

Mohammed Yusef

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Interview Conducted by
Irwin Yellowitz

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YELLOWITZ: The interview is with Mohammed Yusef. The interviewer is Irwin Yellowitz and we are at Mohammed's home in Cranberry, New Jersey. The date is March the second, 2005. Mohammed, I would like to begin at the beginning. What was your childhood like in Egypt?

YUSEF: First of all, welcome to my home, Irwin. It's really a pleasure to have you over. My childhood was a typical, happy childhood of a middle class family. In Egypt, I grew up in a family of one older brother and one youngster, and the older brother came out to be a lower school graduate and he went on to become a President of one of the banks, regional banks, in Egypt before he retired. And my younger sister became ... became a big political Professor, a political science Professor at Cairo University and she was also involved in what is equivalent to the United ... Egyptian Senate. She was a Senator in Egypt with President Mubarak for a few years. She was also representing Egypt at UNESCO in Paris. She had ... she has quite a bit of French background including her own background in terms of her research and interest. She's a student actually of Butris Gally who was the Secretary General of the United Nations for one period. I know he had some trouble with America and that's why he was not renewed by President Clinton. But she had that. And I ... so I was a little child and we had a very loving father who was an ..a judge in Egypt and my mother who was a happy homemaker and she, her health... was not very, very good but she kept a very nice home for us. So that's really very much my childhood.

YELLOWITZ: When did you come to the United States and why did you?

YUSEF: Okay. In ... Yes. In ... when ... in my case I think ... Let me tell you about my background. I was fortunate enough to start education relatively early in my life that... My older brother started school, and I was lonely at home, so I started crying, saying I want to go to school, and I really want to be with my brother. So in any case, there was quite a little story about, actually, my starting in school because I wanted to go to his class--and of course, I didn't qualify for his class. So in any case, they convinced me to go to my little class after some ...some ado to, do here and there and involved quite a bit of rigmarole. So in any.... So luckily the Principal who I, by the way, kept in touch with me till my ... maybe one day ... one year before I left Egypt I saw him the last time,--was a good friend of my Mom, and she said--send him in and we'll try to do something with him. So when I went they ... I kind of apparently took school seriously and so I started like, three-and-a-half years of age... so I finished high school at fifteen without jumping years--I just went through the twelve years--and so I finished. And then I went to the School of Engineering and the School of Engineering itself really had a reason. I was very much, when I was younger in high school and that was at that time just before the Naser Revolution. We had political parties and so forth, and we had so much also corruption under King Aruch. So I was very much interested in becoming a member of Parliament--that was my plan--and the way to do it was to go to law school. So my father said to me: Well, if you're going to become a lawyer, you're going to defend somebody, but you're going to be doing something against somebody so somebody will like you, somebody will not like you. He said: What about taking up a career that will make everybody happy with you? I said: Like what? He said: Take up medicine. And this way

you could have a free clinic and help the poor and so forth. You'll build up a name for yourself that way. Remember, I was like, they told me at that period I was, like, twelve or something or fifteen. So in any case, I mentioned ... Now, my problem was that I couldn't take blood; couldn't take the blood at all. I was very good in, actually, in science and in math. I was just a solid student anyway. But ... so my mother also wanted to have, as most Semitic mothers want to have, one son that would be a doctor. I mean, and she did not have much hope with my older brother, so her hope was with me. The girls didn't count that much at that period. And so ... In any case, I just couldn't take the blood so I said, no, no, no to medicine. I just couldn't possibly think of that. So the alternative was ... and actually, I had a granduncle who was saying to me about, well, the question of irrigation engineers: how they come and the public works and so forth, and how they establish relationships 'cause they help the farmers, this and that. So he mentioned to me about engineering and specifically civil engineering. Now, as I said, my only... the only thing I was really good in math, I was also a decent chess player and I figured that, well, if I have this talent, maybe I should be good in engineering. That was really my ... very much ... but actually, and on a serious level I had also uncle. My uncle was the Dean of a School of engineering at one time--later on and several of my cousins also were assume engineering and became, like, instructors ahead of me so we had that line in the family. So I took up engineering and, sure enough, I stayed with civil with the idea that, as I said, I will build up my career that way. Now, what happened that when I graduated at twenty, a few months after there were a group of, like ...yeah. There was a problem between... Let me go back a little bit. Russia, as you know, was very close to Masser in the '50's, okay, and that was now, as I mentioned, '58 so they had offered Egypt quite a bit of

scholarships for their bright students to continue for their graduate studies in Russia. And actually, many of the students were not that happy with the life in Russia. And then things became bad between Russia and Egypt, for whatever ever reason, and they had always their up and down relationship, so the United States offered quite a number of Fulbrights to Egypt and that was all compet--competition. I mean, you have to go through testing and so forth, and you submit to it and you, so in that case I applied, and I was one of the recipients of one of the Fulbright's, and I know it's part of your interest in the background so.. And on the other hand, if you also remember Egypt--I'm sure that as a historian you remember that, Irwin,--Egypt was building the High Aswan Dam...

YELLOWITZ: Yeah.

YUSEF: ...which made it very close to Russia and it was a problem with John Foster Dallas here, and so forth, so in ... so the.... they had a decree- Nasser had a decree at the time that all the engineers shall work for the government and you cannot do any-anything other than working in the government. That's it. No, no consulting work, no private companies, whatever. So they decreed, after I won my ... I was in the Research Department of the Department of Public Works and they decreed that I could not accept that scholarship. And that was actually my earliest relationship to a Union, if you will, or union activity or so. As will also explain to you the culture of Union there as opposite in America. Now, in ... if you remember there were also--when things became very warm between America and Egypt thanks to the peace-- that back in the late '70s and early '80s of President-the late President Sadat, when we had the Union leaders come to the PSC,

Irwin, you were actually one of the host people and they were talking about the way they negotiated that President Sodat would come to the them and say: "Well, here it is what I have for you," and they say thank you very much and they applaud and that's it. So anyway.... (laughs) So in any case, I was declined and there was about me the other maybe forty or fifty young engineers declined. So I said: No, I'm not going to stand for that. I'm going to go fight for my rights 'cause they have no right to do that. And my father suggested to me do it some other way, I said: No, I'm just going to do it the right, the direct way. So we had what you call a Union. It's called ... you call it Engineers' Syndicate. It's not really a Union but similar to American Society of Civil Engineers here, if you want. We have that in Egypt. So I went and I said: Well, I have a complaint to our President-our Union President. We call it nakeep in Egypt, Nakeep, the word in Arabic. So he said okay. I said that the complaint .. I said I have a complaint from...that... about something that the minister of the Public Works did. The Minister decreed that I can't accept. So the engineer that I said that to him, he kind of didn't know whether to laugh or scam at me or something and he said to me: Young man, do you know the name of Hugh Nakleep, your President? I said yeah and his name was Musaraf. Okleep said okay. And you know the name of the Minister of Public works? I said yeah. He said: what's his name? I said Musaraf. So he said: You're going to now complain about Musaraf to Musaraf. I said: Well, listen. I said: I didn't tell him to become the Nakeep. I didn't tell him that that's his job; that the fact that he wants to have the two jobs, well, that's his ... his problem, not mine. So he said to me: How old are you? I said twenty. He said: That's why. (laughs) And so, anyway, but as.. As luck would have it, I had... We had a representative from the Union, what is called the Union, the Engineers'

Union, who was my office mate who was like, a little bit my ... my boss, a little bit. And I had helped him with his election earlier in the year. So he heard about that and he kind of felt that I had, like, pester him and he could, he told me I should have mentioned it to him and so forth. So he said to me: let me try to help you with that and offered his help. I said: Fine. Anybody could help, but I want to have my right fulfilled. So to make a long story short, actually we went on and on and on and on and there was actually quite a bit of a humor story in that and I learned about how you deal with--Under Secretaries, with Secretaries and so forth, and all the Ministers. But it... the deadline was one forty-five on, let's say, on a Monday to put the papers through if you want to, and at one thirty-five

YELLOWITZ: If you want to leave?

YUSEF: Yeah. No. If you want to ... if you want to get...process continued, I mean, because they were submitted to the American Embassy. And at one thirty-five I took it by hand from there, for myself and other engineers, to the American Embassy, ten minutes, ten minutes to spare and on the same day. So we were successful in getting that. And even though it was a kind of strange thing it kind of, like, maybe in my mind I said something about, not conflict of interest but conflict of roles here, not really interest. Some people say conflict of interest. It's not really interest. It's roles. I mean, how could you be a minister and also the President of the Union. But in any case, it was solved anyway so that's how I came to America...as a Fulbright

YELLOWWITZ: So he approved...

YUSEF: Yeah...yeah. I mean, mine... yeah.

YELLOWWITZ: So he approved of your going.....

YUSEF: The whole thing, yeah, not just me, me and I didn't ... I insisted the whole group, not just myself. So ...

YELLOWWITZ: And you went as a student, not as an immigrant?

YUSEF: No, no. We came here as... I came here as a student. That's correct. That's true. Yeah. So in any case, what happened over here, I went to school here and ...

YELLOWWITZ: At what school?

YUSEF: At. I went to the Polytechnic... actually, called... at the time it was Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn at that time. And then I went on to the University of Michigan after that, and there I met my first wife, and she was also a student and we fell in love and we... she was also happens to be .. she happened to be from New York, from Queens, so we came back to New York, and I continued my studies at polytechnic again. And so... and we were--at the time we were prepared very much to go back, I mean. So then things developed in terms of the Six Day War, and I felt that there was the need for

representation here, human representation-- that people would know the face of an Arab, the face of an Egyptian, because the newspapers were writing about the fact that ... without really discussing the question of the politics of the war, the in--inside of the war. But they were talking about it in terms like, they are like flies. I mean, they just, thousands of Egyptians died, thousands of this die, and the seven hundred Israelis die, and they make a big analysis about the seven hundred Israelis, and the thousands of Egyptians were just nothing. So I was kind of taken by that. And I also felt that it was a question that was a poet, a famous poet, a Palestinian poet, that he said something and I wrote a poem after that, and blaming the Arab leaders for that debacle and all that. And... and he said something about to the youth--he addressed some-part of his poem to the youth—saying emigrate to the land of the--the way he put it--the snow and the fog, meaning the west. The snow and the fog, because people are ignorant of it. People think you're kind of wolves, wild wolves, so saying to the youth. So I was very impressed with that and I said, well, then maybe I could stay here a little bit longer than I did. So I had some practice, some engineering, as part of the training program, and then I applied for an immigrant visa. Okay? So that's where I...

[tape stops and restarts]

YELLOWITZ: Mohammed, you had an engineer's background so the natural question is why did you decide to teach at the college level rather than pursuing a career in industry. And then, if you did decide to teach at the college level, how did you come to Staten Island Community College?

YUSEF: Yes. Part of my work at Polytechnic involved that I was given a fellowship, a teaching fellowship, and I found it to be actually something that I enjoyed very much, teaching young people and working with young people and helping somebody gain. As a matter of fact, I used to also be... I have my own group when I was here on the undergraduate in Egypt and always like to study with students that needed me rather than study with students who are at my level because we had ... and they would .. I just enjoyed helping and enjoyed teaching. So I ... out of that ... At the same time, as I mentioned to you, at the Polytechnic I was also doing ... pursuing some engineering career. But I .. somebody mentioned to me that Staten Island there is a new campus that came out in Staten Island and they are looking for young faculty members in the civil area. So I thought of that. At the same time, I was living in Brooklyn and New York City Technical College also had an opening at that time. So I had an interview at Staten Island and I had an interview at ... Now, Staten Island was... at that time was .. they just had opened the Sunnyside campus. It was a very nice campus, and I did a very, very good interview. You could see that. I mean, they really liked me and I liked them, and so forth, and I was impressed at the time with ... At the time, actually, I took my wife then and Mona, my oldest daughter, with me and she was pregnant with Laura, the second one. So it just was very nice, like a spring afternoon, and I kind of liked Staten Island. I wasn't that familiar with Staten Island, but I had been there maybe a couple of times or something, but I kind of liked it. That's one thing that... Now, in the same time, I had an interview at New York City Technical College which was equally very good interview. I'm not saying that boastingly. That's the truth. I mean, it just was one of those, that we

hit it off well, both groups so ... And so I remember that I decided, well, ... So when I asked about the salaries, I was disappointed that it was about twenty-five percent cut from my salary in industry. I had about ... like, I think I was making, like, fifteen thousand in industry and that was ... they were offering me eleven. So the chair of Staten Island was John Entville, who was a very decent man, and he was saying to me about the range of salaries and he showed me all the ranges at the time. So he said Assistant was eleven thousand whatever, eleven whatever--eleven something, six hundred or something, and the full Professor was like eighteen thousand, by the way, at the time.

YELLOWITZ: Yes.

YUSEF: And he tell ... he told ... he showed me what he was making. So, as luck would have it, of course I was expecting a child and I said to him: Well, I like very much Staten Island and just a question that they had to do something about the salary. So, I mean, again, like, think about, like, negotiating a Union...[laughs] He had. So he said: Well, let me see what I have in terms of my budget. In the meantime, York Tech came to me and he said: Well, they were talking about twelve six for me, which was a big jump. That was like three, three or four steps down. So when I mentioned that to Nan kibble to John at the time I was calling him Dr. Mankibble, so he said to me: Well, I think we can go to twelve one hundred or something but not twelve six hundred because that's I think it would be close to being an Associate Professor which is about fifteen, starting at fifteen at the time ?? So I said to him: Well, I'm going to have Laura now in a few months, so I'll have the six hundred dollar difference in terms of the, as a new dependent or

something. He said but that's not income, he said. I remember that. I said to him: That's okay. I just want to justify it in my mind. So he said okay. Now, so we settled on Staten Island, and I said thank you to New York, even though I was actually living, as I said, in LIU campus, which was right--a stone's throw from New York City Technical. So ...

And one thing that you ... let me add in here, Nankiven was going to against him, as luck would have it. I mean, like now we hear about that kind of thing all the time, to spend a couple of years there so in the summer he said to me that I'm going to work with you about your program for the fall--he was very thorough man... and he said: you will have a young Professor that will call you about ... 'cause we're going to establish the very first course in the computer applications for engineer—pre-engineering students at Staten Island Community College. And he said: You're going to teach one course and the other Professor will teach the other section and one section and he'll teach the other section and his name is Michael Bethides. I mean, that's why, so he'll have much more of a role in my life after that.

YELLOWITZ: Well, he became well known at Staten Island.

YUSEF: Yeah. Yeah. So ... and so .. And he said, I said to him: Well, I'd like to get prepared ahead of time. So he said: He'll call you in the summer then. And that's how Michael Bethides got to work with me in that summer before I actually started in the College. And actually we became confessed friends, I mean, from that point on.

So let me also tell you a very interesting thing about my class of '68 in college. We were eighty-six people. As you know, Staten Island had two colleges. They had Richmond, which was upper division serving forth year and beyond, and then the Community College of Staten Island. The older one was the community college.

YELLOWITZ: And Richmond covered the upper two years.

YUSEF: Upper two years, yeah, but they were not really related to each other. I mean, that was the ... that was their design. So the big year for Richmond was '67 and that's the year that my... our friends Joel Berger and others you might know of, were on--Barry Bresstler--I'm talking about Union people--started in the ... at Richmond. The big years for Staten Island Community College was '68--okay?--and we had eighty-six people, including a new President and that's William Burnbaum who's a real character, I mean. So we... they had a major program of, like, like, orientation for us. So in the orientation they announced to us about, of course, working conditions so the Dean of the College stood up to tell us about work and he said: Well, that you're going to be observed, you're going to do this, and so forth, and then after five years of service you're going to have-- you're going to be eligible for tenure. So as, again, my earliest Union participation, without knowing it, I stood up kind of very shyly but kind of assuredly, and I said: well when I had the interview in the spring I was told it's a three years tenure. Now you're telling me it's five. I said ... He said yeah. He said: there was a change in the State law in the Legislature. I said: Yeah, but nobody want to fight it. And I said: For example, I just gave up a job losing twenty-five percent not on the assumption that I'm going to get some

job security here perhaps. And I am not going to get it now except after five years. So he said: Well, I don't think that's part of the job, and so forth. The Dean was Arthur Kaufman who also became good friends with me later on. So I said: Well, I think that we should have been told that and that's kind of unfair. So we went to lunch afterwards, so the big Dean, Dean Fitzpatrick of the College of the Faculty at the time, came to me and he said: Young man, I want to say this to you. I want to really commend you for what you said because in my stage I really don't think of these things. He was a very much older man. I mean, he was like, well in his fifties, maybe sixty at the time. I don't think of things like that. But really it's an important issue. And then another Dean came to me, Martin Cune, actually he sent for me and I went to see him, and he said: Well, the way you speak, we have something called the AAUP, American Association of University Professors. I said yes? And he said: Well, Nankibble was the head of it and Nankibble now is going to Afghanistan and maybe you should consider it. I said: What's AAUP? (both laugh) I have no idea what you're talking about. Really, I have no idea what you're talking... talking about. So ... And I guess you could say this is my, like, elements or elementary Unionization of teach--you know--learning about Unionsm in my life without really meaning to. So as luck would have it, I mean, I don't know how it happened, but Belle Zeller heard about it, and Israel Cougler heard about it. And in addition to, I think, if I'm not mis--I'm not really sure if they attached my name at the time or not, but in any case, they took ... they ... and, Oh yeah, I'll tell you, one of the deputies to Belle Zeller actually ... Belle Zeller not the Chair... the President yet. The President was the one who became President of City College.

YELLOWWITZ: Oh yes.

YUSEF: Okay? Who was the head, and she was next to him, number two.

YELLOWWITZ: Yeah.

YUSEF: Alright?

YELLOWWITZ: Yes. I know who that is.

YUSEF: Yeah, yeah. I know he was a shorter man. I mean, he was very good.

YELLOWWITZ: Yes. I just don't have his name on ... at the moment, but I...

YUSEF: But in any case, locally Staten Island had Nate Wyler---Nathan Wyler, Nate Wyler, who was very big, who was one of

YELLOWWITZ: Coker--Joe Coker.

YUSEF: Coker-Joe Coker. Exactly. Joe Coker. Very good. We had Nathan Wyler who was the ... and he said: Okay. He was going to take it up with them. And they ... the results of that ... I believe also the UFCT but not directly through me, they got also involved in that. I think it was ... on our campus we had Ted Simms from the English

Department. You might know him. He was also from Jersey but he died, unfortunately, very, very early in his ... in our career there and also a young man. So they took up the fight or the cause. And lo and behold, I mean, with this humble servant of God, myself, starting this, the Legislature actually met, and they modified the law to say effective October 1, they would have the five years tenure. But prior to October one ... and of course, Nate Wyler explained to me, he said you should be satisfied because he said that most people come in in September, not really in February

YELLOWITZ: So they grandfathered you in.

YUSEF: Grand---grandfathered my group for ... with the three year. And I remember one ... a couple of people come to me in the cafeteria that day and she said: I know ..My name is Joe, blah, blah, blah, andmy name is Mohammed Yusef and he said...I said . He said: We really admired what you're saying. We're all behind you. I said: As you could see, I said to him, I said, I'm rather big. You go behind me nobody's going to see you. I said: You'd better stand next to me.

YELLOWITZ: (laughs)

YUSEF: ...this way they could see you. So, I mean this will give me visible support 'cause nobody else said a word in the meting. I was like, all by myself in left field. So in any case, so I'm just saying, that's really... I thought it was an important and aside to introduce. Go ahead.

YELLOWWITZ: Okay. Here we go. Let's move into the next major area of your career in the Union, and that is your entrance into the Union in the early years.

YUSEF: Yeah. Yeah.

YELLOWWITZ: You've told how you became involved sort of tangentially through this issue of three and five years for tenure, and how you became somewhat involved with AAUP, but you then later became involved with the Legislative Conference and moved into Unionism within CUNY. So could you summarize for us what led to your interest in Unionism for college professors, which was not that common a sentiment at that time?

YUSEF: Yeah. Yes. Yeah. And the truth, Irwin, is that I was very much unaware of Unionism for college professors. Of course, I was very much aware of the UFT and its struggle and what was going on and in '68

YELLOWWITZ: In the public schools?

YUSEF: Yes, yes, the public school, and we were, of course, also I had the, like, direct participation, if you will, when they had that long strike in the Brownsville situation in '68--

YELLOWWITZ: Ocean Hill/Brownsville in 1968.

YUSEF: ...yeah, '68, because I happened to have been seated in the Math Department because there was room in my Department for me so they put me in the Math Department. So many of the seniors who really was kind of really stuck without having their classes or so forth, were coming for some voluntary tutorial by the Professors, and I would see them and sometimes they'll ask me a question and I'll answer it.

YELLOWWITZ: These were high school students?

YUSEF: High school students, yeah, coming just, for not ... We said that we're not going to, of course, break the strike or go there or anything, but when they come and ask us questions, they want to prepare for their SAT's or whatever, we'll help them that way. So ... but I wasn't really ... as a matter of fact, even ... I think you were kind enough to say that I got involved in AAUP. I said I had no idea what AAUP is and I did not .. I declined to the Dean. I said no. Thank you very much. I really .. I'm not .. I'm not interested in Unions. Or I'm not... I don't have that much background. But at the time we had the initial representation election and we had the choices of the Legislative Conference, UFCT, the United Federation of College Teachers, or no choice, no representation.

YELLOWWITZ: And I just want to say that his election was under the Taylor law that had passed in 1967.

YUSEF: Taylor law. That's correct. Taylor law.

YELLOWWITZ: That authorized collective bargaining?

YUSEF: Well, actually, that period was very, very much like a new, I mean, a trail blazing for the union. For example, the TIAA, the private pension, only came into the fore for us in '67, I think--you know?----

YELLOWWITZ: '68, yes.

YUSEF: Or '68. I mean, it was brand new, I mean, at the time. So in any case, and I also took that up, by the way, in one of my rebellious moments. I said I didn't want to take the-what was the common ... The big thing was the TRS at the time. I said: No, I'm going to take--or ERS. I said: No. I'm going to take the TIAA. But ... and thinking about it, let me tell you that I wasn't thinking of continuing in CUNY for that long. I mean,--I really wasn't--at the time. So ... but so what happened at that representation election, we got a letter and as a young Assistant Professor, very much green in academia and so forth, and the workings of academia, I thought it was actually like a personal letter to me from--that's how foolish I was, from the Chancellor, Chancellor Voker, writing a Dear colleague, and I said: Well, the Chancellor is calling me colleague now. I'm a big shot. And he's saying to me in the letter, without necessarily telling us what to do, to please consider that you decide the issues for early appointment, your tenure, your promotion. Everything is decided by the faculty, and whether you should really consider that in terms of whether you needed a Union or not; that CUNY is different than other systems. And I

think he might have referred even to the question that only the University that had it was, like, known Universities were like, mostly like, some units of community colleges that were the ones that were preceding that. But in any case ... Actually, when I read the letter, I kind of somehow took it to heart and the first time I voted actually for no representation. And of course, the process was that one side has to get the majority. So in that case the first election was choice was ... resulted in, first was LSC, second, the UFCT, third was no representation. So in the second election I had learned better, and now ... and in the meantime I had got some more education, of course, by visits from Israel Cougler who and I became very good friends, always like, always like an uncle to me. He was always very kind to me. And he came and I remember he was telling us about the UFCT and I asked him, I recall, that I said: Well, what's really the difference between you and the Legislative Conference, which I was familiar with from Nate Wyler, who was with us in the college. So I said: Is it just something styled different because, of course, he had that-- Israel Cougler. You know him better than I do. So I said to him is it just a question of style or and dynamism, for example, or you have really a different, like substantial difference; I mean, something of philosophy or... So somehow that got his attention and coupled with the fact that the Department that I joined happened to have a HO DeTenir, who is now a retiree, a good friend of mine for many years, who was from Israel. And Israel Cougler was very impressed with the fact that we were colleagues and one from Israel and one from Egypt. At the time was, remember still, was the height of, the aftermath of '67 and all that, but we were very good friends, I mean, because that ... we were not involved in that one way or the other. In any case, he became good friends ... as a matter of fact, let me just add here that in after the horrible events of 2001,

September 11th, 2001, he was one ... he took it really upon himself, and I know he's very much advanced in age now and health, to write me a note, a personal note, saying to me that assuring me of his friendship and his brotherhood, and he thought that this was a tough time for the tough times for the Muslims in America and showing solidarity with me, and so forth and so on. I mean, I really was very touched by him, and I mean, at that advanced age from him to still remember and write me a note. And it was very nice of him. And he wrote me also for my wife afterwards. So in ... so... and then, at the same time also, I believe we had also a visit from Belle Zeller, and because Joe Kockler had been appointed, I think, at city. There were some problems and he was appointed the President of the City U--

STOP

YELLOWITZ: Acting President ...

YUSEF: Acting President after what's his name re--resigned--

YELLOWITZ: ??

YUSEF: Gallagher--President Gallagher--you know--was a famous one and retired. So in any case, I also came to know her, and my own inclination was mostly to be... now, of course, I was much influenced by Netwan, and Netwan also happened to have Martin /? in his Department and, as I mentioned, who were very good friends--become very good friends, so I was influenced, that's why I voted for this, this Conference. Now, one of the things that I was told and helped ... swayed me ... swayed me toward the .. was the fact

that the Conference said that we were independent. I remember that--Michael explaining that. He said that it was independent. And the UFCT is involved with the labor and so forth, and just like, it's too involvement that we don't need. We're academics, we're aca-- college professors, and he... he suggested also that... that dues structure was also quite different. I mean, the UFCT had, like, whatever it was, five dollars a month--whatever,-- where we were fifty cents a month-whatever,-I mean, like something very, very nominal. So in .. in any case, so I voted for the Legis-- Conference and that was the eventual winner in terms of the ... the two of them. So .. And, yeah?

YELLOWITZ: You're aware, of course that the Legislative Conference the joined the National Educational Association the next year in 1970.

YUSEF: Yeah. That's correct. Yes. Yeah. No. Actually, what happened is that, in terms of my own career, it took a turn actually away from Unionism, if you will, that .. and Michael Feclides also was Director and like, Assistant Dean for the evening session of the College and he wanted to go back to teaching. And so the Dean offered me that position. So in .. I think that was '69, I think, after one year in .. of teaching. So I.. I took that position for about a year and--I think a year and a half ending in June '70. But... and the way I thought about it, Irwin, really, Well, I was just barely, like, thirty at the time and I said, well, I'm going to be a Dean now and what am I going to do for the rest of my life. You know? I mean, and that's not really what I want. I love to be in the classroom and I like to also be in... in, if you will, in .. in the middle of the battle because the President, as I mentioned to you, Burnbaum, was a very interesting character and we

became very good friends afterwards, but he was starting to kind of bubble the pot, if you will, and a fire was always going between him and the faculty. And of course, as a member of his administration I couldn't say much. You know? So I wanted to be free. You know? So in any case, I resigned after a year and a half in ... in that position and I went back to teaching.

YELLOWWITZ: And the natural question is, after you resigned how did you become a leader ...

YUSEF: Exactly, the same semester, yeah. The same semester was election for the Chapter of the Legislative Conference. And the leader of the Chapter was Bill Klein, William Klein, a very respected colleague, who was... who was, of course, in Nitwan's Department, needless to say--you know- and he was also in electrical technology--- Electrical Engineering Department. And there was another nominee that was completely with him, Stanley Plastrick. You may know him as a historian. You know? Okay? I .. may he rest in peace, I think both of them I think passed away. So .. . And so Michael Beclese said to me: Why don't you join the fray? I said: Michael, I said, nobody knows me from ... What do you mean? Are you kidding me? Yeah? So I said--you know--Here it is, I said,--you know--you have a major composition here with the faculty. Wil--Bill Klein...Of course, Staten Island, as you know, it's very heavily Catholic area, if you will, if I want to put it in ethnic terms, and so I said: You know--Bill Klein was a Catholic--you know--and we had too many Italians, and this and that, in the... in the faculty and Stanley Plastic was Jewish. and I said: who's .. how many .. I said: do you see any ... any

Mohammads there? So he said this isn't...this is America, Mohammed. You know? So in any case, he convinced me to run. And it was a very interesting battle-I must say that--because Stanley Plastrick made the mistake of, like, ... I don't want to say that he disliked me, but that's not the issue. The issue was that he made the mistake of totally ignoring me and he was having his campaign between him and Bill Klein. So we had once we had a debate that he decided to be--to absent himself from, which was really, I think, was his mistake. So I, well, I guess I did very well in that debate 'cause that was like, just an easy give and take. And the issue... they raised the issue about the fact that I had worked in the administration and I said, well, I said:--you know--I may have some friendship with William Burnbaum but, I said, as you could see that whenever I differ with him I never really hesitate to differ with him publicly. And I said, maybe my friendship will be a way to strengthen our cause. This way we would have ready entry to him if we need--you know--to ... to do so. So ... and in any case, the.... so Stanley Plastrick would write a letter saying about Bill Klein this, Bill Klein that, and so forth, and totally ignoring me. So I would just go around and say to him: I just wanted you to know that I'm still living and well. You know... my name Mohammed Yusef. I'm running for this position. And they say why do you say that to us? Of course, we know you're living and well. You know? I mean, so I say that because I know ... you know. I'm saying that because Plessik did not--you know--mention that I'm still running here--you know?--and he just mentioned one other candidate. He says: Oh, that--you know--and he would say something uncomplimentary about Professor Plastik. By the way, we became friends at the end, too. You know? But in any case, the result came out and it was a huge, actually, election. It was a hundred thirty-five--I remember it till now,--a hundred thirty-five was a .. one

ballot was ... was .. was discarded--you know?---was ineligible, if you will, and I remember dealing with the fact of what--maybe two hundred at the time--I mean, a hundred thirty-five just for one...

YELLOWITZ: A very high percentage.

YUSEF: A high, high percentage, almost like ... almost a hundred percent on. So ... and ... or ninety percent or eighty percent. So in any case, the vote was that Stanley Plassik had thirty votes, William Klein had forty-three votes and I had sixty-one votes--you know---well over the Legislat--you know?—it's funny, you know? Anyway, that's how I became the Chapter Chair. So one thing that I did, actually, that was very, very helpful for a very young Union,--remember, we just had the first-you know--contract,--was ... actually, two things I did. One was that I made a point of asking for fifteen minutes or so in every Department minutes--I mean, meetings and I would go and chat with them all-I brought Michael with me--about whatever ... if there's a problem or they have some questions--whatever it might be: What do you think that we could do better for the next contract?--whatever. The second thing I did was that at the time Ted Simms, may he rest in peace now, used to always issue, like, newsletters and he was a very good writer,-of course, an English Professor--compared to me and always needling me say something about the Legislative Conference and the UFCT. And I always very...I decided as a policy, and I told him, I said, Ted, I'm never going to answer you on this. And he said to me why? I said: Ted, because you will see in ... within a year or something, we're going to be one, so is no reason for us to keep attacking each other.

Now, I don't think we're going to continue this way, just ... There's no reason. You know?
So he said: You sure ... You think that? You ... you know something? I said :I know absolutely nothing, but just ... just natural, I said, we're going to work together here, I mean, in this together so why do we not join hands? So as you mentioned, Irwin, that after a year or so the Legislative Conference found it necessary to join NEA and the UFCT, of course, was part of the ... the... the NYSUT--not NYSUT, I think it was the United Teachers, United Teachers.

YELLOWITZ: There were two ... two organizations in New York,

YUSEF: United Teachers and NYSTEP... United Teachers ...

YELLOWITZ: And they were also part of the American Federation Of Teachers.

YUSEF: Yes, of course. I'm talking about the City level. And in any case, what happened is that, actually, we had unity. Okay? And at that point Ted Simms was very sick and so he had stepped down and another person that became a very, very good friend and still is, Lester Keiser,--you may ... I don't know if you know the name or not,--Lester Keiser from the English Department because it was all... all the English Department came into being the chair. And also ... a new star was born when... joined our faculty the same time ...

YELLOWITZ: This was the Chair of the Faculty senate.

YUSEF: No, no. No.

YELLOWWITZ: ...the Chair of ...

YUSEF: No, the chair of the UFCT.

YELLOWWITZ: Oh, of the UFCT. Ted Simms had also been Chair of the UFCT.

YUSEF: Yeah, the UFCT, yeah. That's what it was. So Ted Simms was very ill and--you know--and--you know--like, kind of---you know--like really terminally ill so ... so Les Keiser became the Chair. And of course, a very big advisor to him was none other than Claude Campbell who joined also with us in 1970; joined the Faculty in 1970 together with ... with Les Keiser.

YELLOWWITZ: Right. He was in the UFCT.

YUSEF: Absolutely, sure. Yeah. Claude Campbell , as you know, was a big officer in the UFT and the story was that he actually, like, joined CUNY to help with organizing and getting the Union kind of like on a ...

YELLOWWITZ: And he was in the English Department?

YUSEF: Yes, absolutely. sure. I mean, UFCT is the English Department. That's it. I mean, you don't have to ask me that any more--you know?-is it's all English Department. You know? So in any case, when... when we joined- when the two organizations joined, I mean, I'm just trying to summarize it because in ... of course, there was the Unity and I think the PSC and then the State United... You know? We .. we had actually had one of the very first ones.

YELLOWWITZ: Exactly.

YUSEF: And then the State followed, which both was ... are successful models, and we tried to do it at the national level. That's where we failed. You know? The NEA kind of always--several times not just once,--stepped back after the U-the AFT was willing to go along--you know?--go ahead with the merger. So what happened is that...

YELLOWWITZ: Yes. Now you merged. How did you become the leader of the merged Chapter?

YUSEF: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think ... I think, given the size of the two organizations, and Lester Keiser felt apparently that he wanted me to be the Chair-you know- of ... of ... and remember also, at that time there was... there was only allowance, or there was only release time for grievances. You know? If you remember the Indian?? contracts and how we started wring it saying grievance and contract administration so that Chapter Chairs were not getting any more, just doing it for the love--you know-of their ... of their work, I

mean. You know? So .. so ... but I .. I think it was mostly that Les Keiser was doing it as, like, a stand in for ... for Ted Simms and so we became good friends and Les Keiser was comfortable with me. At that time, by the way, we had quite a bit of active Union involvement. We had demonstrations at the Board and we had ... we had Volker quotas-- remember Volker quotas in...

YELLOWWITZ: Kibby. We had Kibby quotas.

YUSEF: Kibby, yes.

YELLOWWITZ: It was Kibby who put in the tenure quotas.

YUSEF: It was Kibby? Kibby came on that quota year. Okay Maybe it was Kibby that he said one third, one third, one third--I mean, the famous one third, one third, one third. And we had quite demonstrations on that and so forth and so on, and that's how I became very close with Les Keiser and Claude Campbell --you know. And we became like a team in terms of the Local scene.. So ...

[tape stops and restarts]

YELLOWWITZ: ... the events of that day. You worked both with Belle Zeller, who was the leader of the Legislative Conference and then later the first President of the PSC, and you also worked with Is Cougler, as you've indicated, he was a good friend of yours. So

I'd like you to describe the role of each of these people in the formation of the Union in those early days.

YUSEF: Yeah. Well, I think ... You know, first of all, I think personally they were two different individuals. They were quite different individuals so the... I don't think the, like personality-wise they would have united. But I think for the sake of the--you know--the ... the sake of all good and the general good of the faculty and Unionism, I think that's where the spirit of their working. It might also have been, I'm just conjecturing here, that Israel felt that--you know--Belle was already very much on in years compared to him. You know? She was ready to retire, if you remember.

YELLOWITZ: Yes.

YUSEF: And so he felt that maybe she'll step down and he'll become the President. You know? And I think somehow it did not quite work out that way. The dynamics didn't work that way. And I was not involved in that. But I'm saying--you know--just as an observer,--you know--and seeing what's happened. So the merger, I don't think, worked as well as it should have. It was like two camps rather than one camp. You know? And to the credit of the early group they started reaching to each other. I know Claude Campbell was reaching to some people in the Legislative Conference. I know you were also reaching to the Legislative Conference and some people from the Legislative Conference reaching toward the ... the UFCT people. In my case, I already had no problem because I was working with the UFCT people, as I mentioned to you,

because in the ... in the meantime my friend Michael Fadides, who was also my Grievance Chairman, had kind of decided around that time for him to take another new track for him which made him---you know--very famous and of course, he very ... was very much committed to it and was very good at it, namely, to go to the school board route, and that was his major involvement, not so much in the Union any more. You know? So he was always an advisor, he was always a trusted friend, but--and I still miss him very much--but he ... he . he left he Union--you know--as such. I mean, so it was .. So as I said, in my case I was definitely very comfortable with both. I mean, I was in ... in Claude's house and in Lester's house more than I was in my house. You know what I mean? So I mean, we were very, very good friends really,-you know---in addition to being good--you know--work-co-workers. But I think at the Federal level which, or at the University level--(chuckles) Federal level--was that Claude would kind of brief me actually, of what was ... was happening and I think we had some problem about settling of a contract and I believe that Israel Cougler started talking about or was kind of at least floating the idea of a strike, or the possibility of a strike or whatever it is, and just ... the rest of the group did not really go for that, or most of the group. And so the result was there was some kind of, like, split and then they ran for election against each other. You know? But in terms of Belle Zeller, let me just tell you because-you know--

YELLOWITZ: So who did you support in that election

YUSEF: In

YELLOWWITZ: ...in 1973 when Is Cougler ran against Belle Zeller?

YUSEF: In ... I ... I really did not participate actively in that, --okay? -But if you ask me about my own vote I think I probably vote for Le--for Belle, I think. You know? Belle was running as an independent--I remember that-by herself.

YELLOWWITZ: Yes, she was running ... But there was a ticket ?? her but she ran as an independent.

YUSEF: Yeah. I know. I voted for that ticket. Yeah, and ... You know? But in ... I don't remember ?? And what ... what happened is that--about Belle , by the way, Belle used to come for support to us in the ..at ... At Staten Island. She you know, she didn't drive so she'd come to he ferry and I'll go and pick her up. At the time I had Mona and Laura, my daughters, with me and she loved to always see them. You know? They would be sitting in the back--you know--and ... and she would sit next to me in the front and she called them little monkeys. You know? She just loved to--you know ... And then I would . I would let .. I would drive and then I would drop them off at home on the way to the College back 'cause I was living very close to the College so I would drive them home and then go on to the meetings. And then, of course, she would pound the table with President Burnbaum, and Burnbaum had respect for her--you know?--as you know. I mean, she had ... she was very highly respected and she took ... she quite a bit took advantage of her status that she was Professor of so many Legislative leaders and so forth. So, I mean, like, this one was my student and that one was my student, so

everybody was always--you know--like, scared and respectful. You know? And so ... so in any case it will bring her to kind of get the President--you know--(chuckles)--you know? So and actually, it ...it ...so it helped me to develop a model for my ... as a Chapter Chair which I think helped me a great deal of, like, a very I think, and we chatted about that, you and I; we've chatted over so many years together--and I mean, I don't want to have the record not show that our personal closeness and our always exchange of ideas, Irwin, Irwin Yellowitz and myself, so in ... So I said that--you know-- I always thought of Unionism was, without ... without going to school about it,--you know--or taking classes or anything, but was that it was that you have two entities, the Management and the Union and there is... each one has a role. And, of course, the Union doesn't deny that the Management has a role; the Management, if they ... if they accept the Union, and of course they would have to also acknowledge they have a role. So the roles for each of them, I would say, they are maybe partly happened to be complimentary. In other words, you work together on it--you know--cooperatively and--you know, with the fact that you become that important on both sides. But then the question of the role, how you manage, how you do decisions, and so forth and so on, and the Union has to protect the rights of individuals while the administration, of course, sometimes may--you know--want to exercise their own power. That's the part that I call confrontational. So the model that I was trying to always work with was--which is like an engineering model or a mathematics model, is that try to get the complimentary, the cooperative one, as much as close to a hundred percent and minimize the confrontational. The way you achieve that was that to start out actually being confrontational. Let Management know that you are quite capable at adversary and you can be adversary and you can stick to

being adversary. So I did that with Burnbaum, not so much to Nina and Franz, I mean, there might have been no faculty fund, once we had the battle with him and he insisted that the vote be passed ... be a public vote, which was totally against our traditions of--you know--the questions of secret ballot. And he insisted on that. We said: Okay, we're going to take you up on that. And he actually marshaled ... marshaled everybody in front of him walking that at this is against him and that's for him.

YELLOWWITZ: (laughs)

YUSEF: I'm serious. Claude Campbell... I don't remember whether it was confirmed that year. And we ... the vote was a hundred and six; a hundred and two. We lost it but by hun--by four votes. And he knew very well if that was a proper vote of secret ballot we would have won... won it hands down. I mean ,when you ... when you march--I mean, literally march them in front (laughs)--you know--so ..In any case, so once you establish that you could be adversarial and you get the respect of the administration that you stick to your gun and you .. and you don't have your own hidden agendas,--your only agenda is the faculty, not your own agenda. It doesn't matter whether you are up for promotion, you are--you know--whatever it might be,--you know?--your agenda, your only agenda, is the faculty, not your own personal agenda. Once you establish those two facts, then you can actually work out on that model very easily now, because they realize, well, well, let's minimize then the confrontational part and ... and that... you could actually see the history of my Chapter over the many, many years and whether we had Claude Campbell as ... as the ... Grievance chair--Grievance Officer or it was Les Keiser at one time, or before him

was Michael Miclides or after them was Joel Berger, after him was Aaron Blatt, we have ... we had hardly any--you know--like, major. I'm talking about my Chapter because there was some from Richmond that was not involved with me--you know--before we joined. But we had hardly any major grievances, even if there was some problem we always solved it in the question of the ... in ... in the what's--what do we call it--the... the--you know--informal--you know--consultation (crosstalk obliterates a few words here) So, so that's how, I think,--I just wanted to comment on that,--that's how--I ... I enjoyed being the Chapter chair and I enjoyed the of the fact that for so many years that ...

[tape stops and restarts]

YELLOWITZ: ... Yeah, this section.

YUSEF: Okay. Now.

YELLOWITZ: Alright, Mohammed, we're going to move now into your career in the Union from 1976 on. And the first event that took place was the merger of Staten Island Community College with Richmond College to form the College Of Staten Island and you became the Chapter Chair at the new merged facility.

YUSEF: Yeah.

YELLOWITZ: How did this happen?

YUSEF: Okay. Initially it happened as a result of the City financial crisis of '76. Richmond College was destined to be closed and the Union came to help, of course, save the faculty positions as well as also save the idea of getting ... having a four year college for Staten Island and we called it a comprehensive college that will combine the community college as well as the upper... the Baccalaureate programs together. So we were very active in that. We had Committees. We had ... we had, if you will, a model that we were very involved in. As a matter of a fact, at that time I was also the Chair of the College Council, the Faculty Council of SICC- you know- at the time of the merger and so it was a way to actually kind of, if you will, show our Union muscle to the administration. That was one of the few times that we really had to do that 'cause I did not think I should be the head of that Union as well as the Faculty, but that's what happened. So ... And so when ... when we merged the two faculties and we merged the Departments, and so forth and so on, and seniorities, what have you, all the--you know--the vital things, became the question of like, merging really the spirit--you know--together--you know?--and luckily we had good people on both sides. You know? On my side we had, in addition to myself, we had, of course,--you know--we had Aaron Blatt, we had Sherman Heller, we had, of course, Claude Campbell, of course, a mainstay with us, of course, Les Keiser. We had ... we had Dick Curry who was very involved with them. And from the--you know--the Richmond side we had Joel Berger, we had Dan Kramer, we had Barry Brestler. We had so many good people--you know--from both sides that were really good Unionists and they wanted to work things out. So ... And by the way ... we became Co-Chairs as we did, also, by the way, with initially with the

merger of the two ... there were two Co-chairs for a while with UFCT and the Legislative Conference. I forgot to mention that. And then the same thing happened also became Co-Chairs and then, because of the difference in sizes, Irwin Polishook had suggested to... to... in a con--in a meeting between me and him and Joel Berger, who was the head of the Richmond group, whether we should ... I should remain the chair and he would be the Deputy chair or--you know--the vice-Chair. So I think that's how you know,--and I said I'll leave--I'll leave it up to Joel Berger. I said, I would have been happy to do it any ... any way to just continue, but we had to be one Chapter. So...so that's how we ... And then also it worked out that, because of the fact that we had physically two campuses still, so Joel Berger was very much our--you know--point man, if you will, at the Saint George site and I was, of course, continued to be the point man at the Sunnyside campus, I mean, 'cause not exactly the same site as Saint ... Saint George, but because there was quite a bit of shifting of faculty, but still was still the physical locations also kind of kept... so I don't think Joel ever felt that he was, like, a number two man as such. I mean,-you know- whatever he thought was proper--you know--at ... at ... I ... I adopted, and whatever, of course, I thought was proper he adopted. And-you know- and before we ... Let me just backtrack a little bit, Irwin, about the question of the model about Unionism that I developed with the first few years. And that one of the things, by the way, also we developed ...I said our lack of any personal agenda, one of the nastiest periods we had in...with Burnbaum with SICC, was a grievance that we filed against him--and it was my assistants who filed it--that when he denied a woman to be a Department chair and I thought the woman was equally qualified to the man she was succeeding. And I said this was really anti-woman and he was ... he was a very liberal man and he couldn't take that,

and was a big, big battle between us. It was a very nasty period. We spent the whole summer on it, actually. Our vacation was ruined that summer of '72. The reason I'm mentioning it to you is that actually, I was a candidate for promotion that year and ... and, I mean, he could have denied my promotion--you know--or he could have done something with it, but he knew that as I mentioned I established that fact that no personal agenda so he knew that there's no personal agenda and that whatever it is--whatever is right we're going to do. So that's how, I think, we became--well, very good--two years after or ... or four years, three years after that, with him. The only thing that I just want to also add in that period was that we had a little bit of a... of a bump in the road with that Claude Campbell somehow just missed getting approved by PMB for his tenure--you know. And it...and it... I think, was just like so many abstentions. People didn't realize that--you know----maybe it was the final vote--whatever it was. But that we handled, and we had--actually, we had kind of reviewed with Burnbaum about the fact that we would have a large number from that Department coming but they are all qualified and they should be judged not by numerical, because we were very sensitive about ... You recall that was also the era of the so-called Kibby tenure--quotas so we did not want to have any quotas or be participating in any quotas and he promised us that. And that was a direct promise to Claude and Claude even was laughing the same time, remember, I'm going to be one of those people. And he said: Oh, come on! Don't be worried about it and so forth. So in any case, when that happened at PMB was a very easy way to correct it and we corrected it very -you know- very judiciously and very -you know- efficiently and very quietly and to us it was corrected.

So now, by the time we got to CSI, if you will, was that I had established perhaps some reputation as a Union leader in terms of the ... that whatever -you know- not so much that I was a talented Chair but I was a very principled Chair and that's the way it's going to be. And now, I think, shortly after the merger,--let me just comment on that,--I thought that there was very a very limited role to a Chapter Chair in terms of the University wide PSC. And the way I I thought of it to bring it to the fore was that I called the Department--the chapter Chairs to a meeting and it happened to have been the same evening--to make it just easy for them--the same evening that there was a Caucus meeting. And so the result was there was I think three Chapter Chairs went to the Caucus meeting and about fourteen or so that came to my meeting. And it kind of led to some misunderstanding even on my--on the part of my very good friend Claude Campbell. You know? At the time I really did not know Irwin Polishook that well. I knew him well, but not that well. So But that what I was trying to establish, I think I heard your good name, Irwin Yellowitz, saying that ... that ... you were saying that I was trying to do something like replace the Executive Council with the Chapter Chairs and I--you know--I said no. I said: Everybody has a role here to play, but I wanted to have the Chapters. So the result of it was that we had two things. One was that ... that every Chapter Chair was automatically a Delegate, member of the Delegate Assembly. That was a Constitutional change that I ... I had a large hand in. And the number two: we had a monthly meeting so the Chapter Chairs was scheduled every time, every ... actually, preceding or after--sometimes after--the Executive council. This way they will have the purpose of the ... an interaction between the two groups and also. And... and Irwin Polishook, when he talked to me about what I was thinking, and he said: Well, would you mind if I chair it? I said:

No, not mind. I would want you to Chair it because that's ... I want it to be part of the Union structure. So even though it was an ad hoc group but still want you to be ?? I want you to Chair it. So ... so that's how it worked out and I think it was ... so it ... it brought the Chapter Chairs much closer to the--you know--in the workings of the Union as a whole. Yeah. Go ahead.

YELLOWITZ: I just want to say ... I shouldn't be intervening since I'm the interviewer, not the person being interviewed, but I agree that your role was a major one. The Chapter Chairs meeting has continued right up to the present...

YUSEF: Yes.

YELLOWITZ: ...as part of the Union structure so I think you were right in ... in what you did at that point.

YUSEF: And ... and let me say this, by the way. It wasn't that... that Mohammed Yusef--you know--was right about anything. It was a question that when we met together, we all found that we actually were in--you know--in need of something--you know--that, for example, none ... very few of us were members of the Delegate Assembly. Not that we couldn't be elected, we just didn't think of it. You know? So there was a kind of, like, disconnect there. So, I mean, everybody was really on the same--you know--not ??

YELLOWITZ:

So it strengthened the Union quite a bit to increase the role of the chapter Chairs.

YUSEF: Yeah, absolutely. I ... And I think it ... it was a very--you know--it was a very important step and I'm happy that I was a part of it. You know? sure.

[Tape stops and restarts]

YELLOWITZ: All right, Mohammed, I want to ask you a big question which may not necessarily have a big answer and that is what you consider to be your major accomplishments as a Union leader, let's say, from 1976, with the creation of the college Of Staten Island, up until the end of your service.

YUSEF: Okay. The end of my service was ?? official service really or titled service was really in 2000,--you know?--and at that point my own team had kind of either retired or just became involved in other things and we kind of like, if you will, we ... we went into sunset,--you know?--just like, as they say, old soldiers never die but they just fade away. So I mean, the team kind of faded away. You know? But in terms of ... I think what happened in my case was that I had to deal with three Presidents and also with different faculties and different stages of the College. For example, the College from '76 to maybe to '90 ... to '90 or '93 or so, the end of--was ... were mostly like, going toward, like, a comprehensive college model and that was under Volpe. With ... with Volpe coming on the fore, coming to the fore, of course, he had had a very bumpy relationship with his own Union and his own faculty from '74 to '76 so he hadn't had much tenure

with...with them. And he continued that bumpy road and I made sure we continued with it. You know? That was intentional on my part. As a matter of fact,--you know—it's... I ... I just...I had dinner with him and his wife a couple of years back and his wife saying to me--she said: Oh, you were like cats and dogs. You know? And she said:--you know—Ed used to tell us... I didn't know that you knew that. She said: Yeah. You know? You know like ... And she said: But you became like best friends. You became like brothers after that. You know? That was her words--you know?-which was... was nice of her. So because when... when, actually, Volpe, toward the end of his career in '94 when Ann Reynolds decided to end his career in a very nasty way, the only entity that really came to his assistance was the Union, very, very powerfully, and I was included in the delegation that went to meet with Ann Reynolds and I really took her to task about what...what ... the way she ... they let him go about ... effective midnight. I said: What ... Are you going to burn the place down? or something of this ... after forty years of service in the CUNY system and .with such a distinguished career and history you tell the man leave midnight. What's this? I mean, it was I mean, like ... So I just, like, I said it really was a very, very--you know--a unbecoming. And she was very, very furious that kind of ... she showed it in her face but she kind of--you know--swallowed it. So ... And so with ... with Volpe, so we were working about that and he was kind of heavy handed. He was not like Burnbaum. He was not sensitive to any criticism. And he finally got to the point that actually the faculty participation dwindled down too much. I mean, there just was no participation almost. You know? So ... so it was a question that we had to revive this,--you know-- and worked hard ... Claude Campbell was with me in that period, till '85, when he retired. And so from '76 to '7 .. to 1980 was like, kind of like, like a struggle to

get the President to wake up,--you know?--and I was ... I would attack him publicly in meetings and so forth. I was just ... I was really nasty, which is not like my nature but--as you know, but I ... I just was intentionally being nasty to get him--you know-- remember the model I mentioned. You know? I said: Well, we'll have to establish that confrontational part--you know. So he would ... So he finally realized that and to his credit, he learned it not too late and would come to us and-- to me especially and say to me: Mohammed, let's have a meeting. And he'd say to me: Well, remember, I did this, I did this, I did that. Are you counting? Are you recording this? Are you remembering that? You know?--and so forth and so on. I mean, he was very---you know--he was ... he was very. So ... and so after 1980 to... as I said, we had College ... we established that working with Claude and when Claude left, I ... I guess, inherited his spot or the Staten Island spot on the Col--on the Executive council. And so I ... I think the ... at the college level was the fact that... and then after Volpe left and I think it was in a dignified way thanks to the Union, we have the new President that also had a hand in,--you know--like in recommending to the ... to the ... to the chancellor--and that's Maureen Springer--and I worked very closely with her to get her to know about the system. She was totally green about the system, and she was kind enough to acknowledge that. We had a rough time in the very beginning because of the question of fiscal exigency and they had the question of ... of the question of the non-renewal or firings of faculty. And luckily, by the way, for this case in '95 or '76, which you remember also had around of that...

YELLOWITZ: Yes.

YUSEF: ...we ... '76 we lost a few, not that many. In '95 we didn't lose any at all. You know? I worked it out a model with her and she ?? she worked it out. She ..she agreed to it about encouraging people who wanted to retire to retire and give them special--you know--considerations for--you know---future teachings--whatever. and one of my--you know--my losses at that time was really my good friend Joel Berger deciding to take up that retirement at that time. So, so I think it was the question of saving, like, when... when... during hard times, trying to always find a way to save very much the faculty and keep the faculty as it is. You know? And so I would consider that definitely part of my highlight in terms of not so much that people record it for me, but something that I always feel satisfied that I could sleep at night,--you know?--that--you know--my colleagues were saved. You know? That ... There are other things that .. Of course, by ... when you work with a new President and you kind of, in effect, you're actually teaching her about how we're supposed to deal with the Unions and it helps a very great deal because it makes it much simpler to... to work... to work with her afterwards 'cause you tell her, well, you're not supposed to do that ... supposed to do this. You know? So, I mean, even though she was a quick learner and she had he own, of course, independent thinking very quickly, but ... but still it was... it always ... we always are very close and were close and we're still close. You know what I mean?

YELLOWITZ: But you also had to educate President Volpe who was from within the system.

YUSEF: Absolutely. Absolute, I had to educate him because he was very much in terms of, like, he was very heavy handed administrator. I mean, that was his ... his .. his style, I mean, and .. and . and he was not a good listener. As a matter of fact, he had only one ear to listen with and I didn't realize that except af--except after a few years. Then he'd say to me: If you want to... if you want to say something to me you have to speak in this ear, so I realized that whatever I was saying to him in the other ear over the years he didn't hear. (laughs) Anyway, but ... now, in terms, I think ... Let me just add that ..that what ... what I think we did in that period ... Actually, I have two tracks in that period. Was also the Welfare fund as well as the Chapter...

YELLOWWITZ: We'll come to it.

YUSEF: Yeah, I know. I know. I'm just saying in terms of my accomplishments, of the Welfare Fund and the question--of steering the Welfare Fund, if you will, and also the ... The Chapter chair. The Chapter chair I think we were doing very well and whatever ... whatever that model helped in terms of having those meetings and so forth. But it ... it became, I think, more and more of a, like, a ... a social gatherings--you know? And so we were not aware of, I think, sufficiently to help continue and build new leaderships at different Chapters. So as soon as our old leadership left, there sprang a new totally undefined--you know-- ...

YELLOWWITZ: We shall come back to that ...

YUSEF: Yeah. Yeah. I'm just saying ... I mean, so .. Yeah, yeah. So I'm just saying it .. it... I think that's one of the things that maybe I would consider that a failing that we did not see that. You know? And ... But I would say that just .. I'm very privileged that--you know--many people would come to me--you know--by phone sometimes,--and I will never mention names in this case,--but by phone, by ... and some of them were way, way on the left of me,--you know?—but... but they will always come and ask me about my advice about this; advice about that, and so forth and so on. As a matter of fact, I also was paid a very high compliment from my previous provost who retired, Dr. Romela Afron, and who said that--you know--she ... I said: You really taught me Union and what's not union and what's mentioned and what's not mentioned. So I learned that lesson very well so I knew--you know--that what ... what I could do; what I could not do; what I have to consult with, and so forth and so on. So anyway, so I would say, I think it was more--you know--in terms of, like, trying to establish a model, to go back to the model--the ?? model. That's what it is. Yeah.

[tape stops and restarts]

YELLOWITZ: Since you were a leader in the Union from the very beginning up to 2000 I'd like to ask you to discuss the role of Irwin Polishook, who was President from 1976 until 2000 and with whom you worked very closely over the years and also Arnold Kantor, who was the Executive Director for that entire period,--well, up to 1995,--but whose role even went back into the Legislative Conference before the founding of the PSC. So how would you like to describe the role of these two people?

YUSEF: Well, I mean, they were very--you know--they were the leaders--they were leaders. They were very assertive and ... and--you know--Irwin is a very intelligent man and had, I think, his heart in the right place. But he was--maybe he was not a very good listener, Irwin, in the sense that certain things were told to him and I know that I've always taken the liberty to tell him. You know? For example, I thought that the Caucus needed major revamping. And in his case he felt as long as, I guess, there was no opposing Caucus let's just leave--you know---let sleeping dogs--you know--lie. You know? And I ... and I was trying to say to him that you don't have ... the time you organize, that's when you don't have an opposition, not when I mean, you have to have an opposition. You do it before hand. You know? I guess it could be my engineering training. I mean, it's funny that engineering training kind of gets you to ... to solve the issue ... address social issues, you know, like Unionism. And I think was aHe had his heart in it. He worked very, very hard. He was a very detailed person. I know that he had, like, two phases of his leadership: one with Claude Campbell being his Vice-President and then the one after Claude Campbell. I think with Claude Campbell... I ... I would say we lost him too early, Claude, because he was a very, very good organizer, he had good brain, and he was a ... a... like, kind of like a detailed person who had very good ?? mind and he had... had good vision. And ... But I think after... So I think in that... in his case he was forcing Irwin to listen to him. I mean, that's the way I'm ... I'm saying it actually partly from what I hear from Claude. I mean, not so much that Irwin has ever said that to me. After Irwin... After Claude's tenure, Howey's tenure was different--

YELLOWWITZ: Howey Jones.

YUSEF: Howey Jones, yeah, was different. Howey was a very decent guy. He was ... was a brother to me always. I was .. I loved Howey. He was a great man and ... but he had a different role. He did not--you know ... He felt that he should advise Irwin, always in private perhaps, and not say anything to him publicly or whatever and I don't know if that really worked out enough with Irwin. And ... but the major issue, of course, Irwin built the Union and established also a reputation for us. We did not have that. People even hardly knew his name. I remember that in Hawaii when we had the when he was first named to... and gave his first public speech and

YELLOWWITZ: That was 197-- ...

YUSEF: '75.

YELLOWWITZ: '75.

YUSEF: '75, yeah. You mentioned, by the way, about my Union service. Actually, the Chapter Chair at the time that I ended my Chapter Chair was in 2001. The 2000 ... My service--you know--was actually in 2001 Chapter Chair for the ... in terms of the... the Welfare Fund, I mean, really 2004. That ended the Board of Trustees, 20004, this past year. But I made a mistake when I said 2000. 2000 was the Executive council. But in any case, so I think--you know--Irwin did a fabulous job in terms of steering the Union in

a very, very steady hand and... But the question of the next generation or some--maybe that will be another--you know--another topic to talk about. But... but for... for him, for the way he put his hours, he worked hard; he stayed late and he just was... the way he established also the reputation also in terms of International Unionism in terms of the-- you know--the whole Higher Education Unions in Europe and beyond, in Latin America--whatever--was really--and the Middle East was quite a bit of ... was remarkable, I mean, for him to achieve. And.... and he was highly respected and... and I know that the faculty, I'm sure, miss him, given the condition now. So ...

YELLOWWITZ: And what about Arnold?

YUSEF: Arnold Kantor--you know--served for many years. He was a...

YELLOWWITZ: He was the Executive Director. He was a staff person.

YUSEF: Yeah, he was a staff member and he he contributed quite a bit because he was our Chief Negotiator. I listened to him a few sessions in negotiations. He was--you know--a very talented negotiator and very well spoken. And we actually... most of the time we had also a good personal relationship, Arnold and I. I would say that. But I think, you know, that sometimes when a person gets in at the very beginning, or sometimes before the beginning,--you know--when he was ... already ... already came into the... to the... to a staff position from the Legislative Conference. And remember you had Bary Weinberg and you had also you had his deputy...

YELLOWWITZ: Aaron Alexander.

YUSEF: Aaron Alexander, and you had a couple of other people that I think came from the UFCT side; Aaron I think, from the LCT---

YELLOWWITZ: Yes.

YUSEF: LC, but I think Barry was UFCT and a couple of other people in the UFCT...
So I'm just saying, when you come in that ...

YELLOWWITZ: Barry may also have been Legislative Conference.

YUSEF: Yes? ?? Maybe, yeah. Maybe, yeah. So ... Yeah. I think .. I think it was

YELLOWWITZ: Chris Kahn and Mary Pierce ...

YUSEF: Chris Kahn,-I remember Chris--

YELLOWWITZ: Irving Pankin ...

YUSEF: Irving Irving Pankin, that was definitely .. Yeah. That's right.

YELLOWWITZ: They came from the UFCT.

YUSEF: That's correct. That's correct, yeah, Irving Pankin, yeah. So in... in any case, and there was somebody else that also had to do with NYSUT afterwards. His name escapes me now but he stayed with NYSUT for a lo--many years and he was also in UFCT. But sometimes when, like, that line between staff and leader or officer kind of gets a little bit hazy. You know? And I think that Arnold---I ... I .. I would say not just by coincidence, I mean, but maybe by design kind of made sure that it remains hazy or hazier, hazier, hazier. So and... and perhaps that-I don't know if that really affected--you know---his... his period that much, but I think it affected the period after him--the period after him, because when he left in '95 he left after there was already a major change in the Union leadership and he had a hand in that. And he had a hand in it in a way that I don't think was very fruitful, to be honest with you. And ... and so what happened is that I would say that the decline started from '95 down.

YELLOWWITZ: So you're referring to Richard Boreus coming in as...

YUSEF: In ... in part--in part, not--you know--not just Richard Borus, I mean, just the whole direction before Richard Borus also, if you think about it, we had also losses, bad losses, at Chapters. You see? You don't just get Richard ... Richard Borus by itself. If we had local organizations that the Union continued to have, say in Staten Island and so forth, we still ... I think the election of 2000 could have been possible;--could have been different, the result. Okay? We didn't have that. You know? So ...