Andy Frommelt

Dubuque, Iowa

Interview #8

September 8, 1977

Interviewer: Paul Kelso

K: We are speaking to Andy Frommelt in his office at the Fischer Building. Mr. Frommelt is now in the insurance and real estate business. It is evening, September 8, 1977, Thursday night. Mr. Frommelt was the former labor union man who made good in politics and is past Majority Leader and Minority Leader in the House and Senate of the Iowa Legislature. If you will, just start at the beginning of how your work life led you into the union movement.

G: Well, Paul, it starts with a farm background. I was born and raised on a dairy farm. Upon completing high school Dad thought I ought to go to work for a while. I had a friend, a card-playing buddy, who ran a foundry in Dubuque, who introduced me to a man by the name of Gene L. Davis, who was then the so-called Personnel Manager of General Dry Battery Company in Dubuque, a notoriously non-union plant.

K: About when was this?

F: It was in the early forties--very late thirties or early forties--we started at Battery.

K: At that time they had the company union?

F: Yes. They had the company union which was operated by Colonel Davis, as we referred to him. The union activity comprised primarily a big beer bust once a month at what we used to call the old recreation building, left over from the Brunswick-Balke-Calendar Company which was the previous manufacturer of radio and disc recording equipment.

K: They had gone out of business earlier in the thirties.

F: Right. This building laid dormant for many years, and then the battery company became one of the principle tenants. And, as I say, the plant started before I began working out there, and this friend of my family's got me a job. I was just a kid and didn't know a great deal about unions and what have you, but I recall that Mr. Topal told Gene to give me the same treatment as everyone else and gave him a big wink. Well, it wasn't long after I got a job, and, as I say, I was just a kid.

K: You soon learned what he meant by that?

F: I found out that I was supposed to rat on the boys and what have you. It became pretty obvious to me, just as a youngster, that the whole theme was to keep the union out. When I, for reasons that I can't even articulate, decided I didn't want any part of this, I was initiated into the bull gang. That was the heaviest, filthiest, dirtiest work that you can ever imagine. I mean by that black, dusty, heavy, hundred pound bags, hundred and fifty pound bags, just really bad work. I recall that my parents insisted that I quit. By that time I was so burned up by the treatment that I decided I was going to stay. I worked there for some time, and I took the gaff of the bad work. As I recall it, I was introduced to better work and then to bad work, depending upon the attitude of management with regard to my conduct. But it wasn't too long until I decided that I was going to become interested in doing something about the conditions. I recall that everyone was introduced to what they call the bull gang, and this fellow by the name of Davis ran it like it was the Army. He had the men wearing blue and white striped coveralls, the heavy

type. Of course the new employee would buy new ones, and it was hot, dirty work. Believe you me, in the summertime it was just unbelievably hot to wear those things. Incidentally, the women were also introduced to this. They had to work on the bull gang, work in the dirty departments and so on, to make them appreciative of their jobs.

K: This was a method of weeding out people, perhaps, that didn't want to work?

F: Oh, yes, sure. It was a case of reward by giving a little better work, or withdrawing it and sending you down to the dirt. I recall, the thing that really set my mind was I was coming down from a job that they assigned me to in the supply department, dealing with corrugated boxes and the various supplies that the plant used, which were very clean, you know. It was considered very nice work. I was assigned to the bull gang one day unloading graphite I believe, which is lamp black or soot in bags that seemed to be always broken and you would just be in a state of blackness all the time, inside and out. As I proceeded down the aisle that day, Colonel Davis was standing in the aisleway and he said, "Well, Andy came in clean and he's going home dirty. Haw! Haw! Haw! Haw!" I never forgot that, but I became Steward in the union. It wasn't too long until I was being talked about for an office in the union.

K: When you went to work at the battery plant there was a company union at that time?

F: Of sorts. It was just a loosely knit operation, as I say.

K: Did you have any rights at all to discuss things with the company?

F: None. No.

K: So in fact they had a social club to buy you guys off. Once a month they had a big party. Everybody got drunk and had a lot of so-called fun and then forgot about it for another month, as far as the union was concerned. Then how did the, what shall we call it, the regular union or legitimate union, get started?

F: Well, there were a number of people involved who are still around, at least some of them. Tom Folsom was one of the early officers in the union. He was the President for a while. Bill Knoll was elected President. There were some fellows who preceded me, you know, who really put up the big battle to get the union started.

K: Did the company make reprisals against the fellows? Did they fire them or give them the dirty work?

F: They conducted quite a battle to keep the union out and did so successfully until there was finally a certification election and it was voted in. The battery industry was primarily a very cheap industry, nationwide. It was a low profit item, and as a result the pay was quite low in the industry. This made it very difficult to negotiate good contracts when most of the competition was either non-union or at least very weak union to say the least. As I say, I got involved in the thing as a Steward, and battled some. I was always known to be somewhat vocal. And as time went on they asked me to

run for President. I had no intention whatsoever of running for the principle office of the union. My parents of good farm background were the farthest from wanting me to become involved in this sort of thing. But my dander was up enough that I decided . . . Well, I recall going to the union meeting down at the old Metal Trades which was on Fourth Street, later the Legion Building, and so on, but when I arrived at the meeting I had no intention of running. Someone got up, who is still living, and gave a speech against me and made some remarks that I was really company and so on. And in about twenty seconds Andy Frommelt was a candidate for President.

K: This type of challenge was something you were not going to let go by.

F: No, that's right. I was really burned and I announced that I was a candidate, and I campaigned like hell, and I was elected. I was elected a good number of years and became the Business Agent. We had a really interesting union, tough union, primarily of women, a great preponderance of women.

K: This was the Federal Union you're discussing? x

F: Federal Union, right.

K: Local 22516. I don't quite understand what the distinction is here of a Federal Union.

F: You see, the American Federation of Labor was primarily a craft union, Gompers and those groups of people who formed the basic craft unions, starting out with the cigar workers and so on. Then you got into the

x See Vorwald interview

building trades, but they were primarily interested, and only interested in the craft union. It wasn't until Lewis came along that they awakened to the fact, and he formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which means just that, industrial organizations, and decided that the masses of the unskilled were the greatest in need of organization. After the CIO was formed under John L., the Federation of Labor decided they had to come up with something, because the Federation was made up primarily, almost exclusively, of affiliated craft unions, plumbers, carpenters, what have you, bricklayers and so on. And consequently they established what were known as directly affiliated federal labor unions, which were strictly catch-all unions. Now, we had no international. We were directly under the Federation of Labor. William Green was the President when I was really involved originally. And then they had regional offices. Ours was established in Milwaukee, and the regional director serviced the various affiliated federal labor unions in the district, in the region.

K: So a federal union was the AFL answer to the CIO.

F: Right.

K: I see. Yes. Then they got into the nationwide jurisdictional hassle over who got to organize who.

F: If we had a group that really didn't fit into the craft union set-up and nobody really raised heck enough they issued a federal charter. In other words, they voted to be directly affiliated with the AFL in those days, and had a charter under the AFL. Ours happened to be 22516, a directly

affiliated union.

K: So then at some point down the road from here they became a regular Machinists union. How did that happen?

F: The craft portion, the maintenance people, the machine shop, were organized by the Machinists.

K: You had two unions then? Depending on the work.

F: Right. We had two unions. In fact, at one time we had three unions, because the office force was the only organized plant office or any office other than maybe the labor paper. I think Rita County was a member of the Office Workers, but other than that the battery plant was the only organized office. I used to help them negotiate their contracts. But the craft portion, the maintenance, and the machine shop were represented by the Machinists union. The production workers were represented by the federal labor union, and the office by the Office Workers international.

K: We were speaking about the division within the battery plant and the jurisdiction of various unions according to function. So we began to move then into the World War II era. Did you serve in that war?

F: No, I didn't. I didn't qualify physically, so I remained.

K: After you were lugging 150 pound bags around you weren't ready for the service, huh?

F: Yes. At least that's what they said down at Camp Dodge. They rejected me. So I continued to work there and represent the union. Then we got so very large that we decided to establish a Business Agent position. I

was Business Agent for a number of years. In fact, I was Business Agent until 1958 I think, when the plant finally closed.

K: What kind of things did you do as a Steward and a union officer and so forth? What were some of the issues? Do you recall any incidents, things that you had to handle specifically that were of interest?

F: Oh, you know, I always marvel at Dick Bissell's "Seven and a Half Cents." "Pajama Game," you know, when he captured some of the little things that are so important to people in the shop. Some women come in scantily clad and other gals come in with heavy sweaters on and a fight developes as to whether or not the windows should be opened or closed. It's this sort of thing which is kind of interesting. Those are the really kind of humorous type of things.

K: And you get in the middle and have to make this decision?

F: That's right. We would have to come in as a Steward, for example, and convince the company that they ought to open the windows or not open them, etcetera, etcetera, you know. Some close to the window would be freezing, also in degrees depending on how they were clad, and what have you. But, anyway . . .

K: You couldn't win, no matter what you did.

F: But basically the big issues in those days were almost a crust of bread, you know. I still have a check stub that represents forty hours of--eighty hours, excuse me, we were paid twice a month--eighty hours of the hardest work one can imagine, and the dirtiest, under the worst possible

conditions. Eighty hours, and my net check was $28 for eighty hours work. That was net, and, of course, the only deduction was Social Security, which was 1 percent in those days. So you can see that we didn't make a heck of a lot. The thing I compare now over those days, now they speak in terms of increases of, you know, 50¢ an hour per year and all this sort of thing for three years and what have you. And we were talking about cents per hour and basic seniority, whether or not an employee had a right to retain his job over someone who was hired later than him. These were the real basic issues. Protection against discharge without cause. This was common in those days. If a fellow didn't just follow the very whim of the foreman or management he was fired. There was nothing you could do about it. I think those are some of the basic things back in the basic wage structure, you know, providing reasonable benefits, wage-wise, vacations, and so on. Again, I get back to seniority. I think job security was probably the most important thing that was fought for in those days. Jobs were so hard to find, and the fear of losing your job was certainly there all the time. And so as a result, an employee was almost a captive. He didn't dare say too much for fear he'd be fired and nobody would back him up. So people finally got together and said, "To hell with this. We're going to stick together and maybe we can protect a guy's job." And they did.

K: It seems like in the interviews I've done to this point, in the earliest days the issues were wages and hours, and wages first. And then as they went along it became recognition. And the next step then was what

you're discussing, job security. So we were seeing a certain progression in the kind of things the unions were doing.

F: Oh, right. And earlier, you know, some of my predecessors were the guys that really were in the battle for basic recognition through the election and so on. This preceded me. I was there through part of it, but I was just a kid at the time. But those days were rough and some people were fired, you know, and let go. There were strikes.

K: Were you involved in any of those?

F: Oh, I was involved in strikes. I carried the coffee pot more than once.

K: You mean you were working on the strike committee?

F: Right. On the picket line. I always remember the time . . . You know, early in the strike, the boys . . . It was a lark. They would go down the first week or so to the tavern and have a few beers. It was a lark. After that it got a little more serious, and I recall one day that it seemed like everybody was at the other end of the picket line or somewhere other than where they belonged. The only person at one gate was a woman about sixty years old, at least sixty. And this truck was attempting to enter the premises. She literally laid down in the street. The truck didn't get in. The truck turned around, backed out and left, because he would have had to run over her to get in. Well, I raised hell about this!

K: You mean it was bad form!

F: But anyway she did hold the line, and it really affects morale

in a strike, you know, those little things. One truck getting in or not in itself wouldn't make a strike, but it certainly affects morale.

K: So this lady became a heroine.

F: In my eyes, not only at that particular moment but many years since.

K: Do you recall her name?

F: I really don't, and I wish I did, but I spoke about her many times since. I was involved in labor activity for many years and was President of the Federation of Labor and so on, on the various committees.

K: President of the Dubuque central body?

F: Yeah, right, when it was the old AFL central body.

K: Well, do you recall about what period the Dubuque Trades and Labor Congress changed their name and reorganized?

F: Well, when the AFL-CIO was formed they disbanded the Dubuque Federation of Labor and came up with a new . . .

K: So that would have been around 1955-56? What about the CIO people here in Dubuque? Were they very instrumental in that late period? Did they succeed in establishing themselves in this area? Were there any raids on memberships or jurisdictional struggles?

F: Oh, some. Originally, John Deere really introduced what we referred to as the CIO, which was really the Farm Equipment Workers, a kind of a leftist outfit in those days. In fact, they were commies, no question about it. I had an office in the same building, and I used to work nights in

the office. Some of their discussions were really way out as far as I was concerned, you know. But they created quite a stir out at John Deere when they first started, but it wasn't too long until . . .

K: This was 1937 or 1938?

F: No, later than that.

K: I don't know the exact date when John Deere came in.

F: John Deere would be later than that. Yeah, right, in the late forties at least. And it wasn't long until the present CIO took over through an election

K: Were there very many fellows around who were political in that sense? Was there very much philosophical discussion among the union men, or was it pretty much bread and butter?

F: I would say bread and butter really. I was trying to think of UAW, the UAW really replaced the Farm Equipment Workers Local 94.

K: They were active here up until after the war?

F: The FE?

K: Yes.

F: Yes, during the war period, yeah, right, we had the FBI in here following some of these fellows. A fellow by the name of West was considered a cell worker and I recall Deere's firing him. The story goes that the FBI came in and said, "Look, we know where he's at, and we want to know where he's going," and issued some instructions anyway as to what they

should or shouldn't do.

K: We'd be interested in talking to some of those people if they could be located.

F: I doubt if West is around anymore. I wouldn't know who those guys were anymore. My God, yes, it was a long time ago!

K: Well, I can discover this information probably through the pages of the Leader.

F: Oh, I would think so. Right. Right. Rolie White, the Editor in those days followed a lot of this pretty closely, and I'm sure that the Farm Equipment Workers and their background would be pretty well spelled out.

K: So then you stayed in as Business Agent until after the war, and you became President of the Council?

F: Well, during that period I was President of the local Federation, or Trades and Labor Congress, Dubuque Trades and Labor Congress, as we called it. And those were just AFL unions. That included the Teamsters in those days, but not the CIO. As I say, when the merger took place why of course the new federation was formed, the AFL-CIO.

K: Later on in this tape I want to speak to you about some of your legislative accomplishments. When you were active in the labor movement as an officer were you active in politics in the local scene?

F: Yes. This dates way back really. Sometimes I wonder how long I've been in politics. I was in the Legislature for eighteen years, but my political activity goes back far beyond that, even statewide. The original

political action group as I recall it was Labor's League for Political Activity, and it dates back to . . . I'm trying to think who was president of the Federation in those days, right after Lewis, . . . Boy, my memory is . . .

K: Here in Iowa?

F: Right.

K: Oh boy.

F: Ray Mills ran against him.

K: I should know that question.

F: So should I. But I can't recall it. We had what was known as Labor's League for Political Activity, and this was the forerunner of COPE and so on, you know, the Committee on Political Education and so on. And it was a means of raising funds and collectively attempting to influence issues and to elect candidates, quite frankly. And this was during the right-to-work fight and so on, and we had a march on Des Moines to attempt to stop the passage of the so-called right-to-work law, unsuccessfully of course. But I think that Labor's League got rid of Blue, and it was a theme back in those days, "Get Blue," and we did. I'm sure we did. We elected, as I recall, Bill Beardsley. Labor and the Democrats got in the fight in the Primary and voted for Beardsley and got Blue in the Primary.

K: He was the Governor who was responsible for what?

F: Blue was responsible for the passage of the so-called right-to-work law.

K: So this would have been in what year approximately? It would

have been after the passage of the Taft-Hartley law wouldn't it?

F: Right. It would have to be.

K: So I'm thinking that's about what, 1948, 1950?

F: It was in the fifties. I came to the Legislature in 1953, and it was prior to that.

K: Well, then, I think perhaps it was in the first year or so of the Eisenhower administration. 1952. Okay. So from this kind of activity, with being active in this fight and with your activities here in this area, it was sort of a natural step for you then to go into the legislature if you were going to continue upward bound, you might say.

F: Well, that was kind of interesting. It started with a phone call from John Grogan, who was then President of the Machinists. John called me and said, "How would you like to run for the Legislature?" I thought it was the craziest thing I had ever heard and I told him so. He said, "Well, think about it, and we'll talk to you later." I discussed it with my wife, and incidentally, I was married off the picket line. I was engaged and we had our wedding set, and we were on strike. Had the strike gone another day we would have postponed our wedding, but the strike ended and we got married. Just a little anecdote! But getting back to, basically--what the heck were we talking about here when I got off on this subject? The Legislature! John called me and mentioned running, and as I say I thought it was ridiculous. But I discussed it with my wife and she said, "Why not?" So a couple of weeks later I was a candidate. Just a kid.

K: How old would you have been at the time?

F: Let's see, that was 1952, I have to do a little arithmetic here. . . . So I was about thirty, twenty-nine.

K: That's a good age to start a career in the State Legislature, isn't it?

F: Yeah. It was considered young in those days, really. The average age in the Legislature in those days was astronomical, primarily retired farmers and retired businessmen and so on, people that could afford to spend one winter in Des Moines and the other winter in Florida or some place, you know. But I ran, and ran like heck and had tremendous labor support. I ran as a Democrat, but I recall the Adams Company had a rule, as did most of the plants, no placards in the plant. They would put them up, and management would take them down, and they would put them up again, to the point where they just gave up. I beat the Democratic chairman here and two other Democrats.

K: In a primary?

F: Right. There was a run-off and a recount and the other two Democratic candidates, the chairman and another candidate. I was like 1,500 ahead of them, the next closest, and picked up 250 or more in the recount that I wasn't even involved in. So we had a pretty successful campaign, I went to the Legislature, and I was quite vocal on labor issues. I was considered as sort of a labor skater or what have you, and they always associated me with labor and labor causes. That's where my leanings were

and that's where my heart was, and that's what I fought for.

K: Well, tell me about some of those issues that you were fighting for in those days.

F: Well, you know, the issues don't change a great deal, really, on any subject. They had road crises twenty years ago, four years ago, and sixty years go, and welfare problems and all the rest. The way unemployment Compensation was really mis-run in those days and Workmen's Compensation was a disgrace. I recall legislation like the attempts to prohibit political contributions by workers and labor unions. They attempted to introduce the Little Catlin Act, as they called it. I remember I got in trouble with some of the labor unions. See, I was in the House at the time, and they introduced this bill which prohibited political contributions by labor unions, etcetera, etcetera. And they threw in a few groups to make it sound good. So I conferred with a rather astute Senator from Burlington by the name of Tom Daly, and I said, "Tom, I want to include everything possible in this bill as an amendment. I want to include the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, the Farm Bureau, and everything." I recall that Tom gave me this one list of all organizations of an eleemosynary nature. I hardly knew what eleemosynary meant!

K: You probably were not alone in the Legislature!

F: We concocted this amendment, and I introduced it the next day and lo and behold, the principle sponsor of the bill, Clark McNeill, he was from southwest Iowa, said he thought it was a reasonable amendment. We

adopted it. The House passed the amendment and sent it to the Senate, and I recall the next morning that Al Nancy from Cedar who was a Representative came to me and said, "You know that bill we passed yesterday?" I said, "Hell, which bill was that?" He said, "You know what bill it was. You know, it won't see the light of day." And of course it didn't! That was the end. It was never really seriously introduced again.

But, you know, those sort of things were obviously anti-labor, and the Legislature in those days was anti-labor to the nth degree. There were those who would even get up and speak for labor causes, you know. Some of the politicians would pretend to, I recall, fellows like Jack Miller who was supported by labor at one time, but who really in the clutch has never voted for a labor bill in his life where it meant anything. And there were a number of those kind of people who came from fringe areas where they had some labor constituency who would, you know, speak or even vote for a bill if they knew definitely it was going to fail. But when the clutch was on, when it was really down to where their vote counted, they wouldn't be there, see. And that was really the difference between someone who really believed in it and someone who just was acting very political.

Oh, I don't know, there were so many little issues. The railroad brotherhoods were trying to get restroom facilities, you know, and they were trying to get windshields on those little cars that used to run up and down the right of way in the rain and what have you, to protect them from the elements. In fact, it went so far that the little inspection cars came built with wind-

shields and roofs, but the railroads would remove them because it was not required by law. In fact, I don't think the bill passed while I was down there but it has passed since, that they were required to have windshields as protection for the workers. And, you know, you dealt with maximum weight lift for females and this sort of thing. Many, many things dealing with child labor and all this sort of thing, you know.

K: And safety conditions, I suppose?

F: Oh, yes.

K: As an aside, I've been interviewing Machinists and Carpenters quite heavily in the last week, and as far as I can remember, to a man they were all missing a finger, or half a finger.

F: There seemed always to be a great reluctance on the part of the Legislature to require inspections, to empower the Bureau of Labor to get any muscle or any inspection power, you know. It was always, you have department and if you assigned them any responsibility you didn't give them any money. There was nobody to do the inspections, so it didn't matter what the law provided. You simply . . .

K: Pass the law and forget to appropriate any money.

F: Right. Right. And this was the sort of attitude that prevailed for years and years and years. Actually, labor went through two or three cycles in Iowa, two major ones. Back in Shady Lewis' day, that's when the mines were . . . Shady Lewis* was President of the Federation when we had many mines in Iowa, and at the same time this was when the railroads were

* John C. Lewis (around 1938)

really in their heyday. And you can still travel in some small towns and find Machinists halls that were big halls in those days. They don't even have a union today of any kind. But back in those days, as I recall it, there were more affiliates in the Federation of Labor from the Mine Workers than I believe there were at one time affiliated with the Federation in its entirety. But these are all Mineworker locals scattered around, especially in southern Iowa, where there's no labor to speak of.

K: Not only are there empty halls out there but there are towns that have totally disappeared.

F: Right. The railroads had these shops, you know, where

of skilled craftsmen in these very shops all over the state, which disappeared. As a result, while the Federation was strong in many, many counties over the state at one time, we had many unions in many constituencies around the state. Then it shrunk to the industrial centers, you know, the bigger communities, and as a result our Legislature became more and more rural and less labor oriented than in those days. It was very strong labor at one time and then it became very weak, because, you know, unless you have constituency back home from labor that legislator is going to pay attention to his constituency, and if it's primarily farm and business he's not going to be too concerned about labor. So we went through those cycles. This Shady Lewis deal is prior to my time, although I met Shady. He wasn't really active when I became interested. But it's changing again, you know. Labor's spreading more into the various

counties, but it's still tough. You know, I really sympathize with labor lobbyists. They have a tough row. It's an unpopular subject even today to bring up an unemployment bill, or workmen's comp bill, or safety bill. It's just still very unpopular.

K: You were speaking about the continuing fight over the right-to-work law. How did that go back and forth? What are they saying? Why do they want to retain that?

F: Oh, I think it's become more symbolic. More so than meaningful perhaps, I suppose. You have people in Dubuque, for example, businessmen who argue against the repeal of 14b. They point to all the dire results of the repeal. All I do is cite Illinois, across the river, just the width of the Mississippi, East Dubuque, Illinois. They have a perfect right to the union shop and, you know, there's nothing chaotic over there, no great dilemma on the part of labor and management. Things are going along fine. No mass exodus to Iowa because they have the so-called union shop provision or the right to negotiate a union shop. I often used to cite the fact that while it was legal in Iowa we had a number of plants in Dubuque that never had a union shop because the union was never able to convince the management to agree to it, you know, and they wouldn't strike to bring it about.

K: I don't think the general public understands that particular point, that repeal of 14b means only that the union has the right to negotiate for a union shop.

F: It doesn't require anybody to do anything.

K: Certain elements would have us believe that it would be almost mandatory.

F: Well, they refer to it as compulsory unionism, and I suppose the end result of a contract negotiated providing after a probationary period the requirement to join the union could be interpreted that way. But it's by majority rule. It's by consent of the employer and the union and the employees, and it seems to me that it's the prerogative of management and employees to enter into such an arrantement. We came pretty close in 1965 to repealing it. The House had the votes. Our strategy was to pass it in the Senate first. But we never did come up with the two missing votes, which was always a real disappointment to me. Governor Hughes came up and laid it on the line in a caucus, unsuccessfully. We tried everything to persuade these people, from districts where it really didn't matter, to give us a couple votes, but we couldn't do it. That really broke the back of the big push.

But, on the other hand, I think really it's more or less symbolic on both sides. Labor is functioning and doing their job under the present circumstances. It's a handicap, and certainly it's something that really rubs working people wrong, to have the law saying they can't negotiate something legitimately in their contract. But, on the other hand, if John Deere in Dubuque has 15 out of the union or 20 or 22, Deere and Company really couldn't care less. In fact, we have a major employer here who used to tell tell his employees, and maybe still does, that they're not telling them to join the union but they either want union or non-union. They don't want anything

in between. They don't want people sitting around in the john arguing whether or not Mary or Joe is in the union. They want them to make the and not be arguing about this. As a result, all the employees in this particular plant belong. I think that's true in most plants. The few if any that don't belong, it's so infinitesimal that really it doesn't weaken the union.

I get a little uptight about agency shop that some people talk about, which provides that they have to pay for services but don't have to belong. I say it's the greatest way in my opinion to break up the labor movement and cause decertification of anything I've ever heard of. You get a majority of people just paying the minimum to offset the cost of negotiation, and what have you, the company could call an election and decertify the union. I think the union shop is the answer if people want it and if management wants it and they work for it. Agency shop I don't think is really the answer at all. But that's the crumb that some people throw at labor, and sometimes I think they unwittingly would buy it. But I think they're grasping at something that's really very unsound, laborwise.

K: All right, sir, you stayed in the Senate until 1970 which was your last year?

F: Right.

K: You were in the Legislature then during the years of Harold Hughes. He presented himself as a man that was from the working people and seemed to be a friend of labor? Did you find that to be consistent?

F: Yes, I was quite an admirer of Harold Hughes, and I suppose no

x Product

two people disagreed at times more than Harold Hughes and I. I was the Majority Leader and he was Governor, and we had some raw battles down in his office over lunch, but basically he was an honest person. He had a lot of courage, and I say this meaningfully. He had real guts. I mentioned before about the right-to-work law. We were going to pass it in the Senate, and we needed two votes. We came up three short, but we had one, you know. If we could pass it we had the third vote, but we needed two more. We met with him and explained that just too many of our people had gone out on a limb during their campaigns and stated they would oppose any revision or repeal of the right-to-work law, so-called. You notice I mention that, because that right-to-work label is a management label and not a true label of any right. We explained that we just didn't have the votes. We brought Lex Hawkins in, the Democratic Chairman, and so on, and asked him to use his persuasiveness, and he did and we didn't have the votes. So we discussed this with Governor Hughes. He said, "I want to come up to your caucus." I said, "Governor, you realize that you're laying it on the line. You're coming up there and fighting a lost cause, and I don't think you're going to get the votes, I don't care what you do." So he said, "I'm coming up. I have to do it." And he did, spoke to the caucus and explained why he felt philosophically why this was correct, why it was the thing we ought to do. It was in our platform, he believed in it, he thought we ought to do it, and we needed two votes.

K: Were there any opportunities you had while you were in the

Legislature to handle matters that were specifically affecting Dubuque?

F: Oh, sure. Appropriation matters and so on, but not specifically labor problems. Not really, no. Oh, I recall indirectly, it wasn't a legislative matter in the sense, it was during the interim, but we discovered at one point that the Penitentiary at Fort Madison was having a full showing of overstuffed furniture at the furniture show in Chicago. I was called as a Legislator on the Interim Committee, which is the Budget Committee and visits all the institutions, and we have a large local manufacturer of Flexsteel furniture, overstuffed furniture, and they said, "Really, you know, this is tax property and equipment and no pay, free labor, and they're competing with us on the open market at the furniture show, not for state institutions or tax-supported but just you and I buying a davenport for our living room." Well, it just happened we had a meeting in Fort Madison within about a week and met with Percy Lainson, who was then the Warden of the Penitentiary, and he explained it was a great deal because they had at least 50 percent markup on this stuff and they were making lots of money.

K: Where was this money to go?

F: Oh, it would have gone to the general fund.

K: To the general fund. For the state? But the boys in the Penitentiary weren't getting anything?

F: Oh, no, no. They were getting, I think at that time, 15¢ a day or something, and as I say, no taxes paid on equipment, or plant or anything, and it was paid for by the taxpayers.

K: And, of course, there are several furniture companies up and down the river here and Burlington, and here in Dubuque.

F: Oh, yes. Right. Right. We have a large one here. Well, it wasn't more than about a week that the Penitentiary was out of the public furniture business. They still manufacture furniture, school desks and so on for public schools and various institutions of the state that are tax supported, but not competing with things like that, you know.

K: You obviously look back on some of these things with considerable relish. What are the things that you accomplished while you were down in Des Moines that you really are proud of, or, on the other hand, that you're not proud of, if I may ask such a question?

F: Oh, I think we brought about some equity in taxes. Passed some good legislation in the area of safety and that sort of thing. Many things. You know, a lot of people lay labor is only interested in labor bills. Labor was the pioneer of the public school system nationally, and we fought for school standards for public schools. The first school standards act in the state was passed in 1965. The Area Voc Tech setup was our baby in 1965 and so many things. I always remember Harold Hughes saying they might repeal some of it, but they can't repeal all of it, you know. He always said, "Just remember, Andy, there'll be some legislation on the books that we brought about that's good for people that will last for a long time." And I'm convinced of that.

K: Wouldn't you consider the reapportionment fight to be very much

a concern of labor?

F: Oh, very definitely, and one of the real highlights of the Hughes era. The Schaaf plan was Farm Bureau, rural oriented, rural slanted, to continue their control in at least one house, which was ruled unconstitutional. I recall when the Schaaf plan was introduced that Harold Hughes said, "I'm going to go out and fight it." Again, Andy giving counsel said, "Harold, let somebody else do this. We'll do the fighting. Why don't you stay out of this one?" He said, "I'm Governor and I think this is an issue that should be fought tooth and nail, and I'm going to do it." And he dove in and, just no question about it, he changed the whole course of apportionment.

K: You were speaking about a fight against secrecy.

F: Yes, when I came to the Legislature in 1953, the first thing I noticed was that the committees had a vote by secret ballot. I've told this story many times, but to show you how it worked we had what we called a Sifting Committee at the end of the session. It was a committee designed to shut down the session and only bring out what they considered the "must" bills. It was done by secret ballot. A friend of mine who sat right behind me, a Senator, Senator Hoxie, got up and he said, "We haven't done anything for the farmer. It's high time that we passed something for the farmer, and I would like to bring up House File so and so." So it was all secret ballot, and I had indicated in that particular session that at no time would I vote by secret ballot, and therefore I would declare my vote. And they thought that was rather funny, but anyway they called for the vote after his little speech and I

announced that I was voting "Aye" on the bill and then I would vote "Yes" and sign my ballot and put it in the box. The rest would all fold their little secret ballot and put it in the box. Under the rules it took maybe five negative votes to kill a bill, so when they got to five "No" votes the bill was dead. They wouldn't bother to count all the ballots, you see. But in this case I noticed they were counting and counting and counting. So I inquired of Jack Shrader who was then the Chairman of the Sifting Committee as to what the problem was. Finally, we found out that there was one "Aye" vote in the box and the rest were all "No." So the Senator got up and spoke for the bill, brought it up, and voted against his own bill! So I was diametrically opposed to any rule allowing standing committees to vote by secret ballot. If it was any vote on a bill in committee which disposed of it in any way, I maintain it should be done by recorded ballot, made available in the Journal and in the press. Well, I introduced it in 1953 and was laughed out of the place. And I introduced it each session thereafter. In 1965, when we controlled both the House and the Senate, I introduced the rule which prohibited committees from voting by secret ballot, requiring the vote by open ballot available for scrutiny to the public and press. And then Senate File 1 by Frommelt was a bill which prohibited the secret voting on confirmations of Governor's appointees. So that forever, at least I hope, eliminated secret voting from the General Assembly.

K: You say in 1965 you controlled both houses. Weren't you a member of the Legislature the year that the Democrats held their caucus in

the phone booth?

F: Yes, I have a picture out here of three of us in the House. It was Falvey, Reilly and Frommelt. And this picture here. It was a joke by the press. There were three Democrats out of 108, 105 Republicans and 3 Democrats.

K: When was this?

F: 1953.

K: Oh boy. Of course that was the Eisenhower landslide.

F: And they kidded about and one day the press says, "Why don't you fellows caucus in the phone booth?" So we went over to one phone booth and they took our picture. It was in Stars and Stripes, and we had clippings from all over the world, you know. While it was humorous, it wasn't so funny. It was a case of three Democrats out of 108. You imagine the minority.

K: Well, at least you got a great deal of publicity. More probably than you got the rest of the session.

F: Well, they heard about Andy Frommelt, they knew Andy Frommelt was there in 1953 and ever since, really. If you're going to be down there you might just as well be fighting, otherwise stay home. That's the way I always figured. But, happy to say the secrecy was stricken from the Legislature. Which in its own self you know . . . Labor was always clobbered in committee with the secret ballot. You had the phony who was professing to the . . . Not just labor, but you would have someone who would profess to

be for something but would privately get in the committee and conspire with his colleagues to kill the bill that he was maybe speaking for. Then he would come out if it was defeated and say, "Well, I voted for it. Too bad, I was really for it, but those guys killed it." Or vice versa, you see. Always come out the winner. Well, the elimination of that, at least, made them honest to the extent that they had to "lay it on the line." Now, they could still be phony and if it was going to lose by three votes they could vote for it, you know. Or ten votes or whatever. But nevertheless at least they had to be recorded as voting for or against the issue.

K: We've been speaking for more than an hour, and I think this has been an excellent tape. In concludion, sort of a general question which I have been asking everybody--kind of a blanket question. Certainly you've seen changes in the unions, in the labor movement, in your career which spans thirty-some years. My question is your comments and observations on these changes and where do you think the unions are going now and what can they do to better their position?

F: Well, I personally would like to see the UAW and the Teamsters back into one labor body. I can remember when the Federation and the local Trades and Labor Congress were really tremendously powerful organizations. I'm not taking away from them today, don't get me wrong. But the house of labor is divided, regardless of the reasons why the Teamsters are out. Whether they had corruption or what is really beside the point. They are one of the most powerful trade union organizations in the country, and their

affiliation with UAW and anybody else that's out will certainly strengthen labor's hand. I don't know . . . I think labor has come a long way. I think they have some real shortcomings, because the worker is no longer hungry. Back in the days when I was fighting the battles we were talking about enough to eat. Really! Literally, you know. John Lewis talked about a crust of bread for the miners and he really meant it. They didn't have enough slices of bread to go around. And as a result, we used to have union meetings that were attended by 90 percent of the membership monthly. This was common, not the exception. Not at contract time. Now your trade unions meet and, most of them, the only time that they get together in any kind of numbers is maybe on a contract ratification vote.

K: I think the number is now 4 percent.

F: Four percent. So, as a result, there is not the cohesiveness. I'm not so sure that maybe the leadership is so far removed from the rank and file that maybe at times they speak for themselves without regard to the rank and file's feeling. As a result they are sort of discounted, especially politically, you know. Some of the organizations are so partisan that I suspect the members just don't pay any attention to how they suggest they vote, for example.

K: If George Meany comes out in favor of the Panama Canal Treaty as he did, my immediate reaction is, "How did the boys feel about that." I would guess that at least 50 percent of them disagreed with him.

F: I don't know what can be done about this. I suppose until

there's a rallying cry, there's a great need for, you know, a depression or something that would result in cohesiveness again.

K: A common complaint among the older fellows is the young people coming into the movement don't have any real understanding of where the movement came from or how they got the wages and benefits that they have.

F: That's right, and you really can't blame them, because there's no way they could know. If I tell my children that I earned $28 for eighty hours of the worst work possible this wouldn't register at all. They couldn't comprehend this. And there were people worked for a lot less than that. I don't go back a long ways. The rank and file of the labor movement are not really in tune with the leadership or vice versa. And it's not the dominant part of their life. At one time the church and the community and the trade union they belonged to and a couple of clubs--this was people's whole life. Well, now there are so many avenues of preoccupation. There's a lot of affluence. We have the boats, the TV. Even the fraternal clubs are no longer big any more because we're so spread out in our interests. So I think this is the problem, but I think if labor will unite somehow it ought to be brought about. I'm rather intrigued by some of the articles. I believe in the two-party system, but maybe labor is caught in a situation where they don't have any place to go. But the Democrats and the Republicans aren't about to do anything for them. So maybe they're in a kind of dilemma too. I don't know what the answer is. I don't know that a labor party would be the answer, but I know it is being talked about--has been for years and years and years.

K: Do you see any issues that might reinterest young people in the labor movement or use the labor movement as a vehicle something like consumerism? It seems to me to be a natural kind of an interest.

F: Oh, sure. Being perfectly candid, I think that the UAW has excelled in community action and political action, far more so than some of the other organizations. And they stress understanding of the various social and welfare programs, the helping of their members to qualify and get their benefits and so on. This is what it's all about. It isn't just negotiating a contract for wages and so on, but it's bettering the entire life of the membership. And I think this can be done by broadening that scope beyond just those narrow things that we associate with labor interests.

K: This is a question that you may not wish to answer. Can you see yourself getting involved in that?

F: Well, like the old firehorse, you know, at times I become so disturbed at some of the legislative proposals and enactments that I think are unfair to people. Things change and times change and attitudes change, but I sometimes get the feeling like I ought to be there and ought to be vocalizing on the issues as I feel. I suppose that will always be there. Eighteen years of active participation directly in the Legislature, plus many years in the background working on issues and helping candidates and so on, is a heck of a chunk out of an old guy's life, a lot of years. You can't just erase it by shutting it off like a light switch. No, I've always had this love and desire and I always will, I suppose.

K: At what point did you get into this business that you are now operating?

F: Well, I was in it after the battery plant closed. Incidentally, I was the union Business Agent while I was a Legislator, and the membership saw to it that I could go to Des Moines and fight for them, you know. And I did. Of course, we knew the plant was going out for some time, could see the handwriting on the wall. As a result I made the move, and, in fact, I was gradually working into insurance at the time this was coming about. So I got into the insurance business and stayed in the Legislature, and went into real estate, and so on. So now I'm an old businessman, you know, and I'm supposed to have forgotten all about my labor leanings, but, quite frankly, I can't. At heart I'm still basically a labor diehard. I have a great deal of affection for the labor movement. To just have it pass out of the picture, the working man is going to be in just as bad straits as he was at any time in history--taken advantage of by government, and by his employer, and by legislatures and everybody else.

K: Thank you, Mr. Frommelt.