Q: Was there anybody who said: "Let's look at all the factors to evaluate if this is the right time to go on strike."

A: Well, in the first place, we did not have any financial funds to support ourselves in case the strike was prolonged. We did not have anything. It was an immature decision that we made. But as I told you: One of the reasons was because—I personally, had never been in a union, much less participated in a strike, and I think it was similar for the majority of my companeros. We thought that we were going to control the situation very fast, and it was not like that. However, Alicia and Newman had the experience and they should have oriented us, as well as told us: you know what? What are the pick production months. But no. We started in June and it was not a good time to start a strike. What this meant was that we gave time to the *patron* to train other people for the months of pick production. In addition, we never stop to think that the *patron* could call workers who had worked there previously, who had experience making ornaments. We never thought about that and that was a very bad decision that we took, we the workers as well as Alicia and Newman. Because they may had seen us very enthusiastic, but they should have said this is not the right time. Because we went on strike in July, and October is the month when he starts getting very busy. Of course that he started getting ready since July, but the three months that were the heaviest were October, November and December. Since we did not think about that. Alicia and Newman should have thought about that. They should have told us to wait until October, maybe at that time we can win faster. It was our mistake and it was their mistake to go so soon on strike.

Q: After talking to some of the other workers. You and them had told me that the working situation got worst after you organize the union, negotiations were not taking you anywhere, and your salary was going down. Did you think at that time that the strike was going to accomplish what you could not accomplish during negotiations?

A: Well we thought that it was going to get worst—I personally was ninety percent sure that the situation was going to improve, but as I told you. Maybe it was because I did not have any experience in unions and strikes.
Q: When you discussed the strike with your co-workers, what came to mind?

A: I had seen strikes in Mexico, but I never paid any attention to them. I thought that a strike was going to be respected, what I mean is that if we were on strike, nobody was going to cross the line. That is what I thought, that the strike was going to be respected. We talked about that with Alicia and Newman and they told us about several things that we could do to hurt the patron, but later on, we could not do anything. They said that we could close the company because we could research--What I mean, no to close the company, but boycott it at the crafts shows that he went. They said that we could boycott the stores where he sold his merchandise. We were not able to do anything of that. Nothing. Another thing is that we did not have support from the state, and I do not remember us discussing it. The support I am talking about is that the strike needed to be respected. There was no law to stop the patron from hiring other people to replace us. Truthfully speaking: We did not think seriously about all those things before going on strike. I personally felt that we had won the struggle. The strike was presented to us as a "piece of cake". I assumed they had experience on those matters, they had to explain all those issues more in detail, Or they should had told us not to do it at that time because we did not have the funds to support a strike.

When we decided to go on strike there were three members who pressured everybody to go on strike. They said that if we did not go at that time, they would leave the union. I am sure that they also felt that we were going to win overnight. And they were the first ones to leave the strike. They looked for a job immediately, and they hardly ever went to the strike.

Q: Did you form any committees to support you during the strike?

A: No, we just said one night we go on strike, and we did.

Q: How did you tell the patron that you were going on strike?

A: I do not remember exactly, I think we just went to work the next day, but did not go in. We just started walking up and down with our signs. Maybe we sent a letter to the patron in advance.

Q: Sara, during our last interview you told me that the *patron* [company owner or supervisor] cordoned sections of his property, so that you could not talk to the scabs [replacement workers]. When did he hire the two guards to protect the premises and the scabs?

A: I do not remember the date, but it was after he blocked the entrance in the back of the shop. A few days after that, the security man came to work for him.

Q: Was the security man guarding front and back entrances?

A: Yes, he guarded both entrances. Sometimes his wife would work too, and she guarded the front and he guarded the back.

Q: How many times a week did you cover the picket line?

A: I was there almost every morning. I was there beginning at 5:00 a.m. I went home around 10:00 or 11:00 a.m. and I went back to the shop in the afternoon.

Q: How many workers covered the picket line with you?

A: At the beginning there were a lot. Then, later on, some started looking for work, and at the end it was only Dona Elena and myself.

Q: What else can you tell me about the picket line? Was it a new experience? Did you have any difficulties? Or, was it a nice experience?

A: Well, the experiences were good and bad. Among the good experiences, was the community support. We did not think that,
despite the short life of the union, we had so much impact in the community. And that was a beautiful experience for me personally. I think it was the same for all my compañeros (co-workers) because we met many people who were ready to help us.

Q: Do you remember the weekly lunch meetings you had with the community?

A: Well, we ate, had an information meeting and then we formed a circle holding hands, and we prayed for the problems to be solved. We hoped that our prayers would soften the heart of the patron and for him to understand that we did not want anything that was not right for us. We were asking him reasonable things, and we the workers felt that we had justice on our side. We understood that he had expenses, too, but we wanted for him to understand that we also had right. Foremost, we wanted Respect! —To be taken into account when they decided to change the wage in piece rate. They had to discuss it first with the workers.

Q: When you say “community”, are you talking about the Mexican, labor, or white community?

A: At the beginning the majority of the people supporting us were white. Later on, people knew by word of mouth and there were other unions that supported us. And, then, the Latino community supported us. It was the first time that we saw something like that here. People from different colors and backgrounds supported us.

Q: Can you discuss your not so positive experiences?

A: Well, the bad experiences were when we decided to go on strike, we never thought that the patron could hire other people. We saw how other people went in to work. It was a very difficult thing to see somebody taking our place. After so many years of working there, it was a hard experience. That was harder than the problems I had in my house because you know. We did not have a job, we did not have an income. We were suffering in our houses because we did not have the money to provide the necessary things
for our family. We were very limited. However, that was not as important as obtaining what we wanted. The experience of seeing other people taking my place was hard. Latinos, Asians...What was painful was the fact that we tried to talk to them to get the. W, we understood they had the need to work. But they needed to understand that they were going to take our places. We had been working there for over ten years. We told them that if we were out, we were out because we wanted to be respected in our work.” And we also told them that they were “crossing the line.” They did not care about all those things we told them.

Q: In addition to paid holidays, vacation, etc., were also demanding fair and equal treatment? Did you feel discriminated against because you were Mexicans?

A: I do not remember that to be a problem because the majority of the labor force was Mexican. The few whites who worked there, did not last because it was hard work.

Q: How about the supervisors? Were they white? Did any of the Mexican workers ever become supervisor?

A: Yes, we did not agree about all supervisors being white because we thought that probably some of us did not have the qualifications to become supervisors, but there were other Mexicans who could be good supervisors. Like Dona Elena daughter’s [Maria]. She knows Spanish and English. She is a United States citizen. And, they never offered her a supervisory job. We never agreed with those procedures. We did not like the company always hiring white people who did not have any experience in how to make the ornaments. We thought that a supervisor had to have experience in how to make the ornaments.

Q: How did monolingual [English only] supervisors communicate with you?

A: That is why I told you that there were some people among us who were bilingual and had experience with the ornaments. And they (the patrones) did not offered them the job. Since these
people knew the work, they would have been able to communicate with us. Also, they knew how the *patrones* wanted the ornaments to be made; they could easily have explained to us the job procedures. But no, they always went out and hire people who did not speak Spanish and who did not know how to make the ornaments. I think that was discrimination. They thought that a Latino person could not do a supervisory job. Because the woman who did the *masa* (dough) was bilingual, Lupe, who did not speak perfect English, but she spoke it better than some of us. She was always interpreting for the *patrones*. And, the *patrones* always exploited her badly and she never was a supervisor. The reality is that the *patrones* used her because they saw that she always went along with their demands. From the very beginning she was against the union. She always said that she made more money than us, but we never saw her pay check. So, I could not believe that for sure. When we asked to see her pay stub, she always argued that the patron ordered her not to show it to us.

Q  Going back to the picket line and the problems you had at home. Some women had mentioned that they had problems with their husbands because of all the changes in their lives. How was your situation at home?

A: I also had that problem because my husband told me that we were wrong thinking that the problems were going to be solved immediately. We had financial problems. You know that many times the problems between couples is due to the lack of money.

Q  What did you do when you saw time going by, and the strike was not over. What steps did you take to pressure the *patron*?

A: Like you said, as time went by. People started leaving. They became disillusioned because the majority of us thought the strike was going to be a "piece of cake"-- that we were going to solve all problems fast and easy. And after all, we had a very difficult experience.

Q  Did you think the strike was going to be a "piece of cake" or the strike was presented to you as a "piece of cake"?
A: Maybe it was presented to us like that, or maybe we misunderstood them (meaning Alicia [Sanchez] and Newman [Strawbridge]. Because as I told you, we never...I personally, had never participated...I had never been a member of a union. I had never participated in a strike, nothing like that. I did not know anything, and I think that the majority of my companeros were in the same position. They thought that our problems were going to be solved overnight. But we never reflected, the union organizers and us, about the obstacles that we could find during the strike. We never thought that the patron could hire as many people as he wanted. Even if he could only have hired 10 people, from those 10 people, 5 people could have stayed working; they could had been trainable. We never thought about or discussed that.

Q: What happened when your companeros started leaving? What did you do in your meetings with Alicia and Newman?

A: Sometimes they gave us strength and encouragement. Later on, they told us --because we started questioning them-- why the patron was hiring people and why we were not able to do anything about that. They explained to us that here [in the United States] the labor laws do not support the worker. The laws of the United States always support the patrones. So, we became even more disillusioned, and some members of the union started looking for jobs. You know that two or three months without working is very difficult for people, especially for the couples who worked there. One of them had to go out and look for work, either one of them, the man or the woman. But they had to earn at least one income. It became clear in those meetings that people started questioning our tactics. There were members who were very upset. Many of them did not go to the meetings any more.

Q: What happened when people complained in the meetings? What avenues did you take to solved the problem or the strike?

A: As I told you, many companeros got frustrated and sought jobs. In reality Alicia and Newman were not able to do anything because they said that the California laws did not support the workers only the patrones, that there was nothing we could do. We
could not stop the patron from hiring people. The government could not force him not to hire other people. There was nothing we could do about it.

Q: When you voted and decided to go on strike, was everything explained to you in detail by the union organizers? The situation with the scabs, the fact that your union did not have a monetary fund, that the strike could last more than two weeks, etc. Was everything explained to you?

A: Well, maybe it was explained to us, but maybe we did not understand it. As I mentioned, we never had an experience like that. And maybe they explained it to us but not in detail. But since they [Alicia and Newman] were the union organizers, they had experience in union organizing, and maybe they had experience on strikes. If they knew that our union was newly formed, our union was of course, a weak one --Not a strong union. We did not have monetary funds. We did not have anything. They should have recommended to us that it was not the best time to go on strike. They were the ones with experience.

Q: Do you think that if things were better explained to you, or maybe other Mexican workers with union-organizing experience came to your meetings and talked to you about the benefits and consequences of a strike. You would have reached the conclusion not to go on strike at that specific time or that you could have waited until October to take those steps?

A: Oh, yes, definitely. If we had had people with union organizing and strike experience talking to us, we could have waited until October.

Q: Other people say that your inexperience was a factor. But also the fact that the patron was a hard head?

A: Oh yes, the patron was a man that did not reason with anybody. According to him, he was always right, and his word for him was God's word.
Q: Were you part of the negotiating committee?

A: Yes.

Q: During the strike, how many times did you sit to negotiate with the patron?

A: I went only one time, but the others went two or three times during the week.

Q: How did you see the negotiations -- from your side and from the patron's side? Do you think you were well prepared to negotiate?

A: What I saw was that the patrones did not talk to us. They always talked to the union representatives; Alicia and Newman. In that case they were representing us. But, he had the responsibility to negotiate with us because we were his workers, not the representatives.

Q: Were you able to understand what they were talking about?

A: I understood some words.

Q: Do you think you were well represented? When you decided to go on strike, did you all sit down together, to write a contract proposal? Or did the patron come first with a proposal? If he came first, did you review it, accept or reject it?

A: I do not remember if we wrote a contract first, or if it was the patron. But I think we wrote it first.

Q: Who wrote it?

A: Alicia and Newman, of course. They asked us what we wanted and they wrote it.

Q: What did you want in a contract?
A: We wanted to be paid fairly. We did not want any more wage cuts. We wanted paid vacations according to our piece rate wage. And we wanted more than a week because they paid us only one vacation week at $5.00 an hour, regardless of how much money we made in piece rate. We also wanted health insurance for our family and sick days. We had several paid holidays.

Q Were you in the meeting when you and the *patrones* agreed on a contract and the time you could go back to work?

A: I do not remember because the last month of the strike, I was working. I remember that the *patron* gave an ultimatum. He said that if we wanted to return to work, we could do it. If not, we were going to lose our work. I remember that because later on we were interviewed by the man from the *Press Democrat* [Alvaro Delgado was a Press Democrat staff person and he covered the history of the union]. I was interviewed, and I told the news that the *patron* had squeezed our neck, that he had pressured us to return to work, since he gave us that ultimatum: If we did not go back to work...I do not remember if he gave an exact day to return to work, but he said that if we did not go back to work, we were going to lose it.

Q How did people feel about going back to work under such pressure?

A: The spirits were not high. People felt depressed because we spent many months without working, with problems in the house. Women had problems with their husbands and men had problems with their wives. We all had financial problems, and we did not achieve everything we wanted. So we did not go back to work in good spirits.

Q Where you present when Paulina Martinez was accused of hitting the woman guard with her picket sign?

A: No, I was not there. I went with others to take her out of jail. A group of workers went to release her. She was very hurt, and so were we. We all hugged each other, and we told her that we
were going to continue in the struggle, that we were not going to stop. She said the same. It was a very sad thing to happen in addition to the hard times we all were going through. However, we always had each other's support. Even when the patron did things that hurt us a lot, we got even more united. His tactics, instead of separating us, were uniting us even more.

Q  Some workers had mentioned that there were two workers that were working for the patron, and that...Tell me what you think?

A: Yes, those workers never shared...maybe at the beginning...they were close friends of Alicia, and they were also close friends with Lupe Farias. So they were close to the two sides. The reason we thought they got involved in the union is because they felt forced by their friendship with Alicia. That is why we thought they got involved in the union. They wanted to get the best from both sides. They thought: “If the union wins, we gain benefits.” If we lost, they wanted to secure their job through their friendship with Lupe Farias. Even the patron (during the strike) smiled and talked to them, and he never talked to us. We suspected them of giving information to Lupe. We felt they told Lupe about our plans. In our meetings we blamed Lupe for many of the problems, and they defended her. They said that she did not know what was happening. There was even a picket line right outside Lupe's home, and they did not go. So, they were playing both ends.

Q What happened when you decided on tactics, and the patron did something totally different in advance?

A: Yes, we told Alicia several times, not very openly, but we told them that information was getting to the boss. We meant Alicia and Uriel Caballero. And Alicia did not believe us. It is not like she said; “I do not believe it.” But, we saw that she did not believe us. There were people who confronted her directly, and she did not do anything about it. Let me tell you somethin: I am not
going to say that Alicia was even to all of us. If I wanted to talk to her, she listened to me. She found the time to listen to us. But, she could not believe that Alicia and Uriel could be telling the patron about our plans.

Q: How did you, the workers, and Alicia and Newman explain to yourselves the fact that the patron knew what tactics you were going to take in advance?

A: We did not know; I personally had my doubts that they were giving information to the patron. I think Alicia Caballero called Lupe and gave her information, but I cannot prove it because I never saw or heard it directly. Even when we went back to work, Lupe did not talk to anybody but Alicia and Uriel Caballero. She [Lupe] only talked to us the minimum related to work.

Q: Well, she was probably very angry at all of you because, during the strike, you organized a march right outside her house. And, also, you yelled at her when she went in and out of the shop?

A: Yes, we had a rally outside her house and the majority of the community who helped in the picket line screamed terrible things at her. Things that...They screamed horrible things to see if she would stop working. But, she never stopped working.

Q: Sara, how was it for you the first day you went back to work?

A: I will tell you. The first day of work for me...I even got sick. My stomach hurt all day because the atmosphere was horrible. People looked very bad at us. Nobody talked to us and we, well in reality when I went back to work, I did not feel embarrassed, let me tell you. I was very proud because I went back to work. I did not take anybody's work away. The opposite is true for them. They made our struggle harder because, if they would have supported us, we could have achieved faster what we wanted. But nobody
supported us. I did not feel bad because of the people inside, I felt bad about the way the patron forced us to return to work. Because he said: "If you do not return to work, you will not have it any more."

Q When you went into work, did you sit in your regular places, were you used to sit before, or did you have designated places?

A: Oh no, we sat in the places that were vacant, because the majority of the people who were working had their places already. But, I remember that they left one side of the shop for us.

Q Was that better for you -- to be all together?

A: I felt fine because maybe that was the company's plan. They did not want for any of us to be close to the scabs because we were outside, and we were very frustrated about the whole thing. Maybe that was a way for them to prevent any fights, but we never planned to attack physically any scabs.

Q Maybe it the *patrones* did not want you to talk to the scabs. The *patron* probably thought that inside you may change the scabs' minds about the union?

A: Maybe was that, because nobody talked to us. It was prohibited for them to talk to us.

Q Do you remember about Javier and Rosario? Her sister continued working during the strike?

A: Yes Lupita. She did not care about her sister Rosario being outside on strike, and she kept on working. She never wanted to be part of the union.

Q When you went back, I understand that you, Mario, Rafael and somebody else got the worst ornaments. How was that?

A: They always looked for ways to attack us through the work. The company was designing new ornaments every day -- harder
ones-- and the pay was not good. So, they [the *patrones*] were giving them to us hoping that we would grow tired and quit. Because they wanted to get rid of us. They did not want to recognize that we were good workers; we worked fast and good.

Q: What did you do when you got those kinds of ornaments? Did you call the union and talk to Alicia and Newman?

A: There was nothing the union could do about it. We had several problems because we made $20.00 some days; some days we made $12.00. So the situation was very hard. Later on, new orders came and the *patron* knew that the new people could not do the work. So he had to give the orders to us. However, he gave the orders to only two or three people, not to everybody. The scabs, and the people who were on their side kept making certain ornaments for months. Good ornaments, from which we made up to a $100.00 a day, the scabs received those ornaments for months, which means that they could make the same ornament for several months and always make more money than us.

Q: When you went back to work did the *patron* fire all the scabs or did he keep some?

A: He kept all the scabs. There was work for everybody. Later on, the people who left, left because they wanted to. One time an Asian guy told us that "he understood what we were fighting for, and that we were fighting for something good," but that he had plans not to stay in that company-- He said that he "was going to school to find a better job." In fact several people working there told us that they understood our struggle, but they probably were in great need to work.

Q: I understand from other workers that you were getting the worst ornaments, in terms of how hard it was to make them and how little the *patrones* paid for them. They said that that is how you hurt your hands. Is that true?

A: What happened is that they always attacked the people who were more active in the union, and I was one of them. So, that was
the way the patron attacked the most union active people. The way
he did it to me was by giving me difficult to make ornaments, and
the masa (dough) was very hard. I told Lupe to fix it for me. And
she always said: “Leave it there, when I have time I will fix it.”
Since I was not working by the hour, but by piece rate, I could not
waste any time. I fixed my own masa by hand. That affected my
health tremendously. Physically my hands were hurt. My back
ached a lot, my waist, too. Everything. I started going to the
doctor because my hands got very swollen. I could not close my
hands. The doctor told me that my tendons were swollen. My
doctor even told me to talk to my supervisor; and for me to stop
doing that kind of work. So, I talked to my supervisor. At that
time, we only talked to the supervisor, we never talked to the
patron. The supervisor told me that “if I could not make
ornaments, I could no longer work there because they “did not have
another position for me.” The supervisor told me that in case of an
opening, I was going to start making the minimum salary. How
could I start working for the minimum? When I had worked there
for thirteen years and I was making like $9.00 an hour? I could not
start making $4.00 or $5.00 an hour. That was ridiculous! I told
the insurance company exactly what my supervisor told me. The
insurance did not do anything, but my doctor told me not to work
any more because I was working under lots of pain. My doctor
gave me time off. When I went back to work, I simply could not
work. Finally the company’s insurance representative told my
supervisor that I could not work and that they should find another
job for me to do in the company. A year later, Stephany, the
supervisor sent me a letter informing me of a position opening. I
did not want to go because I feared them. I was afraid that it was
a set-up for me.

Q  Do you remember in what month and year you got sick?

My situation got worse little by little.

Q  Did you talk to Alicia and Newman about your situation?
A: Yes but nothing was done. The patron gave the excuse that he needed that production and that was it.

Q: By the time you went into disability, the union was not helping you at all?

A: That is correct. The company's insurance paid me for two months. Then they said that I was fine to return to work. I was without any income for over four months, until I started receiving disability. I received disability for two years, from 1991 to 1993, when I started working in my new job.

Q: When you left Calliope Designs, did you continue having contact with the union?

A: The union was gone by that time.

Q: How did you feel inside the shop at the time you were having a difficult time and the union was falling apart?

A: Well, we felt that all our efforts and sacrifices had not been good for anything. It was in vain.

Q: I understand that between the middle of 1980 and 1990 the union became part of Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Do you remember when and how you affiliated to SEIU?

A: I did not see any achievements with the affiliation. I did not see any benefits for the union with the affiliation. The workers' problems continued happening as before; we did not have beneficial changes after that.

Q: Did you keep in contact with the other workers to find out how they were doing?

A: No, when I left Calliope Designs I became very depressed. I felt very rejected by Calliope Designs because of my sickness. That hurt me a lot, I did not even want to talk to any of my co-
workers. I felt some kind of resentment because some of them said that I was not sick. They said that I only wanted to get money from the company. So, I felt very resentful. Sometimes I would volunteer for the union, or if there was a rally, I would go and support them.

Q Sara, looking back, could you talk about your experiences in the union organizing?

A: Look, one of the experiences I learned about was a union and a strike. First, when I used to look at people being on strike, I had no idea what it was all about. I thought to myself: “Those people are crazy: They are crazy because they do not want to work.” Now, when I see people on strike, I truly respect that strike because I know how much those people are suffering. I support them morally if I go by their picket-line because I know what they are fighting for. Another thing I learned: As long as I live, I will never cross a picket line. Maybe before, when I did not know anything about strikes, I could probably have crossed the picket-line due to my ignorance. But now I am changed.

Q How about in your work -- do you relate to your patrones or supervisors in a similar manner as in Calliope Designs?

A: Well look. The place I work for is a place that really cares for the workers. So, when you find a place like that, you cooperate because you see that you generate profits for that place, but you also see that they in return give you decent salaries and benefits.

Q What were the not so positive experiences that you had with the union?

A: At the end the strike, it became very negative, very violent and aggressive. The community that helped us became very aggressive and some of us too. Now I see that as very negative. If I was to participate in a strike again, I would do the opposite. And,
also, I would think about it twice. A strike is a very important
decision that cannot be made overnight. We need time to reflect
about what we are going to do. By going on strike, we risk our
families, our homes our marriages and our jobs.
Point St. George Fisheries workers

Francisca and Salvador Bejar, workers
Point St. George Fisheries

Q Salvador, where do you come from?
A: I am from Michoacan, Mexico.

Q Francisca, where do you come from?
A: I am also from Michoacan, Mexico.

Q Do you remember when you both immigrated to California?

Q Did you have previous experience with union organizing in Mexico?
A: Salvador: No.
Francisca: I had a little political experience. I worked in the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) office as a secretary. But real experience with unions, no.

Q Since you worked with the PRI party, did you know about election campaigns, and voting procedures?
A: Yes.

Q Francisca, when did you start working at Point St. George Fisheries (PSGF)?
A: I started working in April of 1979.

Q What was your first job?
A: I started peeling shrimp.
Q  Salvador, do you remember when did you start working for PSGF?

A:  I do not remember exactly what month. But I started the same year as Francisca, in 1979. I worked for one year, and then I left temporarily. I worked on the crab floor, and I also cleaned fish in my first job.

Q  Do you remember how much money you were earning?

A:  Salvador: More or less $2.75 or $3.25 an hour. That was the minimum wage.

Q  Francisca, for how long did you work peeling shrimp before you were moved to the fish fileting position?

A:  After I peeled shrimp, I packed fish. I think I worked in those two positions for several months before I became a fish fileting person. It is not right Chava? [Chava is in Spanish the short name for Salvador] Because that was the time when I married you. I became a filetera seven or eight months after I started working at PSGF. At that time, I started working piece rate.

Q  How about you, Chava, did you always work per hour or piece rate?

A:  My jobs were as follows: Clean crabs, pack the fileteras' fish, pack orders, and clean fish. I did those jobs in a rotating way. I was never doing one job all day long. Clean fish, fileting fish; big fish that were difficult for women to work with...

Q  Did you always earn the minimum wage?

A:  Well, my salary increased with time. When I stopped working there, I was earning $5.75 an hour. After working there for six years!

Q  Salvador, as I understand, work at PSGF was seasonal work. What did you do when you were not working at PSGF.
A: I worked on a ranch, in the field. I was back and forth at PSGF.

Q: Did you always work seasonally at PSGF, and never full time as the others?

A: Salvador: Yes. I only worked for two years consecutively, then I left for a while, and I went back again and I stayed for two years.

Francisca: In 1982, when our son Salvador was born, you were not working at PSGF. It was when the migra (immigration) took everybody away.

Q: When you started organizing the union in March and April of 1988, Francisca, you were already fileting fish for approximately eight years, and you Chava? What were you doing?

A: Chava: I was packing the fileteras' fish. This is how the process worked: 1) A man gave the fish to the fillets, 2) the fileteras filleted it, 3) other women cleaned it, 4) and I packed it. So it was a four step process.

Q: How much money were you paid per hour in 1988?

A: $5.75.

Q: Francisca, how much money did you make working piece rate?

A: It was approximately $7.00 to $9.00. But what we have to understand is that sometimes we only worked two to three hours a day. In some days I only made $27.00 a day. And I did not work every day.

Q: What did you do when you were not working fileting fish?

A: Some days we would work in the plant doing something else. We would pack fish, or cleaning salmon, or cleaning crab.

Q: How many women worked fileeing fish?
A: Francisca: We were approximately twenty women.
    Chava: Only in that section, because there were other women on the other side.
    Francisca: Yes but let's not count the others because they were being trained. The ones with experience were twenty.

Q: How many people worked peeling shrimp?
A: I do not know for sure, maybe twenty.

Q: How many people worked cleaning crabs?
A: Francisca: There were many more people.
    Chava: During the crab season at least forty to fifty women worked there.

Q: Can you tell me about the fish and shellfish seasons?
A: Francisca: For the shrimp it is when it is hot, during the summer. The crab season is during the winter. However, we worked peeling shrimp at the beginning, when we started working there. Later on, they removed the shrimp peeling machines, and we did not peel shrimp.
    Chava: Shrimp was packed there, when we received it, it came already peeled from the other plants. We only put it in cans and packed it. I think the shrimp came already peeled from the Oregon Plant. [The company owner had two or three other plants in addition to the plant in Santa Rosa. One in Oakland, one in Bodega Bay, and one in Oregon] We packed it in one or five pound cans.
    Francisca: There was fish all year round.

Q: What motivated you to start organizing yourselves into a union?
A: Francisca: We always saw the discrimination that existed between Mexicans and Portuguese. We always heard rumors about the Portuguese people having health benefits, and we? We worked so hard and we did not have any health insurance nor benefits. We were not paid holidays. Chava: We were paid less money than the Portuguese people.
Q: So if the company hired a bilingual Mexican worker with experience, did they offer him or her a supervisory position?

A: Both: No, there were not Mexican supervisors. Even if they were bilingual.

Q: What was the treatment Mexican people received in that place?

A: Francisca: There was no respect towards us whatsoever. The foreman, Tony de Lima, a Portuguese man was very offensive towards people. He would swear a lot. He would say very strong and offensive words towards the fileteras because sometimes the fish did not come out cut the way he wanted it. There was not respect towards the Latino workers. You know that the majority of the workers were Latinos. I do not know exactly how we started organizing ourselves. I think I heard Celia Mendoza talk about...Because once before a black man came to work there. Do you remember, Chava?

Chava: A Salvadorean man.

Francisca: He planted the seeds about union organizing, but when the bosses found out what he was doing, he got fired.

Q: Do you remember what year it happened?

A: Francisca: I think it was around one or two years before we did, 1985 or 1986. But when they [meaning the bosses] discovered his activities, he was fired immediately. However, the seeds were planted anyhow, Celia, I think, was one of the first ones who started organizing again.

Q: Let me go back to the treatment. How were the men treated, Chava?

A: Chava: In relation to men's treatment, it was easier. The foreman did not scream at us as much as he did the women. He would scream but into the air, never directly to another man. He would do it walking by, knowing that he could get into trouble if he insulted one man directly.
Q: Tell me now. How did you start organizing yourselves?

A: Francisca: By word of mouth. We were told about Alicia [Sanchez] and Newman [Strawbridge].

Chava: Before that the male workers held meetings in which we talked and commented about the lack of health insurance and other benefits.

Francisca: I think it is so sad that the Latino people are the poorest in this country. You should have seen, during that year I had my daughter Julieta and my son Salvador. At that time there was not any help for undocumented people. There was not Medi-Cal for us, so we had to pay for everything, we were always so broke, so poor. Chava my husband only worked during crab and shrimp seasons, as well as in the harvest season. We always said how can it be that the Portuguese people have health insurance, better salaries, and better positions and we do not have anything, even though we were the ones doing the work.

Chava: Even at the end of the year, when we received our Christmas bonuses, Mexicans only received one turkey, and the Portuguese people received two turkeys and a can of shrimp. The discrimination against the Latino people was more obvious.

Q: What was the ethnic breakdown in that place? Who were the workers and who were the supervisors?

A: Chava: The majority of the workers were Mexicans. The supervisors were Portuguese.

Francisca: And if there were one or two white people, they were supervisors.

Q: When you started organizing, did you hear about the other group of Mexican workers from Calliope Designs who were already in the organizing process?

A: Francisca: Yes, I think so, because they were already organized.

Chava: Yes, the monitos (ornaments) ones. Francisca: What I remember is that we all agreed that we were going to get together
at Alicia and Newman apartment at Sonoma Avenue. The word of mouth was passed and we all went. The beautiful thing about it is that many people came. We all had hoped to have some changes.

Q: It is my understanding that when you wanted to start the organizing process, a women's committee went to talk to Alicia.

A: Francisca: I think that at that time Celia and my comadre had gone to talk to Alicia. I do not remember if I went Laura. I remember the first time we went, right, Chava? We all got together.

Q: Alicia told me that she told the committee that if you wanted to organize a union, you had to collect signatures from your other co-workers?

A: Chava: Yes, we signed some cards, I think so. Francisca: I think so Laura. Chava: We signed because I think she [Alicia] wanted to know how many people were interested in a union. After that, the meeting was organized. It was organized by word of mouth.

Francisca: I remember we were a lot of workers because we could hardly fit in that big room.

Q: Do you remember what happened in that meeting?

A: Francisca: The only thing I remember is that everybody came out from that meeting with our spirits very high. Everybody felt that we were stepping into paradise. But they told us that it was not going to be an easy organizing effort. They told us that it was going to be hard, the struggle. And as they said; the struggle was very hard.

Q: What did you tell Alicia and Newman?

A: Francisca: We said everything to them. We told them about the poor treatment we received; the terrible discrimination against Mexicans. We also discussed the low salaries Mexicans got
in that place. We also told them about the fact that we did not have health insurance. Most of all, we did not get paid holidays, nor paid sick days. We did not get paid anything, anything!

Q What did Alicia and Newman tell you about organizing a union?

A: Francisca: Well, all that about organizing ourselves. They explained to us very well that if we had over fifty percent of the votes for a union, we won. But if not, we lose. That is why we had to talk very well with all the workers about the union.

Q What else did they [Alicia and Newman] say about union organizing?

A: Francisca: Yes.

Chava: I do not remember very well, but they mentioned many things...that it was not so easy, that we had to support one another, that we had to...since that company was very strong, it was going to be hard.

Q Did they tell you about the Patron's (company owner) campaign to stop you from having a union? about strikes? its benefits and consequences? etc.

A: Chava: yes,

Francisca: yes, I remember they explained all of that. Yes I do remember everything! they told us that when we started the organizing effort for an election, the patron might fire many of us. We were so determined about what wanted to do. Even if the plant got closed and moved to another place. But if that happened we were all going to be f... up, them, the patrones and us, not only us the workers. And as we said! I was so happy, and I think the majority of the workers were very happy. [The plant closed down in 1993].

Chava: The plant already had problems, because the buildings were very old and the owners had problems with the state. The state wanted for them to renovate the buildings. But for them it
was easier to buy, I think they bought a new building near Sacramento, I do not know exactly where, but they moved over there.

Q: Do you think that your union organizing influenced them to move the plant some place else?

A: Francisca: Yes of course, it had a lot to do with it, because they were not receiving as many profits from the Latino labor as they were before we organized ourselves. So it was not beneficial for them to stay open in Santa Rosa.

Q: Do you think that your organizing affected the company's image?

A: Both: Yes, of course.

Q: Let's go back to your first meeting. What was your next step after the first meeting?

A: Francisca: Look, first of all, we had meeting after meeting to organize an election for a union.

Chava: What I liked the most, after we all agreed for a union was the fact that would all stop working for a while and walk outside to rally together.

Francisca: I think that was during the picket-line period.

Chava: We loved it, the majority of the workers used to come outside and rally.

Q: Do you remember when you started organizing yourselves? [April 5, 1988] This was after you all signed the cards for an election. How did you let the patron know that you wanted a union?

A: Francisca: Oh, yes, yes. How much I remember, with how much pride we wore or bandanas around our arms. I think they were yellow. After that we wore buttons and the T-shirts. The buttons were a rose and a hammer and it said: We want a union,
queremos un sindicato. Later, we had our T-shirts. It was all the small fish in a shape of a big fish that was eating a big fish, and it said: organize!

Q Do you remember a big rally outside the plant?

A: Francisca: Yes,
   Chava: Many people helped us, many people went over there. Francisca: The one we walked inside the plant? Yes that one. I was interviewed by the TV. That was the way we told the patron that we were organizing ourselves, that we wanted a union because there was lots of media there, and other unions came to support us, too. There were lots of white people supporting us. It was all so beautiful, the spirits were so high.

Q What was the answer the patron gave you?

A: Francisca: They did not want to talk to us.

Q What was your next tactic?

A: Francisca: We had the picket lines. When did we have our election Laura? [June 17, 1988]. Since we started organizing ourselves in April, the campaign for an election lasted for over two months.
   Chava: During those two months, we continued wearing the buttons and the T-shirts.

Q I understand that you formed different committees to talk to people in their homes, to inform the community, media, etc. Did you participate in any committees?

A: Francisca: You were secretary of one, do you remember? [Talking to Chava]. I think I talked to people, we also called them on the phone.
   Chava: We talked to people at the plant during lunch time. We would go and eat together, and discuss.

Q Do you remember what were the people's fears for not joining the union?
A: Francisca: Their main fear was to lose their job,  
Chava: Yes, they did not want to lose their jobs.

Q How about undocumented people, were they scared?

A: Francisca: It was even worse, for them, although many  
people had fixed their papers. Both: About fifty percent of the  
workers were without papers.  
    Francisca: Some people without papers wanted a union.  
    Chava: Some wanted a union badly.  
    Francisca: Their main fear was losing their job and having to  
go find another.

Q Did they have fears that the *patron* would call the *migra* (immigration) on them?

A: Francisca: No.  
     Chava: There were some comments about that. Francisca: Not  
that the *patron* would call the *migra* on them because it was  
convenient for the *patron* to have illegals there. It is because of  
their [Mexicans] back breaking labor that they became millionaires.  
     Chava: And also some other people.  
     Chava: I remember that we would take an hour at lunch break,  
and go to talk to the workers, we talked to approximately forty  
workers.

Q What did *patron* do when you started organizing the union?

A: Francisca: He sent the fish someplace else, and he did not  
bring fish to this plant. Only once in a while, he would bring fish  
to Santa Rosa. He took many working hours away from us.  
     Chava: Exactly. Francisca: He took hours away from everybody,  
especially from those ones who were the organizers. Especially  
the fileteras, because we were the ones who started the organizing  
efforts.

Q Why were the *fileteras* the organizers, since you were the  
group of workers who made more money?
A: Francisca: Yes, we were making more money, but we had the responsibility because we were all Latinos, and we were the ones who got fucked-up all the time. For me the fight was for one and for all. I do not know if you understand. It is true that we were the best paid people there, right?

Q Do you know where the *patron* was sending the fish?

A: Chava: To Bodega Bay, San Francisco, and Oregon.

Francisca: Simply he did not buy fish. Chava: --talking to

Francisca: You know that he sent all the fish to San Francisco. It was packed there, I do not know exactly where in San Francisco, also here in Bodega Bay.

Francisca: Right, the damn *patron* has a little plant in Bodega Bay. You know what makes me very happy? That the damn man bought a huge house near Stony Point. And now? He has to work as hard as the others. Even now a days, we still savoring our vengeance of them been forced to close their plant in Santa Rosa.

Q What other actions did the *patron* take during the campaign for the union election?

A: Chava: He closed the door and would not let people go in. They put two to three security guards on each entrance.

Francisca: I remember they did that because sometimes Alicia would go during our lunch break to talk to people. Also some Latinos used to go inside to sell things: tortillas, jewelry, clothes. So in vengeance he kicked everybody out. They did not let any more people to go in and sell stuff.

Q How were you prepared for the union vote?

A: Francisca: Oh Laura, you ask me these questions at this time many years after? I do not know. All I remember is that Alicia prepared us. She taught to us how to vote, how the voting ballot would look like. She did all that because there were even people who did not know how to read and write.
What happened when you had your election? [June 17, 1988]

Do you remember what were the election results? [157 --137 voted yes for a union, and 20 against]

A: Francisca: No. I do not remember. Yes because some people -the Portuguese woman, the foreman, took some women out to lunch, according to her to celebrate the defeat of the union. And what a surprise! We won by a big margin.

Q How were your spirits after you found out that the union was not being recognized by the company?

A: Chava: Of course, people felt bad. Many people were tired already.

Q How were you prepared by Alicia and Newman about the possibility of the company not recognizing the union?

A: Francisca: Well, they told us everything. I admire Alicia and Newman very much, especially when they were married. Because Newman was a very respectful man, and he always gave us courage to continue the struggle. They gave us the tools to learn how to defend ourselves. I think many people learned how to defend themselves in their lives.

Chava: I think the same way, many of us opened our eyes to reality even more. We awakened to our rights. Many of the people working at PSGF presently have better jobs.

Q What happened after you won the election. Did the company recognize the union as the collective bargaining?

A: Both: No. Chava: some people got laid-off because there was not enough fish.

Francisca: They [the bosses] simply said that there was no fish. It is gone --bye bye.

Q What actions did the union, or you the workers take about that?
A: Francisca: One time --talking to Chava, what did we do dear? When they laid-off people, what did we do? We did the picket line.

A: Chava: Yes, we used to go outside and did a picket-line.

Q: Do you remember that the company made over 65 complains about the way the election had been handled by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and by the way the workers carried out the campaign for election?

A: Chava: Yes I remember, I went to testify. [Mr. Bejar and other workers were accused of pressuring other workers to vote for the union. They were also accused of saying things to white and Portuguese supervisors]. I remember now. Yes, as I told you previously. We used to get together and talk among ourselves. So I went to testify. We were approximately ten people, men and women. The company lawyers asked us questions about the campaign for the union election, then Mr. Neil Herring our lawyer asked us different questions. At the end we proved that we did not insult nor threatened the white and Portuguese supervisors.

Q: I understand that you had to buy the equipment you worked with --boots, knives, knife sharpeners, aprons, and gloves? Do you remember that the union lawyer, Mr. Herring sued the company for forcing you to buy protective gear they were supposed to provide to you?

A: Francisca: Yes, but after we won a contract, they had to buy everything for us.

Q: How was the community support during all this time? first you had the campaign for an election. Then you had the picket lines protesting the company sending the fish to another plant? What was the community's role in all of these activities?

A: Francisca: The community support was fantastic!

Chava: We had support from all the communities! Francisca: The largest support we received came from the white community.

Q: How about the Mexican community?
A: Chava: They helped us a lot, they were always there.
Francisca: People from all over came to support us: Family, friends, and people we did not even know. They supported us in the picket lines and in the marches. You could see the people carrying banners, and signs.

Q Your union was not recognized by the company until July 21, 1989. How did people feel during that year?

A: Francisca: Many people felt like everything we had hoped for and battled for was evaporating. They felt like they did not want to continue in the struggle. Can you imagine? Some of the active people were fired. Those ones who stayed working, our working hours were tremendously reduced. It became very hard to continue in the struggle. But more than anything else we had the spirit to continue the struggle. If we had agreed from the beginning not to stop. We had to continue. Even the people that got fired, they continued coming to support us in the meetings, marches, and the picket lines.

Chava: I left on my own in 1988 when I went to work for the labor operating engineers union.

Q What happened when you were certified?

A: Francisca: I do not remember many things. I do not remember sitting at the table negotiating with Les Mundson, I think Celia Mendoza was in the negotiations committee.

Q Do you remember if you wrote your first contract proposal or if the patron presented it to you?

A: Francisca: I do not know because Alicia was in charge of doing all of that. I do not remember the contract exactly, but I remember that the company started paying us holidays. Some workers received health insurance, but only those ones who worked certain hours a month. We the fileteras never worked many hours, so we did not receive health insurance. The union fought for us to have health insurance, but I think we did not get it. Maybe we got
the one where the company paid 80 percent, and we paid 20 percent. I did not get health insurance for my family because you had to pay for them.

Q: Did you see a change in the working conditions and treatment after the contract was agreed upon?

A: Francisca: Yes, we were treated more respectfully, more like humans.
Susana Garcia, worker,
Point St. George Fisheries
Tell me about your experiences at the plant during the organizing efforts?

A: We suffered a lot, the most active union members experienced terrible treatment from the bosses. We were put to do the worst jobs, the bosses made terrible comments about the union, and they were mean to us. After Alicia left the union, the situation at work became even worse. Cesar, our new union representative from the Local Janitors 87 never provided any services to us. I got hurt at work and never receive any compensation.

What experiences did you learn from the union organizing?

A: I learned to see the power of the people united for a same cause. The union helped me a lot. I lost the fear of not being able to do things I had never done before. You know, how people feel when we think we cannot do anything that goes beyond our daily chores. I got courage, strength and a voice to denounce social injustice, the injustice against people. Principally against children, just look at the proposition 187. We went out and protest in the streets against that proposition.
Agueda Gomez, worker,
Point St. George Fisheries
Agueda Gomez, worked at Point St. George Fisheries. First interview. February 24, 1996

Q. Agueda, could you tell me where do you come from?
A: I am from Jalisco, Mexico.

Q. Had you worked in Mexico before you came to California?
A: No, never.

Q. Did you have any union organizing experience in Mexico?
A: No, this was all new to me. This was the first time I became involved in organizing a union.

Q. Do you remember in what year you started working at Point St. George Fisheries (PSGF)?
A: I started working in 1981.

Q. What was your first job at PSGF?
A: I started packing fish. I did not start as a filetera (fillet er).

Q. For how long did you work packing fish?
A: I worked packing fish for about a year and a half.

Q. Do you remember how much money you earned per hour?
A: I do not remember if it was $3.75 or more.

Q. When did you start working as a filetera?
A: I was trained for one year to be a filetera. I got paid per hour rate. After that year, I had the opportunity to move to the fileteras' line, and that is how I started. The only thing is that since we were new in that position, we were at the end of the line.
Q: When you moved to the fileteras' line, did you start earning the piece rate?

A: Yes, when I was moved to the fileteras' line, I got paid by the piece rate.

Q: How much money were you making per piece rate?

A: It depended in the kind of fish and the size. However, we earned more or less $8.00 to $11.00 an hour.

Q: But I understand that you rarely worked more than six hours a day and five days a week?

A: Yes, there were days that we worked only two to three hours a day. Or some days we had to wait for the fish to come, and during that time we worked per hour rate.

Q: Did you show-up to work everyday?

A: No, they called us a day before, or early in the morning, to let us know if there was work.

Q: What was the ratio of hours you worked per week?

A: Well, that was not a lot because there were times in which we worked twenty hours a week, other weeks we worked thirty. But we never worked forty hours a week.

Q: Did you have to buy your protective gear and knifes to work at PSGF?

A: The company gave each of us a knife. They had a log of when and to whom they gave knives. They said that we could only receive a knife every two or three months. We could not have new knives before that time. When we received our new knifes, we had to return the used knife. The same system was used to receive aprons. We used to buy the knife sharpener (stone) and the chaira (steel to sharpen knifes). We needed both the stone and the chaira.
I think we had to pay $8.00 to $10.00 for the stone. And the chaira cost $20.00 to $25.00. We also had to buy our boots; they cost approximately $20.00, and they lasted like a year.

Q: I understand that Mexican workers received poor treatment from the company's managers and supervisor, is that true?

A: Mr. Toni de Lima was not too friendly. Well, he was always making sure that all the workers were always working, working. He did not like for people to talk, he always wanted to see us like machines; always producing, and producing. I think, is impossible. He needed to be better prepared to be a supervisor. Be nicer to workers because I think that, if there is communication between the workers and the supervisor, the work and the production will have better results.

Q: In addition to him being unfriendly, did he insult the workers?

A: Yes, I heard him some times swearing at workers; he had bad manners and mouth.

Q: Before I continue asking you about the treatment workers received, let me ask you this: How was the racial breakdown in PSGF?

A: The majority of the workers in production were Hispanic, and there were some Portuguese people and some whites. Latino people worked the hardest because they [owners] always favored Portuguese people for the supervisor's job. White people also had different jobs, but nobody worked in production the way we did. They [whites] were always doing things like driving the fork lifts, and they were in the shipment department. So the treatment between Mexicans and Portuguese and whites was very different.

Q: Can you talk more in detail about the treatment you received?

A: Well, we wanted to have equal rights for all the workers at PSGF. We wanted to have the same working hours for everybody,
we wanted for everybody to have equal access to better jobs. We wanted to receive health benefits because we knew that the Portuguese people working there received health benefits. So we asked ourselves: "Why them and not us, too? We wanted equality." That was discriminatory.

Q Did you have any kind of health benefits?

A: None. If people got sick and did not work, they did not have a salary. We did not have paid holidays. At that place, if you worked, they paid you, otherwise, you made no money.

Q Since you worked with dangerous equipment, what happened when workers suffered accidents?

A: If we cut ourselves at work, and we did not work for few days, they did not cover any salaries or expenses. Unless a person cut herself very, very bad. Then she was taken to the hospital. If the cut was not too bad, she went to the office and they put a bandaid and a plastic protector on for the finger, and she was sent back to work. If she felt that she was bleeding a lot, she went home. But she did not receive any compensation for that. So, if we saw that the cut was not too bad, we just kept on working because we needed our salary.

Q What happened when a worker hurt herself quite badly. Was she able to receive workers' compensation?

A: Well yes. But it required a longer process. There were people there [PSGF] who fell down and hurt themselves very badly. And they [owners] got very upset because the workers complained to workers' compensation, and they [owners] denied it. They said that nothing happened there, that nobody hurt himself there. So the burden of proof lay on the worker, even though they could prove from the doctor's visit that in fact, they hurt themselves there. When they [workers] recuperated from their injury, they did not return to work at the company. [Workers] had to leave permanently because the company did not take them back.
Q I understand that before you started your organizing efforts in 1988, there had been in the past, some people who wanted to organize a union. Is that correct?

A: In reality, I do not remember.

Q Agueda, what motivated you to start organizing a union?

A: Well, we were tired because we received terrible treatment, more than anything else. We did not receive any benefits. That is when we, the workers decided to unite ourselves to start a new stage in our lives to have our dreams become alive.

Q Do you remember how you started organizing yourselves?

A: We started in 1988. We knew about Alicia [Sanchez] and Newman [Strawbridge]. We were told that they organized unions and that probably they were able to help us. We were told that, if we were willing to unite ourselves, they could help us. We decided to have a little meeting with them to see if how many people wanted to organize. And we were able to do it.

Q Before that meeting, there was a group of representatives who talked to them. Were you part of that group?

A: Yes. Alicia told us that, first of all, we had to have all the workers in agreement with the union because we had to have the majority of the votes. So we started talking to the workers and the majority...Well we did not find one that could say no. There were some who were a little scared, but as time went by, we continued talking to people to convince them about the union, and we obtained good results. First, we signed union cards, we needed to have more than fifty percent of the workers signing them to make sure we had the sufficient number of people wanting a union, to start an election campaign. When we had collected the cards signed, we had our large meeting with Alicia and Newman.

Q What do you think made people scared of organizing?
A: To lose their jobs, because we knew that the supervisors were going to be unhappy about our organizing efforts. That is why they were scared of losing their jobs. Undocumented people were very scared to lose their jobs because they thought that through the union organizing it was going to be discovered that they were living undocumented in this country.

Q: Do you remember where the first meeting was? And how many workers went to that meeting?

A: It was near Sonoma Ave. And, we were few workers going to that meeting, maybe 20? [Five to six fileteras went to the initial meeting]. That was the fileteras' meeting. Then, at the second meeting, there were lots of people, we could not even fit in the meeting room.

Q: Do you remember what happened in that meeting?

A: Well, Alicia and Newman were talking to us about what we could do, and what we could not do. They wanted for everybody to agree with everything. They asked if we were willing to go on strike. At the beginning we all said: Yes! But later on, we analyzed things better, and we felt that it was going to be hard for us because if the owners had other companies, they were going to take the fish there. The strike could be too long, and we were going to be tired, we were not going to have any money, and it was going to be difficult to change the strike. So, instead, we decided to have daily picket lines. Alicia and Newman told us that we should always be united and that, the patrones [company owner] were going to tell us, anyway not to join and that they were going to give us a better salary, health benefits, things like that. But this was not going to happen because we had started to organize and they [owners] were not going to agree with the union.

Q: Did they explain to you what it involved to organize a union?

A: Yes, they told us everything. They told us that by having a union we were going to have more protection at work. They said that if we won the election for a union, we could have full benefits.
They also talked about union dues, they said that we had to pay a monthly fee to the union. They also told us that, if we were not able to organize ourselves, we could lose our jobs.

Q: What tactics did you use to inform the patron about your organizing efforts?

A: We wore a button that said: We want a union (Queremos un sindicato). And we wore an arm-band; I do not remember the color, but we wore one. The owners were very surprised when they saw us wearing those things because, they could never believe that we could organize a union.

Q: Before wearing your buttons and arm-bands, you had a large rally outside the plant. [April 5, 1988] Community members and other workers came to support you. Do you remember the purpose of this rally?

A: We wanted to tell him [company manager] about the union. I think about 300 people came to support us--because there were lots of people. The patron did not want to receive us; he closed all the windows and curtains and never came out. Everybody started chanting. Since we did not obtain a meeting with him, we all decided to leave. However, we decided to continue what we started. We were not going to stop just because of that.

Q: What tactics did you use for your campaign for an election for collective bargaining? The union election was in June 17, 1988, two months after you started the campaign?

A: Well, we had weekly meetings and we were always talking about how beneficial the union was for us. We were aware that the patron was telling workers not to vote for the union because, according to him; "was not going to help in anything because before it would [the union] help us, it was going to harm us because we could lose our jobs, and that there was not going to be work at PSGF anymore."

Q: At that time the patron laid-off many people, do you remember? [As a response to the union organizing efforts, the
patron laid people off immediately after the rally in April 5, 1988--twenty fileteras, fifty fish packers, and 65 workers from other areas].

A: Yes, because there was hardly any work. The *patrones* were sending the fish someplace else. So it was rare to be called for work because we were working only one or two-part-time days per week.

Q What did you do in the meantime for your campaign?

A: We had picket lines. We each chose a shift to be outside the plant on the picket line.

Q What did you do for money?

A: We had to tighten our expenses because we only had enough money to pay for our bills and rent. My husband was working, so it was not so bad for me. It was bad for couples that were employed at PSGF! However, we organized ourselves into committees to request food and monetary donations to help people who were hurting the most. That helped them a little because when the couple worked there, it was more difficult for them. For some of us--it was easier economically because our husbands worked full time someplace else. My husband always worked full time, while my wages were reduced to almost nothing. Even though it was hard, I always wanted to continue in the struggle.

Q Can you discuss more about the picket line?

A: We started around 7:00 a.m. We were there approximately two hours. Then, some other people took over. We did all this because we never wanted to leave the picket line alone.

Q What else did you do to prepare yourselves for the election?

A: We had weekly meetings, and Alicia and Newman prepared us for the election. They explained to us what to do in an election.

Q Do you remember how the election day was?
A: Yes, because they [National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)] set up some little booths for people to vote silently. We were supposed to vote without anybody looking at our ballots. I had to show my identification when I went inside the plant. The *patrones'* observers were there, maybe to make us nervous, but they did not say anything to us.

Q: Do you remember what the vote results were?

A: I do not remember but the difference was large [137 workers voted in favor and 20 against the union].

Q: What did you do after the election?

A: We felt very happy, but I am not sure if we had a celebration right after.

Q: What did you do when you knew about the company appealing to the NLRB to overrule the election?

A: I do not remember what happened exactly. [The company filed close to 60 objections against the union election. Most of them were against the NLRB and how its officials carried out the election].

Q: Do you remember what the union did to keep the spirits up while the NLRB decided to approve or overruled the election?

A: Well, everything was in suspense because, in terms of work it was relatively the same. We hardly had any work, and we tried to do our best because we wanted the benefits. But, the long waiting was demoralizing to people. We did not have any more picket lines.

Q: Do you remember about the union having a class-action against the company for charging you for the protective gear?

A: Yes, but I do not think we received a retroactive pay. However, if we got paid, I do not remember receiving any money.
I left PSGF in 1989 because I was very tired of having work only once or twice a week. I needed to bring more money to my house, so I started looking for another job. At that time, I started cleaning houses and taking care of children. I was making more money doing those two jobs because I had more working hours. I did not keep in contact with the union. I truly became detached from the union because I was very busy with my new job and my children. All I knew was that the union was approved, but it really did not matter because people continued not having enough hours to work. [Workers received retroactive money on May 1, 1990. Approximately 700 workers received from $1.00 to $200.00 in reimbursement for the prior expenses in protective gear. This was a bust to the workers' morale. In July 21, 1989, the union was certified by the NLRB, and negotiations started shortly after that].

Q: Anything else you would like to say about the union?

A: Well for me, it was a beautiful experience because we have to be united if we want to better ourselves. We know that if we come to this country it is because we want to progress. So, I think the union was great for us because we were united, and we became triumphant, even though at the end, everyone found different jobs or something else. However, it was a good experience for our future. If we decided to become involved in another union, well, we would be better prepared. The union helped me, personally, because I understood that we have to better ourselves, and not stay in one job for life. The union helped me to realize that I also have rights in this country.

Q: If you were to have another opportunity to become involved in a union, would you participate again?

A: Yes! [Agueda and her husband have become very successful. She has a small house cleaning business, and her husband opened a Mexican Restaurant].
Julieta Martin Del Campo, worker
Point St. George Fisheries

Julieta Martin Del Campo emigrated from Jalisco, Mexico in 1975, and started working for PSGF in 1978 packing fish. Del Campo is a very frank and strong woman. She has worked in the fish-processing industry for approximately eighteen years. Although she feels that working with fish is difficult, Del Campo continues working in this industry because she earns more money than in any other industry.

Q Julieta where do you come from?
A: I am from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

Q Did you work in Guadalajara?
A: Yes, I worked as a secretary in a government institution.

Q How many years did you work for that institution?
A: Four years approximately.

Q What did you immigrate to California?
A: In 1975.

Q When did you start working at Point Saint George Fisheries? (PSGF)
A: I started working at PSGF around 1978.

Q What was your first working assignment?
A: I packed fish first, and when the patron, [company owner, or company manager] Manuel De Lima saw that I was very active, he put me on cleaning the offices. I continued cleaning the offices about a year. At that time, I separated from my husband, and of course, I had extra financial needs. I asked the patron for a loan
because I needed money to feed my children. He said to me: "You know what, Julieta? You are a very active person, so I am going to help you." At that time, he started teaching me how to be a filetera (fillet). This was around 1980. I was trained for about six months. I stayed in the training section because there was not an open spot in the filetera line. Only when a filetera missed work for whatever reason, Manuel De Lima would assigned one of the training women to filetear (fillet). A woman was promoted to the filetera line when somebody retired or resigned from the company. I do not know if a person left or retired, but I was finally promoted to the filetera line.

The fileteras with more experience were at the beginning of the belt, and the ones with least experience were at the end of the belt. The fileteras stationed at the beginning of the belt, had the privilege to chose the best fish to work with. The fileteras at the end of the belt got what was left.

Q: When you were packing fish, were you paid by the hour or piece rate?

A: I was paid by the hour.

Q: How much money were you earning by piece rate?

A: Well, look I think I was making a little more than before. Because, at that time we were paid $ 3.75 per hour. And, by working piece rate, our checks showed that we made close to $ 5.00 or $ 6.00 an hour. And, for that time, it was lots of money. We were making close to $ 40.00-$ 50.00 a day.

Q: How were your wages in comparison to other workers?

A: Well, much better because, at that time, I started working in a cannery, and I did not last. I realized that I made more money working at PSGF than in a cannery. So, I stayed there.

Q: I understand that fileteras seldom worked the regular forty hours a week.
A: No, there was not need to work forty hours. During the season we worked more than forty hours a week. Even when it was no the season, we always had work because the company usually had to supply fish to customers.

Q: Did you pack fish when there was no fish to filetear?

A: Yes, I worked in the salmon area, or I packed fish. But, when I worked in those areas, I was paid by the hour.

Q: What was the ethnic breakdown?

A: Well, you know that work related to fish is very tough. It is absolutely under-paid, so the people working in this industry, are going to be the undocumented Mexicans. Because they (bosses) try to f... us with hours, work, with everything!

Q: I know this is hard to answer because people do not go around saying: "I am documented, or I am not documented." But we have an idea who is documented and who is not. In your own estimate what was the percentage of people without "papers" vs. people with "papers?"

A: It was a hundred percent people who had no "papers." And, they [bosses] knew who did not have "papers". I did not have "papers" either. However, they see your willingness to work, and they take you in. That does not mean that they [bosses] were nice to us. They paid less to people and they [bosses] tried to cheat people in many different ways. Celia, who was the senior worker among us, was always helping people fight for their rights. You would often see workers arguing about the number of hours they worked because the hours they got paid did not reflect the hours they worked. Celia also helped people requesting protective gear for work, she was always helping us. She helped fileteras a lot because we knew how many pounds of fish we filleted, and at the end of the day, they said that we filleted less pounds. When they weighed the fish you filleted, they always said that you did at least two to three pounds less. Do you know how much money that was? At least $10.00 each pound that they wanted to cheat away
from us. Of course, all the supervisors were Portuguese, and the
general manager was white. The bosses were Portuguese. And, of
course, Mexicans were the ones in production.

Q  How were the working conditions in terms of safety?
A: Well, we had good insurance. I had a few accidents in which I
cut my fingers, and they paid my days and took me to the hospital.
Some people hurt their backs, and the bosses took care of them.

Q  What kind of insurance are you talking about? It is my
understanding that you did not have health insurance coverage.
Other workers have also told me that safety in the working place
was not that good. Workers needed to be cut severely to be taken
to the hospital. And, unless you made a workers compensation
claim, the company did not pay you for the days you did not work,
even if it was a work accident.

A: I meant workers compensation. Well, let me tell you. Fish is
very delicate. Fish packers did not use sharp knives. They used
knives but not sharp ones. So, if there was an accident among fish
packers, it was because of the fish spines. The people who
suffered more serious accidents were the fileteras. If I cut myself
and did not work for two days, I did not get paid. If I did not work
for more than three days, and it was a work related accident, I
needed to comply with workers compensation to have a percentage
of my wages paid to me.

Q  How about the sanitary conditions?
A: Well, at the beginning, when I started working there, it was
dirty. There were not good sanitary or safety working conditions.
The company did not have good floor mats to protect us from
falling down. Instead, they spread salt on the floors. According to
them, salt prevents floors from being slippery. Later on, the use of
salt on the floors was prohibited by the city because people
continued falling down. However, you know that working with fish
cannot be very clean because fish is very slippery anyway. So it
was impossible for the place to be absolutely clean. Fileteras had
to work very fast. We had no time to place all the fish waste properly in the garbage can. We just threw fish skin, spines, bones, heads, etc., on the floor. The company did not provide protective gear, and many people did not have the means to buy boots, aprons, gloves, and hair nets. Many people were often accepted to work in regular shoes. There were not strict rules in terms of protective gear. Lupita, our supervisor was very nice to us. She saw our need to work, so she allowed us to work with regular shoes, even though she knew she was going to have problems with her foreman.

In terms of papers, [green cards] she helped us a lot. When immigration came to raid the place, she would always tell us as much in advance as she could. She called us at our houses to tell us not to go to work because the immigration officials continued surrounding the place for a few days.

Q: According to you safety and sanitary conditions were not that bad.

A: Well, the thing that I have never liked and, I never buy, is fish. Because if you are a filetera, you know when fish is fresh and when it is spoiled. I say this because on many occasions, I filleted fish that was already spoiled, with worms, and it smelled terrible. Even so, we had to fillet it, and we had to use a chemical to kill the worms and take away the smell. That has always stayed in my mind. I never buy fish from any store, never. I do not know what other companies do about fish, but I only eat fish that I have filleted because, in that way, I am sure it is fresh.

Q: Was it common for fish to come already spoiled? What did the patrones do when fish came spoiled?

A: The patrones knew exactly when the fish was spoiled. They knew it very well. However, as you said, we were fileteras, and we were being paid by piece rate. To some extent, we did not care if fish was spoiled. Also, we did not have the power to say: "This fish is spoiled, I am not going to fillet it." We would be fired. The
excuse they always gave us was that Japanese people buy it for specific dishes. Bosses said that Japanese people liked the blackard and dover fish with worms because that was a sign that it was fresh and fermented.

Q: Moving away from the sanitary and safety conditions, what kind of benefits did you have?

A: We had no benefits. We did not have anything. At PSGF the days you worked, were the days you were paid.

Q: I understand that in 1988, fileteras started organizing a union primarily because Manuel De Lima made a filetera night shift and that took away working hours from the day shift fileteras.

A: Look, the night shift came after...Look we were twenty fileteras. And what happened is that we made very good money--up to $500 to $600 a week. What happened is that we saw that packers worked twelve to fifteen hours a day. Because before it all started, [organizing] we started working at 7:00 a.m. and we finish working at 11:00 p.m. The schedule was strange. When there was work, you could work all day long. Or, if you did not want, you work only the hours you wanted to work. Nobody forced you to work more hours if you did not want to.

We did not like the fact that we were making lots of money, and fish packers were making very little money. So, some of us agreed to start organizing the union. Alicia [Sanchez] and Newman [Strawbridge] were guiding us in what to do to organize a union. Celia was the person who knew about them. Celia also was the one who was always protecting us. Therefore, she started talking to people about organizing a union. And I said: "Yes lets do it." We were not afraid of anything because it was the patrones who needed us, not us needing them. We felt bad for the other workers. The fact is that when they saw that we were organizing a union, they (bosses) started training other women as fileteras, and set the filetera night shift. [All PSGF workers I had interviewed, as well as, Alicia Sanchez told me previously that fileteras were the first union organizers Manuel De Lima, the plant manager started a filetera night shift. And by doing that, senior fileteras lost
working hours. Ms. Del Campo told me a different story. However, I telephoned workers back, and they re-confirmed what they previously told me. I decided to include Ms. Del Campo version of the events in the interview's transcript, but I do not plan to take this part of the interview into account for the manuscript.

Q According to you, the fileteras night shift came after you began your organizing efforts?

A: Yes, exactly. Marina, the Protuguese supervisor, trained people to be fileteras.

Q Do you remember your first meeting with Alicia and Newman?

A: Alicia and Newman told us that we needed to talk to the patron to see if he could help the workers. They said that we needed to do this before we started organizing the union. Alicia and Newman gave some cards to people. If they wanted a union, they had to sign them. AS told us what we were going to be doing. They spent lengthy time explaining to us what was going to happen to us. They told us that it was very likely that the bosses were going to take work away from us, maybe they were going to reduce the fileteras' wages. And as they told us, it happened. They told us about all the risks we were going to have by organizing a union. Well, we all agreed. I think it was because we were all excited about it.

Later on, we had some problems, we started having economic problems because the patrones took work away from us. We knew that it was the fish season, and yet, they did not give us work. We knew that they were taking the fish someplace else. They had companies in San Francisco and Oakland. So, they were taking the fileteras from the night shift to San Francisco. The company itself took them in busses to San Francisco, so that they did not have to drive. You can see the extremes they went to to stop us from organizing a union. I knew about it because Marina the Portuguese supervisor was promoting the work in San Francisco, and she was asking other fileteras to go there. Marina knew that people did not have decent cars, or no car at all. That is why they
organized busses to take people back and forth to San Francisco. They never asked union organizers to go to San Francisco.

Before all the organizing started, I used to get along with everybody -- supervisors, secretaries, and workers. Remember that I cleaned the offices, and I make friends quiet easy, so everybody knew me. Well, soon after we started organizing the union --and the bosses knew I was one of the main organizers --everybody in the offices, as well as supervisors, stopped talking to me.

Q: I am sorry to hear that. But can you explain to me how you organized your picket lines? Was it because work was being taken away?

A: Well, Alicia and Newman gave us the knowledge to organize everything we needed to do. They helped us to make buttons, T-shirts, and other things. Lots of people helped us doing those things. Alicia and Newman told us that if the company was not going to give us what we wanted, we needed to organize picket lines outside the plant. So that is what we did. We started having picket lines every two weeks. Later on, we started having them more frequently until we had them every day.

I think the patron talked to Celia Mendoza, I do not know about that. But Celia talked to Alicia because she [Alicia] was our union organizer. Alicia told us what to do: Stop, or continue the struggle. I do not know what the patron told Celia, she talked to Alicia directly. In terms of the picket line, well we did not have work, so we took turns during the day. Some people cover the picket line in the morning, and others in the afternoon. I think we had the picket line for a week or so.

Q: What did you do to pay your bills, since you were not working?

A: Well, let me tell you. I had another job in the evenings, I had always had two jobs. I was working at the Flamingo Hotel in the afternoons, from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. In terms of other people like Celia, I think they did not work, but they did not suffered in terms of money because their husbands were well established in business, or had good jobs. [She is referring to the Mendoza
sisters. Their husbands had their business, or had well paid jobs. However, these were the only workers who had a steady source of income in their households. The great majority of the workers suffered greatly due to the lack of work]. However, we got to a point in which we were getting desperate because we had no money. You know the financial need is too big. Therefore, some of us started moving away from the union. Of course, this was after the union election.

Q: Do you remember the day of the election?

A: I do not remember.

Q: How were workers feeling after the election? You won the election, yet you could not negotiate with the _patron_.

A: Yes, I remember now. Exactly! _It is true_. First we won the election for the union. Right after the election we had work regularly for approximately fifteen days. I even remember that we had a big party because we won the election. We were also very happy because work was becoming more regular, and we were thinking that we had won, right? And it was completely the opposite. The company "elevated" us for two weeks, and then dropped us off, just like that. After that time, there was no work for anybody. We felt very bad because after the election, we thought that things were going to be better and that they _[patrones]_ were going to really help people. We _[fileteras]_ did all this organizing not only for us, because we made very good money. But there were no benefits for the fish packers, and all we wanted was to help them.

Q: How were you informed about the company refusing to recognize the union, and fighting on the National Labor Relation Board (NLRB) level?

A: Yes it is true, they fought with us in those levels. We started hearing rumors that the company was planning to declare itself bankrupt. I was the kind of person that, when I heard all of that, I
removed myself from everything and looked for another job because I had financial needs.

Q. Did you have to testify during the NLRB hearings?
A: No, I did not have to go, but I heard about it because other people were going.

Q. The union was finally recognized in August of 1989.
A: Yes, I remember because they started taking money away from our pay checks. [It is difficult to assess Mrs. Del Campo's answer because she left long before the union was recognized. Some of her answers were quite off the reality-wise.]

Q. What happened during the year in which the union election was recognized as legal by the NLRB?
A: I do not know, because I left at that time; I started working in San Francisco in different fish companies. And I never returned to work at PSGF, nor did I keep contact with the workers. So, by the time the company closed down in 1993, I was already gone for over three years.

Q. If you were to have another opportunity to participate in a union, would you do it?
A: No. I would not do it. Well, maybe. Before my economic situation was more risky; now I am doing better in terms of money. I, personally, still fight for my rights. But my experience tells me that people say they will fully participate in the union organizing and back-out immediately. Or they say one thing, and later on, change their mind. If we want to change things for good, we all have to participate.

Q. Do you think the union experience helped you to grow personally?
A: Oh, yes, it helps you. What I am trying to tell you, is that we all have to be united all the time. The union was a big experience for me. I think that it was good for me. My eyes were open to reality because we wanted to have a union to help other people. However, it helped everybody, not only those who were making little money. After all, we fileteras did not have benefits either. And let's suppose that the money they were going to take from our pay checks for union dues was nothing compared to all the benefits we were going to gain in exchange. Right now, I am in a union, and it has helped me a lot...

Q: What union is this?

A: It is local 123, from Vacuum Dry, a cannery in Sebastopol. I am never laid-off for more than a few days because, if the company does not call me to work, I call the union, and they place me to work immediately. Right now, I am making $12.00 an hour because I requested to be trained to learn the machines called “equalizers.” I have been operating these machines for over a year. I work the night shift, and even though it is hard, I would rather work that shift because they pay you better.

Q: Do you think that organizing the union helped you to get where you are now?

A: I think that if we did not organize the union, we would have continued working at PSGF. But, we would be as ignorant as before. On one hand, I feel that I was better off before because I had always worked for PSGF. To tell you the truth, I have always made good money working as a filetera. It is the job that has given me more money than any other job. Working with fish you earn what you want because it is paid piece rate.

Q: Anything else you want to add?

A: Well, just to get smarter.
Celia Mendoza, worker,
Point St. George Fisheries
Celia Mendoza. Worked at Point Saint George Fisheries. First interview, February 24, 1996.

Q Celia, where do you come from?

A: I am from Tumbiscatillo, a city in the state of Michoacan, Mexico.

Q Did you work in Tumbiscatillo before you came to California?

A: No, I had never worked.

Q Did you have union organizing experience in Mexico?

A: No.

Q When did you start working in Point Saint George Fisheries? (PSGF)

A: I started working in 1968. I do not remember the day, but I remember the month, June, 1968.

Q What was your first job assignment?

A: I was peeling shrimp.

Q Were you paid by the hour, or piece rate?

A: I was paid piece rate.

Q Was this your first job?

A: No, I had worked previously for a month in an apple cannery. I think it was during September of 1966.

Q How long did you work peeling shrimp?

A: I worked peeling shrimp and cleaning crab for about ten years --from 1968 to 1978.
Q: What job did you do next?

A: After I stopped working in the shrimp department, I continued cleaning crab, and I was promoted to the filetera (filletter) position.

Q: What type of wages did you earn when you cleaned crab?

A: Piece rate also.

Q: Do you remember how much money you made for peeling shrimp and cleaning crab?

A: I do not remember how much money I got paid. All I remember is that we got paid by the pound.

Q: But you may remember this: When you compared your wages with your friends or sisters, were your wages higher or lower than theirs?

A: I made very good money: we received good wages by contract [piece rate].

Q: During those ten years, did you work forty hours a week?

A: No, sometimes we worked up to forty, sometimes more. But usually we worked less than forty hours.

Q: When is the shrimp season?

A: The shrimp started in May, around the middle of May. And it ended around the middle of August.

Q: What did you do between August and May?

A: There were some other jobs people could do. Although they [the company] did not call me a lot because I only worked peeling shrimp. But, when they called me, I worked re-packing shrimp that was already packed in large cans. These cans were packed in the San Francisco plant. Our tasks were to empty the large cans, wash
the shrimp, and packed it in smaller bags or cans. When I did this job, I was paid by the hour. Around June, the salmon season started, and I would clean salmon also.

Q: When you started as a filetera, were you one of the first fileteras in the company or were there other women working previously?

A: Oh no! There were some other ladies who were fileteras for a long time before I became one. These ladies were Italians who came all the way from Bodega Bay to work in the Santa Rosa Plant.

Q: How did you communicate with them?

A: We had no communication because I did not speak English, nor Italian. At that time, when I began working at PSGF, discrimination was bad. There were not many Mexicans working as fileteras. In fact, I was the first Mexican who was promoted to the filetera line. I was new in the filetera line and a Mexican! The ladies felt threatened and said terrible things to me. I never said anything back to them because I did not speak English, and I do not like to fight. However, I could feel their anger. They got very angry when I was called to work, and they were not.

Q: How was the ethnic breakdown when you started working at PSGF?

A: Discrimination was worse! There were many Mexicans, the majority of the workers were Mexicans. There were also Portuguese, American Indian, Italian and a few white --one or two. Whites worked one or two months and they left. They did not last.

Now, when I started working at PSGF, the majority of the fileteras were Italian. Later on, when I began as a filetera, the company hired many Mexican women to train them as fileteras, five or six. Later on, they hired some more Mexicans to work as fileteras also. Once in a while, they would hire one or two white women, but they did not last. American Indian women did last working as fileteras.
Q: Can you talk about the discrimination you mentioned previously?

A: There was discrimination, but I did not feel it a lot. Well, they offended you for little things. And they would call you "wetback" for no reason, regardless if you had or did not have your papers. Like myself, at that time, I already had my papers. They would scream at us things like: "You have no papers." 'Wetback' this or 'wetback' that." But no, that was the only kind of discrimination we experienced. The people who called us wetbacks were the ones working in production, like the Portuguese, Italians and American Indians.

Q: How about discrimination coming from the supervisors or the patrones?

A: No, we did not receive any discrimination from them.

Q: How big was the company?

A: Very big. From the time I started working there, it was very big, bigger than when we organized ourselves. At that time, we peeled and packed shrimp and cleaned salmon, other fish no. We started fileting much more fish later on, when I became a filetera. We also cleaned and packed crab. During the shrimp season there were close to 150 people peeling shrimp. At the end of the season, people were laid off, and only workers who had been there longer stayed cleaning salmon. Some women cured it with salt and packed it. Some of us assisted them packing it. Italian women always worked; they were never laid off.

Mexican men cut the salmon because it was very difficult for women to cut. The salmon bones are very tough and women did not have the strength to cut it. Salmon is also very delicate, if you do not cut it right, it flakes all over.

Q: When you started as a filetera, how many Italian women were working there?

A: There were about four or five— all of them older. One was a little younger, and all of them were relatives. They were
sometimes offensive, but not really bad. The ones who were very
discriminatory and offensive were the American Indian women.
They were very offensive and moody. One of them had a terrible
foul mouth, and I had to protect myself from her all the time. Once
we almost got in a physical fight because I had enough of her
offending me.

You know, we worked by contract, and they were very envious
if we worked faster and made more money. They used to say
things like we “took the bigger fish,” and things like that. So when
we got-off work, the most aggressive one was already waiting for
the Mexicans in the bathroom to offend us. Finally one day I told
her: “If you do not keep quiet, I am going to complain about you in
the office.” And, I did it because I could not stand her any more.

Q  How many Mexicans were working as fileteras at that time?
A:  In 1968, there were no Mexicans working as fileteras. In
1978, when I started, six other Mexicans were trained as
fileteras also. That job was very hard and delicate. We had to
work with knives, and we were trained only one month. After that,
we worked per contract.

Q  Who trained you? The Italian women?
A:  No! There was an Italian man who trained us. He was a very
nice person.

Q  How were your wages in comparison to your friends?
A:  They were much higher. That is why I am still working in
this business, because I cannot see myself working some place
else. Now I am working per hour; they pay me $ 9.00, which is
comparable to how much I would make by contract. When the
company closed, later they opened a small shop in Bodega Bay, and
they asked me to work per hour. They just offered to pay me $ 6.50
an hour. Of course, I said “No, I do not work for that money” --
because the job is hard, you always have to be working with very
cold water, so that the fish does not spoil. Then, they offered me
$ 9.00 an hour.
Q: In 1978, ten years after you started at PSGF what was the ethnic breakdown? And, what jobs did Mexicans hold?

A: Mexicans continued being the majority of the workers. And, we always got the worst jobs. Mexicans had to work the hardest. Mexican men had to pack frozen fish all day long. Mexican women helped the men pack the frozen fish to be sent to other places.

Q: Who were the foreman and supervisors?

A: At that time the supervisor was Joe Day, an Italian man. My foreman was a Portuguese man. He was a brother of the man -- Tony de Lima. I am still working for him. His name is Manuel de Lima. However, there was never a Mexican supervisor or foreman. Many years later, a Chicana, Lupe Ojinaga, became a supervisor. Both of us were hired at the same time; we cleaned crab together. She was a supervisor for approximately ten years. Lupe was a very nice supervisor, but the others were very mean. All the other supervisors were Portuguese, Italians or white. There was a Black woman who started working as a filetera at the same time I did. Later on, she became a supervisor, and she was terrible towards the workers! You should have seen how she was before she was a supervisor! She was very nice. But, when she was promoted to a supervisory position, she became awful. She always resorted to physical punishment when a worker made a mistake. Can you believe that she always wanted to hit the workers! Once she hit a young Mexican man with a chaira (a sharpening stone), and the man was fired because the managers believed her that she did not hit him.

Q: I understand that before the organizing of 1988, there was a man who wanted to organize you. Can you discuss that?

A: Yes. I do not remember the year it happened. His name was Tony, and he was from El Salvador. He was bilingual, and he was a supervisor. Even though he was a supervisor, he wanted to organize the workers. He told us: "Look, they are offering everything to me (meaning benefits). I am new; you have been working here for years, and you do not ask for anything. You have to protect yourselves. It is not fair what is happening to you." He said that
to us when he started working there. He said that we “should have a union” and gave us cards to sign. He tried to support us; he wanted for us to open become aware of our rights. However, when management found out, he was fired. There was also another occasion between 1971 and 1972. A Portuguese woman wanted to organize a union, and she was also fired. After that, we did not do anything.

Q How was the work situation during those years, before you started organizing the union? (1988)

A: That is why we started organizing a union because, at that time, the working conditions went from bad to worse, and they were not giving us work. They (the owners) made a filetera night shift, and I told them not to make the night shift because there was not enough work for everyone (meaning fileteras). --I defended myself, because I have always defended myself, right? Then Les Mundson, the general manager, told me; “Do not worry, Celia, there will be enough work for everyone”. But, it was not true. Soon enough, he was giving more work to the night shift than to us, the ones who had more seniority. He said that there was merchandise that needed to be ready to leave very early in the morning. His excuse was that we only worked during the day time, so he could not supply the orders he needed in early morning.

Q Did he ask you to work at night time?

A: Yes, he asked us if we wanted to work the night shift. So I replied back to him; “Are you going to give my regular number of hours?” He simply said; “No, after all, I changed my mind. Women working the morning shift are not to work the night shift”. I do not know why he did that, because he put all new fileteras to filetear (fileting) during the night shift. That is why we started organizing the union because they were leaving us without work. I think that shift had been operating close to a year before we finally did anything. They were all new Mexican women workers.

The problem with this kind of work is that it is never secure. Fish work is seasonal, depending on the weather, and if the fishermen can work or not. It depends on many things. But there was a time when we did not have fish to filetear and we got paid
by the hour. We could just pack fish or re-pack shrimp. But later they took the shrimp someplace else. So, they also took those few working hours away from us. They argued that fileteras should only work in the filetera line. And people working by the hour, just do that, work by the hour. Well, we got very upset, because that was not fair to us. There was not enough work to work by the contract. Whereas before, we could at least make some money working by the hour. By combining these two jobs, we could work two or three days a week. Working only as fileteras, we could be without work for a week when there was no fish. We could get unemployment when there was not enough work because it was always open to us. At least that helped us, but it was not the same.

In addition to the lack of work, they decided to open a night shift: so things got worse. That is why we started organizing. We wanted to secure our regular working hours because we had seniority rights.

Q: How many fileteras had seniority besides you, Celia?

A: Let me see. Approximately twenty.

Q: Do you think that the company wanted to fire all of you?

A: I think that the thing they cared about the most was to supply the demand for fish at any cost. The fileteras with seniority were not their concern. They just did not want people working more hours. I do not know why. The fact is the fileteras from the night shift were receiving the same wages as we were, and that was not fair.

Q: In addition to wanting your hours back, what else did you want from the company?

A: We had no benefits whatsoever. There were no benefits for anyone. Well, there was a rumor about the supervisors receiving health benefits. We knew about it because there was a man from El Salvador -- another Salvadorean, and he also told us about it. In terms of treatment, it was bad. The other foreman, Joe Dave, was a terrible man. He used to insult people very badly. One time he
yelled very bad things at a Black woman, and she in turn slapped his face. Even though I was not fluent in English, I could understand when people used bad words. He was terrible to Mexicans all he did was scream at people instead of talking. The supervisor I am currently working for has a bad temper. His name is Tony de Lima. But he has restrained himself because I warned him, I said: "Listen, I have high blood pressure. And, if you scream at me, I can get very sick for three or more days, and I will not come back to work." That was the condition I gave him when I went back to work. I also think that he learned not to mistreat me from the time we organized the union.

Q: The picture did not look good: you had no benefits and no work. How and when did you decide to organize yourselves?

A: When we, the fileteras started organizing ourselves, the majority did not want to be part of it. Because they had their working hours secured. They questioned our motives for organizing a union, since we made more money than anyone else. They wondered if we were going to be fired. So we answered back to them: "We do not care if we are fired. So what?" After a while, everybody saw that it was good for us and started signing the union cards.

Q: Tell me how you became aware of the possibility of organizing a union?

A: My sister Angelica told me: "Look, go and talk to this man." So, I went and talked to Newman [Strawbridge] and Alicia [Sanchez], I do not remember the month, but I remember that there were many of us women. All fileteras went to see him at his house on Sonoma Ave.

Q: How was your first meeting with them?

A: Newman told us that he was willing to help us to organize ourselves, and, in fact, he helped us. Later on, Alicia came to help him. He said that "we should receive health insurance, and that he was going to defend us." Well, yes, he was the one who was helping us. However, he was not that helpful because later on, we
started having several problems at work. You know? We had less work because the *patrones* were taking the fish someplace else. I mean that they [owners] wanted to tire us, so that we quit work or the union. Later on, to make things worse, they closed the company because the owner died. It is then that everything was gone. Everything died. Well, I should say that the company informed us about its plans a week in advance. They told us that they “were going to close because the owner had died and they “did not want to keep the company open anymore.” They also had several problems with the city and the fire department among other places.

Q  
Let's go back to the beginning of the organizing efforts.

A:  
Alicia and Newman told us that we needed to convince everybody to sign some kind of petition. So we passed the petition around to see who wanted to sign.

Q  
But, tell me more in detail how you did it because you could not do it openly.

A:  
Yes, we passed the petition to whoever wanted to sign. That is how we did it, openly. Before we arrived to work, and during our breaks, we passed quietly the petition around.

Q  
Were you afraid to be caught and be fired like the previous people who wanted to organize you?

A:  
No, I was not afraid. Other people were afraid, but even so, they passed the petition around. We called people and told them: “I am going to wait for you in such and such place for you to sign the petition.” And, yes, they signed it. Many people did not want to sign. But later on, when they saw it was for real, everybody signed it. The majority of men did not want to sign the petition. Only a few signed, but the others did not want to --more or less half of them. However, when the election for collective bargaining came, we won the election by a big margin. The nice thing is that the company could not do anything to cheat us with the number of votes.
Q: The *patrones* and supervisors never questioned what kind of list you were passing around?

A: They never questioned me, and I was one who carried a petition around with me.

Q: After you had collected enough signatures, what did you do, Celia?

A: We took them back to Newman. He said that since we had the petitions all signed, we were ready. He started setting weekly meetings to talk with him. Our first large meeting was very large; I think there were approximately thirty to thirty-five people. After that meeting we had different numbers of people. Sometimes we had more people, sometimes we had less. I remember that there was a meeting, a large one, but I do not remember when it happened.

Q: Do you remember why and when you had a large rally outside the plant? [April 5, 1988]

A: Les and Tony were the ones who were in charge of the plant. So, we wanted to talk to them. Well, we just got in a large meeting before that one. And, Alicia and Newman said that everybody had to be there at a certain hour --outside the plant to be ready to go inside the plant. At the beginning of the rally, they [the guards] did not want to let us in. Because of that event, they fenced the place. Many people attended that rally --friends, relatives, and community members.

Q: Did Alicia and Newman represent you?

A: Yes they did. But they were not able to talk to Les [company manager]. He said that he "did not have the time and did not want to talk" to them. Alicia insisted and requested a good time to come back to talk to him. By the second time, we entered the plant as a group, Alicia was able to talk to him. We used those meetings to inform him that we were organizing a union. The first time we entered as a group they did not recognize us. They even slammed the
door in Alicia's face, but the second time, they dialogued. They accepted the fact that we were starting a campaign for an election for collective bargaining.

Q: Can you discuss what activities the workers organized during the campaign for the union election?

A: Fish was scarce for some days, I think they did it just to scare us. Later on, when they saw that we were serious about the union, they had no choice but to give us work. On one occasion, Les called me into his office and asked me: "You are one of the organizers?" And I said "yes!" "And, it is all your fault because you wanted to punish us by taking work away from us. I clearly told you not to make a night shift because there was not enough work for everybody. But you did not pay any attention to me". He told me to: "quiet down everything" and he was going to give us our hours back. I said "No, we are not going to stop. This is what you are saying now. If we stopped, you will fire us immediately." So I said "No!" "Because this situation has happened many times, and you had never done anything." Buggatto [company owner] never got involved directly because he was always in San Francisco. The ones who were in charge of the company were Les Mundsen and Bob.

In reality, work became very scarce during the month we had the campaign for the union's election. Several people were laid-off. [twenty fileteras, and fifty packers. In total, the company laid-off over sixty-five workers]. We had to raise money because some people were hurting badly economically. They did not even have money to pay their rent. We collected money among ourselves, and we went to different churches and organizations to request donations. We also had daily picket lines to let people know about what the company was doing.

At the beginning of the campaign, somebody proposed to us to go on strike, and some people became very excited. But I said no! They have so many companies that it will be easy for them to take the fish away. I had the morning schedule at the picket line. We started around nine or ten in the morning. However, do not believe that we had tons of support from everyone. Sometimes we had very hot days, and we had to stay outside in the scorching sun. And not everybody wanted to go. There was Julieta, Carmela, Myself,
Susana, Francisca, and Chava who came to support us whenever he could. Carmelo, Pablo, and Gerardo also came. And many others. But not everybody.

Q: What else did the patron do to convince you to change your mind?

A: He did not do anything. He did not offer money to us, or threaten us. The company, I guess, had enough sending the fish somewhere else. Once he [Toni de Lima] called me into his office and offered me a supervisor's job. After twenty years of working in production! He said to me: “Leave all the union organizing aside and I will promote you to supervisor. You had been working for us for so many years, and we had always treated you just fine.” I said “No! “Those are all lies, you have never treated me very well. What you are telling me are all lies. Because you said previously that you were going to give us a raise” --because he always lied to us-- “and you never said when.” Fileteras got raises only every two or three years, and we received it only because we pushed for it, not because it came from the good of their hearts. So, at the end of our conversation, I told him “do not lie any more to me because I know you very well; you are not going to give us anything.” What was even more upsetting was that he laughed at everything: everything was funny to him.

Q: Did you tell the union members about your conversation with Mr. Toni de Lima?

A: Yes, I told them everything, and everybody said not to take the job, that everything was a lie. Everything that Newman had told us about the company was true. Newman had said that the company was going to try in different ways to make us change our mind.

Q: Did Newman and Alicia explain to you the problems you might face when you organize a union?

A: Yes! They explained everything to us; they warned us about the difficulties we were going to face. They clearly said that it was going to be hard because the company was going to take work
They are going to treat you bad, and they will want to 'buy' some of you, and fire some of you. And they are going to make you many promises of good changes. "However, NS said, "the company will only promise you everything, all the company wants is for you to stop the union organizing." But let me tell you this, the previous supervisor did not promise anything, he only fired people who wanted to organize. At least this supervisor, Tony de Lima, promised things.

In the past we might have been scared: but at that time, we were not scared. We were many, and we were organized.

Q  How did you prepare for the union elections for the voting time?

A: Well the same, Newman told us how the voting process was going to be --none of us had been involved in anything like that before. He taught us how to vote and everything. He prepared us well.

Q  What happened the morning when you voted?

A: It was around 1:00 p.m. --I think, one of the supervisors had a camera, and AS and NS told her no to use it. They asked the supervisor to put it away. We entered in line to vote, in silence. There were many people wanting to vote.

Q  Did you vote for the union?

A: Yes!

Q  Were you afraid of people changing their minds and not voting for the union?

A: Yes! I was afraid, as I told you, some workers did not go in and vote, because they were afraid of the repercussions if the union won. But we were going to win anyway. Many did not vote. [from over 200 workers, 157 voted. 137 voted in favor of the union, and 20 against].
Q: What did you do when you learned about the election results?
A: We were told that, if we wanted to know the election results, we had to wait until to the end of the process. Many people waited. And, when we were told about the results, we were all very happy, and had a big celebration.

Q: What did the supervisors do?
A: They were all very quiet and said nothing, but you could see their angry faces.

Q: What steps did the company take after the election?
A: The company hired the best anti-union law firm from San Francisco to challenge the election. The company complained about the conduct of the election. They said that there was nobody who spoke Portuguese fluently, and the Portuguese speaking workers did not have representation. However, Portuguese people held supervisor or management jobs, and they could not vote. I was accused of forcing people to vote in favor of the union. They argued that I forced them when people signed the petition form. The company also accused us of fundraising money to give it to people, so that they would vote for us.

When I went to testify, I was very nervous, -- well not that much. I had never been in something like that, so I was afraid and kept wondering what the lawyers were going to ask me. Well, yes, they asked questions, but that was not so bad. I calmed myself down.

Q: Do you think that some workers did not participate in the campaign for the union election, and subsequently did not vote, because they were afraid of the patron calling the migra [immigration] on them?
A: I think undocumented people were a small percentage among the workers, like ten percent. Well, I am not sure because I really never talked to new people; I hardly knew them. I think the
majority of people who did not have “papers” were scared because they feared losing their jobs and having a difficult time finding another job.

Q  What happened after you testified? What tactics did you use during the time the election case was in court?

A:  It took over a year for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to decide about the union. We continued working, --less work of course; the company continued taking fish someplace else. The workers morale was low. Some were very disillusioned. They said that “we worked so hard and we did not accomplish anything.”

Q  Were some upset with you -- the fileteras-- because you started all the organizing?

A:  Some people said things indirectly to us. They used to say to me: “See what we got for been involved in these things?” And I would answer: “Well, it is just like this in all unions, mostly when you start a new one. It is very understanding that when you want to win something, you have to suffer for it.” Some people got desperate because of the lack of work. I did not get frustrated; I understood the problems of organizing a union. One time, I got very upset because one of the Portuguese supervisors told me: “See what you won with your union? All you have achieved is losing work.” I said: “That is okay, I am not so interested in working. What I am interested in is to stopping the bad treatment towards Mexicans, and for you to stop doing things to people that you are not supposed to do. We finally grew tired of your bad treatment.” You know? This was a company that treated you with yelling all the time. If you did not protect yourself, all the supervisors felt free to mistreat you.

Q  Do you remember the affiliation with another union in 1989?

A:  Alicia and Newman came to tell us that other unions were asking us to consider affiliation. A priest came to hold the vote. AS told us that it was going to be better for us to affiliate with the other union: Service Employees International Union (SEIU); so, we voted in favor of affiliation.
Q: What happened on July 21, 1989 when the union was recognized. Who presented the first contract?

Q: I also understand that you paid for your protective gear?

A: Yes, we had to buy some things: They charged us for boots, the stone to sharpen knives, the chaira, --the only thing they gave us were the knives. There was a period of time that we received the aprons free. Later on, they also charged us for that.
Celia Mendoza. Worked at Point Saint George Fisheries (PSGF).
Second interview. March 16, 1996.

Q  Celia, before we continue talking about your first contract and the affiliation to Service Employees International Union (SEIU). I need to confirm with you a few things. A worker told me that often times you had to filetear (fillet) fish that was already spoiled, even with worms. What can you say about it?

A: Oh yes, that is very true. Well, sometimes the fish came --well, I do not know, maybe they [the bosses] left it without refrigeration many days --and when they put the fish on the filleting belt, it was already smelling and with worms. We had to filetearlo (fillet it) just like that.

Q  What did you do with the worms?

A: They [the bosses] spread tons of lime on the fish with worms, because you know that worms are killed with lime. And they washed the area very well. Only when the inspectors came without giving any prior notice, they were in a big hurry, cleaning and washing everything very well.

Q  How often did you work with spoiled fish?

A: Not that often, only when the fish came from Oregon, or Cresent City, or some other places, so that the fish traveled many days. It happened only a few times.

Q  But sometimes fish already smelled bad?

A: Yes, and for the bad smell and to prevent the fish from continuing spoiling, they used baking soda. First they washed the fish very well with baking soda, then we had to filetearlo just like that. It was not always nice and fresh because fresh fish does not smell.

Q  How about the safety and sanitary conditions in the working areas?
A: Well, it was always clean; they were always cleaning. They cleaned the working areas, bathrooms, and offices. Once a month or every two months, they sprayed the place with some kind of gas. Workers were not supposed to be there when they sprayed the place.

Q: One more thing, was the night shift opened before or after you started organizing the union?

A: Before we organized ourselves. That was the reason for our organizing! Because we did not have that much work after they opened the night shift. They were taking hours away from us. At that time, I had been working for seventeen or eighteen years, and the new fileteras were making the same amount of money as I was. To me, that was not okay.

Q: Well, let’s return to where we stopped in our last interview. In terms of the contract, do you remember what the contract entitled you to?

A: Oh no, I do not remember anything. I remember we started receiving health insurance, but we had to pay for part of it. We did not get a full coverage.

Q: I understand that there was some kind of irony. It was the fileteras who started the organizing, and the fileteras could not receive health insurance coverage, because you did not work more than thirty hours a week.

A: Oh yes, the person who worked full time, received full health insurance coverage. The people who did not work full time had to pay part of their health insurance. Fileteras were the only people who did not work full time.

Q: What action did the union take when you were not receiving health insurance?

A: Nothing, I hardly remember, but nothing.
Q: What else did the union do for you after it was recognized by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)?

A: I do not remember. The company was closed in September of 1993. After we affiliated to Service Employees International Union (SEIU), --well, I had been working for (PSGF) --I wanted to talk to the union representative, I do not remember his name right now. The man from San Francisco because, after affiliation, our representation was moved to San Francisco. So, I called him to find out what I could do to protect myself when the company closed down. I had been working for many years, and I did not receive any compensation from them. However, I was never able to see him. Believe me, I tried many times to seek representation, but I was left alone.

Q: What happened to Alicia Sanchez?

A: I do not remember when Alicia left the union. She did not have a meeting with us, nor explain to us the reasons for her leaving Sonoma County Industrial Union (SCIU). We only knew about it when we called her to find out about what kind of rights we had with PSGF closing. She told us that she was going to be working in Oakland, and that we had been transferred to the Local Janitors in San Francisco. Alicia told us that she was not going to be our union representative because she was transferred to another local. Our representation was moved to San Francisco because SEIU felt that we were going to be better represented by a local that had Latinos in their local. Alicia was unable to help us any more.

Q: What do you think forced the company owners to close it down?

A: What the foremen told was that the real patron had died, and his nephew who became in charge of his business did not want anything to do with this company. That was the reason. However, they had had problems with the city because people in the surrounding areas complained about the smell and other problems
related to the food process. But we had those complaints for the longest time. Now in terms of the buildings? When the safety department checked the buildings, the inspectors told the owners that they had to close those buildings because they were very unsafe, and the buildings were falling down. The new owner did not want to deal with the company, so he closed it down.

I was unable to find another job, and I was left without retirement and a job. A month later one of the foremen called me to ask me to work for them in a new company they had opened in Bodega Bay. So I agreed and it is where I am now working. We are six fileteras and four packers.

Q: Celia, to finish our interview, what kind of experience did you have with the union organizing?

A: I learned several things. One of them, well, for me? I had lots of fun, because I was so used to being in my house. My husband never let me go anywhere. So for me, it was a good excuse to go places. So, for me, it was fun! The other experience was that in reality, they helped us a little, but, in other ways, no. Well, they tried, not so well, but they tried. They tried for the patrones to give us health insurance. On the other hand, we got better treatment at work, because they treated us very bad before. After we started the union, they stopped mistreating us. That was one of the good things in which I saw good changes in favor of the workers. The other thing is that I blamed the union for the company closing down. I thought it was because of that. Who knows?

Q: How about personal growth because of your experiences in the union?

A: Yes, I think it helped me.

Q: Would you participate in another union organizing again?

A: I think that if I was invited to form a union at the place I am currently working, I would say no. I would not do it. Because it requires much work and struggle to organize a union. And, right
now, I could not do it. Maybe if I was younger, I would do it. But, right now? No. However, I would suggest to younger people to struggle for a union. In reality people learn to protect themselves against bad companies.

Q: Celia, what kind of influence do you think your union organizing had in the Latino Community in Sonoma County?

A: I think that some people did not agree. But the majority saw the union organizing as something very good. I think that the marches against proposition 187 were a reflection of our previous organizing because Latinos in this county had the experience of our union, our marches, rallies, etc. I also think that it was a positive experience to people, to give them the encouragement to protect themselves, to fight for their rights.

Q: Anything else you want to add?

A: No, thank you.
Union organizers,
Sonoma County Industrial Union

Neil Herring, Union lawyer
Sonoma County Industrial Union
Q: How did you get involved with SCIU?

A: I am not sure when the union started but I was in Japan from January 1987 to April 1988, and when I came home, I learned that some people were organizing Latino workers. I think, I first heard about Point Saint George Fisheries (PSGF), but I am not sure, anyway that they were building a Latino union primarily for Latino workers. And I was anxious to get back into some social struggle so I [met] with Alicia Sanchez and Newman Strawbridge at the union hall. We sort of interviewed each other, and I offered to do whatever legal work they may need.

Q: Did you attend any meetings?

A: Sure, over the years. I did not attended regularly, but I went to several meetings with the workers.

Q: Since you offered your legal services, what was your primary role with them? Were you their lawyer?

A: I would say so.

Q: How did you start working with the union as a lawyer? What were your first tasks?

A: Well, I think this was well before the Calliope Designs strike began. So I think it was mostly in connection with the organizing with PSGF and, lets see. Yes, the PSGF was in June 1988--June 17, 1988.

Q: The election was June 17, 1988. The company filed several objections? What type of objections did they file? Please discuss the full process of how you prepared the workers for the hearing, and if you can remember workers' names.

A: Okay, the election took place on June 17, 1988, and out of a 178 eligible voters the union got 137, 20 votes against and there
were something like 19 challenged ballots. So on June 24, 1988, the company filed no less than 60 objections. Lots of them were overlapping or redundant. But the objections were aimed partly at the union or alleged misconduct during the campaign but very largely at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for not conducting the election itself properly.

Q Who was the Law firm representing the company?

A: The biggest employers-representing law firm in the west, maybe in the country now. We used to call them Hitler, Mussolini, and Fascist, because, at least at that time although they pretend to act more lightly today, they were pretty rabid union busters.

Q To your knowledge PSGF knew how to bust unions, since they hired this law firm. Was the law firm working with the company before the election for union representation?

A: I do not recall whether this law firm had an active role during the campaign. The company lost the campaign decisively, so I rather doubt they had good management consultants during the election campaign because they lost by a tremendous margin. Not that it might [have] made any difference [if] they had good counsel because the conditions were so bad that the workers probably would have voted for the union anyway. But they might have done more intimidating things during the campaign. I do not know, so this is purely a hunch. I think that they lost the election --the company, and then they shopped around for somebody to get them out of trouble later on because now they were going to have to bargain with this union unless they set the election aside. So they hired Littler, Mendelson, Fastiff, and Tichy. And when these objections--generally unions lose some of the elections before the NLRB now--It is usually [a] union objecting to repressive conduct by the employer. In this case, the union won by a big margin. It was the company objecting out of desperation trying to get the election overturned.

Q Why is it happening now, the opposite way, that the unions are objecting to the election results?
A: Well because since the Reagan years, since 1980, through the 1980's and now, Republicans were appointed to the NLRB and to the general council of the board. And so they basically had [guttered] what were already feeble protections for workers and unions as far as winning elections and being protected against anti-union discrimination. So during the Reagan years they completely spoiled the liberal democratic case law that had built up for 30 years, and that is one of the reasons I quit practicing labor law. Because I could see what was happening, I quit in 1980. I could see that it was going to be impossible to help workers very much as the law shifted to the right. But anyway, I got back.

Q By the time the company objected to the election for representation, were you responsible for all of the union legal business?

A: I do not know. Maybe that was the first big impetus to my getting active because they had no resources. Newman was a member, I think actually. Is Alicia a lawyer too? [Yes, but at that time she was working for California Human Development Corporation (CHDC)] But she had worked with either the United Farm Workers Association (UFWA) or the Agriculture Labor Relations Board (ALRB). [She had worked with the farm workers, but as a legal advice. But I do not think she was practicing law during those times]. No, okay, anyway, Newman was an Alabama lawyer but was not a California lawyer. Well [I was the only lawyer].

Right, and it was very fortuitous for both of us because I was really looking for a movement to help, to work with, and they were looking for a lawyer. It was great.

Q Can you describe the objections, not one by one, but by their main theme? Can you also describe how did you prepare the workers for the hearing? To my understanding, they were all Spanish-speaking people who probably had no experience or understanding of the Labor Law System in the United States. Where were hearings conducted? And were workers allowed to be present?
A: Ordinarily when the Labor Board has a hearing on objections, or on [an] unfair labor practice charge, they do it in a federal building, in a hearing room which is like a court room. But Sonoma Avenue does not have any hearing room. Or, at that time it was a very small one I think. So the government ended up paying for space at the Flamingo Hotel. That is what they do: They go to a hotel and rent a conference room, and the government pays the bill for the hearing space, if they cannot do it in a government building. Well, the result is that these workers were involved in a hearing that was nowhere near the plant, and it was in a upper-middle-class hotel, and of course it was carried on mostly in English except when we had interpreters. And the company insisted on excluding the witnesses, which means, until you testify, you can not be in the hearing room.

Q. Can they do that? Do they have that power?

A: Yes, this is not unusual, but it is a psychological, as well as a delegation tactic. It keeps the workers from first hand observation of the hearing process. So that makes it even more important to have some way of keeping the workers in touch with what is going on.

Q. Were you having meetings with the workers, to inform them about the hearing while the hearing was happening?

A: I think, I do not remember what the schedule was, but there were meetings at the union hall at least once a week, maybe two or three times. And during the time the case was going on, I would try really hard to go to those meetings and explain directly what was happening at the hearing, and what they could expect to happen from then on.

Q. How were the workers feeling at that time? How did they respond to the company's objections? Did you plan any activities to keep their morale up?

A: I think they were very upset and puzzled about a legal system that would say you win an election by that huge a majority, [and] you cannot start negotiating for contract, or let say, the company
does not have to start negotiating. And though we had to explain that this could take months before the Labor Board could tell the company: You have to negotiate now. We are going to certify the union as the bargaining representative. You got to negotiate with them, and actually I am sure I told the workers that even after the objections were resolved, if the company wanted to delay it, they could have delayed bargaining with the union as long as two years.

Q What was their response after you informed them of that? Was their morale down?

A: No, I would not say so. That is the down side. The up side is that, they could if they were willing to engage in economic action, if they were willing to strike or hurt the company with their economic power, they could force the company to give them what they wanted a lot faster.

Q Did they use the economic action? Were they able to use it?

A: They never [went on strike], but they certainly had demonstrations and marches and perhaps there was low-level job action on the shop floor. Workers can always express how unhappy they are by slowing down, [or] like breaking things, [or] whatever.

Q But is it not true that during the election campaign the employer started sending fish to other places so that the workers could not work full time during the time you waited for the election?

A: Yes, I have a file about lay offs, apparently in March of 1988. It was before I even hooked up with the union. In March the union filed an unfair labor practice charge saying that they were threatening the employees with plant closure and diversion of work because of their organizing activities. So that was one charge, with the NLRB in San Francisco. I see that in August the regional office of the Board issued a complaint, an unfair labor practice complaint about that--for threatening employees with the decrease of work because of union activities and telling the employees that they may close the Santa Rosa plant because of the union activities. So that was a threat for the election. The hearing
was scheduled for October 18, 1988 on that charge, and then eventually it must [have] gotten settled. I have a file about that. And then, it seems to me that, after the union won the election, there were lay-offs. And, we suspected that the reason work was slow was because they were farming out some of their processing to other plants on the coast.

Q: How many plants did the company have?

A: I think [there] was one near Eureka, and one in Oakland. I see that that charge was settled on the basis of the company posting a notice in January 1989 saying that they would not try to interfere with the workers' rights to organize by threatening to decrease the work or close the plant.

Q: Was that helpful for the workers to keep their morale up?

A: By January 9, 1989, [it] seems to me that the workers already started bargaining. No it is not true. I can see that we were still delegating the company's objections to the election on March of 1989. So probably, we did not get [yet] certified, I do not know when we got certified. It is not in my file. Probably not until late spring of 1989, a year after the election.

Q: Lets go back to the hearing. How did you prepare the workers for the hearing?

A: I would always meet with the workers either at the union hall or at homes and, because my Spanish is not terribly strong, I would often have an interpreter, somebody to help me which was very, very important, so first of all there were certain workers identified as the source of some objections. I could see that our witnesses Salvador Bejar, Celia Mendoza, Pablo Mendoza, Rosa Soto, were supposed to have made threats against certain pro-company employees and, although those witnesses could not be in the hearing room until they had testified, I could certainly meet with them before they were to testify. And, I did. We met with them, and we went over their testimony. I would tell them what the company witnesses were saying, and I would basically keep them posted on what to expect. So, first of all, they would have
met with me, they knew me as the union lawyer. They would have met with me in their language at least a few times. They would come to the hearing, those who were going to testify, and they could watch what was going on. When they were at the hearing waiting to testify, I [would] always go out for lunch with them, so to decrease the sense of isolation. And that is how we would try to break down the fear.

Q Did you find workers afraid to testify because they may have been undocumented?

A: They were nervous, but they were not intimidated. First of all, nobody was going to ask anything about their papers. I would assure the workers that no one could even be allowed to ask that question and that there will be no migra (immigration) present. So that would not have been an issue. In fact, it would have been a labor law unfair labor practice, for the company to call the migra on our people who were obviously active in the union.

Q How many workers went to testify at the hearing?

A: Well, for the company, probably, you know, four or five workers and two or three bosses. And for us, I would say six to ten workers actually testified. I think Newman or Alicia testified about the nature of SCIU as the union.

Q Did you choose workers to testify?

A: The company has the burden of proof in their objections, so they had to go first. So while they were putting on their witnesses to support their objections, we would listen, take notes of who they were accusing of what. We would cross examine their witnesses and weakened their stories as much as we could. And then we would know who we had to call when our turn came to rebutt the company's case.

Q After the NLRB representative ruled in your favor, did the company sit down and bargain with you?
A: First the Hearing Officer ruled in our favor, rejected all the objections. Then the company went to appeal to the Labor Board in Washington, and eventually the board upheld the hearing officer's decision and certified the union. But that took, like I said, that took about a year.

Q: In the meantime you were having complaints from the workers about unfair labor practices?

A: Well, in the mean time, the union could not get the company to bargain about a contract, but the union did, take out the workers grievances informally. The company would not admit it was recognizing the union, but there were lots of contacts, and things happened you know. Some of our people were disciplined and we would complain to the company as a union, or we would file unfair labor-practice charges. Or, we would fight their unemployment cases. I mean, there were a lot of attempts to intimidate the people that the company saw as organizers.

Q: As I recall you were fighting for economic improvements?

A: The company could not be forced to recognize the union as a bargaining agent. The workers wanted to improve the conditions. They wanted higher wages; they wanted insurance, that kind of thing. But until the company was forced to recognize the union and sign a contract they could not get those things.

Q: What were you doing in the meantime while you were certified? What actions were you taking?

A: We had this other law suit for the safety equipment, forcing the company to provide gloves and boots--gloves, boots and aprons. In other words, the company would required the workers to wear that stuff, but would make them pay for it. And I think also, there was a question about knifes that the workers had to use. Maybe they had to use their own knifes. So we sued the company in the Superior Court for all the workers, and we ended up settling with the company basically with them giving us what we had sued for --that they would pay for all these protective things. And I think it was a morale [builder] because, you know the workers saw it
was possible to take the company on. Again, the problem is, the more success you have in the legal arena, the less people rely on their own power.

Q: Exactly, but at the same time you were having rallies outside the plant, you were trying to have economic impact on the company by talking to restaurants about your boycott towards PSGF, and you encouraged them not to buy the company's products. What else were you doing?

A: You can boycott: it is not illegal. You could ask restaurants not to deal with PSGF, and not to buy their products.

Q: Were you successful?

A: You know, I had forgotten about that. We did try to track down who their customers were and I think that we wrote to them: maybe we even contacted them. I think that I developed a data base, a mailing list of who those companies were, and the contact people. Maybe we organized some telephone calling to call them up...

Q: Going back to the union certification. Do you remember when you were certified?

A: Yes. It was June 15, 1989.

Q: What happened after the union was certified?

A: Well, the company could have delayed longer negotiating with the union, if they wanted to. But they did start negotiations looking towards a collective bargaining agreement, and actually that did not take more than a few months to reach a collective bargaining agreement.

Q: Who was part of the bargaining committee?

A: I was not involved in the PSGF negotiations at all, and I think that by that time the union either had just affiliated or was just about to affiliate with Service Employees International Union
(SEIU) and, of course, there would be a workers' negotiating committee and either Newman or Alicia, and I think maybe somebody from local 707.

Q Who wrote the contract proposal for the union?

A: I had written clauses for the Calliope Designs contract and probably some of those clauses were proposed by the union to PSGF. But I do not think I had put together a whole contract proposal. Actually, I think the company; PSGF came out with a package proposal first. See one of the things that was a weakness in SCIU leadership was not taking organized coherent steps in collective bargaining. In other words, not putting out a coherent union package proposal. I think the good part was that they had meetings with the workers as any democratic union should, to developed a sense of the things that were most important to the workers, to get in the contract. But then, putting them into a coherent contract proposal, I think they got very late with Calliope Designs and maybe not at all with PSGF. My impression is, at the PSGF...What the union did was kind of react to the package put on the table by the employer. I am not sure. Do you know if the union got affiliated by the time they got a contract with PSGF?

Q No, according to Alicia, affiliation did not happened until two years after they started organizing. Going back to the contract. What do you think made the leadership of SCIU weak in terms of knowing how to do the collective bargaining? Did they have any people with collective bargaining experience helping them?

A: I do not think that either Newman or Alicia had ever represented a union in collective bargaining. Paul Kaplan may had been active, but I do not think that he had ever been on a negotiating committee at his union.

Q According to Paul Kaplan, he also saw a weakness in the leadership when they were negotiating with Calliope Designs, but he said that he did not have the union collective bargaining experience that he has now.
A: You know, I had represented unions that bargained for contracts for twenty five years. But I was not closely connected to the negotiation process, so I had a second hand understanding of negotiating.

Q Did you have any other union members, or other community members who have had experience in collective bargaining assisting you? Were Alicia and Newman prepared by someone? Alvaro Delgado wrote this article in October 14, 1988 describing what the company was offering. What kind of proposal did your union present to the employer? Did you have one?

A: No, that newspaper article was written when the workers went back to work, after the strike, so it was when the bargaining was over. The workers voted to go back in without a contract.

Q Because they did not get a closed shop?

A: No, that is mistaken in Alicia's terms. A closed shop is illegal in America. A closed shop is a shop were you must be a member of the union to get the job. That is illegal in America. What the union asked for, was a union shop.

Q Maybe I misunderstood Alicia.

A: Where you must, if you worked there under the collective bargaining agreement, join the union within thirty days. Or if you do not join, you must pay dues to the union without joining. So the union wanted a union shop, and the company refused a union shop and the usual accompaniment to that are dues check-up. If you have a union shop, then you can say: "The company will deduct the dues every month automatically from the pay check and then the union does not have to go around and collect individually from every worker." And Calliope Designs resisted a union shop and dues check-up.

Q Why?

A: That kind of guarantees a permanent support for the union.
Q: The workers really wanted to have the union shop. They did not get it, and they decided to go back to work without a contract?

A: Well, the other thing the company was adamant about was wages. The piece rate scale that the company offered were pathetic and were not significant. Now, there was a stratum of workers in Calliope Designs that were doing very well, you know, they were making...I do not know, very well in terms of that industry. $10.00 or $12.00 an hour at piece rate. But the majority of them were not, and at the bargaining table the company will always point to the workers who were making good wages and say: "Hey what is the problem with these rates?" "No problem."

Q: The company was focusing only on the few who earned a higher wage?

A: Most workers there were paid by the piece rate. But the company would focused on the workers who were high earners under the piece-rate system.

Q: Lets go back a little. Were you present at the meeting, or meetings, when the workers decided to go on strike because they were getting nowhere with the employer? My question is; How did they reach the decision to go on strike? Were they aware of the benefits and/or consequences of a strike? Because in Mexico -- when workers go on strike, the "scabs" have a very difficult time going into the company to work. The strike cannot be broken and the company practically shuts-down. Since these workers were mostly from Mexico, were they well informed about what could happen if they did not win the strike, what could have happened if the strike lasted a long time. As I understand, the union was very new and did not have a fund.

A: The short answer is "Yes." I was aware of that cultural difference since I have represented Mexicano workers for a long time, and I know people believed the same system applies here. So I think they knew that they could be permanently replaced. That is a phrase of the United States law. But, I think that they also had a lot of confidence in their solidarity, and they were very optimistic. They believed that the strike would not be long. They had not an
inflated idea, but a strong idea of their indispensability to Calliope Designs. And, this is always a dangerous misconception.

Q: Because they were thinking that they were going to be on strike for one or two weeks?

A: Well, that is what people usually think, that they will put a lot pressure on the employer at a moment when the employer needs production, and the employer will have to capitulate.

Q: Do you remember when they went on strike?

A: Sure, it had to be around July 1988. Let's see. If you count backwards thirteen weeks from October 15. Around the middle of July.

Q: If this was a Christmas ornament company, and they went on strike in July, were they not a little early to put pressure on the employer?

A: Well, do not forget that the company sold wholesale. The company probably had to ship by September. So I think that the workers--Our analysis was that the longer the strike went on, the more the pressure would be on the company, you know. If they did not settle in August, they will be looking for more production in September. So we would be more and more successful in hurting them, and we did try to keep track of how much stuff was being shipped from Calliope Designs. We tried to watch that carefully, to have a sense of our effectiveness in stopping production. But, I think that our projections were optimistic.

Q: How so?

A: I think that they managed to get out more production using supervisors and bosses and less skilled workers, and they managed to get out more production than we hoped.

Q: Did they hire other people to work?

A: Oh sure. Yes, they hired scabs.
Q: What was the workers' morale like when they saw that two weeks went by and the employer did not negotiate?

A: I think that they were very strong at the beginning, and I do not think that they were demoralized. Maybe never. I mean, I remember being worried about watching them go back to work. And worrying that they be demoralized and that may be the end of the union because I had been through this situation with even tougher strikes. And I have watched people go back to work with scabs, you know, seen them take their jobs and that kind of stuff. And, it is very demoralizing. But I think the Calliope Designs workers felt; "Hey, we taught them a lesson we showed them we cannot be broken and we are going back with our dignity. And, if something happens in the shop we do not like now, we [teach] them a [lesson].

Q: Were the scabs fired right after the strike was over?

A: Pretty quickly. They were not skilled workers.

Q: What was interesting is that they hired other minorities to work, right?

A: Well, they had some South-East Asians. Well, that is the problem. Today people are so hungry for jobs. As long as you can replace strikers, it is very hard to win any strike.

Q: Do you remember --I was talking to Alicia, and she told me that the company hired some security guards to help the company keep the strikers and their supporters off their premises. And also, at some point there was an incident. The company accused one of the active members of hitting one of the guards with her picket sign. Were you in charge of helping her?

A: O, Paulina Martinez, yes. Sure, well, it was simply a company tactic. You cannot fire strikers. You can fire a striker who engages in strike misconduct, that means violence, or intimidation, or interfering with the scabs going to work that kind of thing. But, you can fire the strikers [for these things]. If you do not fire them, they have the right to go back to work when the strike is over. So this was a pretty difficult case in a way. The company got a report
from a guard that Paulina had struck the guard or tried to strike the guard, and at most, it was a very glancing blow if anything. But they insisted upon that and fired her. Now that could have been to the advantage of the workers in a very important way.

Q: How?

A: This is complicated. There are two kinds of strikes in the U.S. law. One is what is called the unfair labor practice strike. So an unfair labor practice strike is one that is caused or aggravated by the company committing an unfair labor practice, which is defined in NLRB Act. And the usual unfair labor practice committed during the strike would be not bargaining in good faith, or firing strikers unlawfully. So, if the union has been able to say...and I think we actually did this, we did tried to convert the strike into an unfair labor practice strike after Paulina was fired. Why? Because the key difference is that if you have an unfair labor practice strike, you cannot be permanently replaced. When you say: "I am ready to go back to work," you must be given your job back. If you are a non-unfair labor practice striker, which the law calls an economic strike, then you can be permanently replaced. So if the company claims it has replaced you with a scab, if you are on an economic strike and you say: "Okay, the strike is over, I am reporting for work." They can say: You do not have a job any more. So the stupid thing from the company's point of view about firing Paulina on this flimsy pretext, was giving the union an opportunity to convert the strike--I think it happened around August. First of all, it angered the workers. So it increased their solidarity. And from the legal point of view, it gave us the chance to convert the strike by changing the language of the picket line into an unfair labor practice strike.

Q: Because you had gone on strike under the economic strike?

A: So that by protesting Paulina's discharge, we turned it into an unfair labor practice strike. So that made it doubtful, at least whether the company could permanently replace any of the Calliope Designs strikers. Well, that is a big threat that they no longer could have over the workers heads. So we tried to explain that--I mean, of course they were angry about Paulina, but first of all, we
They were angry because Paulina was a minority woman, and her husband and children were at home?

A: Her husband was disabled, her husband had had a bad back injury. And Paulina was the sole source of support during the strike and for about four or five months after.

Q: Was she taken to jail?

A: I was not there when it happened, but now that you mention it...The judge was somebody I had known for many years because of my practice, and he was known as a no nonsense judge. And he wrote an excellent decision stating all the facts very precisely.

Q: Was the judge's decision before or after the strike was over?

A: I am sure the strike was over. Labor Board proceedings take a long time. I am sure the hearing did not even take place until after the strike was over.

Q: When all the workers went back to work in October, was Paulina with them?

A: No, they would not take her back.

Q: When you won the case, was the employer forced to pay her back salaries and take her back to work?

A: That is right. That was won for the union.

Q: What happened after they went back to work? Did they have any more negotiations? How were the workers treated?

A: I do not have first-hand information. I think their morale was pretty high. I think they felt proud that they had survived for three months without wages, and involved the community in their support. So, they were not intimidated. They did not go back with