

Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

Marian Kramer

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

August 27, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Marian Kramer is a veteran organizer with roots in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She is the national president of the National Welfare Rights Union, a member of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, and a member of the People's Water Board. Kramer was a lead organizer with the Congress for Racial Equality in the Civil Rights movement. She organized all over the South with a specific focus on Louisiana and Texas. She moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1965 and continued her activism through her involvement in union organizing, organizing against water shutoffs, advocating for access to affordable water, as well as protecting the rights of women and children who use welfare.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Abstract

Marian Kramer discusses how the water shutoffs in Highland Park and Detroit became a major issue for local welfare rights activists in the 1990s. She talks about their organizing tactics, the Flint Water Crisis, the development of the People's Water Board, and water affordability plans. She also recounts the development of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s by Johnnie Tillmon and George Wiley, the end of the National Welfare Rights Organization, and the development of the National Welfare Rights Union in the 1990s. Other topics include the need for all working people to unite and listening as key to being a good organizer. Finally, she gives advice to young activists and talks about how young and old activists can learn from each other.

Keywords

Civil rights; Detroit, Michigan; Emergency management; Flint water crisis; George Wiley; Highland Park, Michigan; Johnnie Tillmon; Labor unions; Maureen Taylor; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; National Welfare Rights Organization; National Welfare Rights Union; People's Water Board; Privatization; Water affordability; Water shutoffs; Welfare rights

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Transcript of interview conducted August 27, 2019 with:

Marian Kramer [MK]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

PB: Could you just give us your name, where you live, and your organization?

MK: Okay. I'm Marian Kramer-Baker, and I live in Highland Park, Michigan, which is in the center of Detroit [Michigan]. We--Detroit is all around us as well as some other cities and what have you. So, that's me, and I am constantly working with--a part of Welfare Rights Organization here in the metropolitan area. I'm a member of Michigan Welfare Rights [Organization], and then we have a national [coughs]--excuse me--a national organization and I'm the chairperson for that. So, that's me in a nutshell. I have--you want to know how many children I have?

PB: How many children do you have?

MK: [laughs] Eight. They all grown and gone.

PB: [laughs] That's the best kind of children to have, right?

MK: Oh, those are the best type of children to have.

[0:01:26]

PB: So, let's pick up with how and when Michigan Welfare Rights got involved in the water struggle in Highland Park.

MK: Okay. We started out in the water situation in 1990s, and it was because someone had mentioned to me in...in Highland Park that they...they had cut their water off. And I said, well, wait a minute, let me go up here and see the mayor [Linsey Porter]. And he told--he said, "Marian, we have whole lists of people that we are forced to cut off." I said, "No. No one will force you if you take a stand for the benefit of the people. Don't cut that water off." And this was during the holidays at the time, and it was cold as hell out there. I said, "We need a place to have a meeting."--telling Linsey Porter--he just passed away, too--because not only are we having problems, we're beginning to have problems in Highland Park. Then, people in Detroit began to call us with some of the same problem. Their water was being shut off. And I was telling Maureen [Taylor] at that time, "Look, if we check deeper, you'll find out..."--Well, they were coming in the office saying they had utility problems. And I said, "If we...if we check a little deeper, you will find out they got more problems than just utilities, and one of them is the question of water, and we're gonna have to dig that out of them because they tend to not say anything because they're afraid that their children will be snatched." So, that's when we, you know, at that...that was the beginning stages of this water fight.

So, we set up a meeting in Highland Park on one of the coldest days of the year. Now, we did not realize that until we got to the library. There's this great library in Highland Park, and there's a wonderful auditorium, and we had used it quite a bit as a, as wel--Highland Park Welfare Rights Organization. And what happened at the time, we walked and Linsey [Porter] said, "I'm sorry, we can still have this. Up to you."--the meeting, because the water--I mean, everything was, the heat was turned off. And so, they were gonna leave it off for the time of the--you know, because no one was there. And...and so, they wasn't gonna call DTE [Detroit Edison Energy] and have it come back out there and turn it on. It was a way for the...for the city to save some money. I said, "We don't have to pull our coats off and everything."

But, we had got in touch with people from Hamtramck [Michigan], Detroit, and Highland Park because all of those are intimately connected. And...and folks--we had about one or two people that--one person that I've known for all her life, almost--that came from Detroit. We had the mayor and some people from Highland Park that was there. We had one person--I don't think Hamtramck made it. But to see these people show up that night, you knew there was some problems at...Oh, we had...who did we have? [John] Conyers came, and he began to listen to the problem too. And he said, "Well, wait a minute."--And I was shocked that the news came, Channel Seven came. I...which--what shocked me was that they showed up for this particular event, and it was a slow night. That is why.

[0:05:50]

And what happened was...It was good because Congressman [John] Conyers got up and said--after he had heard the voices of the people in the auditorium and the problems that they were going with--going...having with the question of water in particular--he said, "Wait a minute. This is my neighborhood. Listen (??) to--You mean to tell me all this is going on?" I couldn't hardly talk. I lost my voice in there. And he said, "Look, Miss [Marian] Kramer--Miss [Maureen] Taylor. I am saying to the people also here, the mayor and all the rest of y'all. Turn the water back on. This is...this is the holidays. People shouldn't be without water. They shouldn't be without water never." The mayor of Highland Park [Linsey Porter] kept saying, no, he couldn't do it. I said--and if you...if you knew Linsey [Porter], Linsey was really tall, and I...I grabbed him by his ear and told him, "Come on, let's go out here and talk." I said, "Do you have...do you...have you ever understood that with him saying turn the water back on, we can then deal with the federals to get some money in here and deal with this situation. So, turn that water back on. And there's a saying that a fool that get a weapon and don't know how to use it will always be a fool. Now that's up to you. I can always address you like a fool."

Well, Linsey [Porter] tried to work closely with us 'cause he came over, came down here, gave me a copy of all the people that were facing water shutoffs in this city, in the city of Highland Park. It was amazing. In fact, we might still have that copy. And...and so, he was able to get some of them back on because all the employees

were off for the holidays. I said, "Oh my goodness, we were on a..." After a while, Representative [John] Conyers called another meeting down at his office when he was in Congress, and a lot of people showed up around heat and water. He was just gone when he saw all these people coming out and shocked that this was going on here. I said, "You should check home more often. And you, you got something to tell the rest of 'em, that people are dying slowly because they don't have the necessities that other folks might have to be able to keep their family warm, you know, particularly during the winter time--and clean during the winter time and what have you." So, he stuck with us for a while on this.

[0:08:49]

And then, we started exposing no other than Detroit. We picketed the Water Department for a period of time because people didn't realize that Highland Park owned its own water because Henry Ford, when he was building in...in Highland Park, one of the things he made sure he didn't have to come through Detroit was the water. So, you know, we finally got quite a few people water back on, but not like it should have been. So we've kinda--We had a couple of people that have passed away that was out there, and we had formed the--this was the second time around--the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition. And Valerie Johnson, and I forgot the--oh my Lord--the other person's name who also passed away, but they stay right in that movement. Valerie would be in the hospital, get down here, and tell me what's going on, but we lost her, and we lost another person that was dear to...to the movement at that time.

But people started calling--we called meetings in Highland Park. And this was afterwards...you know, we had Detroit going, and we had Highland Park going. In Detroit, people just didn't want to believe what we were saying, that folks' utilities were off in the wintertime. Well, we not only picket the Water Department, we picket...we picketed DTE, and DTE finally gave in on some things. But at the same time, we had to fight all these...all these particular settings (??). It came from the fact that people were afraid to say anything out of the fear of their children being snatched.

[0:10:56]

And it didn't--and I think I told you this once before, and that is the Department of Human Services--it was called the Welfare Department at...at that time--lied a lot of times, saying, "No, we don't snatch chil--children if they have...if their water isn't turned on." I said, "That's a lie." And, you know, it was. It was beginning getting to be proven and everything, you know. And so, some of the decent people that we had been working with at the Department of Health--Department of Heal--it's the Department of Health and Human Services now--had retired. And we had... Here it was like starting all over again even with these idiots that refused to understand that people need heat and...and water to live. So, we began...we were beginning to break through, and it was during the same time that, you know, Highland Park, not only were we having water problem, but the governor had assigned another emergency manager [Ramona Henderson-Pearson] there. And she came in like...like [Mahatma] Gandhi--I mean, like she was a gift to us, which was a lie, you know.

We showed the city council there. We had 'em down here at one time. You know, they can't--it's five people on city council in...in Highland Park. You can--if you gonna meet with people, you can only...they can only bring in two 'cause it look like they're, you know, getting to plot with the people that they might be working with. That's a bunch of crap, though, 'cause they didn't. They didn't do nothing. But, we showed *The Waterfront*. Have you ever seen that movie? And we showed it at the school, the high school, and a lot of people showed up. And they didn't want...a lot of folks didn't want to... Some of the folks that didn't have a problem with water didn't want to really believe what was going on. I said, "You need to get out there and go door-to-door." 'Cause we were going door-to-door. It was cold as hell that year. And I hated for people like Valerie Johnson to be out there 'cause she was ill, you know. Valerie said, "No, I'm going out." And you could...you could--I mean, you just felt sick for everybody you had to talk to that was, you know, that was experiencing this particular situation.

[0:13:50. Jump cut]

The person in...in Detroit said--'cause she was at that meeting. It was for--that was over the Water Department at the time. She had some sense, more so that what

I've looked at with the Water Department since then, you know. She'd say, "Look, can you and...and Maureen [Taylor] come down to...to City Hall tomorrow and we'll go through all this stuff and make sure that people go out and turn that water on." And she did. She did that, along with the person that was there representing her and what have you, but Highland Park [Michigan] did not. We still had to fight with them, and...and we had talked to the people at the Department of--the Welfare Department--who said we're ready to take 'em in, to try to help, like you said. They were dragging their feet all of a sudden. Here this emergency manager [Ramona Henderson-Pearson] occurs, and everything just went away in a sense. And so, we had to start dealing with them. Not only dealing with the emergency manager but with these...these clowns that were on City Council.

In Detroit, it was during the same period of time that they were talking about, sooner or later, they were gonna bring in emergency management to Detroit. And we had told--you know, they--every time we tell people about these emergency men--It was my husband [General Baker], myself, and finally Maureen [Taylor] saw what we were talking about, began to see that the emergency manager takes over everything. We went and got the law on that to show people, you know, what was going on.

I mean, we were trying everything to get the water back on, and that water should not be turned off if--particularly in the wintertime. What happened was we started not only picketing Highland Park, we'd picket Detroit. We'd picket the Water Department [laughs] and they finally gave in, but Detroit became, you know, they started bringing in that emerg--the question of the emergency manager at that time. And then, they gon let us fall through the cracks. I mean, Detroit just blew--a big city like Detroit, and they gonna... We said, "We told you." We told the workers that we were helping to picket, you know for their incomes and everything. We said, "We told you they were gonna do it. But see, y'all have so much faith in those two big people that don't have no power. And...and watch they...watch they sell you out." Oh, they...and they didn't believe that they were not gonna go have...have the opportunity to go back to their jobs. They didn't, you couldn't tell them that. I...that, hey, you...you might get your pension, or you might not. 'Scuse me a minute. [Sniffles] Or you might not. But they had the...you know, you hate people got to fall into the well in order to learn that type of stuff.

[0:17:20]

So here we setting around with 'em...with 'em, did all this picketing. We then took it as far as we thought we had, and that...the [Michigan?] Poverty Law Center who was working with us, the Michigan Legal Services who was working with, we were dis--and Michigan Welfare Rights--we were sitting down and said, "Where do we go from here?" We began to think. We got to see what's our next plan of action because one thing I loved about the people in De--Highland Park, we began...They had requested that we should have meetings every Thursday and sometime it be 75 people there, but people would come out. Now, they're asking again in Highland Park, can we have those...some meetings again because the water is being shut off there again. You know...

[unknown voice speaks inaudibly off screen]

MK: ...you know, shut off again. Right now, you know, they try to walk around, they--you know how...you know how delegates are. They walk around there and say they gonna have a chicken, probably try to act like it's a chicken in every pot, a car in every...in every garage and stuff like that. And I'm gonna do this for you, and I'm gonna do that... And soon, they get in there and they don't even know you no more. The disrespect on the...on the part of city council for the people that they are supposed to be representing is...is obvious in every major city, is obvious in every small city. And just like that woman in the suburbs talking about she don't want no, she want to keep...keep it white, you know. She didn't...she wasn't born yesterday. She been feeling like that.

So, you know, all that is used for the capitalists, and we begin to learn more and more here to be able to privatize our water. Then, Flint [Michigan] hit. We kept on. We went to Flint. We went to Benton Harbor [Michigan], all these places now have been hit with the fact of their water being off, going through some of the major stuff that we have gone through. And with...with--that's how the People's Water Board came about. It used to be here, the...you know, it was a thing that people got to understand, you got to constantly be in that movement, you got to constantly be moving based on what the problems are that people are talking

about. And so, we had here at Welfare Rights, we had a utility committee. We had to form that, and the people ran it. And so when it kinda died down, and one lady from...that had been with the Sierra Club--they had moved--and she said, "I had requested like you said, Marian [Kramer], that we move here," and she...and we got her together with one of our members, Ann Rall, 'cause Ann was on the Utility Committee. And we said, "We got to find some kind of way to do to get this monkey off our backs, and we need an organization that's gonna bring all folks together around this." And they were good on beginning to build that, and it became the People's Water Board. It wasn't...it wasn't overnight, but it has existed also. So, we had different organizations not only join it, but at the same time, the...the...the organization reaching out was real good through that. And so, people still--a lot of them--still didn't understand until they came face-to-face with it what was happening here. And some of 'em, a lot of them, are still around and I'm...I'm happy of that.

[0:21:37]

And we still have people from Canada--we all hooked up with people from Canada, from Mar (??) and all of them over in Canada. They brought over...got permission to bring water over to us one day. Were you out there that day? It was amazing. It was...it was...it was great. And then, we had people that drove all night long from...from North Carolina and what have you. Some of the ex-- you know, folks that have been in the mines or their family, you know, parents or something like. Two men drove up here with a...a big trunk with water and then we had to start finding a place to put the water, and so we were able to do that over at one of the churches that works with us, where Bill Kellermann was at the time.

But I tell ya, it is not easy to pick up those big gallons of water. It's like going to...to one of these exercising places and take big...and try to build your muscles up. I mean, we had to...to... Finally, a couple of people, We The People came about, was formed on, you know, out of the People's Water Board and what have you. It wasn't the People's Water Board that formed the thing, but it was, you know, we started working together, and they start dealing with the water situ--you know, getting stuff to people that needed water, and that's gone on and on and on too. But people have to understand, we're not...we're not fighting that we have to deliver water to folks. That should be a part of the infrastructure and you

understand what the...what the infrastructure is all about. You got all these different apparatuses out here that its purpose is nothing but to be able to privatize in the interests of the corporations, and one of the biggest things they want is the water situation.

[0:23:53. Jump cut]

We kinda slowed down for a while. Highland Park was going pretty good for a while there, but it has started back up. I know the present mayor [Hubert Yopp], I told him at one time, I said, "I don't...I don't... As far as the quality report on the water, I don't think is right." I said, "I bet you"--because we had learned from Flint--"I bet you there's lead in here." He said, "Well, the report that they gave us said that we was okay." I said, "You better check for that lead." And he said, "Oh, we didn't check." I said, "Then..." [laughs] Where was I? And they announced about the lead--again, this is the second time in Highland Park. I said, "Didn't I tell you, when the Human Rights Coalition come to you, we don't have to lie to you because we had gone through all these re--not only the reports, but we have seen it in Flint, we have seen it in"--I know Clara and I--'cause I'm from Louisiana--and I, we were...one of the young men down there had us to come down and talk about the water situation. I said, "Well, I can talk about the Mississippi situation too 'cause y'all right on Mississippi, you know." And that water is nothing like it used to be when I was a child in Louisiana. It's filthy. You...you fall into that Mississippi, they not gonna find you for days. When they find you, everything is eaten up, you know, by those little fish and stuff like that. But it, you know, it's the same, it... This water here is some of the best water in the nation, and all over the world and stuff. And as well as Chicago...

I mean, this is criminal, what's happening here. You got these...these. They're in corporations, and people didn't realize what was going--what you say, when you say corporation, I say [laughs] what we mean is if...if GM [General Motors], like what they did in Flint, went and complained about how the...the quality of the water was rust--you know, was hurting their different parts for the cars they had to put together, and they were gonna have to go back on Detroit water. They rushed in there that for--you know, the governor and all of them--rushed in to change that. But do they do it for the people? No. The corporation, who...who is nothing but a dog, for these...these capitalists and all that type of stuff, want that

stuff privatized. They...they are even fighting one another to have that. It's the whole question of the fracking and everything that is happening, going down in the earth and what have you, to be there. And they will always try to divide the class, particularly along racial lines, any lines, to be able to keep people away from each other and understanding that, look, we better get together to fight for our future and the future of our children.

[0:27:16]

So, you know, that goes...I didn't, you know, who was it? Maureen [Taylor] was saying, "I didn't know we was gonna be out here this long." I say, "We been out here a long time on this water." The water just automatically became a...a project of welfare rights because everybody started coming in here having problems with the water in conjunction with the utility company. I mean DTE [Detroit Edison Energy] and what have you, and it's...it's been a rippling effect around the country. Now, we sat down one day and said, "Where do we go again from here?" I said, "Well, I--we been thinking--I been thinking, let's see if this cross y'all mind pretty good--we need to put something on the ballot." I said, "Now, y'all know...[laughs]...with the ballot and stuff. We need to write up something and get a ballot." And so, Lorry [Brown] from the [Michigan] Poverty Law Center as well as Marilyn [Mullane] started thinking. And Marilyn say, "I heard about this guy, Roger Colton, in Boston. Let's try to get him in." We said, "Well, bring him in. Let's see what he can do."

And he told us about the water affordability plan he had been working on, not--it hadn't been really fully implemented. And we said, "Let us read this thing first." And we started critiquing it and what have you and say, "Yeah, this, let's take on Detroit first on this." We...we even gave Highland Park and took some of their people through the thing where they could understand what was the water affordability plan was about. They were gung ho at that time, and they gave it to the emergency man--manager [Ramona Henderson-Pearson]. And she, her thing was, "Well, I'll have to take this to the treasurer." We say, "When will you bring it?" "I'll try to get it back as soon as possible." She never brought it back before she left. The treasurer never okayed it for Highland Park because that was not the plan of action for them. Their thing was take Highland Park water and privatize it.

Here was the same way in Detroit, to privatize, take it out of the hands of the public and privatize it, and all that stuff started appearing by...

The more we pushed with Detroit on the implementation of this program, more and more stuff came out. The guy that was the head of the Water Department at that time, what was his name?

[0:30:04]

PB: Victor Mercado?

MK: Victor Mercado, who had a history of working to privatize certain entities for the benefit of the corporations. He tried his best to get us off, you know, being able to speak in places. I said, "I don't know who you been working with, but we don't move like that." In city council, you had the...the city council was split. But Maryann Mahaffey, and [Erma] Henderson and all of the rest, they were for that water affordability plan. Now, I had to go down there in Detroit daily, 'cause Maureen [Taylor] was working everyday, to be down there. I said, "I feel like I'm back in the [19]60s when I had to be down here every day to fight for housing." But every day we had to fight, and when the day that the city council finally got it in their minds to go on and pass the ordinance, you know, around the water affordability plan and implement it, Sheila Cockrel, at that time, asked Victor Mercalo--Mercado--when...when...where we gonna get the extra money from that is needed to make this a successful program 'cause she was against it. Victor Mercado stood right there in front of the camera and everything else, and he said, "We...I...I..." He said, "The five million dollars that I have," he said, "I will put up. It's money that has accumulated from the late fees." I said, "You get late fee money like that?" We can go on and on and on, you know. And she didn't like that and stuff, you know. But I told her at that time, "Ken Cockrel, who used to be one of my friends," I said, "He's turning over in his grave because of you being Sheila and your backwards mess and his son," I said, "because you have turned your backs on the...the people in the metropolitan area."

PB: Wasn't it her that said, "You can go down to the river and fill up your bucket?"

MK: Yes, it was her that said that you could go down to...to the--she, in fact, yeah--go down to the water with a bucket and begin to get water. She was the one that called me and said, "Can I talk to you when you come down today for...around the water?" I said, "I don't know, Sheila."--because I been knowing Sheila since she was a teenager, and she...she was hell on wheels then, you know, never on the right side. Her mother and father were--'cause we were all in WCO [West Central Organization] together, you know, [Saul] Alinsky-type organization, and her brother was okay, but Sheila... Sheila, you know, she comes from a--her grandfather was rich and everything, lived in Grosse Pointe [Michigan] and everything, but her parents lived out in the community and she always, at one time, used to be chasing Cain (??), and we were hoping there was some hope for her at that time, but it never materialized. You could see Sheila was in the back pocket of the...the corporations also.

Because when I got down, the day that she called me, she said, "Marian, listen. Victor Mercado is a good man." I said, "Sheila, is this what you're wasting my time trying to tell me that Victor Mercado is a good man? Victor Mercado is full of you-know-what because he was brought in here to privatize this water, so don't even waste your time. She said, "But you just don't..." And I said, "Check this. I don't want to know. As far as I'm concerned, he's a crook, and anybody that's affiliated with him is also, too." She was really--I know she was pissed when I left the office. And I said, "Don't you ever call me down here to talk about Victor Mercado and anything else in relationship to the vast majority of the people in the metropolitan or in the state level 'cause you sold out a long time ago."

[0:34:37]

So, we push for that water affordability plan. They finally passed it, and it was left with the agreement that our attorneys, the city attorneys would be working together to get--they were talk--to get the thing properly ready for implementation. We already had a few organizations that was gonna implement it. It was the THAW [The Heat and Warmth Fund]. We had talked to them. Came to almost the end of the year, THAW [The Heat and Warmth Fund] pulled out 'cause it was too long to wait on that, you know. And then, we found out that they

had gone behind our back and city council's back. That's right, JoAnn [Watson] was still on it 'cause she ended up taking Maryann [Mahaffey]'s place after she passed and everything. But Maryann has asked, "You all get that thing together before I die. I want that plan carried out." Maryann passed and they still hadn't got it together.

This water need, we--I said, when we...we didn't realize when we went into that, we were going into a war. And it...it is war. They don't care if we die a slow death or fi--a fast gun kind of death. They don't. It's obvious. The vast majority of the young folks as well as their parents, we're not needed no more for Detroit. There's a plan that they want to constantly implement and we are in their way.

[0:36:33]

But I, you know, I have faith. One thing I do have is faith in...in the class. And I'm, if anything, I told my kids when I die, you know you got to...don't give me to no funeral home. Their dad, my--General Baker had signed--give my body to no funeral home. You can take me downtown in an old sheet and put me up against the pole and let me go. I think I told you about that one time. Because I don't want to give no money to none...to these apparatuses.

They know that the infrastructure is dying. That's why you see all the stuff out there now because we had...we had...we would bring up the question of the infrastructure, but it wasn't because we were saying that they were gonna fix the infrastructure. They're fixing it because people like Dan Gilbert and all the rest of 'em. Damn the people! You know, they don't care about what, you know, happens to us. It's...it's--and that's why I hope people...that this could go out because people have to understand you can't sit back and wait for these folks to take care of your future. You're gonna have to take care of the future in order for the young people to have a future because they...they don't care. If they cared about us, why don't we have healthcare for everybody? Why don't all of our children have a decent education? Why aren't they building new homes every five years or something, have a plan around that, that people can be able to enjoy life even at home and everything like that? And that could be jobs that are created for the

benefit of society, not for the benefit of these no-good folks that are stealing from us.

[0:38:40]

PB: We have models, right? Like the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] and WPA [Works Progress Administration].

MK: All that, all that. We have...it takes the working class, be we working, unemployed or whatever, you know. It takes, to understand something, you know, they got to evaluate, they got to do this, that, and the other. All you have to do is begin to say, look. We got to do a little studying here, and then we got to get our strategy and tact together. And I said, I think, to you once before, I've seen them move before. And once they start to move, if you're not with 'em, you better get out of the way. And...and people say it's gonna be a revolution, but we in a revolution. When the means of production changes, that began the revolution. The only thing that's lagging behind is people's minds.

PB: So what needs to happen for people's minds to catch up with the gears that are in progress?

MK: Well, I probably won't be here, but I'm gonna be--before that happen--I'm gonna be working on their minds to make them see what we have learned. We learned that through our base, as far as the Welfare Department, the poor people, they have cut us off completely. They don't want poor people...it's like they always have used the people that we represent, that section of the class, when they wanted more and more people to come into the factory and stuff like that, but they keep you separated from one another.

And this fool that's in the White House [Donald Trump] up there talking about poor people--Look what he's doing at the border! If he...if it was really left up to him, he would take a machine gun and go down there and kill all the people. And...and people have to understand in the United States, you know, look at

around the country, people are rebelling. What are we gonna do? But it takes this class a long time to put their feet into motion.

[0:40:38. Jump cut.]

PB: Tell me about Johnnie Tillmon's organizing model...

MK: Ohhhh!

PB: ...and how that look...So I guess, what...

MK: Johnnie was something else.

PB: So, tell me about Johnnie's organizing model and what we can be learning from that today.

MK: Johnnie Tillmon, you know, lived in California--my brain's out. I told you, sometime you need to get that to me ahead of time where I can get it to you. Johnnie was the first president of the National Welfare Rights Organization, and Johnnie lived in LA [Los Angeles, California], and she was, you know, she was a mother, a grandmother, and she was hell on wheels. In fact, all those women were something else at that time. They not only sometime had a little job, but they raised those children, and so when it was time to build the National Welfare Rights Organization, she was the person they put in charge. It took a while because we all met in Syracuse, New York at the first Poor People's Conference and George Wiley, I think I told you about that, he'd say, "Well, I got to talk to y'all." I said, "Oh Lord, George got another assignment for us."

My ex-husband, Dave Kramer, we could not do that because we had told the people here in Michigan that he would be one of the organizers for the central organization, and I had another job too. I was working at Hotel, Motel, and

Restaurant Workers, you know, at...over there, learning unions and that type of stuff. So, I said, "But, you know you can call us like you always call us, George." [laughs] And then the next thing I know, George called and said, "Look here, can you help me to get some people to come to these two meet--three meetings, different meetings?" And this was the beginning laying out to build a welfare rights organization.

He--when he met with us the first time, it was Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, and, you know, they both were social workers and married to one another. And it was their concept, how could they organ--how could we organize poor people to jam the welfare department and force them to--the government--to listen to the problems that they were having and begin to loosen up the aid and stuff. And my thing was, we, on our way back home, we were saying, we want to organize them to fight for themselves, and they would be in the...they would be the ones over those organizations. Yeah, we were appreciative to what, you know, they were talking about, but at the same time, we did not, you know. It--I couldn't. I didn't go on as full-time. I was at WCO [West Central Organization] helping out in the...in the evening time and working, and...and all of us were.

[0:44:08]

Next thing I know, I say, "George, okay, I'll help get people to come, but I'm not coming." And so, Detroit had a good contingent of folks, folks from--see, what happened was the people from Cleveland [Ohio] that had gone to their city council and folks to talk about the plight that they were facing was told you have to take that problem to the capital in Ohio [Columbus, Ohio]. And they said, "Well, we don't have transportation and stuff." And they had a dog and some folks lining up, and they said, "Well, we going. We going walk over there from Cleveland to the capital around there." And George was calling us, saying, "Look, these folks are marching, you know, against poverty and what have you and problems that they are going through. Can...can y'all get some people from your area to meet at the capital at the same time that they reach their capital?" We say, "Yeah, I guess we can."

We did. We got folks together, and they, you know, it was like the birth, the beginning of a welfare rights here. That was Selma Goods and Gloria Brown and George's thing was, "I'm gonna get you on staff there." I said, "You can forget that." That's 'cause I'm in CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] with Gloria and Selma Goods. I knew Selma, and Selma was one of the first person--people that we met when we got here, and we all were a part of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. Selma was also. But, Selma and Brown was running the organization. And so, what we done in the welfare right--and out of the WCO [West Central Organization] was built (??) another welfare rights for public housing. And they were...these people were already ready for something like that. These women were dynamite. They were the first ones that came out of the Nat--being a member of the National Welfare Rights.

And it was, too, around the time that George--not George, but Johnnie and the...and the board was getting fed up with some of the things that was going on in welfare rights. There were monies coming in, but the didn't have their hands on the money. You know, you had all these organizers and...and...and no one... George, like I say, George don't have his hands on any of it. He'd go out and talk, and the money'd come in. Somebody'd need to be taking care of that. But, you know, George got killed. We, as of now, we still be wondering who killed him. Was it the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or who? George was an excellent swimmer and he, you know, and he drowned.

[0:47:30]

But Johnnie and them were coming to a head with who runs this organization, and eventually the board took over with National Welfare Rights. They had over a 100,000 people in welfare rights at one time. Particularly, they had a lot of people in New York, but throughout the country. Michigan played a...played a hell of a role too. In fact, Michigan was one of the organizations when the national closed the doors--when...when the government closed the doors of national--welfare rights still was going on here, and it was still going on in Louisiana and Houston [Texas], different places, in LA [Los Angeles, California] and that type of stuff, and Johnnie was over a lot of that until she finally retired. But she brought...she was a person that had to be respected. She helped bring that organization quite a ways. Beulah Sanders helped bring it. These were the leaders. Johnnie was the first one,

then Beulah Sanders after Johnnie stood--stepped down. And then, Frankie Jeter out of Phila--Pennsylvania became the president. And what was the other one after that? I forgot. And then, they pulled me back in or something like that.

But I became the national president after the period of [Bill] Clinton because we saw right through his mess. One thing--those women, when they get, begin to read stuff and everything, we could see what...which way they were going in relationship to the people that we were representing. A lot of time they tried to--the infiltration of welfare rights was something, and those women were not taking some of the bluff that people were coming in there talking about their welfare rights and type, stuff like that to try to break up the organization. And we knew...I mean, they began to understand that the government was moving against welfare rights, and they finally closed our doors.

When [Bill] Clinton was elected, we got...people started talking to Annie Smart from Louisiana, myself, and a couple of other folks, why can't we have the national back? Well, they didn't understand the doors had been closed. We opened up the national, we were gonna be responsible for the theft that had went on in the [inaudible]. You know, you get my drift? And...but we said, "We...we'll look into something." And we finally did, and we called a meeting, and we held it [laughs]. Michelle [Tingling-Clemmons??], she'll be here this weekend. We said, "Michelle, find a place for us to meet in...in [Washington] D.C." And she had it at the Georgetown, yeah. The only problem with Georgetown--is up on a hill and we had to walk, these ladies had to walk up those hills and stuff like that, and the...and the...the other complaint I got--what was the other complaint? It was too cold in the dormitory. [laughs]

But we formed, and we...we...we stayed there for about three or four days because it was during the period of time they were celebrating the constitution and we wrote our statement up around why we were reforming welfare rights--not the National Welfare Rights Organization, who we still love and respected, but it didn't exist no more, but the National Welfare Rights Union because of the base had to change and not be just welfare recipients. It had to be seniors, it had to be anybody that were having some problems with poverty, you know, and that's how we came about.

[0:51:51]

PB: Now let me ask you one question to kind of bridge this...

MK: Mmmhmm.

PB: ...with the water 'cause I want to...one thing I'm interested in particularly is how, like, how you're bringing that experience and that expertise from these...these different struggles within welfare rights into the organizing that you've continued to do. So, I guess in question form that is how...how has all these years of experience with welfare rights--we won't even talk about the League right now, but how has...

MK: Oh my God...you weren't lying, we got another talk to do!

PB: So, how has your experience with welfare rights influenced the way that you organize now around water or any other work?

MK: Well, if you gonna be an organizer, you got to learn how to change your gears with the...with the situation that you're dealing with. And, you know, I used to have a Volkswagen, and I was good on that gear, [laughs] But I, you know. You have to sit and listen to what the people are talking about, what they...everybody come in here to welfare rights don't...might not have the same problem. A lot of 'em come in now because the water situation. And as you talk to them, they begin to see what welfare rights is about, and particularly when they...when you get their water back on and they understand it might not be there for long. But at the same time, that's why you have to join welfare rights and become a member and be...emerge as one of the leaders here.

You know, the way I organize that central organization, that was the whole community I was assigned to, different communities you were assigned to. The

problem was different, although welfare rights was a part of it, than what welfare rights have been about through the years, and that's why we having that meeting this weekend. We wrote this book, little booklet, 'Which Way Welfare Rights?' because the climate had changed. The objective situation had changed as to when we built welfare rights in the beginning. At that time, they were fighting for respect--it was on the heels of the civil rights movement--an increase in...in certain programs and for certain programs to be implemented and for the women to have the opportunity to even go to school and to get a degree and stuff. So, the situation was different. We couldn't use the same tactic--sometime we could use the same tactics, but the strategy was not the same.

So, you learn that everything, you know, you got to not only listen, you have to have the patience and respect for the people that have come out and what have you. So, I...I...I've learned a lot from each contingent of folks that I've had to work with, whether it's dealing with slum landlords. I learned about housing through working with folks in public housing and how the situation was being set up. I learned about policies through WCO [West Central Organization] and going down to city council all the time and looking at their policies on what they were doing. I learned about welfare policies through welfare rights, other members of welfare rights that have...have begin to learn that. And then we took it to another level, that we would not only respect our membership by keeping their problems that they came in here in a decent way and put 'em in a folder and respect them like that, but to treat them as...as human beings and a part of this organization.

So it's, you know, it's...it's not easy, but it's rewarding in the end. You know, and...and a lot of times, I wasn't getting paid. You know, like now [laughs], I'm on social security [coughs], and they trying to take that away from us, this government is. So, I...I learned a lot. I even listened to--at time, I even listen to my children. [snorts] But, yeah.

[0:56:12]

PB: So, I want to ask you about, like, what's next with the water struggle 'cause, like, you're mentioning the objective conditions, needing to define what the strategies and tactics are...

MK: Well, we have to find...

PB: ...and the shutoffs are still going on, right?

MK: Oh yeah. We got...

PB: So, what more needs to be done?

MK: What more needs to be done is that water affordability plans need to be implemented everywhere from [Washington] D.C. on down. It needs to be a part...one of the programs of the federal government but ran by people that have been affected by that, you know. It needs to...on a level, even on a regional level, you need to have the people in the region at least representing the people that have experienced this.

So, they need to, all in one day--and if they say they can't do it, it's a lie--make sure that all the water is for...is pub--taken back to being owned by the public and not by this institution or that institu--you know, corporation or that type of stuff. It's a big job. It's a big job--but then and again, it is not because every time they want to privatize it, they either use an emergency manager and...and all that to move to do that type of stuff, and some of these two-bit organizations go right along with 'em, you know. Look at...look at city council. Look at the fools in...in Lansing [Michigan] and...and...and...and in [Washington] D.C. They're not representing our interests. It's only a few that we can count on our hands. So, you know, that's what's gonna happen. People gonna have to start standing up and begin to fight in the interests of a new society...

PB: So...

MK: I don't care, you know. Until you open up your mouth, they wanna say you're a Communist. Well, we need--soon they open up their mouth like the President [Donald Trump] and all the other folks that thinks like that. We need to call them a bunch--I almost slipped. [laughs]

PB: Say what you want. [laughs]

MK: [laughs] We need to call them a...a...a bunch of idiots--not just idiots, but people that don't care nothing about the vast majority of the people out here. They want...they want to live at our expense, and they want to enjoy their lives at our expense. They...they don't want to respect women. They don't want to respect even some of the men out here, if you...you in the...you in our class and stuff. You know, we have to do that. And we have to...we have to be out here on the front line to make sure that this goes down.

[0:58:57]

PB: So, if you're looking back on this water struggle over the last 10, 15, 20 years, and you're doing like a...a deep analysis about what's worked, what hasn't worked. Why... So, given all the mobilization that took place, the eyes of the world are on Detroit...

MK: Mmhm.

PB: ...for a period of time, and yet the shutoffs still persisted.

MK: Yeah.

PB: What...what could have been done? Was there anything that could have been done differently at that time?

MK: We tried everything. We followed--what was her name, the first governor [Jennifer Granholm?]? We found out where she'd go on the weekend, and that was back to her home she had prior to becoming a governor. And we picketed her, and all the people in her neighborhood said, "Oh, my God." They were shocked to see that. You name it, we...we have done it. We have gone to jail I don't know how many times around this water situation, and they only respect the corporation. It is time for...for the class to start moving on this and saying we want this to be...water affordability plan to be implemented.

See, and the reason why they didn't implement it here is Detroit, you have, you know, if Detroit had implemented it, it'd been a rippling effect throughout the country, and they are fighting not to implement it... Use...using the tax thing, you know, and... We have attorneys that looked into the...the Headlee tax [Headlee Amendment] and said it don't have nothing to do with the water affordability plan. That was a big lie.

So, you know, it's not easy, but we gonna have to keep going. If you got something or anybody out here got something that they think that would be helpful to us moving this stuff forward, come forward yourself and let's see what...what you talking about. We would love for that to happen. I don't know what else I can say. All I can do is keep being a...a soldier in this army, you know. That's about it.

[1:01:10]

PB: So, what's it gonna take, given all the...the barriers that are erected between members of the same class, ...

MK: Mmmm.

PB: ...whether that's ideological, racial, religious, you know, all these different barriers, what's it gonna take for class, for us to get there?

MK: We're gonna have to...we...some of us, like yourself, we're gonna have to go out and not just educate ourselves but educate--like we used to do in welfare rights. We used to go have these meetings in different communities 'cause people said we were living high up off the hog and educate them that we want you to live off the budget that they have given us. They said, "We can't do that!" We said, "What in the hell you think about our families!" And we were able to recruit based on some of that stuff. And, you know, people do begin to have an open mind when you educate them. Why are they drilling so deep into the city? I mean, into the earth? Why...why are they doing to this and...and the...the people that are supposed to be representing our interests are not representing our interests? Why are they tearing up our communities for the benefit of these corporations to move in and have whatever they want to at our expense?

And see, that's just like, when I look back when we was fighting for housing over and against Wayne State, and we went over to Research Park to tell Miss--tell the people over there, "Look. Here is the layout plan that the city have for...for Research Park," and the people didn't want to believe us. "We own our own home!" But, you don't own the land that the home is on. It was a rude awakening for them. We were facing seven years in the federal penitentiary. That's what they had put on our back. But it didn't stop us 'cause we won our case quite naturally (??). [Ernest] Goodman did a good job--old man Goodman...

PB: [laughs]

MK: ...on that. But it took, you know, we didn't win that overnight. But we got to get...we got to get more people in this fight, and we are constantly--we're not going nowhere, unless they...unless they...unless they end up shooting one of us. And I'm still coming back and slap a few people, but the thing is is that we, people, got to fight. They don't care if...if people die. If they did, they'd be building more hospitals, more educational institutions and...and doing...dealing with these houses out here. You know, it's...it's criminal what's going on. I'm tired.

[1:04:05]

PB: Let me ask you one more question...

MK: I knew, I knew he was gonna say!

PB: ...What's--I know...You know I'm greedy!

MK: I know you are.

PB: What...what's your vision for the future of this city that guides your work, that keeps you going on a day-to-day basis?

MK: I...I, like I said, I had a taste of the class moving. It was something else to see those workers pile out of Dodge Main. We didn't do it overnight. We had to do those little newsletters day in and day out and let 'em know what was going on, and the workers began to look forward to that time--this was just one place, and it'd start spreading out 'cause other workers came there and said, "We want to put out one of those newsletters about the crisis that is happening in our factory," and it built a network of folks that came together that didn't even know each other, you know. It not only built that, but the students started coming out, people in the community started coming, and they knew that they had something to deal with when it came to, when it became the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. It was the women, once all these organizations came in there and became organization--we said, "Halt. We're stopping it right now because we're gonna have to build an organization." It was a federation, like, of organizations, but we became a whole organization together, which was a...a rippling effect on the Mahwah workers in New Jersey and throughout the country, you know, and it's somethin...

That's just an example, you know. It's the same thing that happened to welfare rights. People saw welfare rights taking over the welfare office and fighting in the interests of folks, and it became a different world--right on the heels, all this, was right after the civil rights movement and then that type of thing. And it is time for that to happen again. It might not be the same tactics 'cause we don't have the

same problems that we were talking about, but at the same time, we can sit down and talk about it. We don't need to be taking this no more. What's gonna be our plan?

[1:06:15; Jump cut]

PB: You have things that nobody else in this city has in your brain, your lived experiences with organizing, so many years of expertise. When you're looking at the objective realities now of this younger generation, what advice do you give to young organizers and activists about how they go about bringing, you know, this kind of world and this kind of movement that you're describing?

MK: For one thing, I look back on myself as to when I was living in Dallas, Texas--I told you historically how we got there--living in Dallas and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement--it wasn't at its peak or nothing like that at that time--began to happen because we had a lot of people being hung in Dallas for, they claim, for looking at a white woman and stuff like that--or anything like that, you know. And my momma had us involved. The church, whole church was involved and stuff like that. That was a hell of an influence on...on...on some chil--on young folks, you know. But, you know, at a time--and...and the only organization that really existed at that time--you had other organiz--was the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. And...and I think I mentioned this to you--I don't know if I did, yeah--that a lot of us young folks didn't like 'em because we were not included like we should have been. The examples that we were, you know, in...that should have been something different for us to be able to participate, our role in it. But--and you know, you had an attitude even then, like the one young people here now, that, "Oh, what they talking about? That's old history." If you don't know history, you're doomed to repeat the problem--I mean, the...the mistakes we made.

My thing is to do like what you're doing, talk to...talk to folks. We, my thing is that they have to be right out there, right with us--and we can learn from them. I know they can teach me a lot about this stupid phone and learn from them, and they can learn from us. We might not have the patience, but we learned you can teach us to have the patience with 'em. But we...we got to do it together. It...we not

gonna win without each other. And they were like...they ain't got no problems on shooting these young people down. Not at all. And who's gonna come to their...and who gonna come out there for 'em? We are. We have...we have backed them up many times, and they need to come stand and have their rightful place and stop coming with an attitude. I...I've been there with an attitude. And I've, once I started backing up and learning in the Civil Rights movement from older folks that were a part of that as well as what they had gone through. I mean, it was a whole new world that had opened. You know, and it's the same thing with older folks. It is your duty to give up what you have as far as your knowledge about things. I learned about city council and all that from the older generation and all the civil problems that we were having down there in Detroit. Ended up when I kept and...and really understood that I...that was really the same thing in every other state and everything, you know. So, it's enough space for everybody. They think that their way is the best way. Let's test it. The door is open, and we're ready to work with you.