

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

Sylvia Orduño

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

April 12, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Sylvia Orduño is an organizer for the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization and part of the People's Water Board. She grew up in Los Angeles, California and moved to Michigan to go to graduate school at the University of Michigan. She became involved with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization while working on her dissertation, and has been involved with them ever since.

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.

Oriana Yilma is an undergraduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Psychology and minoring in African American Studies.

Abstract

Sylvia Orduño discusses such personal topics as her background, how she came to Michigan for grad school, how she became involved in welfare rights, mentors that she has had, and her neighborhood in Detroit and how it has changed. She talks about the history of welfare rights, the effects of welfare reform in 1996, the goals of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), what they do, and their approach to their work. Another major topic is the history of water shutoffs in Highland Park and Detroit, MWRO's work on water shutoffs, their ties to water activists and environmentalists around the state, the history of their water affordability plan, and how union busting in Detroit caused more water shutoffs. She also talks about the effects of emergency management, including how it discourages people from being active politically, and the fight against the emergency manager law. Themes throughout include how the narrative of blaming poor people for their poverty distracts from the structural causes of poverty and that activists must offer concrete policies in order to prove that their goals are possible. She also discusses lessons that she has learned as an organizer and her vision for the future of Detroit.

Keywords

Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit, Michigan; Emergency management; General Baker; Highland Park, Michigan; Labor unions; Lila Cabbil; Marian Kramer; Maureen Taylor; Michigan Welfare Rights Organization; Poverty; Water affordability; Water shutoffs; Welfare rights

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Transcript of interview conducted April 12, 2019 with:

Sylvia Orduño [SO]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB] and Oriana Yilma [OY]

SO: I'm Sylvia Orduno, and I'm an organizer with Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, and I also do some work with the People's Water Board Coalition, and I live in Detroit, Michigan.

[0:00:19]

OY: So, could you describe your neighborhood when you first got to Detroit?

SO: My neighborhood. So, I live in this area. I guess they kinda call it the Triangle sometimes. It sort of feels like it's a little bit of a dead zone in terms of how it is politically paid attention to. So, there are a lot of people that have been living there for a bunch of years that have tried to sort of keep the neighbor stable, but it's still got issues. You know, we moved in there renting a house. And a couple of years ago, we actually bought a house through the auctions, and so it's about four houses away. So, we're over there sometimes in the evening or maybe weekends to try to do some work on it. But, yeah, that was a project that [laughs] I don't think we really understood before getting into it. So, yeah. Any little bit of money we have is basically going over there trying to get this house livable.

[0:01:16]

OY: So, how has the city changed since then, since you first moved here?

SO: Gosh. It feels like it's a moving question, you know, in some ways, you know, depending on who you're talking to, right, but at least among the groups that I work with, we've been involved, like, for years, for decades, like in anti-poverty work, and that's really like the base of the community that we work with. And so, from that perspective right there, it's changed in subtle ways, but if anything, it probably feels kind of worse off, you know. All these stories about Detroit being this comeback city and, you know, so many things are coming downtown really have little to no effect on what it means for folks in the majority rest of the city, you know, because it's still not addressing the ongoing problems of what people need to be able to have decent quality of life in the neighborhoods.

[0:02:19]

OY: How did you first become active in movement work in Detroit?

SO: So, I'm originally from Los Angeles [California], and I came to Michigan in [19]95 to go to grad school and, in the course of that work, was doing some kind of movement research and learning about organizations that were, you know, possible placements, like, for students to do some kind of community change work versus social service work, and I came across Michigan Welfare Rights when I met some folks through Washtenaw Welfare Rights that were out in Ypsilanti [Michigan]. And just over time--as it goes, you know--you show up to a meeting, you kind of get roped up in the work, right. They're like, "Oh, let's sign you up for something," right. And so, it was really in those kind of community-based meetings learning more about the issues and about the...the kind of grassroots orientation of Michigan Welfare Rights, as well as other groups that, you know, they're working in partnership with, that I got deeper into the work, you know. So, it turned into more of just like a...a research project. The dissertation work kind of got put to the side--because that's really what I came here to do was graduate work--and I ended up just sort of being all into like the movement work itself. And

so, what was participatory research [laughs] ended up being, you know, the place I was just, like, deep in.

[0:03:52]

OY: What or who have been some of your greatest influences in your activism and organizing work?

SO: Oh, gosh. It definitely has to be Marian Kramer and Maureen Taylor. They've really been these incredible mentors, you know, in this work of how it is that you organize unapologetically on behalf of the poor, right. Poor people have rights, and we're gonna make sure that, you know, we work to achieve those rights, and the...the thing though, too, is that they come from this, like, strong background also of, like, Black liberation movement work, union organizing, women's rights work. And so, a lot of interconnectedness on the issues. And so, they've been really, you know, strongly influenced in, like, the work that I do and why I really love it and have come to understand it in, like, more cross-sectional ways.

And then, there are other folks like Mama Lila Cabbil, who we recently lost, you know. That's been a really hard one, a really emotional one 'cause she was, you know, so cutting edge in a lot of ways. I don't think we've really understood until now that she's gone and really seen, like, how it is that she interacted and engaged with people in ways that you didn't even know you were being organized, you know. She could have conversations with you that would really lift you up but also get you to figure out, like, where your place is in this work and how it is that it's important, you know. Not that just we need you, but you have a role in this, you know, and helping folks kinda find their way in that work.

And so... Then, there's obviously General Baker, you know, another legend in many ways. Although we lost too early, too soon, and how he really was about trying to make sure that we understood the interconnectedness between labor and grassroots organizing and, again, where nationalism plays in, but how it is we've got to make sure that we understand the essentials about the class struggle.

[0:06:08]

PB: So, I think that welfare rights organizations have, like, historically been little understood or, like, gotten such little credit for their roles in the Civil Rights movement. Like, the national welfare rights organizations or local chapters. How do you make sense... Or, how do you, like, place yourself in Michigan Welfare Rights Organization within this kind of longer history of welfare rights organizing?

SO: So, that's one of the things that, you know, we're always trying to figure out how it is that we strike the balance between people who are directly impacted, the folks who really need to be leading the movement who are first-hand experiencers of the issues, and how it is that folks who are working-class, you know, maybe not struggling as hard as someone else but just always on the edge, right? One little thing can just pull that rug out from under. And, you know, and a lot of times, many of us that are, you know, working-class, working poor, we're kind of in a cycle, right, of doing well for a minute and then we're back down again, you know. And so, we understand that, you know, there's really no economic security in many ways. And so, this history of welfare rights is really about talking about these rights of the poor, that just because people are dispossessed, have been unemployed, underemployed, or under-employable that there are still rights, dignity issues that we have to address.

And so, a lot of the sort of like issue-based problems that we try to address really are with this fundamental understanding that like, look, you can't blame the poor for their problems when they were placed upon them by other circumstances, you know. We can have all the conversations we want about what you think people should do for their own self-sufficiency or, you know, self-improvement or liberation, but if you don't put them in the context of the economic conditions, of the class struggle, of how it is that people are born into circumstances that are outside of their control, then it just lets you end up getting to this sort of blaming narrative that disengages people from the kind of objective situation, yeah, the economics of it and instead get you to these subjective reasons as to why somebody's in the situation that they are. So, this kind of class analysis has been

really central to how it is that welfare rights have evolved, but also really its origins to begin with.

And so, it's definitely like unpopular work in many ways, you know. We're fighting oftentimes, like, with stereotypes and with, you know, blaming and shaming. That's probably some of the hardest stuff. Because especially when folks who are directly impacted, who are welfare recipients, do come forward and speak from experience, you know, there's like 10 people behind them who are willing to cut them down and say, "Well, you brought this upon yourself." No, no, no, no. Let's look at this in a whole other way about how it is that this family has been forced into a situation and are not really given the opportunity in any kind of realistic way to get out of that situation.

And so, we do a lot of this rights defense work where we will do hearings over at the Department of Health and Human Services for people who have been denied benefits that they're entitled to, you know. And even though the whole welfare system has changed in how it is that public assistance dollars are doled out and how people are determined eligible, we still very much fight for people to be entitled to those things. And so, this kind of, like, casework in terms of having an understanding of, like, what happened that...for a determination was made against someone is something that we have to fight against, not just in terms of...not just the policy, but the public perceptions of it in terms of how it is that we will set up a hearing defense.

[0:10:06]

PB: So, at this particular moment, what are some of the main reasons that folks are coming into the office for support?

SO: So, a lot has changed over the years. One of the things that...that I regularly pointed to was the welfare reform of 1996. And so, welfare rights has had this history since 1966 of organizing on behalf of the poor and for people who are speaking from their own experiences and developing that leadership, but over the decades, what's also changed is that there have been these creations of programs

designed to get people to just go out and find a job, any job. They really don't care what job you get just as long as you get a job so that you can say you're working somewhere, and then it starts putting you in place to get eligible for all these other little sort of minor assistance programs that sometimes they work but oftentimes they don't, right. Anywhere from the childcare to the transportation to clothing assistance to, you know, whatever kind of job support they need to keep you in there.

But the thing is with those jobs--because they really don't care, you know. The system really doesn't care what job you get. You just need to be able to demonstrate that you've made an effort. So, there's no job skill development that's part of it so that you can get a job that's meaningful and is living wage. So, it's...it ends up just being whatever you sort of can come across, and they're usually gonna be the low wage service where there's a lot required of you without a lot sort of kind of given back to you to be able to help you maintain your...your employment. So, people are taking those late night shifts, they're working jobs that might not be safe for them, they're working jobs where it's not good at all for their family schedule or their family life, you know, in terms of kids' school schedules or what families need to just be able to manage so that the main breadwinner can go out and be employed. So, a lot of things fall apart. And, you know, in that context families understand that if they don't find a way to keep that job that they're then gonna be sanctioned or punished, right, and that happens too.

So, what we've done over the years, too, is try to figure out is it...are there ways that we can work within the system in some of, like, the reform aspects of it, you know. To say, look, what we instead need are these kinds of jobs programs, or if you help people be able to better develop their skills or have a stronger type of resume or help them be able to have the computer skills that they need so that they're a stronger candidate for other types of work, then maybe we could help people have opportunities for some sort of better initial job or advancement, right.

But then, what happens is oftentimes, again, the work support things don't come through as promised, and one of the biggest ones is childcare. So, you know, your promise that you'll get assistance to help be able to pay for childcare or have

someone watch your kids and one of these don't come through, the babysitter says I'm not doing this anymore because I haven't been paid or the transportation's a problem, and, you know, if you've got to take two, three buses across town for two hours, and you're late, you know. Employers aren't gonna be patient with low wage folks. So, they figure, you know, you're a dime a dozen, you know, and this to me just demonstrates you're not serious about work. So, all kinds of things just go into the...just really...not only just folks who are trying to make ends meet, but make it so that it's not really set up for low income, low wage people to really win, you know. It's really sort of a dead end, and we understand that.

And so, part of what we're doing when we're talking to folks about, you know, rights is about you have the right to also help declare what kind of support you need to get out of poverty, but we've also got to collectively get together and say, "Look, these are the things that we need in order to ensure that we can live lives out of poverty." That there's gotta be a plan, a way out, instead of just being stuck in dead end work where, you know, it's not likely that you're going to be able to be successful.

[0:14:28]

PB: So, I know that Marian Kramer and Maureen Taylor were kind of at the...the forefront of fighting the water shutoffs when they started in Highland Park [Michigan], like, before Detroit. At what point did you come into Michigan Welfare Rights and get involved, particularly with water?

SO: So, I was there from the beginning. So, yeah, gosh. I remember it was in those early years, too, in Highland Park where we really started getting that understanding of what this might look like. You know, Highland Park being like, you know, this first emergency manager city, and I think in many ways the emergency managers were still figuring it out, right? They were...there was a lot that was still being learned. There was definitely a lot that the residents and the local officials were trying to understand about, you know, what does it mean to be taken over in these ways and, you know, what does it mean that we no longer have these kind of decision-making responsibilities or abilities anymore. So, we

had already been hearing from a lot of residents about problems with the water bills. You know, anywhere from, "The municipality hasn't billed me in years," to "My water's been shut off," to "There's problems with my water bill that there's no way I used this amount of water," or, "There's funny things going on, you know, when I'm not there, you know. Somebody's using my water." Just all kinds of different things were happening.

So, one of the things that we did is--Marian in particular--was organizing residents to have these conversations, and we'd meet like over at a church or, you know, somebody's house and just try to talk about it. You know, what's going on? Like, what have you heard from your neighbors? And so, those led to a more kind of organized efforts where there was the formation of this Highland Park Human Rights Coalition, and one of the things that we were doing was coming up with a plan to go out and talk to neighbors. You know, we gotta go door to door and learn from people about what's happening. And, one of the things I always joke around, like, with Marian and Maureen is, like, we always seem to, like, do these actions in the winter. Can't we, like, plan for, like, nice spring days? [laughs] You know, instead of going out there in the snow?

But, you know, low and behold we're out there again, like, in a...in a winter, and we're going door to door and, you know, people are, like, reluctant to open the door. They're just kinda, like, peaking it open a little bit and we're, like, "Hey," you know, "We're here trying to learn more about the water problems in the city, and we want to know if you have water," and, you know, some folks they would just, like, kinda stuck with their not want to answer that, or some people would be, like, really hesitant to even, you know, share that information. Some folks would open the doors and say, "Come in. Let's talk about it," you know, and that's when we started learning more about how that there were people who really were just confused, concerned, and scared, you know, frankly. So, folks who didn't have water on in the home, but they didn't want to tell anybody about it.

I remember this one house where this woman had recently come home from the hospital, and she only got in because she told us she had water because if she didn't have water, they weren't gonna release her to go home. And, I remember another house the--I think they were high schoolers at the time. They had to go to another relative's house to, like, shower and wash up to be able to go to school

because they didn't have water on at their house. And then, I remember another senior talking about, you know, "I'm kinda scared because, you know, I'd hear the water go on on the side of my house. Somebody's opening up my spigot and taking my water, you know, and I don't know who it is. I don't know what's going on." And so, we're hearing stories like this and then just the other ones from folks who are like, "I don't even know what I owe because they haven't billed me for years, you know, months or years." And so, it...it came to, like, be a big issue that we were trying to, like, really learn.

And, that's when we started having more conversations with some of the local businesses, the small businesses, who were telling us about their water problems, too. And so, one of the things that, you know, folks are familiar with is that film *The Waterfront* that was filmed back in...I think it was 2002 around the water crisis in Highland Park, and Vallory [Johnson] who's featured in there, you know, has this little small barber shop, and she had recently lost her husband who had owned the shop. They owned it together, but couldn't keep up with the water bills to the point where they were gonna...they were losing their business. They were gonna have to close it. And so, you know, she was outraged, and we're going to the city council meetings and we're, like, "Look, what's going on? You've got to do something about this, you know. People want to pay their bills, but you're not sending bills. And then when people would get bills, they'd just be off the chain, right? There's no way no one's--anyone's using this amount of water."

So, lots of protests and, you know, lots of challenging of the officials and... And so, when the emergency manager's there, and they're saying, "Well, we're taking over things, you know. We're gonna...we gotta right side this, you know. We've got this directive from the governor who's placed us here, and, you know, it's our responsibility to...to dig down and find out what's going on and correct things." And so, you know, clearly people are outraged. Like, who the heck are these folks, you know, coming in here and issuing these demands? And so, part of the...the protest was, like, well, we gotta go to the governor, you know. And at that time, you know, we've got, like, [Jennifer] Granholm in.

And, so, Highland Park Community College was still open at that time. You know, it's been shut down for a while, but we had a community meeting there at Highland Park Community College, and it was gonna be a town hall. She comes in,

and we're gonna have a conversation with her about why it is you sent this emergency manager, why it is that you haven't been doing enough to help Highland Park to begin with, that it got in this economic situation that it's in right now. And as the state, you've got a responsibility to help the cities, you know, and, you know, there's been those conversations too around the--I'm not gonna be able to name it--but the...the shared revenue that was owed to the cities that had income coming down. And so, you know, people were in her face, and, you know, she's trying to, like, kinda like be strong and, like, kinda push back, and folks weren't having it, you know. So, she really got laid into by the residents there, but they made it clear, you know, this was unacceptable, and something had to be done, but this was not the way to do it, to just come and do a takeover.

It was also during those years when we started learning more about things that were going on in Detroit. You know, we'd always get regular calls from people who were having trouble paying their bills. You know, utilities have always been a big thing. Utilities and housing, you know, that people are struggling with, and you've got to have both, right? And so, as we're working on this stuff in Highland Park, we're engaging in, you know, more meetings and house visits to folks in Detroit as well trying to understand what's going on with people's water problems. And then, we start asking more questions and say, "Look, we keep getting more and more calls from people who are saying that their water's shut off, or it's on the verge of being shut off, and we want numbers. You know, Water Department, we want numbers." And, they're not giving them to us. And so, we start holding these series of protests over at the Water Department, and we're out there picketing, and we're, you know, calling out the people who are there and saying, you know, "You're all stealing money. You're...you're, you know, denying people fair water prices, affordable rates. And, you know, and we need to do something about it, you know."

So, we're learning--gosh, there's so much going on, like, in those years too, because we'd also been fighting, meanwhile, over at DTE [Detroit Edison Energy], and that was a thing again, you know, utilities. So in the years earlier, the Michigan Public Service Commission had allowed Detroit Edison and Michigan Consolidated Gas to go privatized, and there was supposed to be, like, this agreement that there would some sort of, like, assistance programs created in this kind of, like, transition from these public entities to private. And so, in the years as well, shutoffs are happening, right? So, it's winter, and, you know, it's cold obviously,

you know, in the snowy season that we have, and people are burning up in houses, you know. People are dying, and we're protesting this, and we're saying, "Look, this is straight up because shutoffs are happening from DTE, and you know that people need heat to be able to survive in these, you know, these brick houses in this cold climate. And so, you can't shut off people because they can't afford to pay. You've got to come up with ways that people can afford to pay their bills."

[0:23:12]

And so, again, we're doing protests over there too, and those are actually pretty large protests. We had gotten, like, a lot of mobilization happening in those years, and to the point where people had started building, like, little cardboard coffins and crosses and were out there protesting because some of the house fires had actually killed children. You know, toddlers. And, that...that was really hard in those years. We had actually gone to the funeral of this one family where I think it was four of the kids had died in the house fire?

And, it had been this situation, again, you know, where mom hadn't been able to keep up with the bills, and, you know, we've got old houses too in the city. And so in the old houses, you've also got old wiring. So at some point, they had been just trying to figure out how to hook up space heaters and things like that and caught fire, and, you know, the house burned while she had gone out to actually, if I remember right, go pay the bill. And so, just tragic, right? And so, we're at this church where we had gone, and, you know, we're there seeing all the little bitty caskets, you know, come in and out, and, you know, the community was outraged. It was...it was, like, one of the saddest services ever, you know. People just couldn't stop crying, you know, just seeing that these babies had, you know, burned up like that because, you know, the household couldn't afford the utility bills.

So, you know, while those are going on, again, we're protesting over at the water department in Detroit. We're protesting over at the municipal center in Highland Park, and it just felt like we're constantly in this zone of trying to push back on these elected officials on these utilities, you know, educate and mobilize more

people to say, look, we've gotta, you know, say stop this. Enough's enough. You know, we've got rights, right?

It was also in those early years when we started saying we've got to actually do more in terms of figuring out how it is we develop policy to be able to stop the water shutoffs and instead create, like, programs that actually address it in terms of affordability. You know, we know what utilities want. We know what any bill collector wants. They...they tell you on the bill, "You owe this much, and this is how much we want you to pay." But for a lot of low income folks, that doesn't work, you know. It... Sometimes, you know, whatever they're asking for is more than your income might be at any given time. And so, what we've been saying is, "Look, you've got to work with people where they're at, and you've got to base bills based on what their low income affordability is." So, we started talking to long-time partners over at Michigan Legal Services. And then, they put us in connection with folks over at the University of Michigan Poverty Law Program, and we were saying, "Look, how can we develop some policies that actually address these affordability issues and let us dictate what the payment plans should be, again, based on a household's income."

And so, they started trying to find, you know, a way to do this and came across this utility expert that was based out in Boston [Massachusetts]. His name is Roger Colton. And so, he, you know, agreed to come out and consult with us, and we explained to him what's going on and the crisis around it and what it is that we wanted to do and what we wanted to see happen. So, he agreed to work with us and went in and did a series of visits with Water Department staff, with city council, with, you know, just stakeholders to try to understand how it is that water bills are determined, how it is that the payment plans might be able to be distributed or broken down into other ways, and how it is that we could deal with even, you know, other problems around it. You know, the plumbing problems people have, the greater conservation efforts that people want us to, and then the debt issues that the city had, right? It's like, you don't collect a nickel from anybody if you shut them off because they have no money to give you, and there's no incentive, you know, at that point because now they have no service. So, we've got to find ways so that people can keep from getting shut off and the utility can still collect some kind of revenue.

So, that's when he came to us with that low-income-based water affordability plan that would prevent the shutoffs, would allow people just to pay around two to three percent of their low-income household income on their water bill, and then we would have to come up with some kind of fund that would help pay for the difference, but then the arrearage bills would be a way that we could address in some other way because they had been accumulating. There were also changes going on with the Department of Health and Human Services, like I talked about, coming out of welfare reform. And in those years, bills were piling up.

And, that's some of the legacy problem here that I think that hasn't really been understood about the difference in Detroit customers versus suburban customers, that there were these costs that had accumulated in these changes in terms of Department of Health and Human Services and also just a series of poor operations over at the Water Department itself. You know, there's a problem just with their own, like, record keeping, with their information computer systems, with mismanagement, with waste. You know, and a lot of those conversations a lot of folks still don't want to, you know, really engage in. You know, when we talk about responsibilities and accountability, it's always about that, you know, customer, you know, residential customer, probably the most vulnerable of all the different customer classes, but never really the accountability from the water system itself or the city's failure itself that led to, you know, the problems with bonds and...and...and such.

So those same years--again, like I said, there was so much going on--we started meeting these activists that were coming to us and kind of running back and forth from central Michigan to Detroit. They'd be in a protest with us both in Detroit and Highland Park and then also telling us about this Nestle thing going on up in Mecosta County [Michigan]. And they're like, "Yeah, this Nestle Corporation, you know, they've come, and they've set up in this plant, and they've got this plan to just extract all this groundwater, and they're putting it in water bottles, and then they're gonna be selling it, you know. They hardly had to pay anything for it." We learned that they only had to pay like 200 dollars for this permit. And we're like, "What?" You know, people are getting shut off for, you know, less than that also in this city.

And in that kind of back and forth kind of thing between these kinda like environmentalists and those of us who are working more, like, in the poverty issues around utilities, we came to learn more about, like, these inequity issues between, like, what the state was allowing corporations to do and those environmental impacts where water was being, like, sucked out of the ground at such rates that these aquifers were drying up, and they're telling us about Indigenous people who are saying, you know, we can't even fish anymore because, you know, fish are flopping around because there's not enough water for them to swim. Or, you know, other--farmers are complaining and saying that the groundwater is low, and it's difficult even for crops. You know, we're hearing all these kind of environmental stories, and we're like, "Yeah, that's not right." You know, and then here, meanwhile, we got folks being shut off, right, for water problems that, you know, really aren't even of their making. So, there's all that kind of stuff going on in those years. I'm gonna drink some water.

[0:30:54]

PB: Yeah, please.

SO: Thanks. And maybe blow my nose. Okay.

PB: So, of course, if the water affordability plan seems like a huge, like, benchmark in this particular phase of the struggle, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit before that about like what kind of successes you were having in, like, organizing communities around this issue, whether that's in Highland Park or Detroit, and then what kind of responses you were hearing from legislators or city council, whether that's, you know, local or up to state.

SO: So, yeah. People...people when they're oftentimes directly impacted with something, they're...they're either...they like to talk to someone about it to try to figure out a fix. The struggle with organizing is always about trying to keep them after you figure out a way to address their immediate situation. And so, you know, as I mentioned, like, you know, like, I guess like with other folks but especially with poor folks, then you've also got to figure out, well, how do we get them to come

back, you know, when I know they're already having transportation or childcare issues. We're, like, well, you know, we'll at least help with the childcare stuff, you know. We'll have some things that kids do. We'll have some food, you know. Try to figure out, like, what it is we can just get people to stay engaged.

But also, you know, as Michigan Welfare Rights we oper--operate off of this membership model where, you know, you've gotta join. You've gotta be a part of this struggle. You've gotta be a part of this fight for what it is that we're all trying to do in terms of getting this change. So, you know, we might help you, you know, at first with just trying to figure out what is up with this immediate situation is, but you gotta be invested in this. That's the other part of it is you've gotta be willing to put in the fight for the changes that we need, you know. And, your voice is necessary. That's...that's the other big part of it.

So, you know, in the meetings in Highland Park, you know, a lot of the residents, you know, were experiencing similar things. And so, when people start hearing some of their stories, it was easier to get people to turn out because folks were then, "Hey, yeah, this is happening to me too, and we gotta do something about it." And at the time, there had been, like, several council members on city...Highland Park City Council that residents had helped get on. And so, there was this feeling that, okay, we got some allies on the council. They'll be willing to try to help, you know, hear more about these issues, look into the water problems and the billing problems, and help get to some solutions.

But then when emergency managers are on top of it, they basically have no...no vote, you know, barely a voice. So, folks could show up to the...to the city council meetings, and you could complain to your elected official, but that person had no power to do anything. In fact, they were asking for permission essentially from the emergency manager, you know, for information or to figure out, like, what it is they could do. And in the end, really nothing in terms of any of the economic decisions for the city. And so, that...that smack in the face about the reality of it that, like, what? We elected you, and you can't do anything? You've got to ask this emergency manager for permission? Oh no, you know.

So, there's a lot of that kind of contentious stuff going on, which is good because people are understanding how this came down and that now you've got no say in it, you know. And, you just have to watch and see what decisions they make and then the choices they're going to do to kind of essentially gut...gut the city because debts have to be paid, and that's the message. You have bills that have to be paid, and we're here to make sure those bills get paid. So, it's hard. It's a real hard one because people want to be able to channel their anger into something, and they want to be able to find a way to get solutions, but you're stymied because this emergency manager law was so overpowering, and it was really a lesson for what we would find in Highland Park and then see evolve in some of the other manager...emergency manager cities.

[0:35:11]

PB: So, when people are...are starting to have this recognition that it's not just connected--it's not just about my water bill, it's not just about my utility bill, but it's...it's a broader...it's a bigger question about the lack of democratic rights. Did you see that kind of, like, expansion of people's analysis during this course of this struggle? Were people developing that more systemic or radical political critique?

SO: In some ways, they were. It was kind of a slow learn because you're still going off a lot of assumptions. Like, oh, well, this person's just here temporarily, you know. Almost thinking, well, they're coming in kind of like as this bookkeeper. They need to go through the books and see about how to get things paid. But then, you come to this broader understanding about, wait. They're not just here going through the books. They're here to basically stop business as usual, which means your city council is ineffective, you know. And, they go so far as to say, "Look, if you still want to sit here as a council, you've got to understand now your new role. We're here as emergency managers calling the shots. We're gonna dictate how this is gonna play out, and you can stay if you like." And, this is where it gets kind of tricky because, especially if they're paying folks any amount, those little monies matter, because if you're also a resident of the city, chances are that you're also struggling, you know, like a lot of your neighbors. And so, you know, we want folks at the same time to be able to stay there so we could still have a place to go and voice and issue concerns and then demand those questions, you

know, that we're not getting from the emergency manager or from the governor, whoever it is that's now calling the shots.

So, it's a good exercise in being able to, like, pack the...the room with people who, you know, are coming to ask these questions and get the residents kind of engaged. So, it's good in that way. It's just there's so much frustration, you know, in it and real harm, you know, because if you don't have water then it...there's lots of things that just sort of spin out of control out of that, and it makes it difficult for you to be able to participate well at school or at work. And then, there's all the other vulnerabilities about your pipes, especially if the water...the weather's cold, right, you know, and you don't want to have frozen pipes 'cause then they crack. And, you know, what do you just about your own general wellbeing? And then, you know, one of the things that we've been talking about for years is that no water at your house means your house is now declared uninhabitable, which makes it grounds for Child Protective Services to come and get your kids, you know. So, very cognizant of that is something that we've been aware of through Michigan Welfare Rights, and we're also, like, really trying to help defend. Sorry, I need water again. [coughs]

[inaudible background chatting]

Herbert Taylor: If you tilt it it won't make the...

SO: Thank you.

HT: The sound of it won't be too tilted up.

SO: [coughs] Thanks.

PB: Is it seasonal or just cold?

SO: Yeah, I started getting like these seasonal allergies lately.

PB: Probably doesn't help when you're 70 one day and then 35 the next. [laughs]

SO: And then, yeah, I'm sure I need to dust my house. And then, I was dusting Welfare Rights the other day, and I'm coughing and yeah, so. I need to start remembering the little allergy pills.

PB: So, are we still good?

HT: Yeah. Are you still okay?

SO: Yeah. Thanks.

[0:38:59]

PB: You mentioned that Michigan Welfare Rights operates out of a membership basis. Could you talk a little about that, how people become members, how you are having those conversations about membership?

SO: Sure. So, we are a membership-based organization, and what that means is that we will assist you with whatever it is that, you know, you need help around getting that resolved for, you know, these problems with the Welfare Department or with other kinds of social service issues. Sometimes, you know, they're about custody issues or domestic violence stuff or, you know, separate from, like, the utility housing stuff that we do often. People are coming to us with charges of welfare fraud, and, you know, can you help me get out from this because now they're being charged with crimes. And so, all kinds of different facets of problems that, you know, some of the poor members of the community are asking for help with, and a lot of times we end up being kind of like this organization of, you

know, last resort. You know, people have kind of gone around and said, you know, "Can you help me with this or that?"

And, we always figure out a way to try to help people with something, but we want you to also be invested in this, you know. We're not, you know, we're not a social service agency. We're not a non-profit. We're a community-based group, you know, made up of volunteers, and it's been that way, like, through the history of the organization and in many ways the history of the movement. And so--which means that we have to operate like with a fiscal sponsor. And so, you know, there are all those limitations around that, but if you want to help us be able to help others and get us out of this whole placement of having it be so harmful and destructive to live in poverty, then let's work to get out of it. What are those things that we need to do collectively?

But, it's a challenge, and it's been harder especially, I think, after welfare reform 'cause at least for people who had been kind of recipients for many years, you knew that there were gonna be problems over time with your case and, you know, and you could go get help, and you'd be part of, like, a community effort to try to figure out how, you know, your neighbors, cousins, and, you know, other family members were impacted, you know, and you'd get together, and we'd work on these issues. And, there were even monies backed that the federal government was providing so that community-based organizations could also have monies to be able to organize. All that stuff just went away.

Welfare reform, again, really ushered in this new era of how it was that you were gonna participate in the workforce and the limitations there were gonna be on any kind of assistance you would get from the government and that these time limits were for real, you know. You had to get yourself on...employed within a certain amount of time, and you were gonna be limited to five years of public assistance, you know. No matter you gotta raise kids for 18 years, you were gonna have five years of lifetime assistance. And then, there were even conversations about maybe we should cap the number of kids you can have too, right? So, all kinds of other kind of punitive, stereotypical, you know, language that was being kind of loaded.

And so, now that the federal government had pushed us onto the states, Michigan, especially through [John] Engler, had been one of the harshest ones and one of...one of the states that actually wanted to show the leadership of how this could be done, how you could ensure that people were going to be in compliance and we're gonna hold you to those limits as well. There were all kinds of problems with it, especially in those years, because the states were having to figure it out. And so instead of applying, like, for programs that you would do through the federal government, the state now had to figure out how to implement these sorts of things, and there's always problems, you know.

And so, you know, we're trying to help negotiate those problems for people, you know, on the phone, or we're having the hearings, or we're training people, training people to know their rights. And, that's really been part of the biggest thing. You gotta know your rights, know what you're entitled to get in terms of benefits that are available, and know how to advocate for yourself, you know. Learn policy. That would be the other thing at...at the time, too. There's still the big policy manuals, you know. Flip the page, and you go to the section on food stamps. We're gonna teach you about what you're eligible for so you can also teach the next person. Then, when they started just doing this all online and we're having to find, you know, where are the policies and, you know, then with the changes and such. So, it got difficult, you know, over time with technology even though it was supposed to make things easier. But, we're always been insisting that people had to really know their rights and part of that was involved in the membership.

[0:43:41]

PB: And then, what kind of responsibilities do members have as part of the organization?

SO: So, you're supposed to...supposed to [laughs] come in and also help with, like, the phones and, you know, take calls from other folks so that you can understand the issues that other people are also being faced with, come to membership meetings, turn out for events, you know, where we might organize over at city council or some kind of town hall. You know, engage other people. You've got to

talk to other folks about your situation, about their situation to understand that, again, this isn't just something that you're experiencing, that it really is kinda cross, you know, whole sectors of the population, and that, you know, there are ways that we can collectively organize against it if we can get ourselves together and then come up with what do you want to the solutions to be, what do you want the policies to look like. It's like, okay, let's write this out and actually figure out ways to develop and implement them.

[0:44:42]

PB: So, what have you found that that's a successful model for developing or helping to facilitate the leadership development of new members?

SO: The new membership stuff has been especially hard, again, like after welfare reform, because after five years we don't tend to see people often after that. So, we'll see them especially in those years when they're struggling with those welfare reform program requirements where they've got to get into some kind of job placement program. You've got to demonstrate that you're really trying to get a job to be eligible for the benefits that are supposed to go with it. But, what happens--then, we especially saw, like in the early 2000s, is a lot of people were just being sanctioned, you know. You didn't show up for the interview. You didn't show up for the working training program. You didn't turn in your paperwork. And so, you'd get dinged. And then, after like three of these strikes, they...they terminate you.

And so, we were trying to put the brakes on then and say, "Look, you kind of just threw people out there, you know, Department of Health and Human Services, right?" You've got to actually prepare people, and you've got to really put those things in place that they need to be successful. And so, you can't keep putting that onus on these low-income people who are trying to figure out how it is to manage all these sorts of things with time limits, with limitations, and then, you know, be a...be ready to pass judgment on them and cut them off, because that doesn't help. And then, the ones who are suffering are the kids because now the kids are gonna be in worse situations because they don't have the basic resources they

need, or their parents don't have it to be able to provide for them, you know. Food, shelter, clothing, so on.

[0:46:22]

PB: So, I want to come back to the water affordability plan. Sorry. Could you talk...could you kind of walk us through what that struggle was like with city council and who were allies, who were your adversaries, and what was that...what was the story of that struggle as, you know, in that moment?

SO: Sure.

PB: I mean, obviously it's still ongoing.

SO: So in those early years, Marian and Maureen in particular--and they'd be really good at, like, telling those stories--they were meeting with members of city council. Maryann Mahaffey was one of the key persons there. There was also Erma Henderson in those days--and I'm blanking out on the name of the congress--excuse me, the council member who died in surgery.

PB: Brenda Scott?

SO: Yes. Thank you. And, meeting with some of these elected officials about this need for some kind of affordability program. You know, too many people are calling us, and they know this too. They get the calls at their offices about the shutoffs, about the, you know, even complaints from the water department that people aren't paying their bills and, you know, something's gotta give. We're not getting the revenue that we need, and what do we do? There are ways we can do. We've talked to this utility expert, and he's broken it all down for how you can do it, and he's had these conversations with other utilities that are struggling with similar issues in other parts of the country. So, he's come up with this plan, and we think that we should implement it in Detroit.

So, they got on board with it. They believed it, supported it, and after lots of back and forth between the Water Department and city council--because that's also where some of the headaches were, right? The Water Department's like, "Oh, we can't do this," you know. And at the time, Victor Mercado was in there, and he had been brought in by [John] Feikens, who at the time--Judge Feikens--was kind of this overseer of the Water Department because the department had been in violation of EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] Clean Water Act rules. And so, now they had to have this federal judge who was gonna make sure there was compliance and that there was all kinds of other proper things going on in terms of the budget determinations and contracts and... And so, he was gonna basically be kind of like, you know, the overlord for at least a couple decades until he determined when, you know, the city had come to a place.

So, but we...we knew this. We had, again, those same conversations we'd been having with folks who were going back and forth out to the Nestle plant and with other people who were talking to us about privatization that's taking place in other parts of the country, other parts of the world. We're learning about these big water conglomerates and what it is they do, how they go into communities that are struggling with being able to keep up with the cost of their water infrastructure, and they offer themselves up and it's like, "Look, we can help you with these problems, you know. We know how to do this. You know, you turn it over to us, and we'll help you be able to manage the infrastructure cost that you have to address with. We'll manage the operations for you, all the customer relations problems, and, you know, we'll be able to pay you, right?" But in the end, they're about making profit.

And so, as we're learning more about this and learning how Victor Mercado had actually come to the city from a private water company, we knew that there were starting to be some things in place. And so, we were like, "Look, we've really got to get a handle on this for low-income people to be able to pay based on what they can afford because there are some bigger things that are affront here, and we've got to make sure that we understand clear, front and center, that we've got to have a different approach to this." So, they had passed it at the city council level, the water affordability program that had been proposed by Colton back in 2004. And in 2005, it was presented and passed, but it was never implemented,

and part of the discrepancies around how it was going to be implemented was that we wanted to ensure that it was done through an organization we trusted.

We didn't trust the Department of Health and Human Services. In fact, in those years, there was a City of Detroit Department of Health and Human Services that was separate from the one at the county. So, you needed help on any kind of issue, you would go to the city DHHS office, and we did not want them to operate the program 'cause that's what the city had been talking about. We were like, "Now, we want to go with THAW," The Heat and Warmth Fund, who had actually been this non-profit established to help with the assistance programs for DTE. And so, we're like, "We know those folks. We trust them to do it. We don't want the city's hands in it or even touching the money. Let's actually try to figure out if we can work it out with them." But, there were a lot of internal problems with THAW, and ultimately their board decided to...that it wasn't something that they really wanted to take on.

And then also at that time, there had been some tension between the mayor's office and city council about this water affordability program 'cause the mayor had really been kind of left out of it. This was really something we're trying to negotiate with city council, so when the implementation aspects of it came in they had suggestions about how they thought it should be different. And then two years later, they came up with a revised version of it that folks would call DRWAP, Detroit Residential Water Assistance Program, instead of the original water affordability program, and it changed and--well, aspects of it changed. And then, it got sent over to Detroit DHHS for execution, but it...it didn't have the low-income-based affordability payments that we had wanted. So, that was one of the big differences.

[0:52:07]

PB: Could you kind of just flesh out what the difference between water assistance and water affordability is?

SO: Oh, yeah. And, it's... And, they're different, and the problem is, like, a lot of folks have kind of conflated it. So, water assistance is really an understanding that you're in some kind of temporary problem with being able to pay your water bill. It's a short-term situation, and what you need is just some assistance to help you with the bill right now as other things kind of resolve themselves. Maybe it's that you're going into a different kind of job. You lost a job, but you're someone who is employable, got skills that you can pick up something else. Or, you've been in a car accident, and now you need time to recover, or you have some kind of injury, whatever it is, or illness. But, there's an expectation that you're gonna be able to kind of get back on your feet. You just need some temporary help. That's assistance.

And, what we keep telling folks, the difference is with affordability is we're acknowledging poverty as part of the condition that a lot of folks just live in. Let's be honest about what this economic capitalist system is about. There are people who are going to be living in poverty for much longer. Oftentimes, we've got people who are chronically poor. And so, any kind of assistance on a bill one month is only for that month. They're gonna need help again the month after and so on and so on. And so, if you provide assistance to them at any given month, they now become ineligible for help for a year. In those years when there were more people, actually more programs were available, there were folks who would kind of go to the different programs throughout the year and kind of get help, you know, as they could, you know. They were making the best of the situation.

But, the programs the way that they exist now is you really don't have the opportunity to get assistance again. And so, you get people who will agree to enter into one of those assistance programs. They'll give you X amount of money to do it, but then you have to sign agreements that say, yes, for one, I accept that this is my bill, which is a problem. The other thing is that they say, alright, now we're going to determine what we think you should be able to pay. Again, not based on any two to three percent of your income. This is what we think you should be able to pay based on our assessment of your household income and your bills. This is your payment, and this will be your payment plan. They issue those to people, and when you're desperate and your water's been shut off or about to be shut off, you'll sign anything at that point because you know how important it is to have water on at your home and what it means when you don't.

And so, if people agree, you'll get the assistance on the bill and then part of the agreement was that if you stay in the programs then they'll help you pay some of that arrearage, you know, over time, but people just end up defaulting. You default, you hope to get help again, you default. And, you have people that just kind of get stuck in that cycle, and they really don't have any other recourse.

And so, what we say is, "Look, that is an affordability issue. You're never gonna be able to get those folks out of that situation with assistance programs because you haven't addressed the whole of their economic circumstance. But when you do, then we can actually talk about let's look at just having only a portion of your income go to your water bill. You still have to deal with your other utilities, with your housing, your transportation, whatever it costs for you to get to work and school and so on, and water should not be a factor that then impacts all those other issues because you won't be able to be successful in those other things if you don't have that essential water service on at your home."

So, when people have talked about affordability, sometimes they're talking about assistance programs. And so, we've been trying to get very clear like, no, these are different. And so, you've got to understand the difference because if you don't address it head on, then we're gonna keep going down this path that we're kind of in right now, unfortunately, where people, "Well, if we just donate to an assistance program, that money will go to help people and then they'll be able to manage." No, we're talking about ingrained poverty in this system, and we have no real, you know, solution to get people out of it, but at the very minimum as we're having all these conversations about the essentialness of water for life, we've gotta make sure that we institutionalize ways that water is based on your low-income status.

[0:56:24]

PB: So, you mentioned that one main concern, like, the Water Department was having during all this is that they were falling into debt. Why wasn't DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] collecting on the major back bills from like Mike Ilitch and like the corporations downtown? Why were they instead targeting poor people who were...

SO: Oh my gosh, yeah.

PB: ...back like 100 dollars?

SO: Yeah, that's just been, like, one of the...the biggest outrages of all of this, right? Because there's been such inequity in not only, like, the allocation of the rates across those customer classes but also the collections of them. So, you know, they...they actually broke it down in the simplest terms. They're like, "Well, we don't have the ability to shut off corporate or business customers because the fittings are different." And, we didn't understand that until after a while when they actually admitted it. But they said, you know, the residential customers have the same kinds of fittings. You go out there with the key, you know, in the front of the yard, and you turn it off there under, you know, next to where they've spray painted it, right, the mystic blue. But for corporate and business customers, they had to come up with a way to do it, and they never really did. That was the thing. They kept telling us they were trying to figure it out, but they never did.

And so, also built into what was going on with the...the corporate customers is they were allowed to negotiate their bills. So if I get a water bill that's for 500 dollars and I go to the water department and say, "Oh, this, this can't be my bill. I disagree with it," they're like, "Well, that's your bill." You know, I don't get to, you know, try to negotiate it down in any kind of way. Corporate customers, on the other hand, do have that opportunity. Matter of fact, we've seen it when we look at the financial reports that are public record from the Water Department and now from GLWA [Great Lakes Water Authority]. And so, what they do is they allow the corporate customers to review them for extended periods of time and then come back with some sort of refute about why they think it's different or why there are circumstances that have to be taken into consideration for that bill to be adjusted, right.

And so, you know, part of it also is just that the...the strong presence that some of these corporations have had downtown for many years, and, you know, you mentioned the Ilitches, and I remember that one time we went over to Joe Louis

Arena, some of us that were protesting the...the water bills that they had. It was, like, over 80,000 dollars at the time, and we're out there with our signs and we're, like, you know, Ilitch needs to pay his water bills, you know. This... You know, we should not be subsidizing rich people. And, we're out there on that corner as, like, the hockey fans are trying to get into the arena. And so, we're standing there, and we actually had some friends who were here from out of town too, other Welfare Rights members in Massachusetts. They're out there with us holding the signs. And, I remember just these glares we're getting from hockey fans that are going in, like, you all are tripping, you know, essentially. Or, some people were like, "Why don't you get a job? You know, why are you out here? You know, don't you have anything to do? Go to work!" You know, not even addressing anything that's on the sign, right, about here's this business owner for this stadium you're about to go in right now that hasn't paid his water bills. Are you not concerned about this? You know, I know we're outraged about it, but you're not concerned about this, and instead you want to insult us? You know, as if we're to blame for something, you know, as part of that.

And so, we actually had some legal observers out there at the time, too, which was interesting 'cause they're filming us, and they're just shaking their heads, like, I can't believe the reaction, you know. There was no sympathy at all for, you know, or just solidarity at all, you know. Working person to working person, you know. Like, here's this corporate customer that's not paying their water bills, and you know that people are getting shut off all over but not them, you know. So, that was...it was kind of a learning lesson in some ways. Like, well, for one, maybe hockey fans aren't gonna be supportive, you know, of this issue, but that they're gonna instead turn it around and say, well, you know, this is really about what they saw as like poor people who were wrong and like that kind of criticism. So.

[1:00:44]

PB: Well, I mean, if they're coming...

SO: Yeah.

PB: ...from the suburbs to the hockey game too, right, their water bills are being subsidized by Detroit residents.

SO: Yeah, and there's already that narrative, right, about Detroit not paying its bills and the suburbs that are, you know, just being strangled by Detroit who's just, you know, not being fair and equitable. And, you know, instead tables get turned later, right, with the GLWA [Great Lakes Water Authority] arrangement.

[1:01:09]

PB: So, we're in like the mid-2000s. How does the water struggle change during emergency management?

SO: So, gosh. So, things are escalating in a lot of ways, and we're still trying to figure out, you know, what do we need strategically to be able to still say we need water-based affordability, we need that ordinance that was passed by city council to be implemented. We saw what DHHS [Department of Health and Human Services] did two years later that was a failure. And in fact, DHHS for the city was dissolved shortly after. And so, now we just have--as we do now--the county DHHS offices, and we're seeing more and more people are contacting us, and we're getting to the point where we're, like, pretty overwhelmed with the amount of calls and the amount of concerns that people are raising about I don't know what to do or we're being shut off. And, again, we're still trying to get numbers, and I remember, I think it was finally, like, around 2004, 'cause they're not giving us numbers.

That's the other part of it, you know. We'd ask for numbers. We wouldn't get it. We're still learning about this FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] thing we've got to do, and it turns out that there's this group Public Citizen out in [Washington] D.C. that we had been talking with too. They're calling us, and they're like, "We want to help. We want to understand this, you know." This is something we're hearing from more outside groups, that they're concerned about, you know, they want to learn more about, and they actually got the numbers from the Water Department. And, that's when we learned that the...for the first time about how

significant this was. And now, we're looking, like, over 40,000 households that had been shut off. And we're like, wow, you know. We knew that we were really being bombarded by folks, but we had no idea of, like, the scale and scope of this. And so, it was in those years when we were also, like, look, we have to get something here in place that addresses this on a more, like, you know, large-scale holistic way, you know.

And, you know, it was also in those years too when we're...we're working pretty closely with the union members over at AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] Local 207. They're the water workers. They were the ones that would go to someone's house and, you know, be tasked with either turning somebody's water on or off. But because these were folks who worked from the community, knew the communities where they worked, it was different. It's not like it is now where you just have some red truck from Homrich roll up, and they just go out there, you know, and nitty gritty turn off your water and leave. These were folks who knew the, you know, the neighbors and would actually be trying to learn, you know, you know, they send me over here to shut off your water, you know, what's going on? You know, then you'd hear the story about, you know, somebody just died in the family or somebody was just in a car accident or someone just lost their job and, you know. And so, the workers were actually kind of this front line against some of what could have been really bad and helped, in some ways, kind of defend these communities as well because they would not do the shut offs if there was a way that they could kind of get around it or at least help, you know, these households kind of get a little bit more time. You know, we get paid on Friday. Can you wait? You know, we'll go and pay the bill, something something. You know, and so it was...it was really important to have those kinds of relationships, right?

But, part of the whole thing with emergency management was about also breaking these union contracts. And so, we're learning in the process about the impact on the water workers as well, especially when, you know, they were trying to teach us about, you know, you gotta follow the money. You know, you gotta go to those Water Department meetings. You gotta go to the water commission meetings, and you gotta see what's happening. And so, we go, and we're watching how, like, this board of commissioners, they're passing all these really big contracts, you know, for infrastructure repairs, for new equipment, for, you know, some consultants, whatever it is. All this money that's just flying out, and we're

like, wow, you know. Like, for one, we're not understanding, like, how much they're saying it costs to do these things, but then we're like, why are you giving it to those contractors when you've got this whole workforce for the city? Why aren't you having the water workers go do it? This is supposed to be their job, you know, fixing those pipes or, you know, addressing these other kinds of infrastructure issues. And then, that's when they're telling us too, this is about the business of getting rid of this city workforce, you know, bringing in contractors that are willing to underbid or find ways to kind of get their foot in the door so that they can take on that work that had been the responsibility of...of the city workers, right.

And so, we saw this, like, chain of reaction starting to happen, you know, as we got closer to when the emergency manager actually came in or when bankruptcy was declared on the city, right. And so, they had been schooling us for a while here too, and they're trying to talk to us about the retirement funds and how the city hadn't been paying into them, and this was, like, serious, because a lot of workers, you know, this was all they were gonna have, you know, and these aren't folks who are making like a lot of money, you know, just working men and women. And so, that was really, like, eye-opening too, but it was also really important for building those kinds of coalitions of labor and community to understand, you know, how it is that we're interrelated, but that how...we've got to figure out how to work on these together because we...we want to make sure that these kinds of jobs continue to be, you know, part of the public sector.

[1:06:54]

PB: So, having like been on the ground in Highland Park while there was an emergency manager there, did you kind of see the writing on the wall in Detroit ahead of the emergency manager being imposed upon the city?

SO: Yeah, we saw how it was playing out in Highland Park and how they were just gonna...they were gonna go for it, right. They were gonna...they were gonna call the shots. It didn't matter what...what we thought, what we disagreed with. These were economic decisions, bills had to be paid, and that's what they were there to do, you know. And so, there was no negotiation. They were gonna come and make

the decisions. And then, we saw it playing out in Detroit Public Schools, too, because it was rolling out there as well, and how, again, you know, these economic decisions were made when all along, you know, we didn't even have to get in these situations to begin with if the right structures had been in place and the revenues that were due were there. But, there had been so much syphoning out and poor leadership and...and bad hirings of people who claimed to know things that they didn't and then they would...they would buy things that were not needed or they would, you know, just bring in all this debt and, you know, there was...there was just so many, so many things were going wrong, you know. Which was...they were... In some ways, it ended up helping to build the case for why they said, oh, this is why we've got to have these emergency manager takeovers. People were going to come in from the governor's office and actually straighten all this out.

But, the, you know, the underlying message, you know, that we knew was clear was again this Detroit other narrative that essentially Detroit doesn't know how to run things. They don't know how to elect the right people. They don't know how to pay their bills. Not only that, they won't pay their bills, and somebody's gotta come in and actually show them how to do it and just take it all over. It didn't matter if the folks you had in office were elected by you, you know. There was gonna be, you know, a new mayor in town, you know, and this mayor was coming from the governor's office and was gonna have all this authority, and that's just how it was gonna be, you know.

And so in those same years, too, that's when folks were also pushing back on the P.A. Four [Public Act Four], and I remember it was amazing to see, like, how many people were out there with the petitions, and folks were signing them left and right, you know. All you had to do was just talk about this emergency manager thing and how we had to stop it. Oh, yeah, give me that, you know? And so, people were in shopping centers, they're in churches--or outside the churches. [laughs] They're all over the place, you know, getting the signatures for these forms, and it was amazing just to see like, you know, the stacks of them because we had them, you know, coming through Welfare Rights too, you know, where we would help just at least with the distribution of stuff. And, yeah. And then, just to see, like, from all over the state because we didn't have any idea, too, like, how many people, like, in the northern parts of the state that were also getting all these signatures. And then, when it all just kinda converged in Lansing [Michigan],

we're like, wow, you know. We did it. Because it's so hard to get signatures. It's so hard to get people organized in that way where we can actually say, look, we've got enough of what we need to make that change happen.

And then, that devastation afterwards when the legislature passed the other public act that basically just struck down Public Act Four. So, that was...that was really hard because people felt like, wow. We did all that work. We did what we were supposed to, right? There's a process. If you disagree with your legislature, if you disagree with the courts or whatever it is, there are processes in place, you know. You just have to get yourselves together, not that that's easy in any way, right? But, people did it. And, that was the thing is, like, people were really proud of that success, that organizing success, and then to just see it, like, ripped out, you know, within a matter of days by the legislature because they disagreed with the public and had other things in mind. That was really hard.

[1:10:49]

PB: So, you've laid out pretty clearly what the...the dominant narrative of...of...is about why Detroit was placed under emergency management, and that's been so insidious, right, all over the place.

SO: Yeah.

PB: So, if we flip that and come at it from your analysis, why was Detroit placed under emergency management?

SO: It was straight up theft. Detroit was bankrupted. That's very much our belief. You know, this was not about the narrative that they put out there that Detroit didn't know how to operate, didn't know how to manage finances, didn't know, you know, how to deal with the bond market or with Wall Street, and...and, you know, didn't know how to elect the right people, you know, all those sort of stereotype accusations. This was really about Detroit is, like, the jewel of the state when it comes down to the economic, political, and cultural base in many ways,

what it means to live in Michigan. And the fact that Detroiters, especially Black Detroiters, had been so successful for so many years and defiant, right.

Because there's a whole history of those years with Coleman Young, right, where he was gonna make it so that, you know, families in the city could be successful, and we were gonna kinda right side some politics to make sure that there was Black leadership and that some of the priorities for Black communities were gonna be implemented. And, definitely not popular, right? But, he had the vote. And so, a lot of folks still point to that as, like, those were the years, you know. Coleman was rough, but he got things done.

And, you know, we see, like, over the years how it is that, like, these other forces have come in--economic, political--to really try to grab, you know, those Detroit assets, and the Water Department was one of those big ones right here. We saw also during the bankruptcy how the... [laughs] the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts], you know, was something that, like, folks in the suburbs were, like, almost screaming about, like, no, not that Picassos! You know, we've got to save the...the arts, right. Not save the schools, not save the Water Department, you know, not any of these other things that folks here in the community were saying were valuable and necessary, but we're gonna save the arts. In fact, we're gonna take it off the table now. So now, the City of Detroit has no say over it, you know. Now, it's its own entity, you know.

So, it was difficult, but, you know, the ongoing, like, leadership challenges are always hard because, you know, as residents we want to believe, like, our vote matters and that when we're electing people that we're really electing folks that are gonna be accountable and accessible and responsive in the ways they campaigned for. But, you know, deep down we know that, you know, they're...they've gotta be funded, right, and the dollars aren't really coming from community folks for the most part. It's coming from those...those deep pockets that we know we can't trust. And so, you know, what do we do to be able to still sort of like keep a hold on these elected officials so that they're...they're accountable, but they're also acting, you know, with the kind of integrity and morality that we need?

And, that's really what's, like, been really lacking in this is that we see, like, how our elected officials are for sale. Even if they don't see it that way, you know, they're willing to compromise on things that they campaigned to say that they would hold firm to, whether it was like labor rights or jobs, you know. They find a way to allow compromises or communities--or excuse me, employers to just pay a fine, you know. I know--yeah, we know we said we would hire a thousand Detroiters, but it doesn't work out that way. So, we'll just pay the fine, right? The stadiums. Or, you know, we...we know that we should designate more of the property around the city for affordable housing, but, you know, there are these folks that want to build these townhouse-- you know, townhomes and condos and other kinds of luxury developments. So, we'll do it in the next time, right?

There's always these compromises, and they never really get at what it is that the folks in the majority of the city are saying that they need. They'll throw out these little crumbs, you know. They'll throw out the nice park, and, you know, everybody wants a nice park for sure. But, when it comes down to the essence of how it is that folks can feel that they can develop economic security, that they can have political power in ways that their vote matters and will be part of the shaping of whatever this new, you know, trajectory is gonna be about change, people want to, like, really believe that that's gonna happen and it doesn't happen. And, that's the thing.

So, when we keep saying, well, why don't we get more people to the polls? Why won't more people show up to protest? Why can't we get more Welfare Rights members? You know, it's this beat down that just keeps happening, and emergency management really was, like, the charge for it. Right? Just come right in and just smack everybody down. And, like, with Michigan Welfare Rights, too, we're always very much about, like, we've gotta organize in the streets, the courts, and the legislature. So, we're doing a protest, right. We're out there. We're going door to door, and we're having the conversations with folks. We're organizing the community meetings. Alright, we also gotta do the legislature. We gotta go to the stupid city council meetings. We gotta, you know, wait our turn to speak two minutes, right? We gotta go up to Lansing. We gotta testify before panels. We've gotta write our letters. We gotta call our, you know, elected officials, our congress members because that's...that's what they say we gotta do, right? You gotta let 'em know what you care about. That doesn't matter either, too, right? They end up voting different things, doing things we don't want.

Okay, well, then we go to the courts. Surely the courts will understand the...the law, justice is on our side, right? We can prove that there is inequity, that there's discrimination, that there's bias, that there's other things that are violating our civil, constitutional rights, and we go forward with that. And, we did that during the bankruptcy with the Lyda versus Detroit case where we had residents whose water had been shut off because they couldn't pay, yet meanwhile all these assets from the city are essentially being auctioned off. The bonds have to be paid, you know. So, everyone else is getting paid, yet, you know, essential services aren't being provided, and people who need water as one of the most essential services can't afford it, and this is causing all kinds of household and public health community-based problems. And so, we take it to the courts. Surely, the...the, you know, justice will prevail, shut it down. And in like brief, the court just basically said, "The concerns you raise are valid in some ways, but they don't outweigh the greater needs of the bankruptcy and the reorganization of the debt." And so, dismissed.

Take it over to the state court, to the Supreme Court, we're like, alright. At least we got our foot in the door with the bankruptcy court. Let's see what the State Supreme Court says. Maybe this is just the wrong jurisdiction, right? We'll take it there. Don't wanna hear it. Take it over to federal circuit court. Surely the feds will get this, right? We've had many civil rights cases about African American folks being dis...disproportionately impacted about race and other factors that go into the disenfranchisement of folks, you know, emergency manager, our democracy is being removed and these factors that we're talking about that are impacting people's survival, right? Circuit court strikes it down, you know. So, we're like, damn, you know. We're going through all these channels that we're supposed to do. Where else do we go?

And, that's the thing. It's like we can't rely on any of the systems because the systems weren't built, really, to protect us, you know, and those are some of the harsh lessons of all this, that we really only have ourselves, and that if we don't build this movement, if we don't expand this political understanding of how it is that we come into this and how it is that we're gonna get out only by way of our own effort, then we're gonna constantly be in this kinda struggle. And so, you know, we see, like, these moments. The bankruptcy was this huge lesson in that,

right? Where folks, like, we got enlightened. And, these other struggles around, like, the water rights that we're doing, you know, the fight against Nestle, the issues around infrastructure and who should pay and the legacy costs, the environmental justice stuff that, you know, people are...been experiencing for decades, you know, with Marathon, you know. How does it... You know, low-income, poor-income people are...are constantly being, you know, suppressed and compromised? You know. So, we've gotten the lessons and the organizing. It's...it's starting to come around. It's still slow, but we've gotten...we've gotten to a point where at least we have more awareness now than we used to.

[1:20:14]

PB: So, I want to go a little bit further with this. The courts are yielding no results, the legislature's yielding no results, like, there's this groundswell of organizing that's taking place after emergency management, after bankruptcy. Like, Mark Ruffalo is here, and U.N. [United Nations] special rapporteurs are here. And yet, the shutoffs persist, right. So, what's it going to take? Like, what is the next stage of the struggle need to look like in--that's [phone rings/alarm goes off?] kind of a...this is more like a visioning question--but like, what's the next stage of the struggle need to look like in order to be successful or to have greater successes?

SO: So, it's gotta be a combination of things. We've gotta do the very basic essence of grassroots organizing. We have to engage people in the conversations. We've got to get people to speak on their own behalf. We've gotta have those...those different narratives really be part of the broader conversation, right? So, there's that.

There's also the role of technology, and this also gets at some of the generational differences, challenges sometimes, right, between, like, the old school organizers and the new school [laughs] kind of organizers, you know. And so, you know, we'll still have some folks that say, oh, we just gotta put out newsletters and pass some newsletters out in the neighborhoods, and other folks are like, nobody wants to read the newsletter. You need to get Snapchat or Instagram or something, right, and that's how you get people. We're, like, well who's gonna teach folks how to use Snapchat or Instagram, right? So, this...there's that kind of thing that's still

kind of ongoing, and I guess it cross, you know, lots of different mediums. But, the technology is definitely one of the big pieces, you know. How is it that we really use technology to wield the power that we need, right? And what are the tools that we think can sort of be the most kind of common denominator for the masses?

And then, how is it that we actually can get more money to help us with just the basics of organizing? And, that's one of the challenges, you know. So, again, if you're low income and you're being forced to work in some crappy minimum wage job, at the end of the day, you know, you're not likely to want to turn out to some meeting, right? You've gotta deal with a whole bunch of stuff at home that waiting for you when you get home.

Or, you know, folks who, you know, feel like what's the point anymore, right? I've been in this movement work for years, or I, you know, used to be active in my union or in my community neighborhood group and didn't matter, right? Folks just become disillusioned. So, how is it that we rebuild in a way that people feel like, no, it's different this time around, or you have the ability to make it different because of what you learned you can, you know, transmit onto the next in...in better, more meaningful ways, you know? So, how is it we shape it?

And then, we...I think we just have to be honest about, like, the power of celebrity, you know, as sort of, like, shameful as it is, just, you know, part of the thing, like with the technology and just the moment that we're in, is, like, you know, people can switch off and on, you know, in seconds, right? So, how do we capture attention? And so, some of that is about, you know, celebrity, you know. So, the Mark Ruffalos or the other folks that will come into the space and help with bridging that kind of, you know, gap in the media that we want, but they've got that attention to be able to, you know, get us, you know, some spotlight for a minute, right. And, how is it that, you know, we also, like, really lift up our own folks that have been really instrumental in the work, right? Because we don't really need to reach out far. We've got so many folks that are deep in this struggle for years and really are amazing leaders and teachers and, you know, and motivators in a lot of ways.

So, there's a lot that we need to do, but, you know, I still think, like, we haven't been able to really, like, identify what is that one thing that is gonna motivate someone enough to say, "I'm not gonna watch that show tonight. Instead, I'm gonna go to that meeting." Or, "I really don't wanna go to a meeting, but let me see if I can figure out how to at least plug in," you know. And, again, on the phone, whatever it is. We just figuring out what it is that's gonna help with that switch.

But, I think that, you know, like I said, just the...the patterns of the abuse, 'cause that's really what it is, you know. When you're told no repeatedly, or your vote doesn't matter repeatedly, or you're lied to, or your circumstances didn't improve like you were told that they were going to, you know, the jobs weren't...didn't get delivered, you know, the improvements to your community didn't happen, your family's not better off than they used to be, you know, in fact, your situation is worse off than your parents or your grandparents, you know, you just get to a point where you're like, it doesn't matter if I show up over there or over there. It's still gonna be the same, so all I'm gonna do is just take care of mine and my own, you know. And, we have a lot of that, and it's understandable, you know. And so, part of this is like figuring out where...where can we have those breakthroughs? Where can we...where can we have something that will help demonstrate that, you know, that's true and that exists? Or, let's figure out how we can switch it up, you know. And, those are part of, like, those organizing challenges.

[1:25:52]

OY: So, how do you encourage people--and especially young people--who aren't as familiar with Detroit's history or community organizing or fights for their basic human rights, like water?

SO: So, I think part of the thing is, like with anything, you have to just get folks where they're at, you know. And, I don't know that, like, necessarily my sharing of a history or, like, the experience or the mission of Michigan Welfare Rights, for instance, is gonna influence some young person who's got a whole bunch of other ideas of their own, right? Not saying that they're any better, worse, they're just...they're just different, and that's...and that's good because we need all of the...the different experience. But, I think what we've got to figure out is how it is

that we see them not so much as like generational issues, because one of the things I know folks are very firm about is, you know, we've gotta find ways to work together with people across generations, you know. There's a lot youth offer, but I also believe there's a lot elders offer, and I think that with as few of us working in movements for change, we can't afford to lose anybody. So, how is it that we make sure that everybody across the generations has a role? You know. No one's role is more important or less than any other. We just hold the space in whatever role it is that we have, and we maximize it, you know.

Like, I love hearing it when folks say, "Let's organize our seniors." Oh, yeah! Because you know what you can count on seniors to do. They're gonna vote, right? And, they're gonna get on the phone. They might not be able to hit a neighborhood, or they might not be able to figure out how to use those apps on the phone, but there's some stuff seniors can do, right? At the same time, like my nieces and nephews, I'm not expecting them to get on the phone. They don't wanna be calling some elected official, and then they're gonna be, like, what am I supposed to tell 'em, right? But, they can do other stuff, right? So, how is it that we get people where they're at? That's part of, I think, the key around us. And not to say--again, I feel like I really have to empha...to emphasize it--that nobody is any better or less in how it is we do it. It's just we do it where we're at, right? Because we...we wanna make sure that, like, people are feeling, like, that there is a space for everyone. And, there is.

[1:28:15]

OY: How does advocating for changes in policy coordinate with grassroots organizing work, and do you see that one sometimes inhibits the other?

SO: So, part of the thing is, like, whenever you're organizing for change, the change that, like, we often want in grassroots groups is much bigger than, like, anyone else, especially that's in an elected office or policy makers, were thinking, you know. They're like, "You've gotta be realistic, right? You can't have all those things 'cause it's gonna take all these things." We're like, "No. We don't want to hear that. We just know we want you to get rid of poverty, right? So, we need you

to come up with a way to get rid of poverty.” “Well, you know, that might not be possible.” It’s like, “Alright, well, we’ll tell you how to do it,” you know.

And so, we come at these...at these kinds of conversations with those discussions. Part of it is about water affordability. Well, this isn’t hard, you know. You just make it so that people only pay what they can afford on their water bills, and then the water bill is dealt with. Now, let’s move on to your gas and your light bill. Alright, again, affordability. Great, we figured out the utilities. Let’s go on to your housing bill. You know what, there’s no reason why anyone should be paying 40-50 percent of their income for rent, right, or for a house note. That’s outrageous. So, how is it that we address policies or ordinances or legislation so that people are not paying that much? And then, why are they paying that much? Why is the bank charging those interests rates? Why is it that the property taxes if you’re on a payment plan are charging you 25 percent interest rate in order to deal with your back taxes? Oh, no. These aren’t just rules. Let’s address these kinds of policy issues.

So, part of it is, like, as community organizers, community organizations, you have to confront this stuff sort of head on. Because I think sometimes people just assume, like, oh, well, they know this stuff, you know. These are smart people, these policy makers, you know, these elected officials. And, they don’t, you know. Sometimes we end up being, like, smarter than them. They just had some money, right? They were able to run a campaign, but, you know, they really only survive by surrounding themselves with people who know how to do it, you know. They’re kinda just like the front person. And, we’ve learned that, you know, in the work that we’ve done because, again, we do go to Lansing, we do go to city council, to Wayne County this and that, right? The federal government, you know. We go to hearings in Congress. We go to these international bodies, and we tell folks, “Look, we don’t need folks to help develop the solutions for us. We’ve come with them, right? We’ve got the policies. We just need them implemented. Or, we know what, you know, what poor folks need, you know. We...we’ve got a plan, you know. We can get rid of poverty if we do these 10 things, right?”

And so, part of is that we have to be bold and bring the vision and the solutions as well. And so, we have to feel that, like, we also can be part of that, that’s there not some sort of, like, elevated platform for anyone who’s an elected official or who

works on policy. No, we've got to bring them back down to understanding that you've gotta develop these kinds of proposals that are gonna impact the most people from a place that really gets at the heart of the issues.

[1:31:26]

OY: So, going along with, like, how you were saying sometimes people who just have money are not the most intelligent people or the best people for that job, how does elitism in any form, whether it comes from formal education or money or otherwise, hinder community organizing work, and how does one combat that?

SO: Good question. Well, I'll come back to myself, you know. So, I came out here, again, to go to graduate school from a working-class family. My dad was a truck driver. My mom, you know, she did some odds and end jobs here and there, but mostly, you know, raised us, you know. They both came from some pretty working poor backgrounds, and, you know, like other families wanted to see their kids be able to do better. You know, I was lucky to be able to go to college in California, but, you know, had to take out loans. My folks had to take out loans, you know. We didn't even know how to do all these applications, you know. First to really go to college, you know. So, you're learning along the way, right.

And later, you know, was in state school, you get mentored by good people, and that's part of the thing that, you know, matters when you...when you go to school is you gotta find those faculty members that really are about helping you develop. And, I was lucky to have a couple folks like that where I went to school and helped me, you know, even think about graduate school. You know, I'm like, "Pshaw, no, I'm done with school," right. Like, because I wanted to be a high school teacher. I thought, "Oh yeah, I, you know, I can relate, and I can, you know, do pretty well at this." And so, I thought that's what I wanted to do. But, it was really like this kind of mentorship that got me thinking, "Maybe I could go to graduate school. I don't know anybody who went to graduate school, but maybe I could do it, you know. How do you do it, right? How do you even apply? How do you know where to go?" You know, all these kind of like basic questions.

And so, it turns out that University of Michigan is one of those that picked me up, and I didn't even know it was like a big deal, you know, until folks would tell me, "Oh, you got admitted at Michigan?" I was like, "Is that good?" You know, so I got admitted to a couple of other schools and, you know, got a chance to go visit and met some folks here, you know, some other, you know, Latino...Latino students and, you know, and they're like, "Yeah, you have to come here," you know, and met some other folks that would be like my cohort, and, you know, it felt like a good fit. But, you know, scary as all hell, you know. I had never lived out of LA [Los Angeles] like that before and, you know, being in the Midwest. And then, I'm hearing all stories from folks. They're like, "Don't go to Howell [Michigan], you know. Don't go, you know, down into the corn, you know, fields." I was like, "Well, where are they so I know not to go there?" You know, I'm hearing all these stories. I'm not, you know--and it's... I don't know if they were also messing with me, but that's, you know, part of my experience at the time, you know.

And so, I go through that. And then, again, you know, in the course of, like, my graduate work, I come to meet these Welfare Rights activists, right, folks who are from the movement who experienced, you know, welfare first-hand, who had kids, you know, and, you know, like sadly I was never able to, you know. And like, I'm fortunate that I didn't have to go on public assistance, and during those years, partly they protected me from having to fall that far because, like, I was struggling to just pay my bills in school, right? Even though I was holding jobs. And, you know, they're, like, "Yeah, we can help you get a welfare case, but we're gonna help you not have to do that," you know. And so, you know, just, like, have, like, the experience, you know, in some ways was kind of different for me, but very conscious of, like, where I come from, like, with my economic background, you know.

And meanwhile while I'm in graduate school, I've got family members calling me and saying, "Hey, we had to move into a motel. We got no money, you know. Can you help us out?" You know, some of my student loan money is like going to help relatives and things like, and...and I didn't care, you know. I figured, "Oh, I'll pay for it later," you know, and now I'm kinda jammed in that way. But, you know.

And so, you know, we... I think anyone that's involved in any kind of movement work, at different points you have to kind of do that self-assessment about where

you're at, you know. Are you really still staying true to the values of, like, the movement building work that you're about or--you know, because stuff happens or you're getting ahead of yourself, right. Are you making sure that you're building leadership? Are you making sure that you're ensuring that the folks who really need to have the voice are being, you know, brought up front? You know, that those voices are being heard? And how is it that you also, you know, protect one another? 'Cause that's the other thing. It's like movement work, especially if you're doing anti-poverty work, can be hard because, like I said, the criticisms just from holding a sign, right, over at the stadium, right. People want to throw digs at you, make all kinds of assumptions about go get a job. And at the time, I was like, "I've got two jobs, actually. It's my time off right now, but I'm out here protesting, right?" But the assumption that people will make and, you know, the ugliness that can kind of get part of it.

And, I think that--and the mentorship that I've had especially with Welfare Rights and Marian [Kramer] and Maureen [Taylor]. They've been brilliant at this, you know. No apologies for defending the poor, for fighting for the rights of the poor, for saying that, you know, we all have a right to the basics of life, not just to survive but to thrive. You know, these things that they'll say often. And you're like, yeah. Yeah, you know? And, you...you--the thing is, like, not only do you, like, come to understand it, but you believe it. And then, you take it and you go onto the next with it too. And so, I really appreciate that, that sort of like really fundamental, like, building of, like, my understanding and, like, political awareness as well in the work, and I think that that has to be really fundamental to, you know, what you do as, like, a grassroots organizer.

[1:37:41]

PB: I've got one final question for us. One thing we're asking everyone--and this is kind of, like, a survey of sorts--but you mentioned that part of what being a grassroots organizer is is having a...a bigger vision than the system can possibly fathom at this particular moment.

SO: Yeah.

PB: So, what is that bigger vision that you have if you were to describe it, and how is that... I guess let me put it another way. What is this bigger vision for the future of Detroit that's informing the work that you're doing?

SO: For Detroit or just anywhere, we should all just have not just our basic needs met, but we should have the things that we need in order to be able to live lives of contentment, you know. It's not hard. That's...that's the thing. It's like, for the most part, people don't need a lot, you know. We know we need just to survive, you know, food, water, shelter, those kinds of things. But once you allow people to at least not have to worry about that stuff, you can go onto the next thing. Like, I'm ready to learn, you know. I'm ready to take on that work challenge. Or, I'd like to go somewhere, you know. I know I've met like a lot of folks that never really left Detroit. They might've gone down South for a family reunion, but that was just kinda like, you know, real fast, but not really, like, gone somewhere, you know. And so, like, the things that, like, you might, like, dream of or the things that you think, like, "Hey, that'd be pretty awesome to be able to do someday," why can't we be in a place where everyone is feeling like, "You know what? I don't have those big worries on me. I'm now in a space where I can show up to a meeting, you know. I can turn out for, you know, some tutoring over at the school. Or, you know, I wanna help with, you know, cleaning up of the river." Or, whatever it is, you know. So that people feel like they have the freedom, and now they've got the desire to want to engage, you know.

But instead, like, we're told your problems are your problems, you know. Again, like, you shouldn't have done that that got you in this situation. And now on top of it, you better pay your bills, right? The narratives. The blaming. But, you know, it's like people are always saying, well, this is a zero-sum situation. No, it's not, you know. They've made it that way to think, like, there's only this much money. There's not enough around...to go around for everybody so we've got to figure out what to do. But, the elites, or folks who are in these decision-making positions, are making those decisions without really consideration of, like, the majority of people.

And, that's what we're seeing downtown, and that's been, like, what's been so frustrating, like, with the outcomes of emergency management in all of these

cities because it really wasn't about consideration for the people who lived there before and even after those emergency managers left, you know. They were there for a specific business purpose, you know. They were all there about the finances, about the extraction of wealth and resources, and the folks that were left holding it are now, like, "But, they said we were gonna get a new water department, you know, station, or we were gonna get lighting, or we were gonna, you know, get improved roads. What happened?"

We're supposed to wait. How much longer do you have to keep waiting? That's the thing. And so, then you come to realize, like, no. The perpetuating of the lies. And so, unless we figure out how to come together and say, "No. We're not falling for that anymore, you know. You're not bringing emergency management to this city again because we've learned, you know. We've seen how it played out in all these places, and instead what we're gonna say is we're gonna be part of the design." But, part of it is we've gotta also figure out how to be more in control about how it is we spend our own money, right. We've gotta realize we've got power in our spending, and that's really part of the...the next step in how it is that we build for collective power.

PB: Thank you.

SO: Thank you.