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## Luvernel Clark's Comments - Panel 1

Luvernel Clark

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## LUVERNEL CLARK'S COMMENTS – PANEL I

LUVERNEL CLARK

*“Eventually we found out what was really happening ...”*

OK, so I'm going to tell you about all these adventures we had. But I'm going from memory—which may, with time, not always be so good! (laughing)

Back at the beginning I went to work at the Allied Signal plant. (It was the Jim Robbins Seat Belt Company when I first went there.) This was in 1971. And I was just a normal worker, going in there and doing a whole lot of hard work. Because it was hard—really, really hard—before we got the health and safety stuff in order.

And, thanks to my friend Doug Gamble on that. Because he would help get me going to meetings and stuff. Like with the Tennessee Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (TNCOSH). And we helped get that TNCOSH bill passed through the Tennessee legislature.<sup>1</sup>

I worked at that plant until about 1982. And then all of a sudden, we saw all these layoffs. We had no idea what was going on! Because the company would just tell us anything. Nobody could figure out. I was laid off for a while then in 1982. And then when I finally got called back to work, my head went to spinning. People were talking about, “they're taking our stuff.” And our machinery was gone or leaving—parts of it at a time. But nobody actually knew exactly what was going on. Eventually we found out what was really happening.

I want to thank the union, first of all. Because if it had not been for them to get me involved in that, my life would be different. Because I told them (this is what I told them when we were talking about leadership in the plant), I said, “Nobody is going to represent me like me.” And they talked to me about getting active within the union, and so I did. And when I heard about why the plant closings were going down, I got concerned.

The news was coming from our truck drivers. Our truck drivers told us that the company had plans in Greenville, Alabama, and so

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1. Tennessee's Hazardous Chemical Right-to-Know law was passed after a vigorous citizens' lobbying campaign led by TNCOSH. It was passed in 1986 and is codified at Tenn. Admin. Code § 0800-01-09. For more on work that Luvernel and others did with TNCOSH, see Jessie Wilkerson, *Out Front and Strong: Local Women of the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health*, 11 J. LAB. & SOC'Y 477 (2008).

they were taking our machinery to set up a new plant down there. (This was a non-union plant.)

Well, our truck drivers and the truck drivers down there got word, "It's not staying in Greenville, it's going across the border to Mexico!" So that's when we all got started and wound up about trying to find out what was actually going on. And the more that happened, the more I heard, the more interested I got in this process.

Now Doug, I think Doug has been my saving grace. I know (laughing) sometimes I got on his last nerve! (Turning to Doug) That was about when you got hired on as union staff. And you got to talking to us about it. He took me to a meeting of the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN). And I had no idea what was going on there either. This labor-community kind of an organization was a new thing for me. Because at that particular time, me and a lot of other Black people were not involved, and especially not a woman.

So he took me to this meeting, and I got really interested about what was happening. So we decided to get involved in this project. We went as far as deciding we needed to give money from the union to help this plan, trying to save our jobs and hang onto our standards, to get started.

And to *fight* for that.

So then we started to hear about the company taking our work to Mexico. We went to the company, and the company told us that wasn't so. Which we knew they were, because we had the truth. Our truck drivers were very diligent about looking into this, and they wanted us to see what we could do about it. And I had workers that worked with me that when they say something, they want it done yesterday. So we wanted to get on it.

I was not a union rep then. But then I started going to the TIRN meetings, and I started going to the union meetings. That's something that I didn't do at first. I paid my dues from the day I went to work there, but I never was an active member. But now I've got my head open and my eyes open, and I'm seeing what's going on. And so when we met with TIRN (that's when I met up with Susan, and my sweetheart right here, Fran), we got to talking. So I joined TIRN and became a member of that.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on TIRN, see Eve S. Weinbaum, *The Politics of Industrialization: Three Case Studies*, 13 NEW ENGLAND J. OF PUB. POL'Y 19 (1998); EVE S. WEINBAUM, TO MOVE A MOUNTAIN: FIGHTING THE GLOBAL ECONOMY IN APPALACHIA (2004). Here is how TIRN described itself in an amicus brief the group joined before a Michigan Court of Appeals in 1993 in the case of *Charter Twp. of Ypsilanti v. General Motors Corp.*, 506 N.W. 2d 556 (1993):

I found out they were doing this worker-to-worker border exchange. They were going to go across the border to meet with workers down there. That was interesting to me. I'm going somewhere!

So in 1991, we took vans. We drove all the way down there. Oh Lord!

We had a TV crew that went with us. And you had a mic in your face all the time. They wanted to hear everything. And it was really an interesting trip. Because I can't speak Spanish, didn't know nothing about it. So we had an interpreter with us to tell us what everybody was saying. (They were trying to teach me, but I never could get the "r"s right!)

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The Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network is a non-profit coalition of workers, unions, community organizations, churches and other people concerned about the effects of economic policy on Tennessee's working people and their communities. Formed in 1989, TIRN has worked to build a network of people around the state who are knowledgeable about the rights of workers and communities threatened by plant closings and who are becoming educated about the economic changes that are affecting the U.S. and Tennessee economies in such dramatic ways. Because of its location in the Southeast, TIRN believes that its members are in a particularly good position to understand some important things about capital mobility. There are TIRN members who can recall when the factory where they worked for years first moved to their small town. They can recall hearing that the company was looking for low wages and for a non-union workforce; they can recall visiting with workers in the North who called them "dumb hillbillies" for agreeing to work for peanuts. But they also recall that they paid little attention to such talk: they were glad to get the jobs. Now those same people are in many instances watching as their department or their factory is closed and their jobs are moved to Mississippi or Mexico. TIRN members know from their own life experiences that pure protectionism is no answer to the need for healthy economic development in all regions of the country and of the world. They also know that corporate mobility unrestrained by any rules of ordinary obligation is a recipe for the waste of productive resources and unnecessary suffering. Although Tennessee workers have been the recipients of runaway jobs in the past, TIRN members are clear that it is in the interest of workers and communities everywhere to insist that industrial producers play by the rules just like everybody else.

But we met with the workers across the border, and we saw what was happening there. And it was a shame to me. It really was a shame to me, when we went, and we saw how their living conditions were.

Let me tell you how I first came to know about what was going on in Mexico. It was John Gaventa that came to the union office. And he had a video. Because he had *been* across the border. He had learned about this whole *maquiladora* program that was encouraging U.S. companies to come down there and get all these special tax breaks.

Because all we knew was “the Mexicans are taking our jobs,” and that was what we were dead set on. But he brought back a video, and paperwork, and he explained to us, it’s not the workers, this is corporations that’s doing this. And he showed us what was happening. And it’s after that when we went on the trip.

We had gotten in touch with groups down there that were working with people and willing to show us around. We met workers. We spent the night over in Mexico. I was afraid at first, I’m going to be honest. But I had a great experience, because I learned so much about how their union situation worked, how little the companies were paying! I don’t recall if it was four or five dollars a day then that they were earning, something like that—for the work, the same work, we were getting paid so much more for doing in the United States.

I even took a copy of one of my paycheck stubs, and they could not believe it. Well (laughing) first of all, they could not believe my age. In their eyes I was too *old* to be working, because companies down there only hired the young people. But next they said they couldn’t believe what they were paying me. They were running the same machine that I had run at the plant here in Knoxville, and I showed it to them, and that was just amazing to them.

And working conditions too. They told about how they would have to *ask* before they could go to the bathroom. But . . . the corporation was making all this big-time money.

We also went through some neighborhoods – they call them the *colonias* -- and talked to the people. And they were happy to see you. They’d bring you information and stuff that they could tell us. What I couldn’t figure out is they had labor laws, and they had unions at least in some factories. But the unions were run by the government and in bed with the companies. In some ways I thought they had laws better than ours, but they were not being enforced, and most of the workers had no real way of knowing.

Then Fran and I went down on another trip after that. (Fran, I think it was just you and I.) We stayed in this convent in El Paso that time, the home of some Catholic nuns. Now this is something—I was taking an opportunity (laughing)! Because as a Black person in

Knoxville, you didn't see things like that, you didn't hear about things like that.

After that first trip, we came back home. We had Anne Lewis, a filmmaker, who was doing stories about what we were doing, we wanted to share that film we made. So then when we came back, we thought, hmm, *everybody* needs to know about this. So we started setting up community meetings.

We went to the international of my union too. I've done workshops and given talks to union members to let them know exactly what was happening to our jobs. I have written articles for the newspaper.<sup>3</sup> It wasn't the Mexican people. It was these corporations and these big top men making all this money. And we're getting paid no raises and all that kind of stuff. So we done a lot of outreach, a *lot*. And we worked by ourselves. People started getting more involved in it.

But I know when I first went down there and came back home . . . I have two daughters, and I told them I said, "I'm going to tell you something. If you had seen what I have seen, you would never throw a crumb in the trash." Because the conditions were deplorable. Those people were living in deplorable conditions, and that's all it was. And on one of the later trips when we stayed with workers in their homes down in Juarez, I thought, "I'm not too good to stay all night with these people."

Yes, it was a little different. But I was not too good to do it. So I said to my daughters, "Don't complain to me when you waste food. There's people out there they don't have any."

So, overall, those trips were really informative. And I'd like to thank Professor Ansley, (laughing) because she's a pusher. She's a pusher! She'll get you on the ball, and she still does with me. I retired from the seatbelt plant in 2004, and I haven't done a whole lot since then with these issues, but if Fran's got something on her agenda, she'll call you. She's been one heck of a friend and everyone in the law school ought to be very proud of her. I know I love her, and I am very proud of what she helped me accomplish in my life.

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g., Luvernel Clark, *NAFTA Debate Centers on Pact's Potential Impact: Workers, Environment Aren't Protected*, KNOXVILLE NEWS-SENTINEL, Nov. 14, 1993; Luvernel Clark, *LRR Focus: We Need to Get Together More*, 1 LAB. RSCH. REV. (1992).

