Gray

High in the 20s
Details on page 2A

Democrat and Chronicle

146TH YEAR

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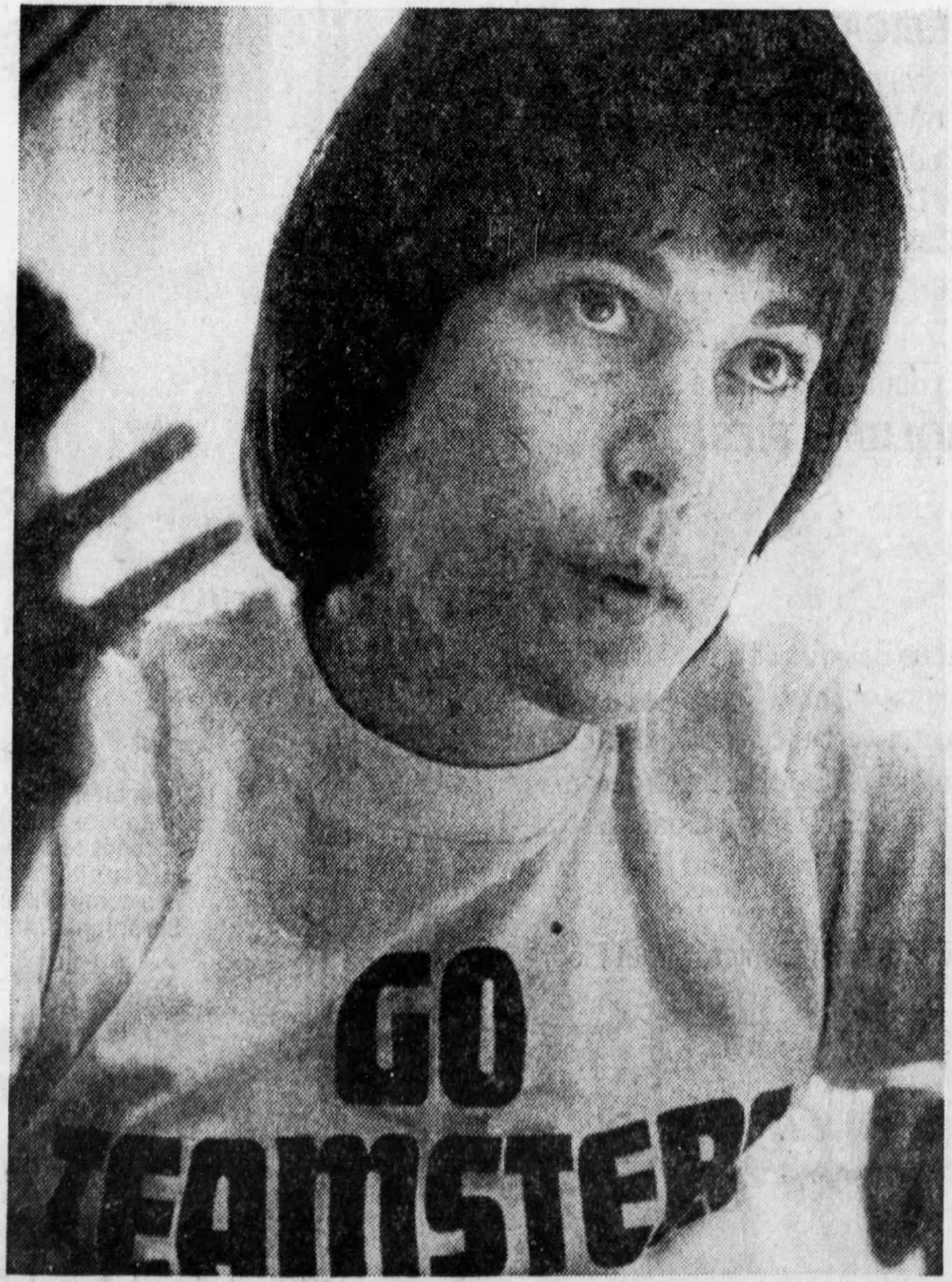

D&C photo by Vicki Valerio

Union organizer Vicki Saporta wears her philosophy

Organizer cheers, 'Go Teamsters,' and gets results

By MICHAEL CORDTS

Like the leader of any successful revolution, Teamster organizer Vicki Saporta was flattered when her enemies in Lexington, N.C., sent a funeral wreath to her going-away party.

"I guess I was leaving in the nick of time," she said Saturday. Her smile faded. She paused and tugged at her yellow "GO TEAMSTERS" T-shirt. The smile came back.

"Shoot, nobody would hurt me. I'd make too good of a martyr."

The morbid parting gift was just another indication that the 26-year-old union organizer from Irondequoit is worth every penny of the $33,250 salary she draws from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the world's largest labor union.

Her stunning success in North Carolina — the least-unionized state in the nation — surprised the Teamsters as much as it shocked the business leaders of Lexington, who watched in disbelief as she unionized the city's four largest industries in 16 months.

But turning anti-union Lexington into a Teamster stronghold is only Ms. Saporta's latest coup.

She was the first graduate in the 33-year history of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations to sign on with the Teamsters, and she was the first woman to be named to the International's eight-member organizing department.

She organized 1,200 workers at Yosemite National Park when she was fresh out of college. She helped unionize Blue Cross clerical workers in Chicago, which a Teamster publication says is the largest unit of clerical workers ever organized.

Business Week magazine said she "burst upon conservative North Carolina like a Texas cheerleader." Marveling at her ability to surprise management and tap worker unrest, the editor of Lexington's daily newspaper called her "an energetic young woman from upstate New York who would seem as out of place here as the Square's Confederate Soldier would in Rochester."

Friends and foes respect her ability, and a partial list of published adjectives includes highly intelligent, persuasive, attractive, vibrant, articulate, hard-working, charming and unconventional.

Turn to Page 5B

TEAMSTERS

From Page 1B

But it's all a matter of fair play for the woman who lives in California, works out of Washington, D.C., and is headed back to North Carolina.

"We don't want everything the companies have. We don't want the companies to be in the red," she said. "It's simple. The workers deserve a fair share of what they produce. They deserve a grievance procedure and dignity and respect."

She speaks quickly, and her hands race when the subject turns to companies that have raised prices after moving to the South. Sunbelt states offer tax cuts and workers who typically earn half as much in wages and benefits as their counterparts in the North, she said.

"We're talking about husbands and wives and kids who are trying to exist on $2.90 an hour," she said. "The profit motive — at any cost — of some companies frightens me."

Lexington is still buzzing about the campaign she masterminded, which included cheering, dancing, singing, picnics, parades and a sea of "GO TEAMSTERS" T-shirts. The campaign unionized more than 4,000 workers.

"The town went crazy," she said. "It was the most beautiful grass-roots movement I'd ever seen. The workers became militants overnight, and it was all because for the first time the workers realized they were worth something.

"I love those people down there. It was the best experience of my life."

She's almost oblivious to corruption in the Teamsters, until companies she's attempting to organize bring up the disappearance of former union president Jimmy Hoffa, the murder conviction of New Jersey Teamster leader Anthony Provenzano and the pension fund scandal.

She was unaware that a close friend of Salvatore "Sammy G" Gingello, Rochester's late Mafia underboss, and current underboss Richard Marino were elected officials of Teamsters Construction Local 398.

"We've got 750 locals, and some of them have problems," she said. "But I'm not affected by what Tony Provenzano did or didn't do. And I just met my first Rochester Teamster two days ago in Washington."

She admits her success has caused some jealousy within the international, "but I've earned my stripes. I was a young female who didn't come through the ranks, but now they (her fellow organizers) know me and trust me."

She also is a new breed of union organizer, said Jean McKelvey of Rochester, one of her professors at Cornell.

"There's a renewed interest in unions, and Vicki was almost a pioneer," Mrs. McKelvey said. "She was a well-motivated student with lots of self-confidence. I thought she would go places, but not this fast. It's amazing."

Curled up in a kitchen chair and sipping milk during a rare visit to her Irondequoit home, the daughter of Abe and Leah Saporta talked about non-union Kodak and Xerox.

"Boy, I bet the whole town would be against Kodak going union," she said, glancing at the ceiling and laughing.

For the time being, she's returning to North Carolina for a series of labor board hearings regarding her latest achievement.

What happened to the funeral wreath, compliments of PPG Industries Inc.?

"I took it to Washington, D.C., and hung it on my boss's door."

Classified Advertising Begins On Page 4C

The Charlotte Observer

Sunday
April 1, 1979

Local News

From Charlotte and The Carolinas

Section
C

Vicki Is A Driving Force As Teamsters Roll In N.C.

By BOB DROGIN
Observer Staff Writer

SALISBURY — Sporting a yellow "Go Teamsters" T-shirt, Vicki Saporta plays the Fiber Industry workers like an evangelist, her fingers stabbing the air, her voice loud and insistent.

"We don't ask anyone to join us," she shouts. "We're here to offer a product and if you get us you'll be damned lucky ... because we're getting calls from around the state."

Such a claim from a union organizer would have been unlikely a few years ago. But the Teamsters are making inroads in North Carolina, a right-to-work state that the U.S. Labor Department says has, after South Carolina, the second lowest unionization rate and the lowest industrial wages in the country.

Ms. Saporta, a 26-year-old organizer for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, is probably the best — and most unconventional — organizer the Teamsters, or any other union, has in the state.

A self-described "Yankee and carpetbagger," she sings, dances and leads rallies like old-time religious revivals. She dresses herself and her supporters in bright yellow T-shirts and sticks phosphorescent "Teamsters Are Beautiful" flowers everywhere. She leads cheers, holds picnics and runs midnight pickup truck parades.

"I'm just a little girl on a white horse leading a crusade," she says with a grin. "I'm out to win."

And she wins. Last summer, Ms. Saporta organized five union affiliates in Davidson County — at Mallory Battery, Binnings Building Products, Coble Dairy, Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG), all in Lexington, and Thomas Manufacturing Co. in Thomasville.

The drive organized about 4,000 workers, a fourth of the Lexington area work force. None of the companies have signed contracts, however, and Thomas workers have been striking since December.

Since arriving in North Carolina in June 1977, Ms. Saporta also helped win union elections for a total of about 1,200 workers at Gulton Electronics in High Point, Modern Metal Products in Greensboro, Miller Brewery in Eden and Liggett and Platt Metal Bed Rail Divison in Linwood.

Contracts have been signed at Gulton, Miller and Modern Metal. Bed Rail's seven employees withdrew from the union after a dispute. Ms. Saporta lost elections at Borden Dairy in High Point and Anaconda Co. in Eden, but the union is contesting both elections.

A self-described 'Yankee and carpetbagger,' Vicki Saporta dresses herself and her supporters in bright yellow T-shirts and sticks phosphorescent 'Teamsters Are Beautiful' flowers everywhere.

Ms. Saporta's successes have not gone unnoticed by employers and industry groups.

She is accused of using mass hypnosis and intimidation. She is attacked in handbills, called a con artist, skunk, communist, member of the Mafia and worse.

"It's almost a compliment," Ms. Saporta says. "If they didn't think I was being effective, they wouldn't bother."

Rhodes Batson, vice president of Lexington's Chamber of Commerce, compares Ms. Saporta's organizing ability to that of Adolf Hitler and the Rev. Jim Jones, head of the ill-fated Peoples Temple.

"It's charisma, the art of persuasion, the use of language and body language, an understanding of human nature," he said. "These people have ability above and beyond the normal person."

Whatever the reason, the Teamsters are holding and winning more elections in the Carolinas than any other union. Last year, for example, they won 18 elections with 3,951 workers and lost 22 with 1,026.

The next most active union, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, won 2 and lost 7 elections.

The Teamsters have won 4 out of 10 elections so far this year in the Carolinas, and are running a highly publicized campaign to organize police and public employees in Winston-Salem.

"Right now we're really tied up," said Jimmy Wright, secretary-treasurer of Charlotte's Teamsters Local 71. "We've got our hands full."

Local 71 has 3,700 members and contracts with 56 companies, Wright said. The three N.C. Teamsters locals had 14,228 members in 1976, according to the latest figures from the U.S. Labor Department.

The three S.C. locals had 3,742 members the same year. The Teamsters are the

See TEAMSTERS Page 3C, Col. 1

Teamsters Pick Up Speed In N.C. — And Vicki Is A Driving Force

Continued from Page 1C

nation's largest union, with about 2.2 million members.

About 141,000 N.C. workers were unionized in 1976, 6.8 percent of the total work force, according to the U.S. Labor Department. About 69,000 South Carolina workers, 6.6 percent of the work force, were unionized. The national union rate was 24.8 percent.

Last week, in a lively, four-hour meeting, Ms. Saporta talked about the Teamsters to about 60 employees from Fiber Industries Inc. She has been trying to organize about 2,200 workers at the plant, which is 9 miles west of Salisbury, for a month. Fiber is a partially owned divison of Celanese Corp. and produces polyester for clothing, furnishings and tires.

"As a result of your going union at Fiber, everything isn't going to be neat and fine and peachy keen," she explained, leaning back on a table. "We can't work miracles.

"We do more for working people than any other union in the country," she continued. "We get better wages, better working conditions .... But they're not going to give you anything unless you stand up and demand it."

Shirley Davidson, 31, a drawer frame operator who makes $6.07 an hour, stood up and faced the smoke-filled room.

"Vicki can show us how to do it but she can't do it," she shouted. "Do you want to go back on welfare, or if not, do you want to be introduced to Mr. Welfare? Then get off your ass and do something." The people in the room burst into cheers.

Ms. Saporta predicted she will petition the NLRB for a union election in two weeks. She refused to say how many workers already have signed applications but said about 200 have joined an in-plant organizing commitee, including seven who signed up after the meeting.

Machinist Joe Tugman, 43, said the Teamsters "have the company scared to the devil."

But in a telephone interview, Fiber plant manager Gene LeGrand said he is "very confident" the company would win an election. "I don't know of any burning issues that the people have," he said.

Employers and anti-union groups cite the Teamsters' negative image, telling workers of Teamsters pension fund fraud, corruption and brutality elsewhere.

"It's a problem organized labor has no matter how they try to wash it down the drain," said Andy Anderson, director of management development for the Central Piedmont Employers Association, a group of about 375 employers.

Ms. Saporta gets angry about such charges, angry that PPG accused her of intimidating PPG employees with a toy gun during the election last summer. The union won 698-639.

"We had little toy blue guns that went 'Errrrrr,'" she explained. "We went up and down the line with 'em for 30 seconds and laughed and then some kid ran off with 'em. They (PPG) went out and said Mafia and violence and Teamsters."

An NLRB official at the regional office in Winston-Salem said a hearing officer is investigating the toy-gun complaint.

"People might say, 'My God, that's a threat,'" said the official, who asked not to be identified. "That's not as facetious as it sounds. Certain things that are innocuous to us might not be innocuous to voters in a tense election."

The daughter of a Rochester, N.Y., custom tailor and homemaker, Ms. Saporta joined the Teamsters five years ago after graduating from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

She is the International's only woman organizer and makes $33,250 a year. She lives in San Francisco but spends most of her time on the road.

"It becomes like a religion," she says of her work. "I feel like a missionary sometimes."

Since joining the Teamsters, Ms. Saporta has organized rent-a-car employees in Florida, Blue Cross-Blue Shield workers in Chicago, flight attendants in Seattle and public employees in Southern California. But she says she "absolutely fell in love with North Carolina."

"When you organize Davidson County overnight, you have an impact," she said. "We could be a major political force there. We could elect people .... When you organize 200 workers in California or New York, who cares?"

Batson, of the Lexington Chamber of Commerce, agreed the Teamsters had an impact there, saying he is "certain" the union will scare other companies from locating in the area.

Experts differ on the reasons for the Teamsters' and Ms. Saporta's apparent success.

"I think the ground is ripe," said Daniel Pollitt, law professor and labor expert at UNC. "If the ground isn't ripe, it doesn't matter how good you are. People want to join unions."

Pollitt said the work force has more women, more blacks and younger people than in the past. "They've got rising expectations, they've been exposed to television, they're smarter and have had more education."

Thomas Kaniesner, a UNC labor economics professor, says the Teamsters have succeeded by organizing skilled workers of large companies that have union plants elsewhere.

"As you see more of the labor force involved in skilled industry, you'll see more union organization," he said. "Traditionally, North Carolina is full of workers that never needed unions."

Ms. Saporta attributes her success to worker involvement and education.

"I come armed with facts," says Ms. Saporta. "I live with my people 24 hours a day. I care. I make them care. And I make them work."

She looked at papers in her briefcase, trying to plan the next phase of the Fiber campaign. She had been working 11 hours and an evening meeting was due to start in 10 minutes.

"I don't know if I'll start them singing yet," she mused. "It's too early for that."

•

The Teamsters are attempting to organize public employees in Winston-Salem. Story in Monday's Observer.

'Girl on white horse' winning Teamsters' crusade

GNS photo-graphics

Vicki Saporta leads Teamsters' cheers

SALISBURY, N.C. (GNS) — Sporting a yellow "Go Teamsters" T-shirt, Vicki Saporta exhorts the 60 polyester plant workers like an evangelist, her fingers stabbing the air, her voice loud and insistent.

"We don't ask anyone to join us," she shouted. "We're here to offer a product and if you get us you'll be damned lucky . . . because we're getting calls from around the state."

Such a claim from a union organizer seems unlikely in North Carolina, a right-to-work state that has the second lowest unionization rate and the lowest manufacturing wages in the country. But the Teamsters are making suprising inroads here.

And Saporta, a 26-year-old organizer for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, is probably the best —and most unconventional — organizer the Teamsters, or any other union, has in the state.

"Carpetbagger"

A self-described "Yankee and Carpetbagger" from Rochester, N.Y., she sings, dances and leads rallies like old-time religious revivals. She dresses herself and her supporters in the bright yellow T-shirts and sticks phosphorescent "Teamsters are Beautiful" plastic daisies everywhere. She leads cheers, holds picnics and organizes midnight pickup truck parades.

"I'm just a little girl on a white horse leading a crusade," she said with a grin. "And I'm out to win."

And win she does. Last summer, Saporta organized five union affiliates with about 3,500 workers, a fourth of the local work force around Lexington, in the central part of the state. The victories ranged from a Coble Dairy to a fiberglass plant owned by PPG Industries here.

She also helped win four other Piedmont-area elections, including a large Miller Brewery in Eden, taking on about 1,200 new workers in a 16-month period. She has lost only two elections.

Her stunning success in the state surprised the Teamsters as much as it shocked the business leaders. She is accused of using mass hypnosis and intimidation. She is attacked in handbills, called a con artist, skunk, communist, member of the Mafia and worse.

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Whatever the reason, the Teamsters are holding and winning more elections in the state than any other union. Last year, for example, they won 14 elections and lost 18. The next most active union, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, won two and lost five elections last year.

But turning an anti-union state into a Teamster stronghold is only Saporta's latest coup.

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Showers

Showers are likely today with highs in the middle 80s (29C). Low tonight around 70 (21C). Rain chance is 80 percent through tonight. Details on Page 18C.

6 A

The Charlotte Observer

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Grant

Teamsters Outraged By Recording Sent To Workers

By BOB DENNIS
Observer Staff Writer

SALISBURY — A brick hits a car's windshield, shattering the glass, and a woman screams:

"I'm cut, Charlie, I'm cut. Get me out of here."

The voice of a radio newsman:

"Hit men move in on men who have refused to sign union cards. One is shotgunned; another's house is burned."

The voice of Gene LeGrand, manager of the Fiber Industries Salisbury plant:

"I can't get to work because Teamsters are blocking the gates. . . . Law enforcement is so outnumbered by the mob that the threat of physical harm — even death — is very real."

The voices and sound effects, including the roar of a mob and the chatter of machine guns, are from a phonograph record sent last week by Fiber Industries to more than 2,000 of its workers who will be voting today on whether they want union representation by Teamsters Local 71 of Charlotte.

The election is considered an important test of Teamster strength in the Carolinas.

Teamster organizers and officials are so outraged by the recording that they say they will file unfair labor practice charges against Fiber Industries.

Teamsters international representative Bill Grant called the recording "scurrilous."

"I've run into a lot of things in organizing," he said, "but never anything like this."

Teamster organizer Vicki Saporta said the recording will help the union drive, which began nine months ago.

The recording, she predicted Wednesday, "will backfire . . . The employees don't like it. We've even got people who weren't for the union saying they're gonna vote yes because of it."

James Allen, a spokesman for Celanese Corp., a part owner of Fiber, said the company felt the recording, characterized as a dramatization of a 1965 labor dispute in Tennessee involving the Murray Ohio Corp., "was a meaningful part of its informational program."

Allen wouldn't discuss the company's purpose in using the recording, which contains depictions of explosions, dynamiting, mob scenes and violence.

"I wouldn't want to get into strategy and tactics at this late hour," he said.

The voting begins today and is scheduled to end by 9 a.m. Friday.

Fiber Industries, which makes high-tenacity polyester filament yarns for tire cord and polyester staple fiber for apparel in its Salisbury plant, is jointly owned by Celanese (62.5 percent) and by Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd. of England

See TEAMSTERS Page 26A, Col. 1

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A dissident Teamster group has asked the Labor Department to order a special election to remove Frank Fitzsimmons from the presidency. The story is on Page 21A.

Teamsters Are Outraged By Recording

Continued from Page 1A

(37.5 percent.)

The union drive at the Salisbury plant, which employs about 2,800, isn't "a real hot issue" in Salisbury, according to K.V. Epting, who heads the Salisbury-Rowan County Chamber of Commerce.

"But if Fiber is organized," Epting said, "it will have a big impact here. If the Teamsters get in, they will go from plant to plant like they did in Davidson County.

Last year organizers for Teamsters Local 391 in Greensboro, led by Ms. Saporta, organized five plants in Davidson County — Binnings Building Products, Coble Dairy, Mallory Battery and Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG), all in Lexington, and Thomas Manufacturing Co. in Thomasville.

None of the companies have signed a contract with the Teamsters, who pulled out of Coble after workers asked the National Labor Relations Board to hold another election to decertify the union as their bargaining agent.

In North Carolina, the least unionized state in the nation, about 6.9 percent of the workers belong to unions. South Carolina is 49th in the nation, with about 8 percent of workers in unions.

Fiber workers who organized to oppose the Teamsters have been getting financial support from some nonunion industries and local businesses, Epting said, to help with cards and brochures. Individuals have held yard sales, he said, with the proceeds going to the anti-union workers.

Wednesday afternoon at the Fiber plant, about 10 miles west of Salisbury on U.S. 70, between 50 and 100 pro-Teamster workers and family members lined up along the road leading into the plant urging other workers to "Go Teamsters."

Ned Davis, a 54-year-old bewhiskered maintenance mechanic, has worked for Fiber for 11 years. In his spare time he is studying to be a minister.

He is for the union, Davis said, "because the way it stands now, there's no grievance procedure. And the pay, we need to bring the pay up to an equal basis to meet the cost of living."

Davis said he makes $7.16 an hour, one of the highest scales in the plant. The plant average is about $6.10.

Since the organizing drive began, Davis has become a fervent believer in the Teamsters.

"I'm just all fired up for God and the Teamsters," he said. "Both of them."

2 Florida becomes a thorn in State Department's side

5 Gov. Bob Graham: Why we must save the Everglades

Fort Lauderdale News / Sun-Sentinel

Outlook

Sunday, Sept. 4, 1983

Section H

Getting organized

Union membership losses have followed the recession in major industries. But a small group of people is hard at work to keep the movement alive.

By William Serrin

Fifty years ago, the hot summer of 1933, was an exhilarating time for American labor.

On June 16, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act, which gave workers "the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing."

Almost immediately, aggressive labor leaders — John L. Lewis of the miners, David Dubinsky of the garment workers and Sidney Hillman of the textile workers — dispatched their best organizers across America. Thousands of workers in industry after industry were enrolled in unions. "I organized nine locals Tuesday," Garfield Lewis, a miners' organizer, wrote from Kentucky. Successes in rubber, autos, steel and other industries followed.

Today, much seems changed in the movement. It has been weakened seriously by membership losses that have accompanied erosion in industries like autos, steel and rubber. Failure to organize in such growth sectors as high technology, banking and insurance has compounded the problem. Unions now represent only about 20 percent of American workers, down from as much as 35 percent right after World War II, and their leaders have been criticized by many younger union people for seeming out of touch, overfed, unzealous and lacking in commitment.

But in many cases, aggressive labor people, often operating out of the limelight, are working to keep the union movement alive. These people exist at all levels — shop steward, grievance chairman, union officer — but the ones who seem to best typify unionism are the organizers. They are considered the key people attempting today — although not always successfully — to stem the decline in union membership in traditional industries, says Charles Craypo, a professor of labor affairs at Cornell University.

★ ★ ★

Dominic Ferri spent 30 years in southern Ohio coal mines before he was laid off two years ago. He is working again, but this time as a special rank-and-file organizer for the United Mine Workers of America. As one of a cadre of men fanning out around Appalachia, he is drumming up support for a union undergoing revitalization with its new president, Richard Trumka.

The union now is stressing rank-and-file involvement in all activities. According to union leaders, rank-and-file organizing, often using laid-off members, is a long-neglected labor tactic of the 1930s, and is successful in making active unionists of members who otherwise might not get involved. It has also allowed the union to cut costs because rank-and-file organizers mostly work in areas near home, saving travel expenses.

William Serrin is a Washington-based writer for The New York Times. *He wrote this article for* The New York Times Magazine.

Staff by illustration by GALE ENGELKE

Ferri, a 50-year-old man who speaks slowly and deliberately, works with nine other rank-and-file organizers out of a field office in Morristown, Ohio, and earns $101.14 a day, a typical miner's wage. He is involved in two organizing drives in the soft coal surface mines of central Ohio, and the rank-and-file organizing technique dovetails with his own approach to union work.

For Ferri, a typical day might last 12 or 14 hours, as he and another organizer drive from house to house through the central Ohio hills, knocking on doors and asking miners if they are interested in joining the union. He is always armed with piles of literature on the union, including a history of the storied miners' union. He stresses wages, health benefits and the fact that union miners, from Ferri's view, have more job security than other miners because of recall rights. He carries "authorization cards," and his goal is to get workers to sign them, calling for an election. Much of his work is done at night when many miners are home.

Ferri has been working in coal mines since he got out of high school. Like most of his friends, he got married right after graduation, and his new father-in-law, a miner, provided his ticket into the mines in 1953.

During his years in the mines, co-workers knew him as a strong union man and he was well-liked. In fact, he was picked for the job because he could talk to miners on their own level and would work hard.

Ferri has never veered from his dedication to the miners' union and unionism. "With non-union people, the companies control lives as well as livelihoods," he says. "With unions, you have power, and the companies can't move people around, manipulate their lives."

For him, the gradual decline in union membership and influence in the 1970s was like a death in the family. The union has always meant more than just a union for the miners: It was a way to define themselves because for many mountain people, a miner is either a union man or a scab. Its disintegration was a

Please see ORGANIZED, Page 3H

Organized

Continued from Page 1H

grave blow, scholars of the union say.

The union started losing members after World War II, and in recent years its organizing efforts have stalled, despite expenditures of large sums of money.

The Miners for Democracy movement, which resulted in the election of reformer Arnold Miller in 1972, collapsed as Miller fired many people whom he opposed. His years in office were characterized by fights and confusion. His successor, Sam Church Jr., was a tough-minded, likable man but lacked administrative and leadership skills. Under him, critics say, the union continued to disintegrate.

In the last 20 years, the union has lost perhaps 200,000 members, with the membership now at 230,000. But much of this is not the result of labor disarray. Companies have turned to automated processes and much coal production moved from the deep mines of the Appalachians to the surface mines of the Great Plains, where coal is cheaper to mine and the union has little representation.

But since Trumka's election in an insurgent campaign last fall, Ferri says the union has a new sense of energy and commitment. Trumka is aggressive and energetic, and is seen by many as the new kind of leader that unions need. But given the disarray that has characterized the miners for years and the difficulty of organizing, Trumka faces exceedingly difficult tasks.

But Ferri remains a believer. "We're going to do something with this union," he says.

★ ★ ★

Vicki Saporta lists her residence as Foster City, Calif., but mostly she lives out of suitcases and motel rooms. As an organizer on the West Coast with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, she spends more than 200 days a year on the road.

She organizes throughout much of the West, in small towns and large, and often must set off with little notice when the union calls. She says she has almost no social life, with almost no ability to plan to go to a concert or a play. The union can call any time, Miss Saporta says, and she must be on the road again, to another motel.

But she does the work, she says, because she fiercely believes in trade unionism. Without unions, she says, workers often get a raw deal. "Unless there are unions, unless there is contract pressure to keep employers on their toes," she says, "the profit motive gets the better of employers and workers get it in the neck."

Miss Saporta, 30, like some other union organizers or staff members, has more academic training than factory experience. Such credentials sometimes are rare in the labor movement, but they are a throwback to many organizers of the '30s, who went first to college and then into factories and mines. Intelligent and hard-working, contemporary union staff members have chosen what, in a way, are jobs in which it is generally impossible to rise to top positions because those go to professional union politicians. But people like Miss Saporta chose union careers anyway, because they are devoted to unionism.

Raised in Rochester, N.Y., the daughter of a tailor and his wife, she studied at the London School of Economics for a semester after earning a bachelor of science degree in industrial relations from Cornell University. She had originally intended to be an attorney, but Cornell's labor and industrial relations school so impressed her that she enrolled. At Cornell, she worked one semester for the Teamsters, and by graduation, she says, "the only thing I wanted to do was work with the Teamsters."

In 9½ years, Miss Saporta says she has brought thousands of workers into the union. She organized workers in North Carolina and Florida before moving West and recently has been organizing at a hospital in Livermore, Calif. In four days, she says, enough cards were signed for the union to request an election.

The Teamsters union, she says, organizes vigorously, puts money behind its efforts, and is, in her view, "the best union in the country." In it, she says, "you find hard-working people who are at their jobs day and night, not at the golf course and not on the take. You don't see mobsters in the hall."

Federal prosecutors have not been so flattering. Three of the predecessors of Jackie Presser, current union president — David Beck, James R. Hoffa and Roy L. Williams — were convicted of crimes and ordered to prison. Hoffa disappeared in 1975, and is presumed to have been murdered. Numerous other local union officers have been sent to jail over the years. Presser remains under investigation by the government on charges of payroll padding, although he vigorously denies wrongdoing.

"I wasn't born with a Teamster spoon in my mouth, and people can't understand how I can be so enthusiastic and zealous without that being in my background," she says. "I developed my enthusiasm in the field, seeing problems and injustices, the real need for union representation."

Her gender is sometimes an advantage because, as a woman, she says, "you get taken for granted." Employers think a woman is not tough enough to be a good organizer, she says, and when they find out they are wrong, it is, she says, too late.

One of her colleagues, Barry Feinstein, an organizing chief and New York teamster leader, says her approach works. He calls her a diligent organizer, as good an organizer as he has ever seen.

Labor union membership

United Press International

WASHINGTON — How membership in the 10 largest unions has changed between 1970 and today:

Union	1983	1980	1970
1. Teamsters	1,700,000	1,891,000	1,829,000
2. NEA	1,640,000	1,684,000	1,100,000
3. Auto Workers	1,030,000	1,357,000	1,486,000
4. Food & Commercial	1,300,000	1,300,000	1,199,000
5. Steelworkers	725,000	1,238,000	1,200,000
6. AFSCME	1,000,000	1,098,000	444,000
7. Electrical Workers	1,012,000	1,041,000	922,000
8. Carpenters	671,000	784,000	820,000
9. Machinists	560,000	754,000	865,000
10. Service Employees	750,000	650,000	435,000

Sunday Democrat and Chronicle

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NAMEDROPPING

OUR OWN 'NORMA RAE' ... The Dec. 26 issue of *Fortune* magazine profiles Irondequoit native **Vicki A. Saporta** as one of the six most important labor union organizers in the United States today. Under a general headline *Rising Union Leaders: Sobered But Scrappy*, Saporta is cited for aggressive signing of workers into the union. The magazine calls the 31-year-old Irondequoit High School graduate "a Norma Rae-like firebrand" and "a self-confessed workaholic," and points out the 10 straight victories she won for union representation in North Carolina in 1978 and 1979. *Fortune* says Saporta's chief concern is relentless automation of semiskilled jobs. "Most managers would like to do without workers entirely," she says. "The trouble is, robots don't buy cars and cereal at the supermarket." Saporta is a graduate of Cornell University and the daughter of **Abe** and **Leah Saporta** of 235 Simpson Road, Irondequoit. She lives in Washington but logs more than 200 days a year on the road. She is, after all, a Teamster.

Vicki Saporta

Teamsters Organizer Travels a Bumpy Road

The Union's Highest-Ranking Woman Heads International Worker-Recruitment Program

By BETTY CUNIBERTI, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—Occasionally, said the petite woman in a ruffled white blouse, people have tried to run over her in their cars.

"It's a good thing I'm quick on my feet," said Vicki Saporta, 31, the highest-ranking woman in the Teamsters Union. "I've learned how to get out of the way fairly quickly."

On one of her 200 days a year on the road, Saporta once was handing out leaflets to employees of a manufacturing company in Thomasville, N.C., miles and worlds away from Cornell University and the London School of Economics, where she had studied. As she distributed information about the Teamsters, she said, a man unloaded several rifles from the trunk of a car, pausing to point each of them directly at her for a few seconds.

"I don't think anyone would want to kill me," Saporta added, eager to drop the subject.

Long Workdays

The daughter of a tailor from Rochester, N.Y., she became the Teamsters' first female organizer 10 years ago. There hasn't been another woman since. With born-again zeal and 20-hour workdays, Saporta helped bring tens of thousands of workers into the Teamsters while she lived out of a suitcase in a blur of motels.

"There were times," she recalled, "when I would get to bed at 4 in the morning and leave a wake-up call for 4:45."

Now, as director of the new national organizing department at Teamsters headquarters in Washington, she is a highly visible, if somewhat surprising, figure in a campaign to tidy up the image of the scandal-plagued union, whose presidents sometimes end up behind bars.

Saporta is chief of a staff of 65 international organizers, and she hopes to increase the number. Her job is to direct the recruiting of thousands of workers for the Teamsters, while sometimes still going on the road herself. She's also in demand as a speaker.

Even some fairly liberated people take a look at all this and can't resist pondering, "What's a nice lady like her doing in a place like this?"

Saporta believes that militant anti-unionists, rather than doing her physical harm, might "want to aim at my credibility, set me up in some way." She had theorized exactly how that might transpire, especially in a traditionally anti-union area: Someone would plant drugs on her.

TERESA ZABALA

Vicki Saporta is highest-ranking woman in Teamsters Union.

So she was surprised one day when she picked up a newspaper in North Carolina and saw, on the front page, that her adversaries had come up with something much more imaginative: an alienation-of-affection suit against her.

Saporta responded by testifying before the House education and labor subcommittee on labor-man-

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ORGANIZER: A Life Dedicated to Union Work

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agement relations about just how far "companies and their union-busting attorneys will stoop to destroy the union's credibility."

The $150,000 suit was filed (and dropped three weeks later) in Wentworth, N.C., by the estranged wife of a television reporter who was covering labor news in the state, where Saporta was conducting several organizing campaigns. Less than a year later, Saporta testified before the subcommittee that an attorney who represented management in that area influenced the woman's decision to file the suit.

The plaintiff, Joanne H. Boliek, received daily calls from various company attorneys and officials inquiring if she had filed the suit yet and encouraging her to do so, Saporta testified. Joanne Boliek had no further comment, other than to say she had withdrawn the suit because of the publicity it attracted. Her former husband, David L. Boliek, called the suit "preposterous" and said there was no truth to the allegations contained in it.

All things considered, why do this for a living?

"I really love what I do," said Saporta, who was sure she was going to become a lawyer until she got a summer job working for the Teamsters, the nation's largest union. She contends the Teamsters' reputation for corruption is exaggerated and says she doesn't give it much thought.

"It's something employers like to exploit. But it just doesn't have the influence on them (the workers) that the employers think it does," she said, adding that workers often are attracted by the Teamsters' image.

"They have a tough employer and they want the toughest guys, the toughest union. That's why they come to us. That's why we end up with as many phone calls as we do."

Personal Life on 'Back Burner'

Earlier in her union career, she moved across the country to Northern California, taking up residence 20 minutes from the San Francisco airport, where she *really* lived. She took the job in Washington this fall and has been living here since then "in a hotel, like I always have." Her personal life is "on the back burner," she says.

She talks faster than most people can listen, bursting with information, statistics, history, philosophy, advocacy and you-name-it about the Teamsters. The appointment of a young, college-educated woman to such a high position with the Teamsters is unprecedented and, to some, a bit incongruous.

"No question, it's window dressing," said Ken Paff, organizer of a dissident group within the union called Teamsters for a Democratic Union. Paff referred not so much to any lack of credentials on Saporta's part ("I'm sure she's a qualified organizer. She has a good reputation.") as to the image-improvement campaign undertaken by Teamster President Jackie Presser, who vowed when he took office last April that he would run an "open, honest administration."

In other words, it would be different from the way it was under past presidents Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa, who went to prison on federal charges of corruption. Hoffa later disappeared and has been ruled legally dead, widely presumed to be the victim of Mafia foul play. Presser's predecessor, Roy L. Williams, resigned in exchange for remaining free on bail while appealing a bribery-conspiracy conviction.

"I have confidence that this chapter in our long history is coming to a close," Presser, 56, said as he took office, only to be shrouded in suspicion a few months later when his uncle, Allen Friedman, was found guilty of embezzling $165,000 in salaries from 1978 through 1981 from the Cleveland Teamsters Local 507, where Presser had been secretary-treasurer.

Nonetheless, Presser, an eighth-grade dropout, continues his campaign to reshape the Teamsters, whose membership of 1.8 million is down from a high of 2.3 million in 1977—due partly to deregulation of the trucking industry. Through Saporta, Presser hopes to enlarge the union further across white-collar lines, adding to a mixed bag that already includes employees in car rental companies, actors at Disney World and nurses.

"That's Presser's direction, go get white-collar hospital workers, raid other unions, and it would fit in to have someone who might look attractive in those areas," Paff said. "Meanwhile, we're losing ground in trucking and warehouses, which should be our emphasis."

While some labor movement people are still confused by what they see as "window-dressing" moves by Presser, outright critics of Saporta are not apparent in the labor world.

Said Bill Roehl, assistant national director of organizing in the rival AFL-CIO: "My opinion of Miss Saporta is extremely high. I've had the opportunity to be present at a number of programs where she participated and I was impressed by her enthusiasm, her intelligent approach to organizing problems and her dedication to the labor movement."

Saporta still works at least 12-hour days, sometimes seven days a week. And every once in a while, as she sits late at night in the vast marble building in downtown Washington, she realizes that other people are out socializing with friends or enjoying families, and she knows that for her, all that has been shoved aside by a job.

"Yes, you think of those things, and you stop and say, 'What am I doing?' " Saporta said. "Usually you maintain a relationship about a year and the person thinks, 'This is crazy, nobody could live like this, this must be temporary and then she'll settle down.' And then they realize, no, you really are gone 200 days a year and that's the normal routine.

"You pay a price. And I guess you make choices."

Saporta's choice, as she sees it, is to lead American workers toward better lives.

"You end up really caring about the people you organize," she said. "You see their problems and you see that a collective bargaining agreement could solve their problems and make life a whole lot better for them. You see that you *do* make a difference in peoples' lives. This is what I want to do in my life."

METRO

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SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE ■ THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1985

Tribune Photo/ DENNIS WHITE

Vicki Saporta, right, director of organizing for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, meets Wednesday with South Bend Community School Corp. secretaries, perhaps the next group to be organized by Local 364 of the Teamsters. From left are Marcia Samarich, Cindy Montgomery, Gayle Farrell, Barb Ferraro and Marcella Kovatch. Fran Lein, back to camera, sits on the table with Saporta.

Union official 'tells it straight'

By GAIL HINCHION
Tribune Staff Writer

No sweet talking for Vicki Saporta. The only woman organizing director of a major American union tells it straight, tells it fast, tells it like there is nothing to argue about.

"We are on the forefront of organizing clerical workers," Saporta said Wednesday at the start of a two-day visit to Local 364 of the Teamsters union. She is director of organizing for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

"Our contracts for secretaries are the best," she said with certainty. "We have practiced comparable worth. We have implemented it in the public sector."

She has been speaking about why the Teamsters are the right union for the South Bend Community School Corp. secretaries. She speaks with the authority of almost 10 years with the union in offices across the country.

A committee of secretaries who want to organize selected the Teamsters 18 months ago. "They came to us," Saporta pointed out.

"Organizing is a matter of education. Once the people understand what the union is about, they would choose ours," she said. Organizing usually is left to the local units. But Teamsters President Jackie Presser reactivated a national organizing assistance operation and sought Saporta, 33, to run it.

Some secretaries hesitate to organize, and some hesitate to organize with the Teamsters, in part because of the masculine image the union has. Some are concerned the Teamsters would not be right for clerical workers, or for workers in the public sector.

The secretaries are gentle people. Some have gotten teary-eyed when discussing organizations. Teamsters business agent Robert Schulz said the fact Saporta is a woman — and might better reach these women — was considered when local union leaders asked her to visit.

"This local doesn't need my help," Saporta countered, praising local leaders for the 18-month campaign they conducted for a referendum on whether secretaries should organize. The workers are to vote by mid-November.

Teamsters officials were to negotiate with Superintendent Robert A. Fallon today on whether

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Botha.

Saporta

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the referendum ballot will bear the Teamsters name, Schulz said. He wants the secretaries to vote for or against the Teamsters instead of voting for or against organization in general.

"We're not even worried about winning an election. We're worried about putting together a contract that addresses the issues they're concerned about," Saporta said.

Meeting with secretaries Wednesday night, Saporta assured them that the union has a long history with clerical workers and with workers in the public sector.

"Most people don't really understand what we're about as a union. We are the most diversified union in the country," she said.

"We are on the forefront of organizing clerical workers," she said.

"We've represented clerical unions since 1950," she said. "We've been in public works since the 1940s."

In a series of contract negotiations in San Bruno, Calif., the union succeeded in upgrading half the clerical workers' jobs because they were found comparable to the jobs of more highly paid employees, she said.

Saporta's observations about why women organize should strike home with secretaries, whose efforts began with what they consider unfair assignment procedures.

Money usually isn't the biggest problem, she said.

"Most of the time, it's working conditions that make them place the phone call," she said.

"They want a way to deal with problems they have on the job, to make their jobs fair," she said. "They're looking for a grievance procedure. They are also looking to be treated with some dignity."

"They need a sense of security and a sense of recognition which nobody can have without a union contract," she said.

BUSINESS
Democrat and Chronicle

ON THE MOVE

Read about job changes and promotions among area business people on **4F**.

SUNDAY
AUGUST 31, 1986
ROCHESTER
NEW YORK

THE ORGANIZER

Rochester native directs campaigns for the Teamsters

By John Campbell
Democrat and Chronicle

WASHINGTON — Vicki Saporta has a big office overlooking the U.S. Capitol, a house across town and an eager research staff to tap.

But Saporta, 33 years old, is not a corporate attorney or an investment banker.

Since 1983, she's been the director of organizing for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the nation's largest labor union and the only employer she's ever had since leaving her native Rochester to attend Cornell University in Ithaca.

IN HER DOZEN years with the Teamsters, Saporta, a trim, vivacious woman, has seen enough drama to fill several lifetimes.

"What really got me hooked was after I started," she said. "I sat and listened to these people's stories, and couldn't help feeling for them. Then it was, 'OK, how do we get going?' "

Early on, some employers spread false rumors of a sexual nature to try to discredit Saporta, recalled Rome Aloise, another Teamsters organizer in San Francisco.

They threatened to fire activist workers during her organizing campaigns. Police have arrested her for littering as she handed out union leaflets.

As her reputation for organizing has spread, more and more employers have retaliated by hiring expensive anti-union consultants.

"WHEN THEY find out Vicki's there, they bring in the howitzers," said Aloise. "Consultants have gotten very sophisticated in the past few years. They take the offensive much more."

On the theory that young workers today retain information better from television than from print, the recent breed of pinstriped consultants uses videotape "dramatizations" of workers coping with a union drive.

Consultants these days camp out for a month at their client's work place, rather than coming in just before a union election.

But Saporta can turn the enemy's tricks to her advantage. For instance, she coaches workers by showing them an anti-union videotape before their boss makes them watch it.

SAPORTA EVEN convinced one employer to appear in a videotape she produced. Len Martin, who owns an apparel-marking firm in Rome, Calif., talks in the film about his unsuccessful fight to defeat a Teamsters organizing drive in 1984.

"Business isn't democratic, it's autocratic," he says. When unions come in, he sums up, they make the work place more democratic.

That cameo demonstrates Saporta's charisma. "I charmed him," she said.

Abuse rolls off her back. When anti-union workers in North Carolina circulated cartoons mocking her as a savior on a white horse, Saporta appeared at a rally astride a real horse.

She has combined such touches of humor with fiery exhortations and careful spadework behind the scenes.

If a company official threatened (illegally) to close down a plant before succumbing to the union, Saporta made sure a group of employees presented him with a form guaranteeing the closing. Asked to sign the form, she said, the company official usually dropped the threat.

More important, according to many who know her, Saporta has a knack for understanding workers' problems and gaining their trust.

"She helps people get angry, to realize they can't depend on someone else for control in their life," said Ellen Gallant, an organizer with the Communications Workers of America Local 1170 in Rochester.

Gallant recalled Saporta's work in North Carolina: "As someone just entering the labor movement, it was real inspiring to watch her. Most of us were accustomed to seeing men in roles of authority — the 'stick with me kid' types."

In a field still dominated by graying men, Saporta and other young labor leaders are starting to reflect the diversity of their rank-and-file membership. More women and minority-group members have moved into the top ranks at local and regional levels.

Only a few have risen to top national staff positions, however, and Saporta is among the most prominent.

"Vicki is one of the brightest stars in the labor movement today," said James Medoff, a labor economist at Harvard University. "She has positively affected the image of labor and the Teamsters when their image overall is not very good."

Others in labor criticize Saporta for

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Gannett News Service

Vicki Saporta has worked for International Brotherhood of Teamsters for 12 years.

Rochester native top Teamsters organizer

FROM PAGE 1F

fiercely defending a union whose reputation has been tarnished by decades of connections to organized crime. Her 1983 appointment as organizing director by union President Jackie Presser, they contend, merely helped the union present a more respectable public face.

"Her main job is to talk to you in the media," said Kenneth Paff, an official with the dissident group Teamsters For a Democratic Union in Detroit. "She doesn't have a real power base. Our problem is with her boss."

A labor leader in Rochester, who asked not to be identified, said, "She's a figurehead. When the Teamsters leadership gets questioned about the Mafia, they bring her in to beat it back."

The union was expelled from the AFL-CIO in 1957 for corruption and has been dogged by its Mafia connections. Three of Presser's predecessors were indicted, and Presser has pleaded innocent to racketeering, embezzlement and other federal charges.

The President's Commission on Organized Crime early this year said four big labor unions, including the Teamsters, are controlled or influenced by organized crime.

These allegations have surfaced frequently, Saporta acknowledges. But she's impatient with questions about them, and prefers to discuss them in the context of her organizing drives.

"A lot of times people call us because they want the biggest, toughest union they can find," she said. "They might be unhappy when we don't live up to our image. But at the first sign of violence we're out of there. You cannot organize people by threatening them, or intimidating them. The only thing that works is education."

Others note that corruption in unions does not look as significant when compared with business crime. Medoff and Richard Freeman, another labor economist at Harvard, cited surveys of large U.S. corporations by *Fortune* magazine and American Management Associations. The surveys revealed a higher incidence of crime, including bribery, tax evasion and arson, than was found in similar surveys of union members.

"They've had problems at the top," Medoff said of the Teamsters, "but it's wrong to infer that means they have problems in the middle or the bottom."

The Teamsters' legal problems haven't detracted much from the main accomplishment of Saporta and her staff — bringing tens of thousands of workers into the union.

Teamsters membership fell from 1.9 million in 1980 to 1.6 million in 1983, as job losses, particularly in trucking and basic manufacturing industries, offset recruiting. But Presser has increased the union's political and lobbying staff since he became president, and Saporta said membership has climbed back to 1.9 million.

In the Rochester area, the Teamsters represents 6,000 workers, said Thomas Kenny, a local Teamsters official.

Organizing hasn't solved all the Teamsters' problems, however. Of the 10 plants Saporta organized in anti-union North Carolina, only one reached a contract. After her initial campaigns in those plants, she had to turn the members over to less sophisticated local union representatives.

Saporta has tried to improve that type of servicing by keeping organizers in a campaign through the first contract, said Nick Salvatore, a professor of labor history at Cornell and a former Teamster.

"She's working within a flawed structure. Everything focuses on the marble palace," he said, referring to the Teamsters headquarters. "You don't have the strong intervention by local leaders."

Saporta knows all the unionizing tricks.

The Teamsters has devoted much of its recent organizing efforts to service industries such as health care, insurance, government and other fields full of female and young workers. Teamsters organizers often take on small units that other unions ignore, observers say.

The Teamsters union has also made a point of raiding other unions for members, the TDU's Paff claims, pointing to the unsuccessful drive to merge with the International Typographical Union. "Raiding is easier and quicker," he said.

Saporta responded that the Teamsters union has a no-raiding agreement with many unions, and has faced outside raiding itself.

Last year, she said, the Teamsters union was involved in 1,600 elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, roughly half the number of 1980. But those figures don't count organizing drives among public employees and some others regulated by the government, such as the current effort to sign on 2,500 flight attendants at Republic Airlines.

Many of the 700 Teamsters locals do organizing on their own, with assistance from Saporta and her staff of five. When a local calls for help, the organizing and research departments can provide a financial and labor-relations analysis of most major companies. Saporta also trains local Teamsters officials, lectures at universities, produces videotapes to use in organizing drives and commands some of those drives by phone.

The work involves long days, although Saporta has more free time now than when she traveled nine months of the year as a field organizer, living out of suitcases and sometimes working around the clock during crucial moments of a campaign. Outisde of work, Saporta, who's single, likes to sail and play basketball or tennis.

"She's driven," said Carolyn Jacobson, a staff member of the Bakery, Confectionary and Tobacco Workers union in Washington and a close friend of Saporta's.

Vicki A. Saporta almost didn't come into the labor movement.

"She always wanted to be a lawyer," recalled her mother, Leah, a homemaker who lives at 235 Simpson Road, Irondequoit. While at West Irondequoit High School, Saporta excelled in her studies, played numerous sports and placed second in a regional level of the Miss Teenage America competition, said her father, Abe, a tailor.

Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations looked to Saporta like a good foundation for a career in criminal law. In the summer after sophomore year, she took a Teamsters-sponsored job as a counselor for a group of teen-agers touring Europe. Besides the usual tourist attractions, the group walked through factories and met with labor leaders.

After completing a year at the London School of Economics and graduating from Cornell, Saporta talked her way into a $12,500-a-year organizing job for the Teamsters Western Conference. (She wouldn't disclose her current salary, but TDU said she earns about $90,000 a year.)

Saporta's first assignment was to organize workers for the concessionaire at Yosemite National Park. She lost the election, but learned valuable techniques such as swapping information and staff with environmental groups.

Other assignments took Saporta to towns large and small, from Utah to Chicago to Sweden. The scenes may have changed, but she saw a common struggle among workers for a stronger voice in their lives.

She also met a common obstacle — the fear of being fired for supporting a union. Last year, the NLRB ruled that one in 25 workers who voted for a union was fired illegally, 10 times the rate reported 30 years ago, said Medoff of Harvard. The actual rate is much higher, he said, because many fired workers never complain to the NLRB.

Saporta's approach is to make a large group of workers the leaders of a campaign, to go public soon after and to bring in Teamsters retirees or rank-and-file members to talk about the union.

"If you've got one spark plug signing up 80 workers, the company can make a point by firing that one," she said.

"Once you build that committee, you can sign up hundreds, even thousands in a week or two. People will come in for that initial meeting with their heads down. Then they get mad, then they get scared to death. When they realize no one's being fired, they have a whole new attitude. They sense power for the first time."

Spotlight

In government and out, Esther Peterson aids consumers

By Irvin Molotsky
The New York Times

WASHINGTON — Since the 1930s Esther Peterson has been enlisting young soldiers in her fights for women's rights, trade unionism and consumer protection. Now, at 80 years of age and with a battalion or two of her followers in the field, she is still seeking recruits.

The battle metaphor was suggested by one of those young followers, Ellen Haas, executive director of Public Voice, a consumer organization. "She has inspired a whole army of consumer activists," Ms. Haas said. "She has combined warmth with toughness to coax presidents and members of Congress to oppose consumer abuse."

Two hundred people from all the varied parts of Mrs. Peterson's life gathered in Washington last weekend for a birthday party at the Woman's National Democratic Club.

Some were from government, since Mrs. Peterson served in the White House as the consumer adviser and the Labor Department as head of the Women's Bureau. Some were from the consumer movement; her interests in that field extend to this day in her role as a consumer representative at the United Nations. Some were from the diplomatic corps, for Mrs. Peterson put her activism aside for a time to accompany her husband, Oliver, now deceased, on his Foreign Service assignments abroad.

Esther Peterson: Consumer advocate.

Mrs. Peterson herself professed to wonder what the fuss was about, asking what was so magical about an 80th birthday and suggesting that 85 was a rounder number.

She sipped coffee the other day in her house and discussed the state of various issues today, finding consumerism under attack. "It's gone down during this administration," said Mrs. Peterson, who served three Democratic presidents. "One problem is that it has people working on laws who don't believe in them. Scanlon is a good example."

Mrs. Peterson's reference was to Terrence M. Scanlon, whose elevation to the chairmanship of the Consumer Product Safety Commission she opposed. Scanlon, however, had praise for her: "While we have not always agreed on the best means of achieving goals, her energy and dedication have been an inspiration."

Public television recently carried a documentary film, "Women of Summer," about a 1930s project at Bryn Mawr College that gave working women a taste of education. One of the leaders was a dark-haired, forceful woman who taught physical education and drama. She was Esther Peterson, practically unchanged today except for the graying of her hair. The forcefulness remains, especially when she compares the influence of consumerism in government today with that of the Kennedy, Johnson and Carter administrations she served.

"Carter approved an executive order I asked for banning the export of a list of things considered too hazardous to be used in the United States," Mrs. Peterson said. "Poorer countries liked the list because they couldn't afford the research for themselves. Reagan canceled that order."

To Ralph Nader, one of her greatest contributions was not in government but in linking two of her other interests, labor unions and consumerism. "She has stressed that workers are consumers," he said, "and she also said that we have to be concerned about third-world consumers."

And unlike many leaders in the consumer movement, Mrs. Peterson has also worked in business, as the consumer representative at the Giant supermarket chain from 1970 to 1977, when she became President Carter's consumer adviser.

Odonna Mathews, who worked at Giant for Mrs. Peterson and succeeded her at Mrs. Peterson's suggestion, said, "Esther, in a sense, trained and sensitized Giant executives to listen to the consumers."

"She is an extremely young 80," Ms. Mathews said. Perhaps this is due to the fact that she has such a rich past but is not rooted in it. Her attitude seems to be the same as it was at the Bryn Mawr sessions for working women, always learning, always making fresh discoveries.

Her latest discovery is Vicki Saporta, head of organizing for the teamsters. Mrs. Peterson is almost aghast that the teamsters, no longer dominated by trucking and warehousing, are doing a better job of organizing women than the traditional unions she had worked for. She comes from the old school of organizing — clothing and garment workers and teachers.

She appeared recently before the teamsters and was introduced to Ms. Saporta, "one of the most clear-headed people I've ever met."

Mrs. Peterson came away having learned something from a far younger person, saying, "We have to find new ways to organize."