KAREN NUSSBAUM INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Karen Nussbaum
Organizer & Activist
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Interviewed by Betsy West
Total Running Time: 39 minutes and 31 seconds

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ON SCREEN TEXT:
Makers: Women Who Make America
Kunhardt Film Foundation

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BETSY WEST:
I'd like to start getting you to talk a little bit about your family, your childhood, and really how you think that prepared you for what you wound up doing in your life.

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

I grew up in a suburb of Chicago, in a family that was concerned about their social environment. My parents read a lot, they had a play reading group. They were concerned about the social issues. We lived in a Republican county but my mother was a democratic precinct woman. My father wasn't involved really in politics, but the dinner table conversations were about the civil rights movement, or having read Uncle Tom's Cabin and crying all night, or…

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What was going on in our world was important in my family. And that was combined with this sense of middle class invincibility in the 60s. I grew up feeling like, very secure. I could do anything, and none of that was a problem for me. And so, that all ran straight into the explosions of 1968 at at a- really what was a revolutionary period, both in our country and around the world.

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So we watched the civil rights movement unfold in front of our television, and Martin Luther King had come to Chicago to desegregate housing. So that was all part of what was happening around us, and it was part of our lives too.

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BETSY WEST:

And as a young girl, what are you thinking when all this is happening?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

I'm thinking this is awful, I have to do something about it. And that was always part of my response, and also the response of my brother and my sister, and it was fostered by my parents, although I think they never intended us to go as far with it as we did, to take it that seriously. But for example my parents opposed the war in Vietnam, and my brother was a draft resister, and every Saturday the family would go to a silent vigil in front of the library in our suburb. And so a sense that you had a responsibility for your society was part of my growing up.

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BETSY WEST:

So you took a path that, perhaps, your parents might not have been expecting or so happy about. I mean, tell me what you decided to do at that point.

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

So I left school and decided to become a full time activist. And I ended up moving to Boston where I just got a job, and it turns out that the kind of job that a young woman could get was as a clerical worker. But I never thought of my work as part of my politics, I just thought of it as a way to support my politics. And I was active in the anti war movement.

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I had become very interested in working with women to try to resolve the internal conflicts that so many women felt about whether they could be strong in their families and strong in the world, or what trade offs they had to make. And so I just left everything behind me and I had no ambition other than to make a difference.

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BETSY WEST:
Tell me how you got to Boston.

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
In those days, there were what they called drive aways, and you could- Someone who wanted to fly across the country but also wanted their car there would just let people drive their car—I can't believe they did it. So a friend and I just got a drive away and we drove to Boston, and I didn't even really know anybody there. I found a place to stay the first night, and then I ran into people that I had known someplace else, and you just were able to make those connections in those days and build a life.

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And it was cheap. You could live if somebody or a couple people in your household- if 4 or 5 people had a job, then you could live. There was a free clinic if you got sick. you could borrow each other's cars, it was an

environment where you were really free to experiment with what you wanted to do.

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BETSY WEST:
At what point did you start to turn your attention to women's issues?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
When I was in college, I had been active in the draft resistance movement. My brother was a draft resister, and so that was someplace that I gravitated to. People famously know this poster from that period with Joan Baez and a few other women from the draft resistance movement, and the slogan is, "Girls say yes to boys who say no." And this part of the peace movement was one that really exemplified a lot of what was wrong for women, and became the birthplace of the new wave for the women's movement.

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This idea that you were there as support. And it was during the civil rights movement as well. The leaders were men, so many of the workers were women. And so the experience both in the civil rights movement and the peace movement was a pearl being created in the oyster. The rubbing, the irritation of wanting to be part of a movement and being serious about making a contribution, but being invisible.

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BETSY WEST:

So talk to me about starting 9 to 5. How did it happen?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

So I was working as a clerk typist because that was the kind of job that was available, and not really thinking about my job as a place that needed fixing. But the more I did think about it and looked at the other women I was working with, it began to become apparent to me that the problems weren't just outside, they were in my work place as well. The pay was really low. Office work was supposed to be higher status than blue collar work, and some people felt good about dressing up to go to work, but the pay was terrible and it turned out that we were making less than women in factories.

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I met a woman who was a school secretary who earned less than her son who bagged groceries at the grocery store. A woman who had to budget for whether she could buy a packet of gum that week. One of my co-workers was a young woman who was saving up money to get married, and she- I remember this clearly. Every day, she bought two hot dogs and a soda for 69 cents for her lunch, and she ate the two hot dogs and the soda every single day for two years that I was there. Because it was really low pay.

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Another co-worker who was an older woman described herself as just working there temporarily, but she had been there for 14 years. Women felt like we were incidental in the workplace, that we really weren't making a life. And while we all thought of ourselves as temporary or just filling in or waiting until the real part of our lives would begin, we discovered—when we started 9 to 5—that actually women worked an average of 34 years in their lifetime.

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But we had sold ourselves this bill of goods that, "Well, this is just temporary," that this is not something that we needed to try to struggle over or try to fix, because somehow the pay off is going to be someplace else.

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BETSY WEST:
You're meeting your fellow workers, you're getting all these stories. I mean, the moment where it sort of clicked, how did that happen?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
There was a strike of a small group of waitresses in Harvard Square. This was a group of working class waitresses at a place called Cronin's Restaurant, and it was so reflective of the times. Something must have happened at work. Some waitress must have got patted on the butt and complained, and the

boss just said, "Ah, just live with it," or something like that. And so, the women went directly from zero to going on strike.

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They decided, "We have to do something about this!" So all eight of them created their own union, the Harvard Square Waitresses Organizing Committee, and decided to go on strike, and then organized picket lines—because they, of course, immediately got fired—for a year, while they tried to bring charges against the restaurant. And so, I was on a picket line duty, and it was as I was going around the picket line every Wednesday night for a couple of hours, that I began to realize that these notions of women's equality were penetrating everywhere.

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And while I had been very conscious of that because I was an activist, I really hadn't put together that you could bring the idea of women's equality into the workplace, and that you could exercise it not just within your home or your relationships with your family or with legal structures, but your boss. And that there was an avenue of power that we were failing to exercise, that we could organize on the job, to both become the women that we knew we were and really change our real conditions.

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And so that was really explosive for me. That was the moment that I began to realize that you could bring organizing onto the job, not just use your job to support your organizing. And so, I talked to friends, who were all working as clerical workers, and we met for almost a year talking about what we would

do and how we would put it together, and what kind of organization people like us would want to join. And then we started 9 to 5 in 1973.

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BETSY WEST:
Why not a union?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
We took the ideas of community organizing and put them into our community which was downtown. We didn't think of starting a union, even though it was obvious. It should have been right in front of our faces, but it really didn't seem like an option to us, partly because unions weren't organizing women. Most organizers were men. Most unions were in the industrial sector. There was a pretty bad attitude about organizing women.

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There were very few women who were in leadership, and there was almost no organizing among office workers that was going on. And then also, unions had been, to my mind, on the wrong side of the social movements of the 60s, both civil rights and peace. And that's a gross generalization, but that's how they were characterized in the media and in American culture.

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So it didn't even occur to us to start a union. And it wasn't until years later, when we would go as a group at 9 to 5, and we would take 20 women from

different publishing companies to one publishing company and meet with the employers there, and complain about job posting and opportunities for advancement- It was amazing we would get these meetings with the employers, and they would talk to us and they would say, “Yes, that’s very interesting. We’re very concerned and we’ll get back to you.”

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We met with employers about pregnancy discrimination and, “How come there weren't maternity benefits?” And every time we would do that, we would be assured that they would look into it, and then nothing would happen. And we said, “There should be a law about this, they should be required to get back to us,” and then we discovered that actually, there was a law. It was called the National Labor Relations Act and it had been on the books since 1935, and that workers did have rights and could command the response of an employer, but they had to have a majority in the workplace, and that was called a union.

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So we decided, after just a few years, that we would also create a union that would be a sister organization to 9 to 5. So 9 to 5, the association, organized whoever wanted to join, and we would work on legislative issues, we would get the government to investigate bad insurance companies. We did studies of banks to find out why they weren’t promoting women. We would do all these kinds of agitation within workplaces and the biggest employers in the city.

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And then on the other side, we had a union that had the same character as the working women's movement that we had created. And it was run by us. I was the president of our union. It was all women organizers. We organized mostly women in workplaces. And so we were able to create our own culture, both as a city wide association and as a traditional union that had a different kind of power to affect people's lives.

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BETSY WEST:
Those early meetings and those early discoveries must have been very exciting.

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
They were exciting. It was such fun. It was exhilarating. I was 23 when we started 9 to 5, but that felt perfectly natural. We were all young, and you could do so much, and because it was a moment when people were responding. We were in the newspaper all the time. It was a message that resonated, and so, we just got this huge response from women, and also from employers. They were afraid of us, and that was kind of cool too.

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BETSY WEST:
Yeah, no, it must have been. How did the movie happen?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

I knew Jane Fonda from my days in the peace movement. We were in the same organization. And then in 1975 when the war ended, Jane wanted to make a contribution to the work of 9 to 5, and the best way she knew how which was to make a major motion picture. And so, we talked for a couple of years about what that would look like, and she met with a lot of our members, and I had to do a briefing memo for her for the studio about whether there would be an audience for a movie about office workers.

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And in fact, office workers were invisible, but we were the largest sector of the workforce. There were 20 million women office workers, one out of three women worked in an office in those days. But there had been no cultural depictions of women in this job, with the single exception of Ann Sothern playing Susie, the secretary, in 1950s television. So women were invisible in their jobs, often in their homes, and also in popular culture.

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So this notion about whether there would be an audience was one that Jane Fonda understood and tapped into, and that also the way- Her genius about this was understanding that it had to be real and had to really reflect the way women talked, what their issues were, how they felt about it, and it couldn't be didactic, that it had to be a comedy. That the only way you could bring people into it was by poking fun.

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So Jane Fonda and the writer and director met with members in a number of cities where 9 to 5 was organizing, and spent long nights talking to working women. And almost every detail in the film comes from those conversations. There's a whole section in the film about the fantasies of women getting back at their boss, and one about arsenic in the boss's coffee. Well, that came right out of the discussion we had in Cleveland with Jane, and so did almost all the other details.

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At the end of the movie where the women take over the office while they got the boss kidnapped, well, basically all of the changes they made were the 9 to 5 bill of rights. Job posting, equal pay, and on-site child care—those were all the things that we had been demanding. And it was electrifying. I went around the country when the movie came out, and we would do premieres in different cities, and so I saw the movie many times in movie theaters.

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And you'd sit there, and the theaters were always packed, and there was an electricity in the room because the women were riveted. And their boyfriends or their husbands were kind of, I think, noticing, "Something's going on here that I don't quite get." And I'll never forget, one night when we're in the movie, and there's a scene in the movie where Jane is new at the workplace and it's a complicated copying machine, and papers start flying out all over the place and its havoc and chaos, and one woman leaped up from her chair in the movie theater and yelled out, "Push the star button!"

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And because it was this total identification with what was going on. Because it rode the wave of a popular movement, it didn't come out of nowhere. It helped shape the debate. It ended the discussion about whether there was discrimination in the workplace. That's what we'd been doing actually, for about 7 or 8 years, was trying to convince women that there was discrimination—it wasn't them—and bosses that it was discrimination and it was illegal.

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But the movie, because it was a farce, said "Are you kidding? Of course there is discrimination." And it ended that debate and moved it to, "What can we do about it?" And it was a relief off the shoulders of working women, to go to the solution and move to a different way of looking at themselves.

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BETSY WEST:
How successful was the movie?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
The movie was the number one box office hit in 1980. It was fabulously successful. Years later, I talked to a young woman— she was 20, 21—who was a community organizer, and when she found out that I was associated with 9 to 5, she said to me, "Oh, gosh, that's so exciting. My grandmother used

to make me watch that movie with her." Because it meant something to women, and this notion that a grandmother was having her granddaughter watch this movie because it was about women fighting back.

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BETSY WEST:
What about the song?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
It captured everything about this amalgam of self identity… understanding that the boss was really a problem that you had to deal with, and that you could do it in a popular way that didn't set you apart, but set you with other women.

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BETSY WEST:
Do you remember when you first heard the song?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
I heard the song before the movie was produced. The day before the movie wrapped in Hollywood, it was the national secretaries day, and by then, we were having national secretary's day as huge days of protest all around the

country. And so in Los Angeles, we had this giant national secretary's day event, and Jane came from the set to our event. She was in costume at lunch time.

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And we heard a little bit of the song there, and she gave a speech and the place was electrified, and people stayed long, and when we went back to the office later, people kept calling, or they'd come from the workplace and- One woman came and said that she'd been talking at the water cooler with women from the office who hadn't been at the event, and her boss called her in and told her that she couldn't be using company time on this, and she said, "I just came from an event with Jane Fonda about 9 to 5, and you can't tell me what to do."

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And it was those kinds of things that were happening all around the country, and it was the inspiration of the song, the film being recognized. It made a big, big difference.

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BETSY WEST:
So what happened? All that excitement and all that movement and organizing, and then what happened?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

Well, change happened, and some of it was legitimate. It was good change. Women pushed for change and some of it occurred. More women became professionals and managers. They got into graduate school. We pushed out of 9 to 5 for women to be made managers in banks. We had the office of federal contract compliance programs and agency of federal government target banks and insurance companies for their discriminatory practices, and they did.

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And banks and insurance companies opened up avenues for women to be promoted. So those were advances, they were important. But there is a part of it also that was, "Create a safety valve. Let some of the steam out of this movement." And so, while things got better for women at the top—educated women, college graduates, they did find opportunities for advancement—there was a split between them and the larger group of office workers, who found during the 80s that their conditions got worse.

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So that now what we see, overall, are worse working conditions, not just for women but for men as well. When I first started working, whether you were in a union or not, you expected to get five days of sick days. You got a week of vacation. You had standard leave, or expectations along those lines. That's gone. Half of all workers don't even have paid sick days for themselves these days.

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After all of the happy talk in the 80s about working family and how important that was going to be, and the need to keep women in their high paid jobs, there aren't even community centers to leave your kids at, much less child care in your workplace. Pay is lower, pensions are a thing of the past. So for most women, they work longer hours for lower pay, and fewer benefits than they did when I started working. So there was a split in the workforce.

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I think that's a tactic, on the part of corporate America, to deal with this insurgency. And so, there was a strategy that was announced in *Businessweek* magazine, certainly in many other places, but in 1974, there was an editorial in *Businessweek* that said, "We have the biggest selling job that we've ever had in history, and that is to convince Americans that they need to do with less so that banks and big business can have more."

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It was a strategy to take the low road, not share the wealth which is what had been happening since the second World War, and instead to lower the wages and working conditions and siphon profits to the top and to the corporations, and that has really worked out well for them.

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BETSY WEST:
What was that like for you?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
It's painful. I feel that my life's work was to try to lessen the gulf between the rich and the rest. To create opportunity for people who want to pursue it. to reorder the power relationship so that some people aren't always in charge and other people are always victims. And we have been losing that battle.

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You have to acknowledge that, but it hasn't made me feel any less urgent about or committed. I feel very lucky that I have been able to have a job where I get to put my heart into that every single day of my life.

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BETSY WEST:
In the 80s, you continued working 9 to 5, and at some point, you start getting involved in the union movement. What's that like?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
Well, in 1975, we started a union as a sister organization in 9 to 5, and so I always operated in both worlds. And then by 1980, we had the movie, and we liked the idea that we were a movement that incorporated the character and concerns of the working women's movement, the power of unions, and the glamor of Hollywood, and that that was the kind of package that would be appealing and hit all the bases.

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And I always believed that you needed to have both the ability to speak to people where they are, but institutional power at the same time. You had to be able to be in touch with popular culture and real desires and concerns, but mold that into something that could really contend for power. And so that's why I've always thought that operating both inside and outside of the labor movement is necessary. And so I've been able to craft that through my years, and again, feel lucky that I've been able to make that work.

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BETSY WEST:
You went into government. The agitator, the activist—were you surprised at yourself for doing that, and what was that like?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
Yeah, I had no intention ever of doing anything. I only just wanted to do good work the next day. And when Bill Clinton was elected president, union leaders were looking at the department of labor, and what kind of positions they thought were important, and wanted to have people who were associated with unions in them. And so The Women's Bureau was this little known agency in the Department of Labor—which I don't think I was aware of at all—and John Sweeney, who was President of the Service Employees Union, asked me if I wanted to be the Director of the Women's Bureau.

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And at first, I said no. I was perfectly happy running my union and thought my work was very important. And John Sweeney said, "Are you crazy? This is a really important thing to do. You've got to step up and do something new." And he was exactly right. So I went into government as the Director of the Women's Bureau, which is the highest seat in the federal government devoted to women's issues. And it was a gas. I had a wonderful time, operating within a different bureaucracy, figuring out how do you leverage power, and how could you really create a voice for women on a very different scale?

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We used so much of what we had pioneered in 9 to 5, this notion that you really were as much about listening as you were about telling. That we were there to understand what women cared about, and then broadcast that back out and put power behind it.

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BETSY WEST:
What would you point to as your biggest accomplishment in addressing those concerns? What were you able to do?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
We were stalled by the midterm elections when the House and Senate went Republican, and we were just prepared to run a huge initiative around child care and equal pay when the midterm elections happened. And it was around

then- and I think we could have made big changes both around child care and equal pay. I had gone around the country, around the child care campaign. 24-hour child care was this huge issue I've heard about. Workers who worked the night shift in a potato factory in Idaho who had their children sleep in their car at night in the parking lot at the plant, because there was no child care available—

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—We were ready to take that on, and then lost the opportunity because of the elections. Soon after, there was an election in the AFL-CIO. The failure of the labor movement to meet the challenge of globalization, automation, a changed economy, and a really virulent attack by employers to lower labor standards, created a challenge within the labor movement, and John Sweeney, who had been the president of SEIU, ran against the president of the AFL-CIO and won in this contested election.

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And so at that point, I decided to go back into the labor movement because it seemed like there was an opportunity to build power within the labor movement, not just outside of it.

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BETSY WEST:
And how did that work out?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

I've been really happy to be part of the labor movement. But it's been a really tough time. The laws are against workers. It's almost impossible to win a union election because workers get fired every day if they try to organize on the job. Employers are determined not to share power in the workplace. It's a global economy where you can outsource work, rather than meet even the simplest demands, the most reasonable demands, workers in your own workplace.

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So the relations of power are incredibly distorted, and unions are struggling with how to exercise power in those conditions. One of the things that I've been able to do in the labor movement in the last 8 years though, is to, in some ways, recreate 9 to 5 in a different sphere. So we have an organization called Working America, which again organizes people outside of the traditional trade union movement, but around the concerns that they have in an environment in which they feel comfortable, in their neighborhoods.

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And we've organized 3 million workers, who don't have a union on the job, to begin to exercise power as citizens and as working people in their communities.

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BETSY WEST:

How do women workers see themselves now?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:

Women today are much more self confident. They are tougher, they are more self reliant, but they are also much more isolated. If you ask a woman today who she turns to if she's got a problem on the job, she's more than likely to say, "Well, I depend on myself or my mother," rather than a union or a working women's organization, or a congressperson. In the 70s, women would have said, "Well, if I've got a problem on the job, I'll call NOW, or I'll call 9 to 5, or I'll call my representative."

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You felt that there was something you could do. You could get help. When Anita Hill challenged Clarence Thomas in 1991 and sexual harassment became a huge issue, 9 to 5 was running a hot line. And so if you had a job problem, you could call the 9 to 5 hotline and a counselor would help you with your problem. Well, the hotline exploded during the hearings that took place around the Clarence Thomas, and all of a sudden ,sexual harassment became this issue that people could talk about.

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There was one woman who was a janitor on the night shift, who called and spoke to the counselor. Aand the counselor gave her information about what she could do and how to handle the problem with this supervisor who was harassing her- sexually threatening her every night. And the counselor

thought that- She had dealt with her and it was over, but then three weeks later, the woman calls back and she says,-

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"I just wanted to let you know what happened. I told my supervisor that if he ever touched me again, I would register a complaint with a national working women's organization, so he'd better watch out. And he hasn't touched me since." And that's what it was like then. That you could have the confidence of knowledge and the courage from feeling backed up. But women don't have that now. Women don't feel backed up because they are not, for the most part. And so the effort to have women rely on themselves and be confident—well, that worked, but collective power, strength in numbers, is missing from the equation.

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BETSY WEST:
Where do you think the women's movement was most successful?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
The women's movement said we want to have it all, and I think that's what we got, and what we didn't get was equality. Women now can be workers, and they can be parents, and they can have financial responsibility, but they never got the rest of the social safety net to make that possible. There was nothing

there to replace the wife, and so families are under unbelievable stress. It's terrible.

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Communities are hollowed out. The kinds of supports that used to exist, whether it was because you had an adult at home taking care of things or a supportive community that picked up where the adults couldn't fill in, that's really in shreds. And so, the other half of the demands never got met.

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BETSY WEST:
Do you think there is a women's movement now?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
Women believe that they have a rightful place in society. Women—I think we feel differently about ourselves. Young women have different attitudes than young women when I was growing up. But there's not much of an organized women's movement, and we see the effects of that in the fact that… 40 years later, women still earn 80 cents on the dollar of men.

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The fact that women's and men's pay have gotten even more closely together—it used to be 57 cents, now it's about 80—is because men's pay has gone down, not that women's pay has gone up. There is no institutional child care. There is no flexibility around work hours. The very basic demands that

women had early on have not been achieved. So we have to start over, almost, and certainly there's a desire.

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Women today may not have the same demands for rights and respect that we did, but they've got big demands around job security because of the global economy or around work and family because of the collapse of communities. So we need to start over. We need to start with a sense that these are problems that can be solved, that they go beyond individual accommodation, and that there is strength in numbers, that if you join together, that you can, as women and as workers, make a difference.

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BETSY WEST:
Why isn't this a rallying cry?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
For generations, many working class people were peeled off by a right wing social agenda to vote not in their economic interests, but to vote around issues that were, I think ,in many ways, a smoke screen for economic interests. And so whether it's social issues around abortion or religion or guns, those became the most salient voting issues for White workers, less so for people of color.

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But that had been the base of the new deal. That had been the base of the coalition of the union, motored, working class coalition that brought about all of the benefits that had created a middle class in this country. A 40 hour work week, overtime pay, social security, Medicare—those were the kinds of things that had been created—child labor laws—by this coalition, which then got torn apart by a determined corporate agenda to redistribute wealth up, and a social agenda that took away economic power.

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BETSY WEST:
You are a mentor to younger women, but I'm wondering, first of all, what's the best advice that you ever received?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
Years ago, I was frustrated about trying to organize women workers. I was already in the union. We were trying to organize women who were very reluctant. They couldn't see that the boss might have different interests than they did. Women office workers often identified with their bosses, and that's been true for women in general. Well, you identify with the person who has power, whether that serves you or not.

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And so, I went to a woman, who was much older than I am, and had been a union organizer of women office workers actually in the 1940s,and said,

"What do I tell these women?" And she said, "Tell them to keep an open mind but don't let your brains fall out." And I thought that it was the same kind of everyday language that's about power but an understanding where people are that has helped me think about the way I do my work ever since then.

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BETSY WEST:
What's the advice that you give to young women now in this, obviously, changing circumstances, changing economy?

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KAREN NUSSBAUM:
In working America, we've got lots of young women who are organizers and staff of the organization, and we believe that you need to share all of the victories, and if you share the victories, then you can share all the failures. That no one person is responsible for making something work well, and if you're really part of a group effort, then you're not the one to blame either. That we all have a reasonability to operate with professional excellence but personal modesty. That—leave your ego at the door, this is about getting the work done, and I think that, at the end of the day, makes you feel really good.

END TC: 00:39:31:00