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Title: Helene Powell oral history
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Abstract: Contains a transcribed copy of Lucille Kendall’s 1976-1977 interviews with Helene Powell covering her involvement with the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), Local 6, in San Francisco as a steward and member of the Legislative Committee and Executive Board. The interview also covers Powell’s appointment as the ILWU’s International Representative to Los Angeles in 1943. Supplementary materials include newspaper clippings, ILWU-related ephemera, photocopies of a speech given by Powell, a transcript of a radio interview she participated in, and a Life magazine article featuring a photograph of Powell.

Access
Collection is open for research.

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Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Helene Powell Oral History, MS 3518, California Historical Society.

Separated Materials
The original sound recording from which the Powell oral history was transcribed is stored separately on cassettes 34.1-34.9.

Related Collections
The following oral histories were prepared by Lucille Kendall in her effort to document the lives of women labor activists and radicals for the California Historical Society’s “Women in California Collection”:
Clemmie Barry Oral History, MS 3251
Elaine Black Yoneda Oral History, MS 3524
Katherine Rodin Oral History, MS 3517
Louise Lambert Oral History, MS 3520
Marion Brown Sills Oral History, MS 3525
Mildred Edmondson Oral History, MS 3523
Violet Orr Oral History, MS 3516

The following oral histories were prepared under the auspices of “The Twentieth Century Trade Union Woman: Vehicle for Social Change,” a project of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, The University of Michigan-Wayne State University:
Angela Ward Oral History, MS 3536
Caroline Decker Gladstein Oral History, MS 3025

Donor
This oral history was transcribed from an interview with Helene Powell conducted by Lucille Kendall for the California Historical Society in 1976-1977.

Biographical Information

Helene Powell was born on April 17, 1919, and raised by a close-knit family in a small black community in San Jose. When Powell turned seventeen, her family moved to San Francisco, where she attended college preparatory courses at Lowell High School. After high school, Powell enrolled in University of California, Berkeley, earning a bachelor’s degree in Spanish. At U.C. Berkeley, Powell served as president of the Negro Students Club and participated in the Associated Student Government’s Committee for Peace, California Youth Legislature, and Student Workers Federation. Upon graduating in 1941, Powell took a job with Alexander Balart Coffee Company in San Francisco, participating in a three-day strike against the company over wages. Powell’s involvement in the strike prompted her to become active in the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, Local 6. As a member of Local 6, Powell frequently served as shop stewardess, spoke at membership meetings, and conducted house meetings. In 1943 Powell was appointed as the ILWU’s International Representative to Los Angeles. With Local 26, she organized aircraft workers at Aero Reclamation Company. In Los Angeles Powell became particularly active in organizing African American and Mexican American women warehouse workers and in housing reform for minorities. Powell also served as an election worker for the CIO Political Action Committee, registering black voters around Los Angeles’ Central Avenue. In the mid-1940s Powell returned to San Francisco and Local 6, becoming active in the Legislative Committee. As a member of the committee, Powell took up a variety of issues, including Local 6’s involvement in the war effort, gender discrimination, rent control, and housing reform.

Scope and Contents

This oral history collection consists of a transcribed copy of Lucille Kendall’s 1976-1977 interviews with International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) organizer Helene Powell, an interview history, and supplementary materials documenting much of her labor organizing work for the ILWU.

The bulk of the Powell interview covers her participation with the ILWU, Local 6 (San Francisco), as a stewardess and organizer, beginning in the early 1940s and continuing on until shortly after the end of World War II. Powell was involved in a variety of labor issues, including wages, gender discrimination, housing reform, and rent control, as well as union extracurricular activities. Powell discusses her time in Los Angeles as the ILWU’s International Representative, where she participated in organizing aircraft plant workers and African American and Mexican American women warehouse workers. She also addresses her work with the CIO Political Action Committee recruiting and registering African Americans in Los Angeles’ Central Avenue neighborhood for the 1944 presidential election. Powell’s involvement in the ILWU throughout the 1940s was influenced by World War II, and she discusses both her personal reaction and feelings regarding the war and also the war’s effect on the labor movement and workers’ rights. Powell talks about the influx of women into the jobs that had been traditionally considered “male” work and how these changing roles increased women’s participation in the ILWU and their expectations of gender equality in both labor and pay. In particular, she points out how the union’s job dispatch system became more egalitarian in the post-World War II era.

In addition to her labor career, Powell discusses her earlier years growing up as an African American in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1930s and 1940s and her experiences participating in the peace and racial equality movements as a student at the University of California, Berkeley.

Subjects and Indexing Terms

International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.
International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. Local 6 (San Francisco, Calif.)
University of California, Berkeley--Students--Political Activity.
African American college students--California--Berkeley.
Employee rights.
Equal pay for equal work--United States.
Oral histories.
Race discrimination--United States.
Sex discrimination in employment--United States.
Strikes and lockouts--California.
Women labor leaders--California.
World War, 1939-1945--Women--United States.