

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Bill Danyk

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Dates: August 2001

Location: Edmonton

Index: Edmonton Hunger March - Canadian National - Calder yards - machinist - International Association of Machinists - grievance officer - 1950 railroad strike - 40-hour week - diesel trains - 'bumping' - Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Transport and General Workers - Edmonton & District Labour Council - Alberta Railway Legislative Committee - Edmonton City Council - Premier Manning - civic elections - Edmonton Voters Association - Medicare - Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired

His background

I've lived in Edmonton all my life, since July 1, 1923. We lived in the northwest corner of Edmonton, an agricultural area mainly, where the Bonaventure once stood - at Yellowhead and St. Albert Trail, in today's map terms. My introduction to labour matters, or politics, as I mentioned previously, was the Hunger March of December 1932. In a way you could call it Politics 101, kindergarten style. They used to have discussions in our place and other areas. You had the types; there were communists, the CCF, Marxist Leninists, Nazis, fascists, whatever. Sometimes they all come to blows. Most of them were Ukrainian. Even then I got some idea of the different systems, what they were arguing about. The hunger marchers, they were talking about hunger, no jobs. We lived near the railway and used to see these guys get off the train come wanting to eat something. We had a cow and pigs, so we gave them what we had. We didn't have too much. They were just guys looking for a job from one end of the country to another, but there were no jobs. They were a good bunch of guys as such, from what I remember. They'd do any work there was to be done.

Working for CN

I started with CN in 1943 in the shops at Calder, and soon got promoted to machinist's helper. Sometimes things weren't going right as far as working conditions or some concerns. But I'd bring them up. Pretty soon I guess I was self appointed or whatever to be Grievance Officer for midnight shift.

At that time, I was with the International Association of Machinists, a very strong local, Local 817. I had belonged briefly to CBRT before that, but I wasn't involved in labour matters with them. Then came the big strike in 1950 of all railway unions. It was for a 40 hour week, we were previously working 48. We were ordered back to work, but we did win that, the 40 hour week. That was a big demand, and we accomplished it. During our strike I was more or less Picket Captain for the midnight crew you could say. I got

involved in the machinist's local, in various areas, and was the Machinist President for about 5 years.

Coming of diesel trains

In about '56 to '61, they brought dieselisation in, so I went over to the wheel shop. I was rolling 750 lb. wheels, when I finally got onto the job just about - to make it work, you had to roll one in on edge. That lasted about 4 years; took me from '58 to '62. Then there was a period of 'bumping', where I may be laid off for about a year when I didn't have any job with CN. Then I tried different departments, but you'd no sooner get on the job than you'd get bumped for somebody else, after about 2 weeks or so, as you probably know from other areas.

Anyway, when I got back on CN I started with storage department, which was under the jurisdiction of CBRT and GW, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Transport and General Workers. I had represented local 817 machinists in the old Labour Congress, from about '57 to about '60 I guess.

Edmonton Labour Council

Back in those years, I got into the picture for the merger of the two Labour Councils here in Edmonton in '58. I didn't get back in the Labour Council, however, I got active in Local 79 of CBRT in GW, mainly with the shop and store workers. Then I got back in the Edmonton & District Labour Council about '66. I was on there until about 1980, when I retired early from the railway. I might digress for one point earlier. As far as under the machinists union, while the general strike later demands. In the mid-fifties, I was secretary of the joint railway strike committee, which included the 'non-ops' and the 'ops'.

In those days, we were working for much the same thing as unions today: working conditions, better wages, so forth. Better pensions, more holiday pay - the usual. And a medical plan.

I represented the shop crafts on the Alberta Railway Legislative Committee, which included mainly the running trades and the shop craft and maintenance people. Henry Cobie was the chairman of that, and he was a darn good labour man. He was on the Labour Council for a long time. We used to present our briefs to Manning at the Council. I was on there for about 5 years. Not only did we do workers compensation, but also general labour matters. We looked at general working conditions, increase the minimum wage, the need for Pensions in Alberta, and even womens' rights in those days, you name it, we had it in the brief. That was about a 3 year period from 1977 to 1980.

We made these presentations to Premier Manning and his Executive Council; we were very left wing. They were mostly Social Crediters, in fact they were all Social Crediters and they would listen to it, but didn't pay much attention. But I'll say this for Ernest Manning, he had control of that Council. If a Cabinet Minister wanted to ask a question and Manning smiled or nodded, the Member would ask the question. If Manning said no or frowned, nobody would ask a question but Alf Hooke. He got eliminated from the Council; Manning took him off the council years after, but that was more or less for corruption. But he was an independent thinker; he wasn't under Manning's influence to that degree.

Another side line, and this involves Alf Hooke also. Henry Cobie was reading our Brief making a presentation, and Mr. Hooke was reading comics. So Henry says, Mr. Manning, we may not agree with our contents of our brief, but you should at least have the courtesy to listen. I notice one of your members is reading the comics. Manning gives Hooke a dirty look. That was the last time Hooke read the comics at a presentation at the Legislature to Manning and his Executive Council.

Edmonton City Council

The Labour Council did a number of different things as far as the City Council goes in the various, because we did have quite a very active Civic Affairs Committee. Bill Kuberski was one of them, Jack Hubler, I were on it for a time. We'd meet with different aldermen on different issues. Transportation was one of them, the LRT and the river valley were others - wanted to keep all the park land intact.

There were probably other issues, but at election time, we would have different candidates, ask them to come give us their 5 minute spiel, whatever. We had them in whether they were labour people or other people. We'd have special nights for that. I think we were effective to a certain degree, and in the meantime if we thought there was a particular issue, we'd make representations to them: for housing, for the Landlord and Tenant Act, etc. Mike English was great for that purpose; so was Ed Ewasiuk. So I think we did have some influence on that.

I remember when we elected Ed Ewasiuk to Council. We were happy with him. I can't remember names offhand of some of the others. If you bring up some names, I'll probably give you an opinion. _____ - that goes way back! But as far as I remember, he was supposed to be our Labour Mayor; yet he was the one that ordered the police to bust up that demonstration. He got orders maybe from Brownlie, whatever, or even Ottawa.

Yes, Charlie Gilbert was the President of the old Trades and Labour Council. He turned out to be a pretty good alderman. Who else? I remember campaigning for Graham. He was pretty good labour man who stood for the working man and for the community. I remember there was Mr. Tanner who was also a good labour man - not always, but generally speaking. Then there was Kinisky, not Julian but his mother.

Edmonton Voters Association

We all remember the Edmonton Voters Association. It was a coalition of various groups that was established to run candidates for alderman. I don't remember whether they ran for school board. It was their purpose to have the working person in mind, whether it was for housing, parks, or whatever. The represented working people, rather than the business element, which more or less dictated things in this city. When you had 12 wards and 12 people running it from the west end, heaven help us; we had a tough time electing anybody. Usually, we'd have a meeting of the Voters Association, and we'd think we had everything agreed, but about 11 o'clock everybody wants to go home. Then Julia would all of a sudden pipeup to say, "No I just don't agree with that." Everybody turned their head. They maybe agreed with Julia just to get out of there. She was a good woman. I think I'm talking about maybe the late '60s and early '70s - just don't hold me to that, but that was about the period.

It was very rough to be a trade unionist, because you're automatically branded a 'red,' whether you were politically active or not. I happened to be active in the OCCF to a certain extent, but there was alliances going between communists and others on certain issues. But if you told anybody else that you're a trade unionist, automatically they would call you names. You would even get beat up at times. I got beat up once. I got beat up because we had a picnic and it was our right wing Ukrainian picnic, in about '57 I guess. I happened to raise some issue. Then, they wanted to free Ukraine, and I said, "Well, you've got problems here with Ukrainians, haven't got their full rights. Maybe we should have issues here first." So I got pummelled there a bit, and told not to come back.

This happened in Borden Park; the old park I don't know if you remember them. It was a real right wing organization, almost neo-Nazi in a sense. I didn't want to go there, but other people went there. So I went there.

I thought that during the '50s and '60s we were making great gains. We were after the 32-hr. week and wanted better wages. Medicare - we were still pressing for it. We didn't get it then. I think we were getting better legislation federally, and even some provinces. I wouldn't say we got much better in Alberta, but that was interesting. You felt you were a part of something. You were building a better society in a better world. There was real hope for the world after the Second World War. Even with the Cold War on, you felt well, through the trade union movement, we can build a better society for the working people and represent even the non-trade union people in the society. We could bring about better working conditions, wages, and whatnot. Better legislation, and through that Medicare, pensions, you name it. In fact, be able to have a small portion of heaven here instead of supposedly somebody promising way up above. Not that I personally believe in pie in the sky type of thing.

Even in the '60s, it was still there; but in the '70s, it started to pale a bit. We realized that labour perhaps weren't going to have as much power as we thought it would. I got to Labour College in '68, and did some instructing for my own Union. I did some instructing for the Labour Council previous to that - even some for the AFL to a certain extent. In the meantime I got involved in other activities adjunct to the labour council, such as mental health, the suicide distress line, United Way, credit unions, co-ops, the store particularly, credit union. The stores have gone under, but we tried. Maybe there were other reasons why it went under.

Retirement

The CBRT was a more progressive union, but we were hampered by that old politics rule of international union at that time. We tried to get more autonomy at that time. They got autonomy financial now, and they can take political action. They weren't able to then. They were a craft union. CBRT was an industrial union. They took in railway workers and a lot of other areas. They were a pretty big union at one time when I belonged to it. I got involved in social areas. There was union labour, there was social services. I was on distress suicide line for 4 years. After I retired in 1980, I got another job, and when I retired from that, I volunteered with the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired for about 14 years. I mainly stuck with the front line to provide workers that registered with the society, to provide homecare services like snow shovelling, lawn mowing, minor maintenance, minor renovations for seniors that phoned in for the service. We had to

interview the workers. We had to include even house sitting when they were away on vacation, but you had to get a police check in the end.

I haven't stopped serving my fellow men in that way. The reason I got out of the Society volunteering was my deafness; I'm at about 50%. You get recorded messages in the morning and you can't get the phone number to get back to him. There's no use. The senior is mad and you can't get us, you've lost them. So rather than continue, I decided well it's time to leave that area. I served for nearly 15 years. That's long enough.