

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Gilbert Levine

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The word that would describe most of Lenihan's life would be "rebel". He grew up in Ireland, participated in the Irish rebellion against British rule in 1915, '16, '17, in that period. The politics got too hot for him. He had to leave, and eventually came into Canada and The States. He got involved with the Wobblies in The States, which was a radical labour organization. He automatically tended toward that kind of a life. He was very active in the organizing of the unemployed in Canada during the dirty depression years, particularly in Calgary. He became a fiery orator and a great organizer. He used those skills within the unemployed movement, which was very strong in Calgary. Some of those skills did him in good stead many years later when he became a union organizer. But he was always fighting the establishment in one way or another.

It's hard for some people to comprehend today the extent of unemployment. It was massive, particularly in places like Calgary. Unlike today, where the unemployed are virtually voiceless and unorganized, in the '30s the unemployed were highly organized, particularly so in Calgary. There were thousands that belonged to the unemployed. It was basically men. Women weren't considered unemployed. There were a number of unemployed men's organizations. Some of them were organized around being veterans of World War I. There was sometimes distinctions between married unemployed and single unemployed. But nevertheless, it was massively organized. They were active in demonstrating for jobs, demonstrating for adequate welfare, it was called relief in those days. Calgary had the highest city relief rates of any city in Canada. That was the power of the unemployed movement. Lenihan was one of the leaders of that group. He was

active in the communist party during this period. He ran for city council in 1938, and was elected on the communist ticket as a city councilor. It was because of recognition of him as a leader of the unemployed and fighting for decent welfare rates and so on. It was on the basis of that that he won tremendous support.

The old line parties just turned their back on the unemployed and said, there's nothing we can do about your problem. They tried to individualize the problem rather than an economic problem. The party did come forward with action where people could actually do something about their situation. There was a sense of belonging to an organization that was speaking to your concerns as an unemployed. Even if you were employed, the rates of pay would be terribly poor.

I don't think that was so much Wobbly, I think that was more communist party activity. Of all the areas of Alberta, and there were many strong sections in Alberta, huge demonstrations in Edmonton in the '30s, and Calgary. But the strongest area that the party's membership was was in the Crows Nest Pass, and particularly amongst the coalminers. At one point the entire municipal council of the town of Blairmore, which was a coalmining town, were all union members, communists. Even the chief of police. Lenihan was key in helping to organize that.

He lived for a while in the Crows Nest Pass area, and was heavily involved in organizing. The mines were highly organized in that area. He used that as a base to reach out into some of the surrounding areas. Of course it's on the border of BC, and he organized within the mining areas on the eastern part of BC as well.

In actual numbers, there are more unemployed in Canada today than there were during the height of the depression. I think there's over a million unemployed in Canada. I don't know the exact number. Canada in the '30s had a much smaller population. But in terms of actual numbers, there are more people unemployed today. But we never hear anything in the media about it. It's sort of considered a natural problem. Official statistics say the unemployment rate is 7%, 8%, we sort of take that as a normal way of life. But I'm

always distressed that today the labour movement does not work with the unemployed. Once you leave your job, once you leave your union, you become a non entity. When you think of the potential, for political and social reasons, an organized unemployment movement would be powerful. But they're voiceless.

When you think of what happened during the war years in terms of the growth of the labour movement, there was a huge increase in union membership in Canada. The labour laws made it easier to organize. There wasn't the same hostility from the employers, and there was a huge growth of union membership. A lot of that was done by communists. In the auto workers, in the electrical industry, in the rubber industry, in steel, and woodworkers, and so on. When you look at the big organizing campaigns that took place during the war years, many of those were led by communists.

It was spotty. It was in specific parts of the country. It wasn't nationwide. I don't think the numbers were huge. It was also a difficult period for the party. During the war years, they supported the government because it was conducting the war effort. Immediately after the end of the war, the party became more critical. But it certainly had a great deal of strength and respect. There was a short time where the communist party in Toronto had a daily newspaper, which was a major achievement. And because of the role that the Soviet Union had played in the defeat of Nazism, there was a respect amongst many people for what communists had done internationally as well as locally.

There's no question that there was an organized and directed campaign to vilify the left in Canada, and to vilify the Soviet Union at the time. It didn't happen spontaneously. It was the Churchill speech in which he first talked about the Iron Curtain. The campaigns against progressive organizations in both The States and Canada. And I'm convinced that it was also directed by employer groups against the labour movement as well. If an employer could vilify a left wing union in his shop, that was an added club that they could use against union activities.

It became much more difficult for lefties and progressives to put forward ideas that were even motherhood ideas. Because they would be immediately labeled. If a communist stood up in a union meeting and said, I'm in favour of pasteurized milk, there might be suspicions about his ulterior motives. I think chill is the best word to describe what took place. The sad part was that a lot of the energies and leadership of the labour movement were directed towards fighting communists, true or suspected. A lot less energy was directed towards fighting for workers rights. It was not a good period, in many ways.

Today roughly three quarters of Canadian unionists belong to Canadian unions. Back in the '40s and '50s it was a totally different picture. Three quarters of union members in Canada belonged to international unions. There was virtually no Canadian autonomy that the decisions on a lot of political questions were made in The States. Quite a few of the international unions actually adopted within their constitutions clauses that barred communists from holding any office, even at a local level. So that had a huge impact. That didn't particularly apply in the public sector, because they were not part of the international unions. But certainly in the industrial unions, that had an important effect. It gave Canadian directors, where they did exist, a club to go after people on the left.

Up until 1955 there were two labour central bodies in Canada. One was the Trades and Labour Congress, of which NUPE, the National Union of Public Employees, was a part. The other labour central was the Canadian Congress of Labour. Their public sector union was NUPSE, the National Union of Public Sector Employees. NUPE, the TLC union, was much larger and much more national in scope. Many of the locals, municipal public locals within NUPE, had a long history going back to World War I days. Whereas the NUPSE group were more recently organized, and were primarily concentrated in Ontario.

The central labour bodies, both the Trades and Labour Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labour, both took a very strong anti-communist position, beginning short after the end of World War II. Most of those unions that were left led. Like the mine mill, electrical workers, in both labour centrals, were eventually expelled because of their opposition to the establishment of NATO, which both congresses supported.

NUPE didn't exist when he came out. The Trades and Labour Congress, to which a lot of the public sector employees belonged, did not have a national body. They were individual locals of the Trades and Labour Congress. It wasn't a union that brought them together, as is the case today. Lenihan spent a good part of the early years of World War II in internment. When he's released and goes back to Calgary, he didn't have a lot of connections with civic officials. He'd been active in the unemployed movement, had been alderman and so on. He was able to get a job as a civic employee, as a laborer. Because of his organizing skills and oratorical skills, in a very short time he's the president of the union. He was able to use that as a base for organizing, not only in Calgary but reaching out to other independent municipal groups in Alberta. There were groups organized in Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat. He was able to begin to bring those groups together under an umbrella organization, the Federation of Public Employee Unions. That in effect became the basis for the founding of NUPE. He used that model in Alberta, bringing the groups together in one province, to then go the Trades and Labour Congress and say, look, we need a national organization that speaks for public employees.

The party was a great school. It was a great educational institution, not only in terms of analysis, organizing skills, public speaking skills and so on. Lenihan had a good education in his years in the party. He was able to use those skills to bring public employee groups together.

They quickly understood that if they were going to have successes in bargaining in Calgary, the employer would always point to some other city that had poorer conditions. Why should Calgary be better. It was important from his perspective that there shouldn't be these pockets of low wages and poor conditions. That they all had to rise together.

Lenihan was actually expelled from the party, as was his wife. I don't think the party ever left his thinking and his ideology. He still thought and acted like a communist. But in terms of his local union, the Calgary Municipal Employees, he was accepted for his

skills. They had been so poorly organized before he came on the scene. They didn't have a proper dues collection system. They didn't have any effective grievance procedure. So he turned that local, which was a patsy union, into a real union. It was pretty hard to criticize him on his political history.

Public employees within the labour movement, the few that were organized, were not considered real unionists. They were second class unionists. The civic employees, who were unionized under the Trades and Labour Congress, had a lower per capita payment to the organization than the industrial and craft unions. The idea of them having a union of their own was questionable. It took people like Lenihan and a few others, on two or three successive Trades and Labour Congress conventions, to argue that there's a need for the establishment of a national union representing public employees. When I talk about public employees, I'm talking primarily about municipal and school board people. That was the core of the union.

That was true at the municipal level, that whenever a municipal employees union, if they had an annual dinner, they would always invite the civic officials. This is not an Alberta example, but around 1943 when the municipal employees in Toronto applied to the Trades and Labour Congress for their charter, when the charter came they invited the mayor to the event. There was kind of a company unionism attitude in many respects.

Many of these TLC locals' negotiations, such as they were, would be a TLC official sitting down with the mayor over a bottle of whiskey, and in half an hour the whole thing is all settled. There wasn't any membership mobilization, no membership involvement. That was the kind of unionism that Lenihan fought against. He wanted to mobilize the membership to get them involved and active and filing grievances and processing grievances, and having a steward system that made sense. Because that didn't exist before he came on the scene.

The contacts were usually made at the annual conventions of the Trades and Labour Congress. He would make a point when he was a delegate to these conventions to bring

together on an informal basis the delegates from the other municipal employees unions. The leader of the municipal employees in Toronto, Garnet Shire, the two of those, Lenihan and Shire, developed a bond. They were the ones who began talking about the establishment of a national organization.

By the time these movements towards setting up a national organization within the TLC took place, the Vancouver group were already outside.

That's kind of a misunderstanding that a lot of people have. The NUPE people were more a-political than anything else. I remember before the merger took place, someone getting up at a NUPE convention and raising the question of getting involved politically. They didn't get involved in politics. Whereas the NUPSE people, because of the CIO CCO connection, were fairly heavily involved in the CCF in those days. They were more political. But in some instances that meant more anti-communist.

Politics ran through his veins and arteries. He had to be involved politically. If he couldn't be involved in the communist party, then he was going to get involved with the CCF. But he never had the same kind of commitment to the CCF or the NDP that he had to the communist party.

To formalize the establishment of NUPE? Not a lot of travel. People didn't hop on a train like they do today. I'm not aware of any trips that he would've made outside of Alberta, other than to go to the annual conventions of the Trades and Labour Congress.

It was a natural development that the scattered independent local unions in the public sector, and I'm talking again mostly municipal and school boards, they were facing the same problems. They needed the help of one another. It took a long time, but eventually when Lenihan came along and planted the seed, they all jumped in and said, this is a good idea, we've been needing this for many years. I don't think it took any direction from another world to say a national union of public employees is a good idea. It was just

a natural outgrowth of what each of the independent local unions were feeling in their isolation.

Through his communist party work, he did travel extensively throughout Alberta. He had contacts everywhere. When he became a union organizer, he used those contacts wherever he went and made the old connections. One of the places he went back to was the Crows Nest Pass, which was highly unionized and highly political. But when he came back in the '40s and '50s, it wasn't the same as when he went there in the '30s. He didn't always get the same welcome that he used to in the earlier days. The whole political atmosphere had changed. There were instances where there was a lot of bitterness towards the role of the communist party who had led some of the strikes against the miners. Some of the workers were blackballed, lost their jobs, and were quite bitter about the role of the mine workers union and the role of the party. Some of those people didn't give Lenihan a very good welcome.

Nevertheless, he did organize the municipal employees in all the small towns in that area. Hospitals, municipal employees, were all organized under his leadership.

I started working in NUPE in 1956. That might be considered the height of the Cold War. I had been active on the left in Toronto before I came to work in Ottawa for the union. It was a dream job that I had always wanted to do. I had been a member of municipal employees local in Toronto, and because of that I was able to get this job as research director in NUPE. But I knew the politics of Bob Rentule, who was my boss, who was very conservative, very anti-communist. I had to bite my tongue many times. I knew that not only my union activities, but all other activities would be highly restricted. I had to be careful about the people I associated with. For example, there was a group in a small independent labour research organization in Montreal, Labour Associates, who were early labour consultants. They were doing excellent work in their publications. I would've wanted to use them in a consultant capacity. But I couldn't do it openly, I had to do it covertly, and with a lot of limitations. When I think today of the kinds of people who are

in senior staff positions in many of the unions, who are progressive and play an important role in the political direction of their unions, that wasn't the case back then. The research directors were only a handful of them in the early days, eight or ten would get together once a year with Eugene Forsee, who was the research director at the Canadian Labour Congress. But we never tackled the real political or economic problems. Everything was low key. So it had a chilling effect on everything that was happening in the labour movement.

That's exactly what happened in my situation. The first president of the merged organization -- the merger of NUPE and NUPSE to form CUPE -- the first president was Stan Little. He fought strongly against me becoming the research director. His words were, we can't have a communist heading up the research department of a new and big public employee union. He was working closely with the RCMP to try and document a case against me. It was a struggle. I eventually did get the job, because the people in my union, NUPE, were supporting me. The merger would not have gone through if he had his wishes. So he bit his tongue and finally agreed. But the fact that a president of a Canadian union would work together with the RCMP, with a long history of anti-labour activities, against one of their own employees or members, it was just abhorrent to me. I remember the mid-'60s when Canada was discussing the establishment of Beaumark missiles, and there was a Beaumark missile base going into La Macaza in the Laurentians in Quebec. I helped organize a few people to go up for a demonstration against the nuclear weapons on a Sunday. Monday morning Stan Little had me in his office. The RCMP had told him that I was there. He really laid it on, don't you do that sort of stuff. There was that kind of a chill. And the same during the period of Vietnam war. I was involved in many activities. He tried in any way he could to block me from participating in that sort of stuff.

During the period of the Vietnam War, which heated up in the mid-'60s and didn't end until 1975, the labour movement went along with the Canadian and American governments. It was only around 1972 that unions, primarily the auto workers, began to speak out against the war. From then on, things began to loosen up a little bit. For me, the

big change took place in 1975, when Stan Little retired and Grace Hartman became the president of CUPE, that I had a sense of freedom of operation that I never had earlier.

When NUPE was formed, it was just a tiny organization with national director and a secretary. They had office space in the CLC building. When I first came to work in Ottawa it was in the CLC building. That was quite intimidating for me, knowing the attitude of the elected officers and the staff. I remember the first day I came to work, and Bob Renfule took me on a tour of the building and introduced me to some of the CLC staffers. We came to the office of Comin Coplansky, who was international affairs director. I'd never met him before. He says, oh you're from Toronto. You must know JB Salsburg. He was one of the leaders of the communist party at that time. Immediately I was labeled and identified. That had a chilling effect.

At the merger of the two unions in 1963.

For the merger? The first NUPE convention I attended was in 1957 in Calgary. There were a lot of discussions about merging with NUPSE and I thought it was just around the corner. But they were on again and off again for a period of six years. Finally at a NUPE convention in 1962 a delegate said, enough of this talk, don't come back to the next convention without a merger agreement. There was a lot of talking for position. It was only when the NUPE people said come back with an agreement.

It wasn't the largest at that point. It took a number of years before the CLC recognized that. They had their own tight group of industrial and construction unions. The public employee unions were not considered real unionists. It took a long time before Stan Little, the president of CUPE, had a senior position on the executive of the CLC.

When I first started working full time in NUPE, the whole emphasis of the organization nationally and locally was what we would call business unionism, to concentrate on whatever is happening on the job. The things that surround the job, the politics, the legislation, those matters were not discussed. That was somewhere else to be discussed. That form of unionism, which I never liked, I think was fertile ground for McCarthyism.

Because if the politics of some of the lefties would in any way impinge on how I do my job and what I get paid for it, they would shy away from anything like that. It's a total contrast to the conditions today. There wasn't a labour leader when I started working full time, that I had respect for. There was no leader that I would respect for their politics, their commitment to social issues, or even the collective bargaining stance. Today there's a world of change. I have a lot of respect for the leadership of most of the unions in Canada today, that they're involved in political issues, social issues, economic issues, trade issues. Because they realize all of those things have an impact on the day to day job. A lot of their progressive attitudes have not seeped down to the membership level. But it's far different than my early days when I would spend a lot of my time fighting the leadership instead of fighting the bosses. It's a totally changed world within the labour movement.

The people who began fighting for these social issues in the '70s and '80s have now risen to positions of leadership within the broader labour movement. When I think of the early conventions of NUPE that I attended, the issue was on wages, benefits, working conditions. That hardly makes a mark at a current CUPE convention. Most discussion is the impact of government legislation, privatization, international trade. Those are the issues that are discussed at conventions, because of the impact they have on the day to day job. It's a totally different world.

Even when things eased up a bit, I can't remember the year that the restrictions were dropped about allowing left wing unions back into the congress, must have been the late '70s. There were unions like United Electrical Workers came back to the congress. But they were so careful not to upset the apple cart and not to be critical of the leadership, that they played a very passive role. When they came back, even though some of them were the same people, they didn't play the role of critics from the convention floor that they did in an earlier period. So even when they came back, in the early years conventions were still very tame events.