

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Gene Mitchell

Interviewer: Dave Werlin

Date: October 29, 2002

Location: Edmonton

Index: Executive Secretary of AFL; Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers; Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union; Labour lawyers set up company unions; First union in petro chemical industry; Building the NDP in Alberta; Ernest Manning, politics, religion and Social Credit; AFL's Bodie invites Bill Graham to Alberta; Bodie and Ken Pugh draft labour law in NWT; Ken Pugh answers directly to Manning; Roy Jamha becomes Chairman of the Workers' Compensation Board; Growth of public sector unions; Squabble in CLC over convention representation; Building trades unions leave CLC; AFL membership reaches 120,000; CCF Armchair Socialists; The Gale Commission; The bosses Christmas present

Q. Where were you born and raised and what were some of the early influences that got you involved in the trade union movement?

I grew up in British Columbia in the Kootenays. Was born in Nelson. Then our family moved into Trail. My dad worked in the smelters there. I was certainly aware of the labour movement. The Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers' Union represented the workers in Trail at that time. In later years the Steel Workers were in trying to raid Mine Mill. There were some major battles going on. I went to Medicine Hat in '55. In '56 Northwest Nitro Chemicals bought a new plant that was built by Commercial Solvents to make chemical fertilizers. I hired on with them and we had a major battle in there trying to get a union established. The personnel director of that plant was a fellow by the name of Blenner Hasset who came out of the British American Oil Company. The oil industry at that time was not very favourable to unions. They never have been and still aren't. They had company unions. He said they will never have a union in this plant as long as I'm here. We got a union eventually, but we had a battle. I remember Buck Philp and Roy Jamha, the role they played in getting a union.

Q. How did company unions gain a foothold in the petro chemical industry?

Well that's interesting. They had quite a system worked out. There were certain legal firms in this province that were well connected to the Social Credit government, who were very instrumental in helping form company unions and setting up constitutions. We didn't see the legal guys coming down at that time. What the company did was plant people right in the plant. They hired people who were travelling around from one plant to another, forming company unions. It was quite a system, and all of a sudden overnight there was meetings being called and constitutions put in place and cards being signed. And of course the company was badmouthing the unions. You should have your own thing here, we'll get along fine. The guys bought it. In fact there was a vote and there was 3 votes for the union. I was one of them, I knew that. That was pretty disappointing. Anyway, we didn't give up. It didn't take long before that company union signed a sweetheart deal with the company. Another year went by and they had to get a new contract. A lot of good people in the plant that really wanted to do things right. In fact, some of the leadership of that company union realized they weren't going to get anywhere, so their minds were changed. Then the campaign was on and we in fact overthrew that company union and got the union in. In spite of Blanner Hasset.

I was a process operator and Ted was a lab technician. After we changed over and got the company union out, there was a change of officers. I became president of the local and Ted was the chief steward. We had a pretty fine relationship going as far as keeping the company on their toes. We really didn't back off from anything, and we built a pretty good local union down there.

Q. Was that one of the first chemical industry unions?

Yes, that was the first one in the world. They had quite a history of anti-union activities. They had quite a history of criminal activity. So many years ago now, I don't remember all the details. There were people making deals selling stuff to farm groups in the United States, non-existent things. People that were involved were about to expose them. Some of them mysteriously died. I know there were a couple of bodies exhumed and they found there were bullet holes in their back. I don't remember all the details at that time, but they were people involved with commercial solvents. They weren't a very nice outfit.

Q. How was Medicine Hat chosen as a location for petro chemical plants?

Medicine Hat was a good place for them. They got cheap land, the city was prepared to give them that. Good source of cheap natural gas. They had everything going for them.

Q. Is that when you were first involved in the Alberta Federation of Labour?

Well when I was president of the local, after a couple of years I also was elected to the executive board of the Alberta Federation of Labour. I remember people like Jack Hampson and Roy Jamha, Pat Lenihan. In fact I remember a young guy that came on to the federation one year was Dave Werlin, who later became president of this federation. Dave left after that, I think he was working for the City of Calgary at that time. He went out to the west coast before he came back to Alberta. This would be in the early '60s.

Q. Was your union local involved in political action?

Yes we were very much involved in getting the NDP established. In fact I was kind of proud of what we did in Medicine Hat at that time. The party hadn't even been founded. There were new party clubs being set up across the country. The founding convention was going to be coming up some months down the road, but a by-election was called in Medicine Hat. We ran a New Party candidate before the NDP was formed. We made quite a stir. We probably quadrupled the vote that the CCF had ever had in that area. In fact I think we even scared the Social Credit a little bit, because Manning made a point of coming in there to bolster the local campaign. Because they were a little scared of what all these young guys were doing with this new party.

Q. Was Grant Notley involved in that campaign?

Grant Notley was just getting his feet wet. He came down South a lot. I don't know how controversial he was. He was a very enthusiastic guy. He would buttonhole anybody he could to become a candidate. We saw some strange ones appear, but everybody just pushed forward.

There were people like Hampson and Jamha, Pat Lenihan. Keith Johnson of the Woodworkers, he later became the IWA international president. People like that were taking a very active role politically. But you had other people within the labour movement, especially the old AFL unions, which were really dragging their feet. In fact

some of the individuals were very much involved with the Social Credit. Frank Bodie, who was the executive secretary of the federation, and the only full-time officer at that time.

Bodie never took a very active role politically. Kind of dragged his feet. In fact he was very close to Ernest Manning and the Social Credit. I recall one year we were making a presentation to the government. We went down there every year, cap in hand. Ernest Manning never seemed to like us. On one occasion after we'd made our presentation to the cabinet, I know Frank Bodie stayed behind and was having a chitchat with the premier. It happened that our next executive meeting was coming up right after that. Bodie came in with a proposal to the executive board that the federation co-sponsor along with the premier bringing Billy Graham into the province for a tour of Alberta. I know at that time I made a motion to have him fired. The board didn't see fit to fire, it was certainly made very clear to him that there'd be none of that stuff. That was kind of an interesting thing.

Q. How did you see political action developing in the Alberta unions at the time?

It was a strange thing. Coming out of British Columbia, people always talked politics and there was always some political debate going on in that province. Alberta at that time was just a one-party system. Everybody voted for Ernest Manning. It was also this sort of religious aura too. If you didn't vote for Social Credit and Ernest Manning, then the good lord was going to bring some bad things to bear upon us. After I first came to Alberta I'd be trying to talk to some of the guys in the plant about the politics in Alberta. I couldn't get anybody to talk to me. They looked at me like I had two heads, even going around talking about that. Whoever I did get to talk to, I didn't find anybody voting for Social Credit. But on election day everybody voted for Social Credit, then they went home and that was the end of it again. As far as the labour movement, it was a strange thing that developed. It became an individual thing where some of the old AFL unions seemed to take the attitude that you had to sit down with the government and get along with them. And not attempt to change things. Just content to go along with whatever the government wanted. You didn't see that with the industrial unions so much. The old Packinghouse Workers and Steel and Woodworkers, and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, those

unions were leading the fight for social change. A lot of the old AFL unions were sort of just content to get a little wage increase, but let the government look after the social issues. I found it rather strange.

Q. When were you first hired by the AFL?

In 1968 I became an employee of the federation. Frank Bodie was executive secretary, which was a full time office of the federation. The executive decided they'd hire someone on as his assistant.

Q. That was fairly early in the history of the reconstituted Federation. Who was president at that time?

Well, Charlie Gilbert was the first president of the federation, followed by Jack Hampston. At the time I was hired, Roy Jamha was the president. That was in February of 68. Frank Bodie left in the summer. He went to work for the Northwest Territories government. He was labour commissioner or something like that. Of course, once he got up there, it wasn't long after that the Northwest Territories were having public hearings to develop their own labour act. Low and behold, the chairman of that commission was Ken Pugh, who happened to be the guy that was Manning's boy looking after all the labour relations in Alberta, wrote the Alberta Labour Act and was also head of the Board of Industrial Relations. Ken Pugh looked after all the labour matters for Mr. Manning, and now after Bodie went to the Territories Pugh became the chairman of the commission that would hand down similar type of legislation to the Territories. Very regressive legislation.

Q. So once Brodie had left, did the Federation begin to operate in a different manner?

After Bodie left, they brought in a fellow from BC, John McNiven. He was going to be executive secretary, but he was only here for less than a year. Then I became the Executive Secretary.

During those years, the federation grew. We saw a lot more militancy amongst the workers. Although we were still being saddled greatly with company unions. Some of these legal firms in this province were just having a heyday. I can remember when I was still with my local union before I started with the federation, probably a year before, I was in Fort McMurray organizing the first oil sands plant up there, Great Canadian Oil

Sands. Of course you got one of the people that was famous for helping set up company unions came out of Edmonton up into Fort McMurray. A guy by the name of Eric Lesfrud. He's now a judge of the province here. I believe he was involved with that kind of stuff. I believe a bunch of other lawyers, like David Ross and his father before him were also very much involved in setting up company unions. Neuman Thompson Acroyd, they've been around for years. I believe they made a fortune representing and setting up company unions. We went through all those struggles. I think the thing we can be most proud of during those years through the 70s was fighting for a lot of social programs that we're enjoying today. I remember the fight we had to get Medicare in this province. Alberta was the last province to come into Medicare. The only way they did it is the federal government held all their funding. They didn't want Medicare, and now they're the first province trying to get out of it. That fight's still going on. We saw the old age pension established. These things didn't come about easily. We had some of the politicians within the NDP federally and some of the provinces did a pretty good job. I think along with the labour movement doing a lot of pushing, we established these things. But a lot of what concerns me today is a lot of these programs that we were instrumental in getting, we see them being eroded today, and a good chance of losing them. I don't see the generation that's following us really taking on the fight to maintain those things. I hope they aren't lost, or we're going to have to see if they ever lose them, that fight's going to have to be started all over again by another generation down the road.

Q. What was the Labour Act like in those days?

The labour act was bad then.

Q. I've heard from other people that Ken Pugh was closely connected to Premier Manning, not at arms length from government as Chairman of the Industrial Relations Board. Would you care to comment on that?

That's right. Ken Pugh, the Chairman of the Labour Board reported directly to the premier. There was not an arms length relationship from government to the Board of Industrial Relations. That situation would never happen in any other province. It doesn't happen here anymore. I don't know where Ken Pugh got his expertise on labour, because he was a banker. All of a sudden he became an expert on labour issues.

In the early days, much before I got involved with the federation, they'd have all the government ministers sitting in the AFL conventions. Some of them acting as advisors to some of their convention committees. It was unbelievable. The government was running the show.

But that changed once the merger convention took place in 1958. It probably took a little bit of time for things to start to gel, but the AFL stopped inviting these government people to speak to the convention. We started inviting our friends in, leaders of the NDP and these kind of people. Labour leaders from other parts of the country, instead of bringing in the government people.

Q. Why do you think unions rely so heavily on lawyers these days, and how has it changed since you were with the AFL?

Those days, I don't think the unions had very much money to be spending on lawyers. Lawyers really, I think it's a bad thing that's happened over the years. There's too much involvement of lawyers in labour relations. My goodness, I see that just a regular grievance a worker has today, he takes it to the union who takes it to an arbitration board or something. Company's got lawyers and the union's got lawyers. I don't think this is the way to settle things. You end up lawyers writing collective agreements, settling the grievances. I don't think that's the way we should've been going. I don't know how you ever turn the clock back now.

Q. You said Roy Jamha was the President of the AFL when you came on staff. Can you tell us of your recollection of Roy's role in the labour movement?

Roy was quite a remarkable person. I first met him when he was organizing the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union in our plant. Then after we were organized, Roy was a servicing representative. He was very active, always on the go. He was very much for getting involved politically and getting involved with the NDP. Worked hard on that, to get the party founded. I don't recall exactly what year it was, he said Gene I'm having trouble walking once in a while. Then he found out he had multiple sclerosis. But he continued to carry on and do his work. He became president of the federation which was not a full-time position in those days. He ended up in the hospital flat on his back, couldn't even move as he was coming up for re-election, but he was re-elected. He was

well liked around the province. He was walking around with a cane, and then eventually ended up in a wheelchair. But he continued to function. I'm not sure what year Roy stepped down as president of the AFL and he went on as Chairman of the Workers Compensation Board.

Q. Did you work with Roy in your union before you both ended up at the AFL?

There was this guy Blenner Hasset I was telling you about earlier. We were in negotiations, I don't recall exactly what was going on across the table. But Roy said something Blenner Hasset didn't like, and Blenner Hasset stood up and Roy stood up and Blenner Hasset took a swing at him across the table. Then he fell down and Blenner Hasset fell down too. He was quite a guy. We walked out. We went downtown and told the vice president of the company we weren't going back in there as long as Blenner Hasset was there. Well low and behold, Blenner Hasset was fired. So this was the guy that would never have a union. We outlasted him.

Q. Getting the NDP started in Alberta was no easy task was it?

I can remember originally we had the long haul to get the NDP established and get it going. I think all the work we did in those work paid off down the road. We ended up with about 16 members in the house provincially. Unfortunately we're not there today, have to build back up again I guess. But then we went through those years with the high inflation in this country. Trudeau decided to bring in his wage and price controls. We had a big fight on that one, and a lot of energy spent there too.

Q. How did the AFL put pressure on the Social Credit government to implement social improvements?

The NDP was formed nationally between the labour movement and the CCF. But that didn't happen in Alberta. Of course Neil Reimer would know that a lot of the CCF were bucking the merger with the labour movement. It was really the labour movement that carried the day on bringing about the NDP in this province. Neil Reimer from our union was the first leader in Alberta.

Ted Grimm became the mayor of Medicine Hat. Ted and I were going to represent the local union at the founding convention of the party. The local paper got a list of people

that were going to this founding convention. The company was going to fire us. But we said we're going anyway. They said if we attended that convention we'd be fired. So we went. It was on a weekend. We were going on our own time, not the company's time. We came back, didn't know if we had a job on Monday or not. However, they didn't fire us. But they certainly threatened to. I think that strengthened the membership. Any time the company would threaten any of the people in the local, the membership I think it made them stronger.

You'd come out of your convention and take all of your resolutions from convention and things that needed to be done. In those days we always drafted up a brief that we would take to the government on the legislative changes we wanted to see. A good part of it would be about changes to the labour act and minimum wage and these types of things. But there was all kinds of other social issues we'd be bringing up also. My gosh I can remember, you think of some things that have come about today. It's not that many years ago we were in there telling them we just wanted legislation against any discrimination in housing. Because of race or one thing or another. We made a lot of progress in those areas. But we'd go down there to meet the cabinet, and they did meet us. But I can remember Ernest Manning. He would just sit there and scowl. I never saw that man smile. Just sort of tolerated these labour guys coming in here. He'd have all his cabinet. The odd cabinet minister would be appointed by the premier to speak on some subject. They'd tell us what a good job they're doing. That was about the end of it. Of course you're not going to get many changes from a government that's got most all the seats in the legislature until people start voting differently. But I guess also what happened those years, then it was sometime after that Social Credit started to slip. They got old and tired. Ernest Manning was writing his book expounding his philosophy on social conservatism. He really paved the way for Peter Lougheed. It was quite a nice transition from the old Social Credit to the Progressive Conservative. No difference in philosophy. But Lougheed came in with a bunch of new faces.

Q. Where do you see the labour movement going today?

I'm really concerned about where the labour movement is at today. I see the labour movement kind of falling back and not really taking a leadership role in the type of fight

that we took in the 60s and 70s. There's been some mergers that have strengthened some of the unions. But there's so much of the economy that's subject to what's going on with all this globalization. A lot of things I see is a big fight to take away the social programs that we gained. I don't see a real major fight being taken place to keep them. There are some skirmishes, and we've seen them take place, and quite effectively. But there certainly has to be more. We saw the fight with Medicare when they were trying to push the thing through the legislature on bringing in the private health care stuff. Many thousands of people came out and supported that type of thing. But I think the issues are still there. It's a matter of mobilizing the people. I think the labour movement has to get into the forefront on some of that stuff.

They've just quietly gone and opened the hospital in Calgary, in spite of that. There was hardly a ripple. The fight today, our fights were to get things and bring about some of these things and get them established. I remember through the CLC every year we had a program going on with political action type of programs, citizenship month. You'd get the whole labour movement behind it. We'd pick those kind of issues, whether it was pensions or Medicare or what have you. Pushed and pushed for these things. But I don't see those types of things being done now. What I see is these programs being eroded and taken away, and people sort of quietly taking it.

Q. Do you feel there is a problem of complacency in labour these days?

There's a lot of complacency amongst a lot of people. I think there's an awful lot of other people in our society that have benefited from the things the labour movement gained for them. But they sort of accepted that's the way things are. When I hear people that are saying, well we don't need Medicare, we'll look after our own. I think that becomes a little bit scary.

Q. We've entered into a new stage with globalization. How do you see that development affecting working people?

Globalization, that's an alarming thing that's going on. I think there's more people all the time being dropped off the bottom, going into the poverty group. The whole society's set up now with all this globalization. The way these multi national corporations are just moving their operations around the world. I just saw this morning General Motors

moving into Korea now. That means they'll be shutting down more North American plants. They move around anywhere in the world where they can exploit the people, cheap labour. And you've got certain people in North American society are gaining from this type of thing, and their incomes are going up. But there's thousands of others their incomes are falling. They can't even afford housing anymore, this type of thing. I look back from after the 2nd world war up until just the last few years, you didn't see the hunger and food banks and things in this country that you have today. There's more and more people depending on that all the time. I don't think we're going ahead. We're going backwards. That's the right wing agenda.

I would hope that something is going to wake us up to the challenge. I think the labour movement will probably have to take a lead in it. There's going to have to be some movement to the left in this country. We just can't continue this right-wing agenda, because we're just going straight downhill with it. |

[Break]

November 5, 2002

Q. the merger of the _____ and the _____ took place while you were at the Alberta Federation of Labour. Later, in the 80's the building trades pulled out of the Federation. What were the issues that caused that split?

When the merger took place between the building trades and industrial unions, the public sector were there but they weren't that influential at that point in time. That sector with the help of major industrial unions, was strengthened, like CUPE for instance. AUPE was nothing more than a company union province wide, run by government management people. But the thing is, our goal was to turn that around and bring them in to the house of labour and eventually make trade unionists out of them. That happened. Those public sector unions were growing, some of them starting to flex their muscles a little bit here and there. Then I remember the big squabble in the congress. Mainly the building trades were very concerned about the representation. Because building trades were made up of a local that might cover the whole province, or you might have 2 locals of plumbers and pipe fitters or carpenters or whatever province-wide. They would have quite a few thousand people, yet they didn't have that many representatives at the congress. Because

under the constitution the delegates were based on the local union structure. A lot of the public sector unions were growing and a whole bunch of little locals, some of them 10, 20 members, were getting representation at the congress convention. Of course it gave them disproportionate voting rights. That's basically what the big argument was about. That was building dissatisfaction. Then we saw the public sector unions, especially in Alberta, a lot of the CUPE locals, AUPE, PSAC, decided they would form within the federation a council of their own public sector unions. It then became a power play within the federation.

I don't know if they ever officially had a constitution or anything that official. But it was a loose organization. They met regularly. They just did it as their own group. Because of the numbers, they wanted to muscle their way around. At least a lot of the people there at that time wanted to muscle their way around in the convention. Especially when it came to voting on issues.

I can remember when I first came on with the federation back in the 60s and all through the 70s. It was generally accepted that the officers that were elected to the federation would be those people that represented their organizations provincially. It was always agreed, and worked out amongst the delegates and the people at the conventions, that there wouldn't be any lopsided representation. Various unions in various sectors would have representation on the federation. The federation was a provincial body, had to represent the whole movement. Then you had groups that decided they wanted to start having a power play and getting more people and defeating other people. We saw cases where a couple of people came from unions that had been very influential in building the labour movement in this country and in this province, being defeated and no longer having a seat on the federation executive. There's something wrong with that.

Rather than sit back and say, look we've got our share, we've got our representation, we don't need to fill up a bunch of other spots. The broader the representation you can have on an executive board of a federation, the better.

Q. You were hired by the AFL as the Executive Secretary, a position that no longer exists. As well, there were not full-time elected officers. What prompted that change to the AFL leadership structure?

The executive secretary was the full time officer then. Then we had an assistant. Then the move was that there should be a full time president. That came about when Reg Basken was the president. There were certain factions within the federation that wanted Basken out of there and Reg wasn't about to run for full time president. He had his own work within his own union. Then it became wide open, who was going to be running for president. Harry Kostiuk ran and was elected, and Walter Dorskosh also sought the presidency at that time, from the building trades. That carried on for not more than a year or two. The move was to get rid of the executive secretary position and make it a full time elected position of secretary treasurer. I suppose there's all kinds of arguments in an organization why that's the right thing to do and a democratic way to do things. But recognizing that the executive secretary was always responsible to that executive board and answered to that board and carried out the policies, and if the executive secretary didn't carry out the policies of the federation, then I guess he or she wouldn't be there. But that position would also, even with an elected president that might be changing meant that you wouldn't be changing both your full time officers at the same time. There would be some continuity. However that was the wishes at that time that the constitution was changed.

I think there was some backlash because of that. But it's like one time, and I suppose that'll happen throughout different periods of history. We had a lot of activity from United packinghouse workers of America. Those people that were active in that union at that time, once they started merging with meat cutters and retail clerks, the old AFL unions, those people that were involved in the packinghouse workers, they didn't have the same influence.

The first year they changed it, I don't think anybody was out to play an opposition role. At that time they had their ducks in order. I ran the first year and served one term as secretary treasurer. But then the move was on. Certain people within the fed decided it was time Mitchell went. I ran, but Ernie Sentes was elected. He's out of the insulators, a small local in Calgary. I guess the question was asked, were the building trades opposing me? That wasn't so. You may have had some people in the building trades supporting Sentes, but I generally had a pretty good relationship with the building trades. I think the biggest opposition to myself came from the public sector.

Q. What were some of the important issues facing labour while you were at the Federation and what gains did they achieve?

There were a lot of important issues. I think those years during the 60s and 70s were the years we made some of the greatest gains in things we were striving for across this country. The membership of the unions was growing. We were organizing workers. We'd slowed down the growth of company unions. It wasn't easy. When I started with the federation in 1968, the membership at that time across the province was 35,000. When I left in 1981 it was 120,000 and it has never reached that mark again.

The federation was in the forefront of a lot of things going on in this province, and recognized publicly. The congress was active during those years too. We used to have something called citizenship month. Every year we'd go out on a theme where we would fight for UIC or pensions, Medicare, these are the types of issues we'd take and make a month long campaign out of it. I think we can be pretty proud of some of the things we established. I know we got the Canada Pension Plan established in this country, and the majority of people in this country had no pension plan - And still don't. But they do have the Canada Pension Plan today, but it's inadequate. Even though we got it established, we wanted to get it improved. But the fight over the years with insurance companies and employers, they don't want that. In recent years, the big push is for everybody to look after themselves in their old age. You invest your own money in the stock market and mutual funds. Then you wake up one morning and find out you've lost everything. I feel sorry for a lot of people who are ready for retirement today, and find out everything they're depending on is gone.

I remember back to my own father. When he quit working, it was before the Canada Pension Plan came in, so there was no pension plan. For all the years of service he had with a company like Cominco, I think he had \$100 a month. That's all there was. There was no CPP.

Premier Manning said we would never have Medicare in Alberta, that was his attitude. We don't need it. He opposed it. But the federal government had the clout when it came to the money. The only reason Alberta came in, is because they could get all these federal

dollars that were going to go into Medicare. So they reluctantly came in, but it was the last province in Canada to do so.

We raised all these issues with the government. You talk about a cap in hand session, that's what it was. But the big purpose in the federation going there is that we were able to generate some publicity for our own position with the press and the public. So you did those things. You didn't do it because you were going to make very much headway with Ernest Manning. But there was public support for some of these issues. If you finally brought enough pressure to bear from the labour movement and outside influence, eventually they might bend on some of these things. That did happen. We did have a lot of influence.

Q. How much influence was the AFL able to bring to bear on the Manning government? The labour movement was instrumental in getting the New Democratic Party off the ground in this province.

Q. What was the relationships between labour and the NDP at that time?

Nationally it was a merger between the labour movement and the old CCF. But in Alberta, the CCF didn't come along. They were a bunch of armchair socialists that liked to sit around and debate the ills of society, but they never seemed to be interested in getting people elected. They certainly didn't seem to want to come along with the labour movement in forming the NDP. It was really the labour movement on their own on this. The officers of the federation at that time were very active. There was a change of attitude taking place. It didn't take too long after that, that the invitations to government people to attend our conventions didn't go out anymore. We thought, we've got our own friends. If we're going to promote the party, then we better have the leader of the NDP talk to our convention, not the minister of labour, who's diametrically opposed to everything we stand for.

That was before Lougheed's time. He came in during the 70s. It was before his time that we stopped inviting anybody from the government.

Q. Roy Jamha was the President of the AFL and late the Chairman of the Workers' Compensation Board. How did his appointment to the WCB come about?

It's rather interesting what happened there and it was an opportunity for Roy Jamha to keep himself involved. His MS was worsening somewhat but he was still functioning very well. But to be able to go full time with the Workers' Compensation Board gave him an opportunity to have an income and also continue to work on behalf of injured workers in this province. Peter Lougheed appointed him. But I think all the medical evidence at that time told Peter Lougheed that Roy Jamha wouldn't be around that long able to function but he fooled him. Roy stayed around and was appointed as chairman of the board. The federation nominated him. In those days the nominees from the federation were accepted. Peter Kolba from the packinghouse workers was appointed as a labour representative to the board. At that time you had a chairman of the board and a workers representative and employer representative. What they've done with Workers Compensation Board since Roy Jamha and Peter Kolba were finished there was restructure the whole thing. Now we've got a corporation down there and they're paying people corporation salaries with money that should be going to injured workers. It's a terrible system they have down there now. It is far from what we ever knew the workers compensation board to be.

Q. The Gale Commission recommended a number of important changes to the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Did those recommendations result in the changes contemplated?

That was another accomplishment that came about. I know Neil Reimer sat on the commission. We'd been pushing the government to get some health and safety legislation in place in this province, so they set up the Gale commission and we got Neil Reimer put on the Commission. The labour movement certainly made our wishes known at that time. The report that came out at that time was excellent and recommended setting up mandatory health and safety committees at the worksite. That resulted in legislation that was good for working people. The report was accepted across the country, but since that time it's been gutted in Alberta. It's disappointing. You get those things, then you get a different bunch of people running the government down here, and they decide they're

going to gut everything that works. All they're doing is listening to the employers. The employers never did want this. They didn't want health and safety committees, they fought that all the way. That was for all worksites, not just unionized worksites. The employers thought, if you're going to have health and safety committees, that's just the first step to people getting a union. We also helped to introduce the idea of a Workers' Health Centre which has since been formed and is still functioning.

Then the government got rid of their Occupational Health and Safety inspectors and let companies inspect each other. It's like saying, go find yourself guilty of something. They aren't going to do it. Self inspection has never worked anywhere and it's never going to. When they first started out the health and safety program, they hired and trained health and safety inspectors. Things started to work. But it's all been gutted. Now the accident rates are higher than ever. Now the employers are all screaming because the premiums are going up.

Q. What do you recall as the highlights of your trade union experience?

I think the highlight of my career was in the 60s and 70s when we saw major growth in the labour movement. We saw some militancy appearing in this province. People came out of the shadows that they were under during the Manning government years. Although the philosophy of the government didn't change that much, there were some improvements when Lougheed came along for a while. But the right wing has really taken over that conservative party. They're right back where they were 40 years ago. We made a lot of gains. I feel good that we got Medicare in this province. We established the Canada Pension Plan. The health and safety things. I think we can be proud of those accomplishments. But what concerns me now is you see that these things are being eroded away. They're being taken away from us. Another thing we wanted to establish in this province was no fault auto insurance. We never did. Now they're saying Alberta has the worst drivers in the country, Edmonton has. These rates are going sky high and people won't be able to afford to drive their automobiles anymore because they got all the lawyers involved. You drive down the streets today and you see all these billboards of injury lawyers. Get in an accident, come and see us, we'll go to court. We're all paying for that kind of stuff. I guess probably the other major accomplishment was the fact that we

got the NDP established. We had a very effective opposition in the house at one time. That's not so today. People are going to have to wake up in this province and start taking on some of these fights all over again. It seems to me that's what happens. Each generation has to renew the fight. I think a lot of people grew up in a period of relative prosperity in this province and this country. They took a lot of these things for granted. We're losing them now.

I don't regret a thing. I feel good about a lot of the things we did.

Q. Trade union organizing is not always an easy thing to accomplish. Looking back, how difficult was organizing in Alberta?

Organizing in Alberta was not easy. It took guts. If you stood up and said you wanted a union, you generally got run out the gate. When I was in the plant, I always had the attitude that they're never going to fire me for poor workmanship or not doing my job. I'll be the best process operator they got. But I'm going to stand up for what I believe in. I defied them. In fact, I remember one day the superintendent came in and saw me and said, I've just had orders from the top to fire you. I said, oh? He said, somebody complained that you were talking union to him. I said, well what are you going to do about it? He says, I'm not going to do anything. He says, you're a good operator, I want you here, but just watch yourself. That's as far as that one went that day. But those are the types of things you did. You had to fight for these things. I remember when I first came to Alberta and it was not many months later, and our first child was born. Of course I had to pay for that out of my pocket, and I didn't have very much money. There was no Medicare. In fact they wouldn't even let me in the hospital room. I had to look through the window in the hallway to see the baby and my wife. That's the way they operated in those days. Today the fathers go right in and help deliver the babies. Those things stick in your mind. During one of the very early campaigns just after we got the party going, I went to a little town of Walsh on the Alberta/Sask border just east of Medicine Hat. I was campaigning for the NDP candidate at that time and went to this one house and knocked on the door. This fellow opened the door and I introduced myself. He said, you know, I just took my wife to the hospital this morning. He says, she's very ill, I don't know whether she's going to make it. I looked in the door. There were about 4 little tykes, all

bare assed, running around, no clothes on. He said he had no food in the house. I told him I was representing the NDP and he got belligerent. He said, you get out of here, we don't need you because Mr. Manning will look after us. I couldn't believe it. That's the way he looked after them? I was a young guy then and I thought, there's better ways of doing things than that. That's why I was prepared to fight for a lot of things. I put my own livelihood and my family's on the line at times. But so be it, I don't regret it.

Q. What were some of the early influences that set you on the path of a labour activist?
There are a lot of things that influence you in your life. When I grew up in BC in the 30s we were pretty poor. We lived in a small village and my dad worked on building the power dams along the Kootenay River. He'd work in the summer, then get laid off. He was a proud man. As a young guy sitting down talking to him he said, well you know the guys that stayed on later in the fall and winter were the ones that gave the boss the bottle on pay day. He said, I worked hard for that money and it wasn't very much and it hardly put any bread on the table and I sure as hell wasn't going to give a bottle of whiskey to the boss. That's the type of guy he was. I suppose that had a lot of influence on me. Then we moved to Trail in 1942 during the early years of the war. My dad went to work for Cominco at that time and he joined the union. When I finished school I went to work in the dairy. I was working there as plant superintendent. I decided I'm not staying around this town any longer. I had a job offer and went to Medicine Hat where I got a job in a grocery warehouse unloading boxcars and stacking stuff in the warehouse. They didn't pay us very much. I remember the boss coming around one day and he said, we're going to give you a raise, \$5 a month but I don't want you to tell anybody else. This is the way they operated. Then it wasn't long after that, they're coming around before xmas and want me to put \$5 in the pot to buy the boss a xmas present. I said I can't even buy my wife and baby a xmas present, why the hell should I buy the boss one? I remember talking to some of those fellows in that warehouse at that time. They weren't very happy either. I said, you ever thought about getting a union formed in here? My gosh, they'd run off. They'd run in a different direction. You didn't talk about those things.

Then I heard the northwest nitro plant was opening up in a few months, so I applied and got on there. I was involved in getting the Northwest Nitro plant organized. That was a battle and it was a continuous battle even after we got it organized.

I had some other fun experiences. I did some organizing work around Calgary area. I remember going into Ft. McMurray in the early years when it was first developing. Great Canadian Oil Sands, Sun Oil. First organizing drive in there. We had some fun times in there too. Difficult times. Took a lot of years, but the union finally got that place organized too.

Q. A trade union leader leads a pretty busy life. It is sometimes hard on their families.

How did your family cope with your union involvement?

Our first child was a daughter. We lost her at the age of 13 to cancer. Then we have our son - a couple of years younger. About a year or 2 later we adopted a young boy, about 5 at that time. A year after that we got a little girl who was 4. They're all grown up with their own families today.

My wife is very supportive. If I hadn't had a wife that was supportive of me, it would have been very difficult. When involved full time with the labour movement, you spend a lot of time away from home. If I do have any regrets, I'd probably regret not spending as much time as I'd like to with my kids when they were young.

Q. What do you see for future generations of working people in this province?

I don't know what's to say. I just hope that the labour movement in this province can get back to a position of influence. I would hope to see the day, and I hope I live long enough to see the day when there's a change of political thinking in this province, that people aren't just going to continually go out like sheep and vote for these right wing governments. It's been going on for so many years. You really don't even have any meaningful political debate in this province anymore.