

Susan Keeley

March 9, 2007

Susan: This was presented to the laundry workers from the 1995 strike at the old General Hospital. It was presented by the National Action Committee for the Status of Women. They always awarded a Woman of the Year presentation. This is the first year that they awarded it to a group of women, and it was for the actions that they took in 1995.

Q: This is March 9, 2007, an interview with Susan Keeley, taking place in Calgary in the CUPE area office. Susan, you've been an activist and a union representative. You've been involved in many things involving working people, involving women, involving social action. Tell us a bit about your upbringing and some of the early influences that led you to choose the course that you followed.

Susan: The first thing I have to say is that my early influences weren't what brought me here. My early influences were non-political. Our family wasn't allowed to talk politics at home when I was growing up. That was not a subject that was ever discussed. What political party my parents belonged to or voted for at any given time was never discussed. They quite often would put up political signs in the yard, but it actually had no bearing as to whether they voted for that party or not. It was just that they had a good corner and people asked them to do it and they said okay. I grew up not having any clue how my father voted. It wasn't until many years later, shortly before he died, that I found out he

voted Liberal, which was unusual in Alberta. But it was not a topic that he would talk about. Talking about wages or what kind of money he made was also not a topic.

Workers' rights were never an issue. It was basically bread and butter issues. We were a large Irish Catholic family that just tried to make ends meet from day to day. We had some rich relatives, but we were the poor cousins. So maybe being a poor cousin helped make me believe what I do believe, that we should all be treated equally instead of as poor cousins. But certainly my upbringing wasn't what really influenced me.

Q: Where were you born and raised, and what did your parents do?

Susan: I was born in High River. My family lived in Nanton at the time. There was no hospital in Nanton then as there is now. We moved up to Calgary when I was about two months old. My mother was born in Calgary, my father was either Claresholm or Banff, one of the two. I know he lived in both. My dad was a traveling salesman most of the time. When we were kids he'd usually be gone Monday to Friday, and come home for weekends. It wasn't until I had my job as a daycare worker that I found out that he had worked at the CIL plant, and in fact was a shop steward there. He'd never ever talked about that when we were growing up. The only reason I found out is I'd been telling him the story about what was happening at work and how things were kind of unsafe on the job. He said, well if I was your steward we'd be hitting the bricks. I'm going, how do you know that phrase? So that's how I found out. It was never something that he really ever talked about.

Q: So you became a social worker, went into daycare.

Susan: Yes, I went into daycare as a career and worked there for about 10 years. My first job was a non-union private daycare centre, horrible conditions. I actually got fired after six weeks because I complained about the conditions. The boss overheard me, so I was out the door. I was basically responsible for 10 infants from the age of six weeks to 18 months, by myself. If I needed a break there was nobody to go in and watch them when I left. Any time that I would take a break, we'd have to leave the door open and hope we'd hear if there was a problem. Shortly after that I got a job with the City of Calgary at one of their daycares. It was night and day. The city had good standards on their own, and that was prior to the provincial regulations coming in. They felt that they had a social responsibility to show what a good daycare should be and how it should be run. They also felt that it was important to provide an avenue for single moms in particular to have somewhere where their children could be safe and secure while they went out to work rather than staying on welfare. We had fairly good conditions in those early days. The provincial regulations came in and they made the standards worse than what the municipal had.

Q: What years did you work at the daycare?

Susan: I started December 10th, 1973. I worked there until '82 when I became business agent for Local 38, the City of Calgary Inside Workers. And I went back for a year in '87.

Q: Talk a bit about those municipal and provincial standards.

Susan: We had ratio of one to five with two to four-year olds. I think it was something like one to seven with the five-year olds. When the provincial regulations came in, it was considerably more than that. I haven't kept up to date with what they are right now, but we know that our group sizes increased tremendously after the provincial regulations came in. The city had a policy of only hiring people that had training. The provincial regulations at that time didn't have any requirements for training. The city continued to hire people with training, but there was no longer any requirement to do that.

Q: So at that point you became business agent for CUPE Local 38.

Susan: Yes, in '82.

Q: What led you in that direction?

Susan: As I mentioned, I started in December of '73. In January of '74 my local had a motion coming up to raise the union dues. They were going to raise it on a flat-fee basis. It was something like \$2.55 a pay period for union dues, and they were going to increase it considerably. So a group of us from the daycares came out to the meetings and said, we can't afford this. You're going to take food off our tables if you take this. We were making maybe about \$2.50 an hour at that point, so it wasn't a lot of money in wages. While we were there it took three meetings, but we ended up going to a percentage basis in union

dues. The first meeting we defeated the raise. The next meeting they gave the notice of motion to go to percentage. Then the third meeting we actually did succeed in getting the percentage, which meant that the daycare workers who were amongst the lowest paid of the city inside workers actually saw a decrease in their union dues. The people at the top saw a huge increase. There was one brother in particular, Neil McDougall, who was near the top of the range within the local, who actually got up and spoke in favour and basically made everyone feel guilty about not proceeding with the percentage dues. So he was a real favourite of the daycare workers.

Q: He started out as a rabble rouser within your union.

Susan: Well not so much a rabble rouser, but saying, hey we can't. . . What I really learned is that you had the right to come out and say what you believed, and to get assistance from your brothers and sisters. Through that process the local learned that there were daycare workers working for the city. We had so many job categories within the local, the local knew that some of the lower categories in their pay grid, there were no people in those positions because they were so lowly paid. All of a sudden they found out they had a category of daycare workers and they did exist. As a result of that, the local went to the city and talked to them about our wages and how low we were paid. We got a 15% wage increase in between contracts because of that. That was also basically the real impetus to get the job evaluation program off the ground. Through that job evaluation program, the daycare workers received another 47% wage increase. So that sort of sealed the deal. I realized that by working together with other workers, you can achieve an awful

lot. We were quite happy about that. After that process went through, I don't think I missed a local meeting unless I was sick or off on union business.

Q: You worked in one daycare. How many daycares did the city have?

Susan: There were three daycares that they had.

Q: And how many people?

Susan: Around 50 or 60 people. Maybe a bit more, because we did have a number of part-timers as well.

Q: So you took action that helped about 60 low-paid workers.

Susan: I don't know if you can say that I did that. Our local did that. All we did was bring forward the problems. There were people in the local that helped find solutions. I'm not sure I can take credit for that.

Q: But you took action on it.

Susan: Yes, but there were other daycare workers that did that as well. Unfortunately, after that process was through, I was one of the few that actually continued going to the meetings. I would end up having to be the one to go back and tell the members, this is

what's happening. I very quickly became the shop steward. Then, liking what I saw, I just got more and more involved. So I ended up being a trustee for a period of time, and then an executive member, and then into the business agent position.

Q: How long were you a business agent?

Susan: From '82 to '87 and '88 to '90.

Q: Along the way you met a lot of activists. Who were some of your major influences?

Susan: I guess one of the earliest people that I remember, other than Neil McDougall, was John Corcoran. I think he was chief steward. Jean Ross, who was like a mentor to me. There were very few women who were actually involved on a regular basis in the local membership meetings. Sometimes it would be just Jean and myself, sometimes Barb Lawson. Then throughout the years more and more women got involved as well. Orlando Campo was our national rep when I first started, a very strong trade unionist, scared the shit out of me. I was really afraid to ever disagree with him, because he was very assertive and had this big booming voice. I think if I'd met him when I was a bit older I would've gotten to know him a lot better. But I was always just a little afraid of him. That was my local. Then I got involved in our district council and then our labour council. When I got involved with the labor council, probably one of the biggest influences was Bill Paterson. He basically took me under his wing, tried to educate me whether I wanted it or not. He had very definite ideas and made sure that we all knew

them, and was a very good influence in that he really did teach us that you had the right to stand up and say what you believed in. If you disagreed this time, that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be disagreeing all the time. We would have huge fights and then go on to the next issue and be the best of buddies. I wish that we had more of that today, that people felt that we could have good healthy debates, and just because you disagree with them you're not the enemy. That was some of the things I learned from Bill, as well as you had to start the meeting exactly on time. When I first became president of the labour council, my first executive meeting I came about five minutes late. That wasn't unusual for my local, because my local never started until you had quorum, which meant 10 or quarter after the hour. So being five minutes late I didn't think was any big deal. But Bill certainly made known that it was a very big deal. I never forgot that and I was never late again. Some of the other people that had a lot of influence would've been Art Roberts, who was basically, if not retired, very close to retirement at that time. Harley Horne. I remember spending a lot of time with Harley, who was probably the most down-to-earth person I've ever met in my life. Not concerned with appearances, just what you felt and did were important. Pat Lanahan was a fairly big influence, though I didn't have a lot of opportunity to get to know him. But when I was first involved in the labour council, he was in the back row and would get up and speak as a retiree. A very powerful speaker, even though he'd been retired for a long time. He was a very powerful speaker, very knowledgeable about worker issues. I always tended to agree with what he said, versus some of the other delegates.

Q: You mentioned when you were president of the labour council you went from being business agent for local 38, but president wasn't a full-time position?

Susan: No, the president of the labour council was never full time in Calgary. We had an executive secretary, which was Bill Paterson until he retired, and now Gord Christie. I became president of the labour council before I became business agent. I got elected in June of 1979. I was fulfilling the end of a term. The previous president had been elected in January and then resigned by April or May; so we had the elections in June. Then I think I was there for two or three years. Stepped down for one year and then came back for another two or three years.

Q: And during that time you were still business agent?

Susan: The second time I was business agent.

Q: So that's how many years as business agent?

Susan: The business agent was '82 to '90 minus a year. So I was '79 to about '82 or '83, then I stepped down for a year and came back for one or two more terms.

Q: Women faced a lot of challenges in those days in being elected or holding positions or commanding respect. Can you tell us some of your experiences in asserting yourself so you could take your rightful place?

Susan: In some respects it was easier in the early days, because there weren't very many women and the women that were involved did tend to command a lot of respect.

Following Jean Ross was kind of easy, because she was very forceful in making sure that people listened to her. One of the reasons that I decided to come on national staff was I was tired of the difference women candidates for election were treated than the men. You never heard about men and their sexual activities, or assumed sexual activities, when it came to election. But when I would run, I would get people going around saying that I was either frigid or I was very easy. I was either nymphomatic or I was frigid. Some of those statements were from the same person, because people that he told it to came back to me. I was getting quite tired of that type of treatment.

Q: You're talking about union elections.

Susan: Union elections, yes.

Q: And in the labour council?

Susan: The labour council, I think just because of the timing, I know there was a lot of people that wouldn't vote for me because I was a woman, and this is really a place for men. There were certainly some strong ideas from some of the building trades in particular, but not just them. Those were in the days that I remember transit getting up and complaining that the city of Calgary actually hired women to drive buses, and they

shouldn't be. Women can't do that job; so they really shouldn't be hired. So there were some, but I think I lucked out just in the timing following Jean and gaining the respect of some of the men that were more progressive than others. But I do know that other women have had even worse times than I have.

Q: You were involved in much more than just the union and the labour council. You were involved in a lot of social actions. Tell us about some of the experiences you had.

Susan: One of the ones that is really dear to my heart is the Chilean community. After the coup a number of Chileans came to Calgary. The labour council worked very closely with the Calgary Chilean Association. In 1982, I was president then, because that's when I went down to Chile. The Chilean Association raised the funds to send me down there to see what was happening down there in '82. By '82 people in Chile were really starting to fight back. They'd been oppressed for a long time, almost shell-shocked. My impression is that they're very similar to Canadians in social thoughts and family thoughts. It took them a while before they could regroup to really fight back, and they were really starting to fight back at that time. I was able to go there for about 12 days and meet with a number of unions and women's groups and peace groups and different social activism groups that were there. Most of the meetings were illegal. At that point the only meetings you could have would be church-sponsored meetings. The Junta knew there were two things that they couldn't take away from the Chileans without an immediate rebellion, and that was soccer and the church. Over 80% of the Chileans are Catholic and they have very strong Catholic ties and beliefs. So they knew if they tried to take either of those

away that they would have an immediate revolution. So they tended to stay away from those two activities. So if the workers wanted to have a social function or a political function, they would either have it at the church or in a soccer field. They tended not to be bothered in those places. Any other meeting was considered illegal and subject to the secret police coming in.

Q: What kind of living conditions did you find there at that time?

Susan: You could see that a lot of the people that I dealt with, their places had been in better condition before. But they were rundown; they couldn't afford to fix things. For example, this one house that I was billeted at, the patio door was broken and they couldn't afford to fix it. The vehicles were in such bad shape by then that in order to get them to start they'd have to push them downhill, and then you'd have to run and jump in. You could see that they'd had better times before. But if we went to the outskirts of the cities, particularly Santiago, there were just horrible conditions for people. They were living in shanties and sheds and any building material that they could find and sort of prop up to make some sort of covering over them. There were hundreds and thousands of people living in those at that time. My understanding is that those are now gone, that there has been more affordable housing. But I still have a very clear image in my mind when I think of this one woman who was pregnant with a little tot by her feet, standing in front of a plywood shack that had holes for windows and doors, but no coverings. That was burnt into my head, and I'll never forget it. We did take a couple of days and go out to the coast. We went to Vina del Mar in Valparaiso. Valparaiso and Vina del Mar are like night

and day. The rich people live in Vina del Mar and the poor people are in Valparaiso. To see the absolute poverty in one section and then you go almost right next door and see this incredible... it was amazing. Pinochet had a pink palace in Vina del Mar that was up on the hill that was incredible. I thought it was a school at first; then they told me it was his palace. That really cemented the view that our society isn't a very fair society.

Q: Then after you left Local 38, was that when you went on to be national representative?

Susan: Yes. That would've been August of 1990.

Q: In your favourite city, Edmonton?

Susan: I moved to Edmonton to take my job. I knew a lot of people there, but I certainly developed a lot of strong relationships there. If they'd been a bit closer to the mountains and to my family, I probably would've stayed.

Q: Tell us about your experiences as a national rep, and some of the outstanding actions you've been involved in.

Susan: There are certainly a lot of them. My first assignment was Edmonton East, doing Vegreville, St. Paul, Elk Point, Wainwright, Lloydminster, Viking. Met some wonderful people, very down-to-earth, just so appreciative of any assistance that their national rep

could give them. They weren't the big city folks that I was used to. They didn't have a lot of the big city issues either, because in those communities their bosses tended to be their neighbour or their cousin's wife. There was always some connection with them. One of my fondest memories was in St. Paul where we did an information picket.

...had it in her back yard, and they had pizza and beer for people who came out, and they were drawing their picket posters. Over the fence leaned their boss saying, whatcha doing? He wasn't upset. He understood. Extencicare is an international corporation, and he understood the issues. He didn't have a lot of say in it. So when we did have the information picket, he brought out coffee and told us that if we wanted to go rest they had a gazebo on the property that we could go sit in. He was quite pleasant about it. But that's your small town. You know everybody. When you're going to take an action, it could be your next door neighbor or it could be your cousin's wife that's sitting across the table from you. So that was one of my favorite things. Another was Salem Manor Nursing Home in Leduc. Dave will remember this, because Dave was my regional director at the time. We were trying to get their first collective agreement. We were really down to the crunch. Dave and I were sitting in the boardroom trying to come up with a counter-offer that we could maybe get the employer to agree to, and we get a phone call. One of the members called and said, we just thought we'd let you know what's going on. We asked, what's going on? Well, we're occupying the building, we're having a sit-in. I went, and you're doing this because...? Basically it was the employer had terminated one of the labour-friendly managers, because she had told the boss that if there was a picket line – because we were close to a possible strike – that if there was a picket line she would support her workers and wouldn't cross. So she got fired. So immediately upon that

happening, the staff just took over the lobby of the nursing home. They called us up and said, if you wanna come, this is what we're doing. So we got down there. They had phoned family members and said this is what we're doing. The people that were on shift continued doing their work so that none of the residents were at risk. But one by one the members were going up to the administrator. When Dave and I walked in, one of them was wagging her finger in his nose. One of the residents was sitting there and was trying to push people out of the way and she said, get out of my way, I can't see what's going on. One of the management fellows that was maintenance was set to work bringing in chairs for everyone that was coming in. So when Dave and I walked in, the administrator was going through all this and looked up and saw us as if we were going to be his saviours. We just went, oh well, let them go to it. We basically occupied until the employer... At one point he came back and said, we can't do anything because it's a board decision, so we'll deal with it at the next board meeting. The employees said, not good enough. Eventually they had to call all the board members and get permission to bring this woman back. Finally they called her back in. In the meantime, Dave had brought in hamburgers for everybody. He went to a local burger joint and brought hamburgers in. Just before they finally said they would take her back, we were arranging to get sleeping bags and stuff in. That was one of my favourite actions. The next time we were at the bargaining table, the employer said, well I don't like this point. We said, ya but we do. He said, oh okay, then sign it. But I don't like this one. Ya but we do. Okay. So we finally got a deal.

Q: ?? We organized the nurses.

Susan: In the midst of all this, the nurses at the facility who weren't organized indicated that they would be interested. So we phoned the United Nurses and said, if you come down right now, we'll send the nurses across the street and they'll sign up. So while we were having our occupation, all the nurses signed up and UNA became the bargaining agent there as well. So, fond memories.

Q: That was in Leduc.

Susan: Leduc, ya.

Q: You were on a lot of picket lines that weren't exactly as you describe some of these rural events.

Susan: Let me think, there's been so many. The laundry workers' strike is a whole chapter in itself. I was a servicing representative for Local 8 at the time. Len Fagnam was the president. Len and I were called into a meeting. Early afternoon the meeting was called. They said, we have some news to give to the employees of the laundry, and we'd like you to be there as union reps. So we went down, the employer called all the laundry workers in, and told them that they were going to get two weeks' notice. They would get the two weeks' notice or pay in lieu, and thank you very much, but goodbye. They were contracting out the laundry to K-Bro at the time. This was occurring after those employees had taken a 23% wage decrease about two years prior in order to save their jobs. So people were just a tad upset. We met with them immediately after the employer

left the room. We decided that they were just so upset that they should just go home sick, because they weren't going to be safe working in that environment. It can be fairly dangerous at the best of times. We said, just go home sick, we'll tell the employer that you're all off. So we told the employer. We also then said, come back this evening, we'll get a meeting room at the Bridgeland Community Center and we'll meet and discuss what we're going to do. When we came back to the meeting there were some very irate people about what had happened to them, just 2 weeks' notice after everything they had done for this employer. We talked about different options, including doing an information picket and things like that. Several of the members got up. One in particular, Yvette Lynch, got up and said, I'm a single mom with two kids, but I say an information picket isn't enough. We're outta here. So the decision was not to go with the information picket but to go with a full-blown walkout the next morning. It was their decision and it was unanimous. That night I phoned Dave and said, Dave, you might want to come down to Calgary, because at 5:30 tomorrow morning we're going to be having a walkout. So at 5:30 the next morning we were on the picket line in front of the laundry. It was probably one of the most exciting times I've been through as far as watching the members stand up for themselves and grow strong every day. You could really see the strength grow. There was one woman, well there was more than one woman, that was very afraid of standing in front of the laundry tubs. She was so afraid that somebody would get hurt. Well the very next day she was the one there with her arms folded saying, you ain't crossing. So just to see the strength that each day built on those workers was probably the most phenomenal thing I've seen in my life. The support that was gathered, even in Calgary where the majority of citizens were in support of these people. The citizens actually saw that these

people had really been unfairly treated. Watching it grow day by day and building in support. Things like the Police Association coming in and donating \$500 to the strike just a few days after they'd arrested ? on the picket line; it was kinda cool. It was, I think, a very important time in our history.

Q: And that grew.

Susan: It grew. Each day it grew in support. It grew from just the laundry workers at the General Hospital. The next day the laundry workers at the Foothills Hospital walked out. They were members of AUPE. The next day other members of Local 8 at the General walked out. We had people at the Holy Cross walking out, at Rocky View walking out. We had Health Sciences members walking the picket line; we had union members not going out on strike but walking the picket line. We had doctors coming by with doughnuts. We had citizens at large coming by to give support. I've never seen that kind of support before or since.

Q: How do you recall it going from there?

Susan: There was a few things that happened. During the time that we were out, Dave Rutherford, who's a radio announcer, was away on vacation. His replacement ended up being fairly supportive of our members. The phone calls that came in to that radio show were all in support. The day that Dave Rutherford came back, he came back on a huge rant about how horrible this situation was, that here's these workers that are defying the

law because they'd been ordered back to work, not only by the labour board, but also by the courts. So he went on this rant and we started seeing at that point more calls coming in opposing us. So we were seeing that. Then at the same time the nurses had a meeting to decide whether they were going to walk as well, and they decided not to at that point. That was sort of the first stalling button.

Q: Talk about how the process went, and how you felt about the settlement.

Susan: As I mentioned, it was building each day. One day our national president Judy Darcy came down and we toured all the sites that were out on the line. We had a bus that took picketers from site to site to site. The national president of NUPGE came down one day. He stayed at the AUPE site; it was gathering national coverage at that point. Ralph Klein actually got involved by, even though he said he wasn't going to blink, he phoned the division president at 3 in the morning saying, we've got to get this settled. He was the one that actually pushed to get to the bargaining table to get a settlement. The people that went to the bargaining table was our national president, Judy Darcy; the provincial president of AUPE at the time was Carolyn Dean; Len Fagnan and John Maltose were also there from CUPE, as well as Reynolds from AUPE. Terry Mutton, the division president, was there as well. They went into bargaining. I had a choice of going into the bargaining table or staying out on the line. I felt that I was better used on the picket line maintaining support and making sure everything worked well. I was basically the police liaison as well. I just felt that my place was with the workers more than at the bargaining table. They eventually came to a settlement and brought it forward to the members. The

settlement wasn't what the members wanted. There were a lot of tears and frustration. But I think everyone in the end realized that because we had reached the pinnacle and we were starting to see a down slope on support, not a major one but it was starting, we were starting to hear negative things that maybe we had gone as far as we could. Our members did realize that they could stand up and walk back to work with dignity, that they did save their jobs for two years. They were able to now look at possible retraining, redeployment with the employer, or severance packages that hadn't been there before. So while they didn't get total assurances that there would be no contracting out, they did save their jobs for two years. So while they weren't happy about it, they did go back to work. The morning that they did go back, we went in with them, went in singing. The people went in with their heads held high, which was important. We weren't happy at the time with the settlement, but we're not sure in hindsight that things might've been worse if we had stayed. If the trend had stopped from growing and building to going downwards, we could've ended up with a lot of problems. So maybe the settlement was the best. But we were looking at it at that point as possibly building to a general strike, which could've changed the face of this province for a long time.

Q: Why do you think that didn't continue?

Susan: I think that, while we had the support of a lot of the workers, quite honestly having the nurses say no really did deflate a lot of the enthusiasm. Having Dave Rutherford go on air, we actually banned them the last couple of days, we banned our

members from listening to him because he was so mean and nasty, and it was just deflating our members.

Q: Do you think the leadership of CUPE nationally, provincially, and the leadership of AUPE wanted it to go further? Do you think they had reached a point where they thought enough is enough?

Susan: I can't say for sure, but I think there was thoughts that they had to get a settlement. I'm not sure to this day that if had just been CUPE in that position, whether we would've been able to go further, or whether it was working with another union that... We know that the AUPE didn't come in there willingly; it was the members that forced them. I think back to those days and remember the frustration of us not getting what we felt was right.

Q: How did the members react when the settlement was brought to them?

Susan: A lot of disbelief that we didn't get what we wanted. There were tears. I remember having to console several women there, that we didn't get what they felt they deserved. They had been so buoyed up by the growth each day, that having to come down all of a sudden was very hard on them. There were some angry members. But at the end of the day, it was their vote. It was a close vote. To this day we don't know for sure that we got the right settlement.

Q: I remember some of the people were scared about going back. What was it like going back that morning?

Susan: There was a bit of nervousness, but I think the employer, when we were walking in, they were very careful to be very welcoming. I think the mid management that were right at the site were very happy to have their people back. It probably saved their jobs too for a couple of years, because their jobs wouldn't be needed as well. Our members went in and we went back a few days later with working TV. We did a documentary on the laundry strike. By then the members were not as disappointed. They actually sang a song for the camera about their position. I think things were starting to get back to normal fairly quickly. But they were also very very proud of what they had done. I think maybe that's the best thing that happened in that laundry strike, is that the workers that went out came out of there with a lot of person strength and collective strength that we were the laundry workers. When they received the award from NAK, they were just so proud of that moment.

Q: How long was it after that until the General Hospital was imploded?

Susan: In '98 I think.

Q: So some of those people might have got jobs after the laundry closed and some of them might have got jobs in the General.

Susan: Most of the people at the General ended up at the Lougheed. I don't know that we had a lot of job loss. A lot of the programs from the General were moved over to the Lougheed, and so I don't think we actually lost a lot of people that way. Some of the laundry workers are still there today, because K-Bro hired some of them. They were actually given offers from K-bro to come and work for them. Others went to other departments and some took severance packages. If they'd offered severance packages in the first place, the laundry strike would never have happened. I'm sure of that. They were just so shocked and upset that all they were offered was two weeks' notice at the time. If they'd have been offered a severance package they probably would've accepted it and gone home.

Q: So you've been a national representative now since 1990. Rumour has it you're thinking about retirement. When is that likely to happen?

Susan: I'm looking at the end of this year for pulling the plug.

Q: Not only that, but Sherry said she would work with you.

Susan: Yes. And Sherry is going at the end of the year too.

Q: Sherry is Bill Paterson's daughter.

Susan: Yes. Sherry has had a long history, and I almost feel like we're related because of her connection to Bill.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Susan: . . . with the Postal Worker Defence League. That was one of the activities in my early experiences in the labour movement. It was back in the days of Jean-Claude Perrot, when he was arrested for union activities. Some of us through the labour movement, we were actually the young folks of the labour movement at the time. We decided we would form the Postal Worker Defence League. We silk screened, sometimes in the middle of the night, posters to put up showing JC behind bars. We would go out at two or three in the morning and paste them on post office boxes and things. People like Bruce Potter, who was one of the rabble-rousers of Energy and Chemical Workers, and a number of other social activists, we'd go out in the middle of the night papering these post office boxes, trying to get support to get JC out of jail. That was one of the activities that bring back a lot of fond memories of how a small group of people can have an influence. The post office wasn't too thrilled, because every morning they'd have to come out and tear off these posters that were glued with really good glue on the boxes. But it showed how we can work together on a common cause, and support each other.

Q: Tell us about the Labour Temple and how it was significant.

Susan: It's actually now been declared a historical site. The Labour Temple was built by members of the trade unions who volunteered their labour. It would've been in the early 1900s. There was a lot of significant events occurred in that building. An example would be meetings of the OBU, the One Big Union. Unionists from mainly the prairie provinces and BC met on occasion there regarding that. There was one occasion where the BC Federation of Labour actually decided to stay. The delegates stayed an extra day and held their convention at the Labour Temple. It's not usual for BC Federation of Labour to meet in another province, but they did because they felt it was more economical, since their delegates were all there for the OBU meeting. We also had fairly significant action there with the On-to-Ottawa Trek from 1935. The trekkers rode the rails heading to Ottawa. They stopped in Calgary. The Labour Temple was their headquarters while they were here. The trekkers actually camped out at the Stampede grounds. That was in the days when the Stampede was a community-based organization rather than a big corporation. Today there's no way the Stampede board would allow that, but in 1935 they understood the importance of this trek and allowed them to camp out there. Most of their meetings for the trek were held at that building. One of the things that we did 50 years later, in 1985, is we sponsored a dinner for the 50th anniversary. Some of the people involved or relatives of those involved came out for the 50th anniversary. I think there were three of the original trekkers that came out. So that was quite a thrill to meet these people who had quite a long history of struggle.

Q: And the NDP?

Susan: The NDP, the actual birth of the predecessor of the NDP, the CCF, the actual real birth of that was at the Labour Temple. Following the meetings that were held there to decide that they would form, they then went to Regina and had their founding convention. But the initial meetings were at the Labour Temple.

[END]