

Jimmy Arthurs

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JA: My name is Jimmy Arthurs. I was an electrician in the maintenance department at the Calgary General Hospital. I've been a longtime employee of the hospital. I started in '77 as a maintenance electrician temporary. Then I moved on and got a regular position in '79. I was active in the union from the get-go, because I've always been active in the union. It basically comes back to my heritage. I'm Irish; I immigrated to Canada in '76. I became a member of the IBEW 254 here in Calgary, worked construction. I was involved in one of the extensions to the Calgary General Hospital, and through that connection is how I got a job with the hospital. When they opened the new wing, the H Building, in '77 I was hired to transfer a lot of the maintenance departments and nursing units into the new building. They kept me and eventually when they got the expansion to the budget, I was hired on permanently. I was always an active member, always attended my meetings. The local at the time, CUPE Local 8, through different stages of my career, different departments were very strong at different times. When I got there, there were several members of the maintenance department were on the executive and very active within the local. Through the years that moved over to move services becoming very active, and then from the clerical role and some of the laundry workers became very active in the union. Lil Patheti comes to mind; she was a laundry worker and was president of the local at one time. She wasn't president of the local at the time of the strike, but Len Fagnan was. He was a maintenance worker, co-worker, another electrician at the General Hospital. Len had influence on me. John Kavanagh, the president when I arrived, he was a maintenance plumber. He was the president of the local at the time; so he had a big influence on me. Many of the maintenance people were very active in the union. I did work in the laundry myself when the laundry facility opened in '86. I was the electrician assigned to work over there. So I knew a lot of the people there personally. I worked there for about a decade. In '94, just prior to the strike or a year or so before the strike, I ended up going back into the main hospital to work as an electrician in the main structure. I was replaced by Dan Clark as an electrician, and he was there at the time of

the strike. The strike itself, my memories of it, personally I was at home sick when the laundry workers walked out. I believe it was a Tuesday morning. I came back to work on Friday. The maintenance members had been supporting the strike at lunchtime, before and after work. On Friday morning we had a meeting and it was decided that we would support the laundry workers. We went to see our executive director and informed him that we would be supplying the maintenance power engineer in the power plant to make sure everything was safe, and that the rest of the department would be walking out to support the laundry workers. Mid-morning of Friday the maintenance department walked out. For safety reasons we left the power engineer in the boiler room. We had a general meeting that evening or Saturday where the local met in a community hall downtown in Calgary, and they decided that they would support the strikes. Officially the strike was supported on that Saturday or Sunday. On the Sunday evening, as I was a member of the executive, we had an executive meeting and I was allocated the responsibility of supplying any requests from the employer for staff. So on Monday morning I went to the switchboard and received a pager. Initially they wouldn't give it to me but within 45 minutes the office phone rang and they said, please come back over. So I went back over, got a pager, and I was in direct connection with people, a member of management, and dealt with any requests for additional staffing. The direction from the executive was simple – if you feel it's warranted, do it and we'll sort it out later. The primary direction from the executive was patient safety was the primary responsibility and if in doubt, do it, and then we'd deal with it the day after. I got two requests. I got a request for surgical processor type workers in the classification. That was on a Tuesday. They wanted to do some operations so they needed sterile instruments to do it. They asked for some sterile processors. I went on the line and got some sterile processors that I knew. They had a meeting and they set up a rotation, so we supplied two sterile processors for a day shift Wednesday, Thursday and Friday the second week of the strike. They also asked for a purchasing buyer that was attached to the surgical suites. He did all the purchasing because they needed equipment; so he went in, reluctantly I might add, but he did go in. We kept the emergency operations operating. The only stipulation I made to them that whatever these guys processed and sterilized would stay on the Calgary General Hospital site and not be transported to other hospitals within the Calgary area. They complied with that and we were able to do that.

That's the only requests I had for staffing. The strike itself, I never heard a bad word in the press or heard anything negative on the radio or TV stations. The support from the community was unbelievable and the support from other unions within the Calgary area. The four hospitals in the Calgary area, two of them were represented by CUPE Local 8 and Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 1240 at the Rocky View and Holy Cross. They were supportive and they came out en masse from the Rocky View and Holy Cross. The other two hospitals in Calgary were represented by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees Local 55 and Local 40. Local 40 was at the Alberta Children's Hospital, 55 was at the Foothills Hospital. They also had laundry workers that were going to be impacted by the decision of the Klein government to outsource the laundry workers' work and to transport linen to Edmonton. There was a great coming together of both the unions and also the union community with the Calgary area, the Labour Council, we had a lot of support from the Canadian Union of Public Employees inside and outside workers at the City, Locals 37 and 38. We also had a lot of supporters from the iron workers and the construction trades. It was a really a great time, a coming together of the community. When we were on Memorial Drive, which is just parallel to the hospital site, the laundry site, we had great support from the people driving to work. Lots of tooting on horns and waves – it was just unreal, the support that we got from the community. When we were manning the picket line, people who were crossing, we had a lot of support from the nurses, UNA, and we had a lot of support from Health Sciences as well. The doctors were going in, they promised to do their work and only their work, and we could understand the position that they had taken. We got gifts of food and great support from the doctors who were crossing the line. They understood where we were going. They had seen the devastation to the healthcare industry that the Klein government had created with their cutbacks, their slash-and-burn tactics. So there was a great understanding of what we were going through and what the laundry workers were suffering. Here they are, some of the lowest paid workers within the healthcare industry, and their jobs are going to be contracted out to the private sector with no rights or benefits granted to them, and no retraining. They'd had enough and they took it upon themselves and walked out on that Tuesday morning. The community came together. I was on the picket line along with the role I was playing to handle emergency staffing requests, coordinator for the local. I was

also on the line as a picket captain, also doing some driving down. The members came together and organized in CUPE 37's hall. They used the kitchen to make food, make sandwiches for the people on picket line duty, warm soup. It was just a great coming together, a wonderful experience. Nobody ever likes to go on strike but you do eventually get pushed. The laundry workers were pushed to the brink and they felt the need to be heard. They were heard. Not only did the Klein government blink, I believe he wet his pants. But it was a wonderful time coming together. It's very serious when people are willing to support a strike and loss of income. Many people lost 7 days, 10 days work. It's a lot of money to healthcare workers because generally speaking they're on a lower-end pay scale. We got a lot of support from the community, as I said. We had several buses come in from all over the province to support us on the picket line during the second week of the strike. We also had a march from the Holy Cross over to the laundry plant location. Also we took a whole lot of people down to the committee was meeting with the province and the employer at the old Colonel Belcher site on 4th St. We went down there while they were meeting to show a sign of support and solidarity, and support the committee. We worked long into the night on Thursday night to Friday morning. They had meetings--I'm not sure how many--, but that's when we were down there, when they needed our support on the Thursday night and early into Friday morning. They were able to get a resolve for us. We met again en masse, both unions, AUPE members and CUPE members, in the community hall. We decided that we had been heard and it was warranted that we go back to work. We went back to work over the weekend and everything was back to normal two weeks after the strike had started. Wonderful experience. Unfortunately, it didn't go provincial. The strike stayed basically focused in the Calgary area. I believe if we had been able to go provincial we would've had a better outcome. But we did have a very good outcome. We were able to bargain some retraining for the staff, severances, and a lot of notification. They did well for themselves. I'm very proud of the women, mainly women, in the laundry. They got a resolve to many of their issues. It was a very good experience.

Q: Talk a bit about the meetings.

JA: The meetings were in Sunnyside Community or one of those communities over there, either Sunnyside or the one up the road from it. The meetings were joint meetings, well attended, in excess of 300 people at both meetings. The executive sought direction from the membership and they were given that direction. The direction was the first meeting they requested permission from the local to support the lockout, and they were given that. A lot of good discussion, a lot of inputs and people on both sides of the argument. The vast majority on the first Saturday meeting supported it and it became an officially supported strike. I think it was the second Friday of the strike when the committee came back and reported to the membership that they had an offer that they could recommend to the laundry workers and to the membership at large. We held a vote and it was decided that we had achieved our goals enough that we could go back into work, and it was decided that we would return to work.

Q: Do you recall what the mood of that meeting was?

JA: The mood of the first meeting was very good, 100% support. There were no questions, very little negativity about it. Something about the loss of income, but the people did support it. The mood was upbeat, very positive. You never heard or read a bad word in the press, which is abnormal for Alberta. It's an anti-union province and not necessarily a blue-collar town, but never did I hear a negative word about the strike in the media. The meeting itself was upbeat. There were members from the two hospital unions, Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, the Children's and the Foothills Hospital. Then we had the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 8 and Local 1240 from the Rocky View, Holy Cross, and the General Hospital itself, which is where the laundry building was attached. So upbeat, very positive. Lots of people signing up for strike duty, picket duty. It was really very good. CUPE Local 8 had an office just kitty corner to the premises of the Calgary General Hospital. That was centre headquarters for the strike. People could come in and out, warm themselves up, get a coffee, get a doughnut or sandwich. One of our members, Ryan Casey, turned the basement into a café. That was his role; he was there every day faithfully. The coffee was warm and the place was clean. There was great camaraderie in the building, in the room. It was just wonderful seeing

what people could do when they come together. I had some people come to me. One member had come to me and she was crying. She had talked to her husband and she was in a bad relationship and she said she had to go in to work; otherwise her husband would be mad at her. He had beaten her before. I said if anybody had any problems with her, tell them to call me, because she needed to go to work. She wanted to support the laundry workers but couldn't do it because of physical threat to her own wellbeing. That was one of the negative things that you hear about when people are pressured and put into a corner where they have to make a decision on what to do. She's still a worker in the hospital industry today, at the Peter Lougheed Center. She's a strong unionist, not active in the sense that she's a union steward, but she's very supportive of the union and she's thankful for the understanding that the union showed to her when she was struggling. She's no longer in the relationship; so she's safe and that's good.

Q: Were you involved in union struggles before, when you first came to Canada?

JA: I remember when I first came to Canada when I was still a temporary employee, we had a strike action in '77. I don't remember the details but it was during the Trudeau years and there was a wage freeze on. I think we were on strike for a day or two at that time. It was a protest against price and wage controls. We and UNA were out there, and Health Sciences. That was one of the other struggles I was involved in.

Q: That was Dave Cook and the one-day strike.

JA: Yes. We were on the line then, too. Well supported within the healthcare industry here in Alberta. I've been a steward most of my working life but not overly active because in the maintenance department there were several very active stewards. I was always an active member, a positive supporter of the trade union movement. It comes back to my history. Like I said, I immigrated to Canada in '76. It's part of the culture in Ireland, that people belong to trade unions. That's the way they protect themselves, that's the best way to protect themselves. ... I would've been 25 when I immigrated to Canada. I was single at the time so I didn't have family responsibilities back then. But I did get married in '79

or '80. So during the longer strike I was married and had two daughters. I did have family responsibility. So it was a hard decision to cut off a week's or 10 days wages. Our pockets are not well lined; so they're hard decision to make. Luckily, my wife was supportive. We did lose about seven or eight days' pay. It was hard but we were able to recover. But it was well worth the money, no question about that at all. I'm very proud of the stance of the laundry workers and their ability to... They'd had enough and they just decided to walk with their feet.

Q: What changes have you seen in the healthcare industry over the years?

JA: One of the major changes I've seen, I believe it was in '93 the Calgary General Hospital was the employer at the Calgary General Hospital site. They decided to contract out housekeeping services. I think it was in the spring of '93. That has devastating results. Back then you got a sense of cleanliness when you walked into a hospital. Today here we are 16 years later, and the sense is no longer there. Hospitals, when you walk into them you get a sense of them being run down, not only from a cleanliness point of view but from a maintenance point of view. Budgets had been cut back through the Klein years. We're in buildings that have not been adequately maintained and are not adequately clean. That's been a big impact on the healthcare facilities. Being a maintenance worker, you get to see a lot of the hospital that the public don't necessarily get to see. You're in and out of nursing units, you see the cleanliness and the deterioration of the facility from a maintenance point of view – the painting of walls and that type of thing. Lack of investment through the Klein years, the deficit ended up in the public domain. The buildings in the infrastructure, the hospitals and schools and roads, hospitals weren't immune from it. Staffing was often cut. We had a rollback of 5% in '97, a retro rollback, so people were very upset about that. Unfortunately, they continued to vote Klein in.

Q: What was the General like?

JA: General Hospital. In their wisdom they had built the Peter Lougheed Centre and it opened in 1988 in northeast Calgary off 36th St. For several years it was partially opened

as an urgent care centre, 12-14 hours a day. That eventually expanded to a 24-hour facility, then became a full emergency facility. In '95 the Klein government made a decision to close the General Hospital and move all the services to the Peter Lougheed, the newer hospital. They decided to build a wing on the west side of the building to compensate for the loss of the 500-plus beds that we had at the General Hospital. Peter Lougheed with the extension was approximately 500 beds. The transition, they moved the units up and finally closed the hospital, and in '97 it was imploded. Well documented, a lot of struggles around trying to keep the facility open. At the same time, prior to the General Hospital, they had closed the Holy Cross Hospital in Calgary. They also closed the Salvation Army Hospital and moved them to one building on the Foothills Hospital site, north tower I believe. There were massive cutbacks within healthcare through the mid-'90s during the Klein government, and they're suffering from those today still. We don't have adequate hospital space to cater to the needs of sick Calgarians.

... It was rumored that they were going to consolidate services on one site. They were operating two hospitals on one site; that was the concept. It was all called the General Hospital. One was the Bow Valley Centre, which was the downtown centre of the old Calgary General Hospital, and the other half was called the Peter Lougheed Centre of the Calgary General Hospital. There was one administration operating on two sites. The decision was decided on input from the government because of the cutbacks to funding. They needed to consolidate their services; so the decision was made to close the General Hospital, because it was an older building. There were some newer wings. The psychiatric wing, the H building, had been built in '77 when I worked there as a construction worker, and was opened in late '77. It's called the Centennial Wing; so it was a project that started back in '74 or '75 and opened in '77. It was a relatively good building. Some of the older buildings were there from the '50s. But they were well kept and well maintained. There had been several improvements over the years to different floors and expansions.

... Some parts of it were run down but it was a functional building. They had made improvements: upgraded some electrical, upgraded the fire alarm, upgraded the medical gasses in the main building. They had spent in excess of \$1 million designing a new building for north of the existing General Hospital. They had purchased the land and had

moved houses off the property and it was turned into a car park temporarily, with a view to building a new Bow Valley Centre just north of the old General Hospital site. But those plans were scrapped when the Klein government came upon the scene and decided to implement cutbacks. But the building was usable. Certain parts were run down but they were usable.

Q: Talk about the implosion of the General Hospital.

JA: Just prior to the implosion of the General Hospital, about a year prior to that when the decision was made to close the General, I ended up acting as the temporary manager. I was the last temporary maintenance on the General Hospital site. One of my responsibilities was to move the units from the Bow Valley site, to coordinate with the people at the Peter Lougheed Centre, to move the units so it was a smooth transition. That took several months to do. The emergency was closed down first and they moved them. Then several nursing units were moved. The ICU unit initially ended up going to the Foothills Hospital. Then the ICU was opened at the PLC later. It's sad to see an institution that had been in the community for in excess of 70 years, not necessarily all on that site but had been on several sites in Calgary. The implosion, it was gut wrenching to see an institute and see 20 years of good memories go down in the blast, in a cloud of smoke. The employees had mixed feelings. There were severance packages offered, because there was a reduction in the staff. If you were over 55 you got three weeks a year; if you were under 55 you got two weeks a year. There was some major cutting of staff, around 20% reduction of staff. Sad time.

Q: How did life progress for you after that?

JA: I moved to Peter Lougheed in '97 and assumed the role of an electrician again in the maintenance department. As I said, they contracted out the housekeeping services to a multinational corporation. Sedesco, I believe, was the company that was running it. I'm not too sure who was running it in '97. Understaffing was an issue in housekeeping; you could never get housekeepers. After the laundry strike they contracted out laundry

services. There was a shortage of linen; people's units were stealing linen from other units because of short supply. It was a bit chaotic from that side. The building, as a brand new building, was an excellent building. But the services had definitely deteriorated. The size of the hospital, too small for the needs. Northeast community, high usage area, a lot of immigrants, a lot of sick people; poor generally speaking tend to have more illnesses. It was very crowded; emergency was very small. So, a lot of pressure. They used to have a code burgundy through the late '90s and early into this century. They'd have code burgundy. Code burgundy was called when there were no beds available. There was a period of time when you'd get those calls two or three times a week on the PA system. Then they changed the process and it was no longer overhead paged. They decided they didn't want to publicize it too much; so they decided through a paging system that they would inform them. Code burgundy meant that the staff, the nursing units, the doctors, had to look at the patients and see who could be sent home early so they could free up some beds for people who were lying in corridors in and around the emergency department. The loss of the General and the Holy Cross and those beds, and the Grace Hospital also, we're still suffering today from it. Big change in services supplied to the citizens of Calgary.

Q: Talk a bit about the union.

JA: The union. The Alberta government in its wisdom decided in the mid-'90s to create regional health authorities. I believe they created 19 initially across the province. Then in about 2002 there was talk about reducing them, and they reduced them from 19 to 9. Then when they did that, they also decided there was a need to reorganize the structure of how workers are organized in healthcare. We were in excess of several hundred certs in the province of Alberta. The government decided that they would have four certs, functional bargaining units. One was the general support services, which was maintenance and food services with the group I belonged to. Then you had the auxiliary nursing group, which are NAs and LPNs and some technicians. Then you had health sciences, which is the professional group. Then you had the nurses themselves, the RNs and they're organized under UNA. So there's four functional bargaining units. We ended up under

Bill 27 where there was runoff votes to decide which units would represent who. In the general support sector that I was in, there were two strong units in there – AUPE and CUPE. So there was a runoff vote; they were on the ticket. The ballot was held and the chosen union to represent the GSS or General Support Services was AUPE. We were transitioned over from CUPE to AUPE in late 2007. I became an AUPE member in 2007 and I got active in AUPE as a steward, as a member. The employer is still the employer; enough said about that. There are still issues to be dealt with. So the members still need the protection of a union. A union is only as strong as the people make it. It's always been my thought that we need to get involved to make sure that you're not only protecting yourself and your family, but to help protect others. When we help to protect others we help to protect ourselves. It's a win-win situation when you get involved in a union. Since then I was elected to executive of my chapter, my local. I was a member of Local 95, which was combinations of Local 55 at the Foothills and Local 40 at the Children's Hospital. They were two older structures with AUPE and they were combined to form Local 95 of AUPE. I sat as a council rep to the local council and I was a steward. Took some training courses, attended their labour school, and got more versed and better prepared to protect the members. I've since moved on. I had the opportunity to ... it's common for officers in the Calgary office, for two summers for two and five months. Then a vacancy came up and I was the successful candidate. I've now worked as a membership services officer for Alberta Union of Provincial Employees here in Calgary representing many of the people I knew at the Peter Lougheed and many of the healthcare workers. I represent people in Carewest also, which is the long-term care facilities operated by Carewest funded by Alberta Health and Wellness. It's a lot of changes in the last 32 years. The laundry strike stands out as a very warm moment when you see it all coming together as it can when people step up and support each other. It was really good.

Q: ?

JA: Effective April 1, 2009 the employer of the members I represent has changed from the Calgary Health Region to the Alberta Health Services, or the superboard as some people like to refer to it. The superboard now is a board that controls healthcare

provincially, from the Saskatchewan border to the B.C. border, from the American border to the Northwest Territories, and everything in between. It's a ginormous undertaking. They hope to glean some savings from the fact that it's all pooled together, but that's not been the experience. My experience, last year I was back home for a wedding in Ireland of my nephew. I was talking to some people over there. They had in the '90s also gone with the same experiment, where they had four regional or provincial health authorities that they amalgamated into one. Now in the last year they were disbanding it again, because it was too big to handle. They didn't get the savings they thought they would. So I don't know why we're not learning from the history that's happened in other parts of the world, of just making it so big. The Calgary Health Region is colossal in itself. They had a \$3.6 billion budget. That's a lot of money. In the general support services alone we have over 8,000 employees. I believe the total number of employees is in excess of 26,000. That's a big business to run and I don't believe the combining of it into Alberta Health Services will give economy scale, as they call it. I am concerned. More and more layers of management, nobody knows. A lot of amber lights, people have been on hold, their lives have been on hold, programs have been on hold until the new board took effect. There's a lot of circling the wagons right now and nothing is going forward. A lot of things on hold. Part of the Alberta Health Services was to bring together ambulance services right across the province. There were many employers there; I don't know how many. That's been a big focus. Right now there's a lot of concern from citizens--I share them as well--, about the ability of ambulance services to meet the needs of Albertans so people don't die.

Q: Do you have any words of wisdom?

JA: I retired last year from the Calgary Health Region. As an employee, I'm a member of LAPP, which is the Local 30 pension plan. So I'm now a retired former healthcare worker. It's a great industry to be in. There's lots of wonderful people. We don't know how lucky we are, the level of service that the employees in the healthcare industry supply to the citizens. I'm very proud to have been part of that. Words of wisdom – join a

union, get involved, make it work for you. It works because of you and for you, so my advice would be get involved. It can only get better by your involvement.

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