

Cindy McCallum Miller

(November 11, 2008)

CM: I grew up in Toronto. I was born in Toronto; don't hold that against me. I came to Alberta as soon as I had a chance. My dad was a labourer and my mom stayed at home and raised the family. There was myself, my younger sister, and my younger brother. We were an average family for that time period. My father was pretty dominating and my mother worked hard to keep the family going and keep everything calm and steady, and put up with a number of things. They were a hardworking couple. We grew up in apartments in Toronto, which is something that, now that I'm older, I really hate living in apartments as a result of that. You felt constricted and confined and you didn't have a lot of freedom. You had to be quiet and all those other things that you don't have in other kinds of accommodations. That was the first 10 years of my life. Then we moved to a tiny village called Dungannon, which is along Lake Huron about 150 miles from Toronto. That was the area that my mom's family had come from. They were part of the clearing of the train in Huron County. So, all of her parents and grandparents and great-grandparents all lived in that area. My grandmother was ill; so we decided we were going to move up there so my mom could be closer to her. That was a culture shock, because I moved from this very restrictive, very industrial kind of environment to this town that had maybe 50 people, and probably most of them were related to me one way or another, whether I knew it or not. I ended up going to a one room schoolhouse for the first year I was living out there. From Toronto to this little tiny village--it let me know fairly quickly that life wasn't the same, wherever you happen to be. When I look back on it, it helped open my eyes to the difference between urban and rural realities, especially for children.

Q: Were you a middle-class family?

CM: I would say we were a working-class family. Money was really tight. My dad worked in construction; so it wasn't year-round work. Mom was the one responsible for trying to figure out how to make ends meet when he wasn't working. I remember it being

pretty tough. Mom brought in other kids, she ran an in-home daycare centre. I remember little ones. I'd come home from school and there'd be other little kids there. I didn't know what was going on at the time, but mom was looking after other working-class families' children because there was no real childcare around. When I think back about that, I think those kids were actually lucky if they were in a home with my mom, because my mom was really a caring person and a nurturing person. If you couldn't have good quality childcare like the childcare that we want, at least that was the next best thing, having a nurturing person. So money was really tight. I was the oldest kid and I would get secondhand clothes from my aunts, who were about eight years older than me. It was like, yea, here's the new stuff. That happened for quite a long time. When we moved out into the country it was even worse, because my dad went to work in construction in Manitoba. He would send home a paycheque once a month. That made it even more difficult for mom. Those are the things I remember. In the country the nice thing was we could have a garden. We could never grow our own vegetables or any kind of supplementary food products in the city. But there mom was in her element because she'd have a chance to go out and garden. I got to know the difference between canned peas and fresh peas when we moved out to the country. It was quite tight, but we managed.

Q: What were some early influences in your life that led you to becoming active in the trade union movement?

CM: Part of the tough times in my growing up was my dad was a violent alcoholic. In the days later when he was no longer working away from home in construction, he started working in the salt mines in Goderich. When he was closer to home he got more frustrated with his life. Watching my mom try and survive those kinds of circumstances I think instilled in me a sense of, first of all anger and frustration that she had to put up with some of the things that she had to put up with, but also a sense of resolve that people shouldn't have to live under these circumstances, and women in particular. She didn't have an outside job; so she was particularly trapped. I think that had a lot of impact on me because that was just not fair. So how could I make sure that I didn't get stuck in a situation like that or that other girls that were growing up with me, that we had something

different to look forward to? I didn't realize it at the time, but that really marked me quite significantly. So when I had an opportunity as a member of a union to have some protections and be able to expand into other areas and seek justice and advocate on behalf of others who didn't have those same opportunities, that all came back to me and that fuelled me on. So that environment and that circumstance was probably one of the first significant influences in my life to make me want to get active. I didn't know how to get active though until I joined the union. That's one of the things growing up in the society at the time that I grew up in. They didn't talk about unions much and you didn't have an opportunity. Unless your family or friends' parents were members of unions, you really didn't have that kind of connection. It wasn't until I actually started working at the post office and got involved in my union that I realized where the venues were in terms of political action, in terms of community action, in terms of making changes through bargaining. I didn't know that those doors were able to be opened if you wanted to come through and start putting your energy into those directions.

Q: Was the post office your first job?

CM: No, I started working when I was about 16 and at school, in retail stores. When I was 18 I started working in bars. That was before they changed the legal age in Ontario to 19. Then I moved out to Banff when I turned 20, and I worked in a credit union and a big retail store, and then I worked at the post office. So I'd had a lot of different types of jobs for short periods of time. But the post office in 1982, I missed the big strike in '81. Too bad, my timing was off. But when I started there in '82 that was the first unionized work experience that I had, and the difference was pretty significant and I noticed that right away.

Q: What differences did you notice?

CM: The first thing is having a collective agreement that actually outlined what my wages were, what my rights and benefits were, what time periods were, having a grievance procedure. For example, when I worked in retail in Banff, you could tell the

kinds of exploitation that people faced based on both the working conditions but also the living situation in Banff at that time. Because it was a transient town and not open all year round, the staff were relying on their employers for accommodation. If you lost your job, you lost your place to live, so employers played on that fear. That was one of the first experiences I had in Banff. It was like, wow, you really have to be obedient in order to maintain this job, because otherwise you're going to be out on the street. That's a double injustice. So coming into the post office and having a collective agreement and not having your working and living conditions connected was kind of nice. You could see those differences right off the bat--knowing that I was making a decent wage as a result of previous strikes that had taken place and struggles from my brothers and sisters that had come before me. There'd been all sorts of other struggles that had taken place in the non-unionized retail sector, but those workers never benefited from that. What you ended up having was people getting fired and having to move on like disposable commodities. One batch of workers gets tossed aside because there's another group to come in. By the time they start to feel, wait a minute, I should have some rights in this matter, I should count for something here, then it's time for them to be gone too. Well they couldn't do that to us in the post office. It was like, wow, all right. And this isn't because of a magnanimous employer, this is because of the struggle of my brothers and sisters before me. It amounted to something and it meant that because they acted in a collective manner, in a little post office in Banff workers benefited the same as they did in the industrial plants in Toronto or Calgary or Vancouver. It made me feel like I was really a part of something much bigger. Knowing that I had that connection and being a part of something much bigger, meant that not only was I benefiting but others would benefit too. That really inspired me to try and use the new privilege that I had as a unionized worker to try and speak out on behalf of other workers who were silent. Once they started to speak out in their own defence, they were gone. Their accommodations were gone and their jobs were gone. It started to make me feel more connected to the community as well.

Q: When did you actually get involved in the union?

CM: As soon as my probation period ended. I started in May as a temporary employee. Really I was only hired for the summer, but it so happened that two of the part-timers had moved on, so there were two vacancies and I got one of them. On September 30<sup>th</sup> my probation ended and I became a part-timer, and the next day I became local secretary-treasurer. I did that and it was funny, because it was a small local and the people had held positions so long that they were really looking for someone else to start taking on the responsibility. I was approached by one of the longtime activists and I said, ya, whatever you need. She was quite shocked that I would volunteer so quickly. I said, I owe you something and this is my way of paying back. She said, you don't owe me anything. I said, no not you particularly, but I owe this local something, I owe this union something. I didn't walk into this job; at that time we were making \$11.86 an hour. That was double what anybody else in Banff was making. If you were working in a gift store you were making \$4.50 to \$5.00 an hour. If you were working at the local banks you might be making a little bit more. If you were in a position of responsibility in one of the hotels you might be making \$7 an hour. I made \$11.86 the day I walked in that job. That wasn't because all of a sudden somebody out there had recognized all these great skills that I'd always had. It was because of that collective agreement and because of those struggles. So I knew that I owed somebody something. I became the local secretary-treasurer that very next day and never looked back.

Q: Tell us a bit about the work in the Banff local.

CM: When I started in 1982, well let me backtrack a bit. Banff is a very unique small town. It expands like a huge balloon in the summer months. In those days there wasn't much happening any other time of the year. It was before the ski season really took hold and the ski resorts really took hold. So, when I started there in 1982, basically the summer season from May 24<sup>th</sup> weekend until Thanksgiving, the whole town was like a small city. So all of a sudden this very small group of employees had to serve tourists from around the world and huge numbers of people. We had a year-round base of nine employees at that time. Now I think they have about 14 or 15. I said I was a job creation just by leaving; they had to have a couple of people to fill in for me. So that was good.

But it was also reflective of the work that we did in the local to try and get Canada Post to pay attention to the unique situations that were happening there. They were treating us as if we were any other small town of 5,000 people. But we would have 50,000 people to serve in the summertime. So that was part of the tensions that took place. We really only had a couple of slow times as the years went by. In a small post office like that we do everything. We get the incoming mail for large places like the Banff Centre and the Banff Springs Hotel and some of those larger businesses, but also for the local residents. We'd serve the customers at the front counter as well. So you'd sort of rotate through. Some of the shifts would start at 6 o'clock in the morning and that would be the incoming sortation of mail. Then we'd sort it into the local lock boxes, because there's no door-to-door delivery in Banff. People would come to the post office and collect their mail. Then you'd open the wickets, and sometimes in the summertime you'd see the buses lining up at quarter to nine and you'd go, oh. It would only be like one wicket clerk on in the morning at nine o'clock and it was like the early morning summer terror. I'm thinking, here we go, tourists are going to come in not just to buy stamps but they're going to want to buy philatelic and some of the other things, because it's a tourist destination. So that was part of the struggle that we had in Banff over the years was to try and get Canada Post to not only acknowledge the volumes and the workload, but also to try and promote the Canadian post office service to tourists through things like having stamps designed to look like the national parks and feature some of the mountains and things like that. Those were some of the projects that we engaged in over the years.

Q: So you became involved in the local and then things probably snowballed. What was some of your other involvement with the union?

CM: I became secretary-treasurer and then within a couple of years I became local president. What happened was the local president had been around for a long time, a wonderful woman by the name of Magda Lertz. It was just too much for her; her health was starting to be impacted. So we kind of switched roles. We had our general membership meeting; she offered for secretary-treasurer; I offered for local president. That was good because I didn't walk into it cold. Even though Banff was a very small

local we did a lot of work. We were very active both in our community and in our union generally. Over the years we started getting more involved in the Calgary and District Labour Council and the Alberta Federation of Labour. But in those early days, I remember Magda, of course there's no offices, the small locals don't have the facilities or the resources to have an office. So all of your documents are all in somebody's house. I remember when we switched I had to go to Magda's house and unload boxes and boxes and boxes of files. I realized that some of these bulletins nobody had ever read. These were the communications from the union that were financial documents, grievance files, all sorts of things. It's like, oh my goodness. It's good that I had her with me to sort of weed through, find out what all this meant. I got to know my union through some of these historical bulletins. Before I started working at the post office, the stories that you heard about the militant postal workers and this horrible guy named Jean-Claude Parrot who was the national president, a big mean bad guy. If you only listened to what the media had to say about our union and about our leadership, you would have a really negative impression. I started to be able to go through some of these documents and realize the kinds of struggles that had taken place before I got there in the broader context. I was inspired and I thought, wow, there can be no local or no group of workers too small to make a difference. I kind of dragged our local into getting more involved in the union. The first thing I did was want to participate in the constitutional meetings of our union -- our area councils, our conventions, our negotiations meetings where we start to build our set of demands. That was when I first walked about a little bit within the union, was when our local came forward with a demand to change the way staffing was dealt with in high mail volume situations, and to allow regular and part time employees to get more hours, than just bringing in casuals off the street. Up until that time in Banff, because the only high volume time that was ever acknowledged within our collective agreement was the Christmas period, because everybody knows the post office is extremely busy in the fall and getting ready for Christmas. We had a campaign called Christmas in July in Banff, and I started doing a little research and finding out places like Jasper and Niagara Falls and some of the other locals where we had those same kind of anomalies were having the same kind of difficulties where the post office would flood the office with a number of people off the street for a short period of time, and then the part-timers who were

working there were limited to 20 hours. I brought forward some suggestions that actually made it through in a different format, but made it through into our next collective agreement. I realized that it's not a matter of the large group of workers in Toronto or Vancouver or Montreal making all the decisions. Here was something that our nine members sat around and talked about. I went through the process and had my first speech in front of a microphone. I thought I was going to faint. I can't actually remember whether I finished it or not, but I think I did. But we were able to make a difference because that demand got passed by our regional conference. That was hard to do, because I had to explain the circumstances to people that never experienced what we were talking about. They supported it, because we had gone through the process and they said, we need to fix a problem for these workers, and just because they're in a small local doesn't mean that we ignore them. It really made me feel like there was an important connection, that a small local like ours could actually make a difference and play a role. That inspired me to get more and more involved in the union. In 1986 I went to my first national convention. I have this wonderful picture of myself, I looked way younger in those days, but a picture of myself and Jean Claude Parrot, at my very first convention. I'd gone up on a lunch break when the entire delegation was gone. Some of the brothers and sisters from Calgary said, go up to the podium, we'll take your picture up there, it'll be a nice souvenir of convention. So I went up there and I'm standing at the podium and I didn't see Brother Parrot coming in behind me. It was like, oh-oh, I felt like I had my hand caught in the cookie jar, like I wasn't supposed to be up there. Here's this delegate from Banff up at the front, like oh what am I doing? He said, you should stay here and get your picture taken with me; someday you'll be here. I went, no. But I had my picture taken with him and it's one of my prized possessions, because he's always been one of my idols, he's always been a hero to me. I told him one time that he'll always be my president. He's someone that absolutely inspired me in the union and put a stamp on our union and a stamp on the labour movement that has never been duplicated. Our union benefited from having him as national president, and we felt it even in a small local like Banff. It was a pretty inspiring process to go through for this person who'd never had any kind of trade union orientation before I started at the post office, and in a very short period of time starting to understand the struggles my union engaged in and why they engaged in them



and why we were a social union, and having an opportunity to see Brother Parrot in action. That was kind of overwhelming for the first couple of years but it certainly fuelled my enthusiasm for getting more involved in the union and in the labour movement. I started going to educationals, I started trying to make sure that I was contributing and learning. Every time I would think that I found out some information, I would see how much information I didn't have. I became thirsty for knowledge both of our union and of the women's movement and the peace movement. I started looking at all the policies in our constitution and realizing that our union was so connected to the progressive movements of not only our own country but around the world. It allowed me the thoughts of, well maybe I can get involved in this area, or maybe I can do this. Before I knew it I felt like I was in a bit of a tornado. Once you willingly start to get involved, there's really no end to the opportunities to get involved further. That's where I started from.

Q: What was there about JC Parrot that really inspired you?

CM: When I came from the perspective of being a member of the public, and when he went to jail for his union, I didn't know anything about that other than, oh well, they threw him in jail, I guess he must've done something wrong. Members of the public, the media, they don't ever explain what's going on. When I had a chance to attend some of the meetings, like a national convention, for example, where he was in the chair, and the strength he had and the connection he made with you as an individual worker. For example, you'd go to a hospitality room and JC would come and sit down and grab a glass of soda water, and he would talk to the people that he didn't know. You felt so, it's hard to describe now because this is so long ago, but you felt so amazed that here's someone who's in the news all the time, Pierre Trudeau hates his guts, he's a national figure, and he's sitting here talking to me and wanting to hear what my experience as a worker is and what my interests are and what the problems are in my workplace. He has time for that. It inspired me because you think in terms of leaders being isolated or having buffers between them and the little people. He was a worker and still is a worker. Anybody who meets him now will tell you the same thing. He just spoke recently at a Saskatchewan Federation of Labour convention, either last year or the year before. I was

leading our delegation there and was so delighted that my president was speaking. Well he's not my president anymore but he always will be. In our delegation were some very young rural and suburban mail carrier members fairly new to the union. They were in awe that he was there. I said, let me introduce you to him. They were, no no no. I said, no, he'll want to meet you. This one woman, she's an activist in her local now, she sat down, I introduced them, he started asking her questions about her work as a RSMC [ed. Rural and Suburban Mail Carrier] member and the fact that she has young children and that she's a young worker herself. She was so inspired and I said, ya, that's the same feeling I had 20 odd years ago. He's always been like that. The other thing about JC as a leader is that he always makes sure he's on a direct road to defend workers' rights. Anything he's ever done, he's never shied away from taking a controversial position, a strong position on behalf of the people that he represents. One of my proudest moments with JC, I know I'm bouncing all over the place, now I'm going to move to when the G8 meeting was taking place in the Kananaskis. Jean Claude Parrot came to a civil disobedience course that I was organizing on behalf of our union. He engaged in an action where the postal workers had collected a whole bunch of letters from citizens of Calgary to the leaders of the G8 to say why we didn't want the kinds of programs that they were going to try and put in place or try and force governments. There were a number of issues that we were dealing with, but our action was postal workers were going to break through the barricades and we were going to go and deliver those letters to the G8 leaders. My proudest moment was the fact that JC and I were the first two that were to cross the police lines. I never thought I'd be able to engage in that kind of activity with him. As we were heading towards the police he said, it's not the arrests that I'm worried about, it's the beatings that they'll give us. I went, beatings? Nobody told me about beatings. But he was trying to make me feel at ease, I guess, because of course he'd been arrested and not beaten before. It was those kinds of human moments, and yet absolute courage in the face of any kind of challenge. It inspires people to go beyond what they think their own limitations are. When you see someone like JC who will talk to you about the first time you do any public speaking and will tell you that he still gets nervous. He shares that humanity with everyone that he's with. But his absolute courage and his absolute dedication is just really inspirational and always has been for me.

Q: How did you first get involved in the Calgary and District Labour Council?

CM: That was part of the education that I got with my union, is the need to connect to the broader labour movement. The Calgary and District Labour Council was the only labour council that was close by. There were two things I tried to do. One was I tried to get a group together of unions in the Bow Valley, because I knew that all of our union structures are quite different. Some organizations affiliated by provincial group or by a district group. Some locals were spread out all over the place. Ours was an independent local within our union, so I had an obligation because our policies direct locals of CUPW to affiliate to their local labour council. So I thought, I have no choice but I have to see if Calgary will accept this. Of course at that time the Calgary boundaries didn't include Banff and Lake Louise. So the Calgary and District Labour Council actually changed their by-laws to allow the Banff local of CUPW to join. I was always grateful for that, because I had a chance to meet amazing people like Susan Keeley and Bill Flookes and Sean Gilliman. Bill Patterson, I have a lot of fond memories of him, as crusty and scary as he was when I first came to the labour council, because he seemed very impatient and wanted to get things done, and I'm trying to figure out what the heck's going on and trying to understand what the circumstances for workers in Calgary was. I'll remember Bill Patterson forever for coming out to the first demo that I organized in Banff. He drove up from Calgary to show support from the Calgary and District Labour Council. That was the kind of trade unionism that I found within that council, and I was absolutely delighted that our local was able to affiliate. At the same time, I started talking to the Public Service Alliance and United Food and Commercial Workers and AUPE and the nurses and the teachers within the Bow Valley, and talked to them about the need for our organizations to have a meeting place. The boiler makers in Exshaw. So that our members were all talking to each other, the same kind of principle that the labour council has within one area, but all of these other unions were feeling isolated. The activists within these unions felt isolated because they weren't part of Calgary and some of them didn't really know how their structure worked in the first place. I thought, let's use that same kind of principle of the labour council and form a committee where we would talk

and get involved in political action or some of the local issues to try and raise the visibility of the labour movement in our area and talk about some of the issues that workers were facing. So the Calgary and District Labour Council gave me not only support and solidarity, but taught me how to do that. The activists within the labour council shared vast experience in terms of how to get workers involved in a campaign or how to get workers connected with each other. I've always been extremely fond of the labour council. I really liked the Calgary and District Labour Council because of the activist space. It seems to me that in all the years since I first got involved, and I look at other labour councils around the country that are also very good and do the best that they can, but the activist space in Calgary, even the debates we had within the meetings and some of the frustrations we had within the meetings, there was a passion that was underlying in that labour council that I remember with a great deal of fondness. It also inspired you to go beyond what you thought was possible, because you got such diverse opinions and passionate viewpoints. It made you feel fired up and you'd say, ya we can do this, we can accomplish this. So I was happy. I would take reports back to our members in Banff and sometimes I would bring some of the members with me if they were available to come. That was a big change for the members in Banff too, because when I first started getting involved in the union and would come back all enthusiastic, oh my union this and our union this, we gotta do this and we gotta do that. They'd be going, oh we can't send her out anymore because she's too union. I was like, you can't be too union. But they started getting more interested with what was going on because I was linking some of the work that was happening with municipal workers or some of the other activists in Calgary. They would be reading some of the stuff in the newspaper and I'd say, okay, the person that they're recording there, they're a delegate to the labour council and I talked to them about this. It started to make some links for them, which expanded when the nurses went out on strike in the '80s and I had members from our local actually picketing with nurses in -30 degree temperature. When I think about it, only a few years earlier they were terrified to picket in their own strike. But now they were starting to get more politicized and understand not only the importance of showing solidarity with other workers, but also the energy you feel when you're connecting with other workers who are engaged in struggle. They started to feel that. So this was sort of a

really great connection between the different aspects of a small local, the Bow Valley, the Calgary and District Labour Council. And from that I met so many wonderful people who were leaders in their own organizations. It showed me the difference, and some of the good ideas that were happening in other unions, and some of the things that were happening in other unions that I wanted absolutely no part of. It made me realize that not everything was the same as it was in CUPW. That's part of the challenge of the labour movement generally. So it was a good experience.

Q: Talk about how you expanded to involvement at the provincial level.

CM: This was all happening at the same time, around the time of our strike in 1987, when I realized that I needed to have a bigger connection. We were taking on a pretty significant role with our local. We were getting some fairly big media attention because Banff is a tourist community. There were all sorts of reference to the struggle that was going on. So my union had, in those days--the structure of the Alberta Federation of Labour, for example, had designated spots for different unions. All the feds are a little bit different, but my union had a vacancy. I was temporarily appointed to the executive council of the AFL and that was a whole different learning experience. Then you're dealing on a broader base with union leaders from around the province, people like Dave Werlin and Don Aitken and some of the Federation leaders at the time were people that I'd only heard about. I hadn't actually met them before, or I'd only seen them at Alberta Federation of Labour conventions. This was quite interesting to see the types of debates that took place at the provincial level and the dynamics between unions in terms of the different challenges that unions were facing and how some very proactive leaders and proactive unions wanted to take on direct action and some of the other unions who had a different philosophy didn't want to go the same route. How do we come up with a unified program for the Federation of Labour on a provincial level? It was very interesting. While I got involved in the Federation of Labour I got involved in the women's committee of the Fed. Became the secretary of the women's committee for a term, then I became the chair of the political action committee, which opened up a whole different dynamic and a whole different set of time pressures in terms of the expansion of my

activism, from the labour movement into electoral politics. I hadn't ever seen that one coming. The more I got involved and the more I saw the requirements for change on so many different dimensions and levels, the more I realized that electoral political action was one of the things, not the only thing. Because when you rely on only electoral political action and electing friendly governments or friendly councils or whatever, then you abdicate some of your responsibility in terms of developing a society that's going to support those progressive candidates. I never wanted only to have involvement in electoral politics, I wanted to do both. The Federation of Labour is what allowed that to happen, as well as the Calgary and District Labour Council. Not only was I looking at the community level but I was looking at the provincial level as well. That all happened within a 10-year time frame. From 1982 to 1988 was the surge that I had in terms of getting involved in a number of different factors. It was a really interesting experience. I got involved with the Alberta New Democrats as a result of being involved with the political action committee and the executive council of the Federation, which was linked fairly closely with the Alberta New Democrats. So I got involved with the labour caucus of the party. Before I knew it, not only was I involved at the constituency level but I also ended up as second vice-president of the Alberta New Democrats for a while, from the labour caucus and the direct link to the labour movement from the party. That was in the days when the labour caucus and the Federation of Labour had an opportunity to put forward their candidate, and it was acceptable to the delegates as a whole. I'm not sure that that's still happening anymore but I think that's a proper way for the labour movement to link directly to the party. I haven't been convinced that unless you're involved directly with the Federation, which is the voice of labour provincially, unless you're connected that way you can't really speak on behalf of labour within a political party. Hopefully we'll be able to take a look and see what happens within the party dynamics and within the labour movement dynamics in this province in the future.

Q: Talk about 1989.

CM: I could start with a number of things but I think I'll start with the birth of the Sisters from Hell. That was one of the defining moments in terms of organizing in a different

way. The Sisters From Hell with my identical twin sister, Susan Keeley, who looks nothing like me and yet we're identical twins, and two brothers from CUPW, Darren Steinhoff and Ed Langele, started this little tiny beginnings of little tiny movement that actually overwhelmed us for a bit. It was really a wonderful experience to put solidarity in action. Maybe I should talk a bit about how we started the Sisters From Hell. We were at an Alberta Federation of Labour convention and the steelworkers in Edmonton were on strike at the dam galvanizing plant. When you have 500 delegates from around the province it makes sense that you go out and show solidarity with our brothers and sisters who were engaged in struggle. So we did that; we went out on a lunchtime demonstration, busloads of people. When we left, the members who were out on strike started getting taunted by the scabs inside saying, oh ya, you think you're so tough when there's 500 of you here, but wait until 6 o'clock tomorrow morning when there's only the few of you, and we'll see how tough you are. That story got back to us and we were highly offended. We decided that, okay we'll show you how tough we are, 'cause we'll come back. Of course at Federation of Labour conventions we also usually had Labour Council solidarity night, otherwise known as Labour Council pub night. We were very involved in labour councils and pub nights. We heard about this story while we were there, and we decided that it was important for us to go. Having celebrating many hours with the pub night, we went almost directly without much sleep the next morning at about 5 o'clock. I recall a few of us huddled together trying to stay warm, because it was really cold as we were bolstering the picket line. My good brother Darren Steinhoff looked at sister Susan Keeley and I and said, you've never seen anything like it, they'll stop the scabs from crossing the line because of the Sisters from Hell. I thought, yes we are. So it became a bit of a joke at first. We were talking about how we're tired of the old boys' network, we'd start an old girls' network. The language wasn't exactly right, but we were coming up with some ideas and we said we'd let some of the brothers in but they had to take on the name of women. Because women have always had to accommodate to male structures, men are going to have to accommodate to our structures. We were just having a lot of fun with this. When we got back to the Fed convention, one of the sisters who had been with us was a sister by the name of Melva Forestburg, who ran Buttons Unlimited, still does I believe. She had heard Darren talking about sisters from Hell and thought it

was kind of cute. So she made four buttons for us, four of these little yellow buttons that had Sisters from Hell on them, with little lightning bolts on them. She gave them to us as a souvenir for our activity, and we started wearing them. I remember this so clearly, it was April 28, 1989. We were talking about the Day of Mourning, we were talking about the struggle of workers. I remember this very tall imposing brother coming up to me saying, I want to be a Sister from Hell. I thought, I don't know what you're talking about. I said, you'll have to go see Melva if you want one of these buttons. He said, no I just went to see her and she said I have to see you. So I thought, I have no idea what you're talking about. But I had a quick conference with my comrades and said, okay, I have an idea. There's a fundraiser going on right now for the Workers' Health Centre. They were doing this wall of fame where if you donated \$75 on this brick wall you'd get a brick that had your name on it. I said, why don't we get Melva to make a few buttons up and we'll sell them for \$5 each. We'll wear them proudly and we'll make the donation, \$2 to pay for the button, \$3, that's \$75, we'll make a donation and we'll have Sisters from Hell on the brick. It'll be a private little joke among the 25 of us and it'll be good fun. So we agreed to do that. Melva made those buttons and we sold out in no time. We had people who were really upset that we hadn't thought about them in order to sell them a button. I thought, wow, if I'd ordered 100 buttons I probably would've sold 3 and we'd have all these buttons left over and no money. But because we had a limited amount, all of a sudden people wanted in. We thought, okay, CUPE's going to get some buttons, CUPW's going to get some buttons, let's see what we can do with this in terms of a fundraiser. So we became the Chief Battle Axes. That was the title that was given to us, so we accepted it gladly and gracefully and thought this was a great way for us to do some fundraising. We decided we would pick some really good causes, some long-term strikes or some other cause that was really important, and we would do some fundraising around the sales of these buttons. We had no idea how quickly this would take off. I remember the next year at the CLC convention spending the entire convention out in the foyer swearing in new Sisters from Hell, well swearing at. The swearing-at ceremony, because we couldn't be so mundane as a swearing-in ceremony. People would give us ideas so we would incorporate these ideas, and it was just a wonderful swearing of humor. We realized that when you're involved in the struggle in the labour movement, the long-term strikes and



some of the other causes that we chose, battered women's shelters, for example, in terms of those kinds of realities, you have to maintain your sense of humor in order to survive. The struggle can overwhelm you and it can kill you. You can't let that happen, you have to have some sense of balance. Having a sense of humour helps keep that balance. So this was fun, and people wanted to be part of it. Not everybody; some people were offended by the hell idea; they thought it was a religious term. We explained that hell on earth is working for employers like Canada Post and some of the other employers that we deal with on a regular basis, who treat workers like dirt or like disposable commodities. Or hell is fleeing for your life from an abusive situation, whether at home or somewhere else. That's what hell is, and what we're trying to do is change that any way we can, through collective power, so people don't have to live in hell. If you're offended by that, oh well, we're going to carry on. We had a lot of fun. We swore in people like Bob White, who at the time was the president of CAW. We did that at a political action conference that he came to in Alberta. We told him about it. He was negotiating with General Motors at the time. So he made sure that he told the president of GM that he was now a Sister from Hell, and wasn't too surprised that the president of GM really didn't care. The stories that I've got from the Sisters from Hell and all of us who were involved from the beginning, there's hundreds and hundreds of stories. But the one I really treasure, just talking about Bob White, was a few years later when a bunch of us were in Ottawa for the federal NDP convention. It was when Ed Broadbent was leaving, so there was a big tribute night to Ed Broadbent. All the delegates were there and I saw Bob White was there. I didn't think he would remember me. This was a year later and this was one event in a busy trade unionist's life. But I could see he was doing this, which is our official secret gesture, which nobody's supposed to know; now everybody's going to have to get sworn in or sworn at. But he was doing this gesture. I thought I was mistaken. I thought, surely he can't be making the gesture. He was getting really impatient; so finally I gave him the gesture back. I went, okay we've got something going here when somebody's enjoying it this much from that one little event, and remembers that. So that was fun. The things that really made me run the continuation of the Sisters from Hell was the impact that it had on the tiny little donations we made to long-term strikes. We would sell 100 buttons and that would generate \$300 that we would donate. People would tell us

about different causes in each province. They would tell us about some long-term strikes. I remember one year the workers at Federated Co-op had been on strike for a long period of time. We had \$300 from the collection of buttons; so I sent them a letter. I always explained the donation and that it wasn't very much but we just wanted them to know that they weren't alone in the struggle, that we were thinking of them. I got this letter back and I still get choked up even to this day when I think about it. It was so moving to me, the response I got back from those workers. They'd been out on strike for a long time. They'd faced all kinds of difficulties in their own community. People isolated them because the strike was an inconvenience. When they got our letter, and it was right around Xmas time, I said maybe it would buy some turkey dinners for the families. It wasn't very much money; it was the thought behind it. They felt a reconnection with the labour movement. They felt inspired that somebody out there who they would never meet, a whole bunch of unknown people, knew about their struggle and cared about their struggle. No matter what happened, that touched them. It touched me because I said, we can't stop this. We'd always said that once we got 1,000 members that's enough. We started talking about that and realized that we can't stop as long as there's an interest in participating, that we would make sure it carried on. We've got thousands and thousands of members now in 13 countries around the world. We expanded in French we're *soeurs de l'enfer*, in Spanish we're *les hermanas de l'infierno*. We have T-shirts that have all three on them. We did a cookbook for Bill Flookes in the Calgary and District Labour Council when he was an NDP candidate and there were some challenges going on. He almost won; we were pretty excited. We did some fundraising for him and did a Sisters from Hell cookbook. It brought people from across the country and other countries together. It was just another way of building some solidarity and using a different tool to organize. We had Sisters from Hell flying picket squads who would go into different areas for picket-line duty. People would do this on their own. We didn't try and set up any kind of a structure because this was a very ad hoc, very informal kind of connection. But it helped people have a link. We did swearing-at ceremonies over the phone. We had a helleconference call. People wanted to do these different things and wanted to get together. They wanted to use that as a vehicle. I still get letters every so often from people saying, I need some more buttons because I did a swearing-at the other day, and here's list of names and some

money. It's like, oh my. So it was a wonderful activity. I remember one time in particular at a Federation of Labour convention when we used to have the auctions every year for the Workers' Health Centre. I remember having a bit of a controversy when the Sisters from Hell started bidding on the firefighter's calendar, because we wanted to torch the sucker. So it was the Sisters from Hell versus the firefighters, all in good fun. The firefighters understood what we were doing and we were obviously promoting the calendar for them, but also we were trying to deal with some of the sexist nature, which is something else that the Sisters from Hell always did. We said it was subliminal; a lot of our information was subliminal. It was men having to accommodate to women's structures. Women could keep their own names but men had to change their names. It was a nice little lesson for them. We were doing this not in any kind of sanctimonious attitude but in a real effort to build solidarity and create some discussion. And we had a lot of fun. There were some people we allowed in on the affirmative action program. They really didn't have enough of a sense of humour to join on their own, but we allowed them in hoping that hanging around with us for a bit of time would shave off some of those rough edges and get them to be more thinking human beings. It worked in some cases and not in others, but that's okay. We never claimed to have 100% success on anything. But it was a wonderful experience. We had Sisters from Hell campouts, we did all sorts of different activities where we had a chance to build solidarity. I'll never regret a single moment of it.

Q: Where did you go from the Banff local?

CM: I was really quite active in the Banff local and from that gained a little bit of notoriety in the union in terms of some of the campaigns that we took on in Banff, for example, the fight against the super mailboxes. Even though Canada Post was absolutely determined that they were going to get super mailboxes in Banff, they had all sorts of advertising campaigns ready to go to promote other communities that were also fighting. We were able to mobilize the entire community and the town council to oppose those kinds of things. So those were victories within the union. Different locals would then start asking me for some advice in terms of how to deal with their particular situations. I

started getting more involved and was appointed onto the Regional Union Education and Grievance Committee. It was basically a group of full-time officers and a small number of other non-full-time officers who formed the discussion groups within the region that talked about how to develop policy and how to enforce the collective agreement and have a continuous approach. That was my introduction to more activity within my union at a different level other than constitutional meetings and educationals. I was actually a part of a committee at that point. From that venue then I started getting elected to serve. I served on the National Appeal Board, which was a new structure within our union to deal with internal discipline. I was the first woman on that board. Then I got more involved in terms of developing courses and working in terms of education. Finally in 1996 I was approached by the national director at the time, Sister Susan Dennis, who was not going to be reoffering in 1996. She approached me and asked me if I would consider offering to serve as national director for the Prairie region. My head almost exploded because I thought, no way, you can't go from the president of a small local, we had 12 members at that time, to being a member of the national executive board. That's just too much of a leap. But the kind of confidence that she showed in me and the kind of confidence that many of the leaders within the region showed in me gave me the confidence to offer. So in 1996 I was elected as national director, only the second woman ever to hold that position. I served right through until 2008. So I was the longest-serving national director in the Prairie region ever. For a long period of time I was the only woman national director on our national executive board, which was not a very pleasant experience, to be the only woman. I've always hoped there would be more. There's eight national directors all together so I hoped there'd be a couple more. For a short period of time I was actually joined by a sister from Toronto; so I thought, yea, we're expanding. But that didn't stay in place for very long. That was a significant move on my part because it meant that I had to relocate to Winnipeg where the regional office was. It meant that I was on the road all the time. Part of my time would be in the decision-making body of the union at the national executive board but the rest of the time was giving leadership to all the locals in the largest geographical section of the country, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the NW Territories. So that was a huge challenge. I learned a lot and saw a lot of wonderful leaders come and go in our union during that time period, and enormous challenges.

Within a couple of months after I got elected, that's when the government decided to get rid of 10,000 ad mail workers. Our union was engaged in one of the biggest struggles that we had had, where we were about to lose 10,000 of our most vulnerable workers, workers who had never really connected with the union because they were always considered to be an add-on. They were the ad mail deliverers at that time. Many of them didn't even know they belonged to a union, but all of a sudden they were going to be fired. That was a huge challenge for our union on how to deal with that, when you have the bulk of the members not feeling connected to the small group of vulnerable members. Would they be willing to take dramatic action in order to defend them? We found out that most of them weren't, and that was a huge devastation for many of us in terms of realizing that as a union we hadn't done the work that we needed to do to bring the solidarity of all of our groups together. As a result we lost 10,000 workers. I don't think our union has ever been the same since that point in time. The great thing is that recently we gained 6,000 workers, the rural and suburban mail carriers. I said, in my time as a national leader of the union that we could never make the same mistake as we did with the ad mail workers. We have to make sure that the bond of solidarity between our urban members and our rural members is so tight that the employer and the government will never be able to separate us again. Hopefully that's something that our union is starting to really connect with. I guess we'll see that in 2010 and 2011 when our first big collective bargaining challenges coincide.

Q: Tell me about the Bow Valley group.

CM: We started the Bow Valley Labour Action Committee shortly after I got more involved in the Calgary and District Labour Council. I wanted to talk to some of my other brothers and sisters who were active in their unions but who had that sense of disconnect because they were outside the boundary of Calgary. We wanted to have a local focus for Banff, Exshaw, Canmore, because it's not Calgary, it's the smaller communities outside. A number of us, some of the members from the boilermakers, the nurses, the teachers, UFCW, the Safeway workers in Banff, AUPE, Local 50, some of members there who were the active AUPE members in the area, and the postal workers, got together and

would have meetings out in my store and have a little office space where we would get together. We would talk about how we could raise the profile of the labour movement and the specific struggles as different unions were entering into negotiations. How do we make the people in the Bow Valley, the entrepreneur kind of mentality, make them understand what was at stake and why it was important that the community support the workers who were engaged in struggle? It was pretty good. What we started to do was to have an annual event with the Canmore Folk Festival, we thought that was a natural link. The Calgary and District Labour Council was extremely supportive, especially Brother Christie in particular. Gord Christie would come up and help us set up the booth and hang out with us. It was taking up one of his few long weekends but he never complained and it was wonderful. What we would do is we would set up a booth and we would hand out information. The postal workers were always engaged in some sort of fight against the government; so we would give information about what was happening with our struggles. Other unions as they were coming into negotiations would give them a chance. We'd also have information from the CLC about unions in general and about the Congress and why several million workers in the country belonged to the House of Labour and why it was important to have a national voice as well as a provincial voice as well as a municipal voice for workers with the decision-making bodies that make decisions on working conditions and living conditions. One of the things that we did was we set up this booth. The very first year we applied to have the booth the organizers for the folk festival said, well what has this got to do with a folk festival? Why would we want to have a labour booth? We said, if you ever listen to some of the music that your singers are entertaining the groups with, it's all about struggle. Any of the real folk musicians are talking about all sorts of either historical struggles or current struggles. So don't you think there's a natural link? They said, ya, I guess there is. We didn't have any money. The Bow Valley Labour Action Committee was just this volunteer group of activists who wanted to put some things together. The Calgary and District Labour Council paid for our registration fee, with a vote from the membership to approve it. It was wonderful. We did have some activists from Calgary who would come up and help us staff the booth for a little while. We had balloons, we had kids coming by. We always got a helium tank; so of course the kids would come by and they'd suck on the helium and go \*\*\* and it would bring the

parents over to find out what kind of information they were providing. A lot of the members of the public were members of unions, but didn't know anything about their own union. They would pick up some information about their own union, and we were really proud of that. We thought, here we're engaging in the community and something that's not specifically about labour but shows that labour is an integral part of the community. It's an integral part of our history and it's an important part of our day-to-day life. When we stopped having the booth there, people were disappointed. It was a big vacancy. I was really happy that all the work we put into it, people walked away from that experience feeling good. The other thing we did with the Bow Valley Labour Action Committee was, we really didn't want to turn it into a labour council specifically because what we were trying to do was expand the Calgary and District Labour Council. But we knew there had to be a vehicle that was specific for the area. I was happy that eventually, long after I left, it actually became a labour committee with right to sit on the executive council of the Federation of Labour. That meant that the workers in the Bow Valley were directly connected with the voice of labour at the provincial level and maintained a solidarity relationship with the Calgary and District Labour Council. The other thing that the Labour Action Committee did was provide another vehicle for the unorganized workers, which was something I was always proud that the Calgary and District Labour Council did, was actually talk about situations for all workers and not just be an exclusive group just for unions. That was always an inspiration to me. The Bow Valley Labour Action Committee had another group that was connected with it, which is Banff Workers for Improved Conditions. That was started by myself and a woman named Annette Enrico, who is one of the most militant activists at a grassroots level I've ever met in my life. She's somewhere in Montreal right now and she's dedicated her entire life to being an advocate for the most vulnerable. When she came to Banff and saw how hideously people were treated and how disrespected workers were, she got angry. She found me because I was fairly vocal in terms of political issues and from my position as a postal worker was in the local newspaper a lot in terms of some of our activities and some of our challenges. She asked me if I would help her organize something that could be a venue and a voice for workers who were unorganized in Banff. I was absolutely honoured to be able to do that. One of the things we did there, which was fairly

controversial, we created a little booklet called *The Workers' Guide to Banff*. It was for new workers because when people came to Banff they had all these expectations of what a wonderful town, they would have a great time. Then they found out the realities of Banff, the slimy underbelly that nobody ever wanted to talk about, the kind of sexual abuse that workers went through, the kinds of ripoffs that employers foisted upon workers, the housing situation. They would come to Banff and then they would say, I have no friends or family here, I'm stuck in staff accommodations sometimes with 10 other people in a three-bedroom house, I have no privacy. I work for an employer who doesn't respect me very much. I have no voice and I don't even know where to go for any kind of assistance. We organized a guide and got some assistance from the YWCA and Family and Community Services. We'd been so proactive in the community that they decided this was a good endeavour. The controversy was we were pretty brutally honest in terms of what people could expect. We could warn them in advance so they wouldn't be surprised and that they would have their guard up when they went into some of these accommodations or some of these employment situations. We gave them numbers where they could get help. Some of the numbers we gave them were to unions, and said, maybe your best bet is to unionize. When that was published and some of the sponsors looked at it and said, oh we didn't think it was going to be this controversial, we thought it was going to be here's where the medical clinic is, here's where the fire department is, here's how you dial 911. They thought it was going to be pretty innocuous. We wanted it to be way more than that. We wanted to talk about ways to influence council to show appreciation for workers by finding ways to improve housing, things like that. They didn't want any kind of criticism to be attached to the project. We only got funding for the one year. I still have copies of it; it's still relevant. But what I do notice over the past 10 years is that the community, the town council, has delegated something fairly similar but very innocuous as a welcoming to new workers in Banff. They picked up on what our original idea was, to provide information to workers in Banff. They sugared it up a bit and cut away some of the rough edges, but at least it provides a bit of an information guide. It's better than nothing, but ours was something of a lot more value. I do have to give a couple of the places credit. We had businesses who came to us and asked for copies and they handed it out in their new employee kits. I thought that was quite brave



because these were fairly large hotels that might've been nervous about the idea of a union organizing drive within their hotels. But they were prepared to give this kind of information to their staff. I wish more businesses had been like those ones. That was one of the big projects. The other ones were in terms of the issues around housing. We held forums. It was one of my introductions on how to have a community meeting and chair a community meeting, and have speakers come and talk about different avenues. The Landlord and Tenant Act, we sent in submissions when they were looking at making changes to reflect the particular difficulties that workers in Banff had. So this was all a grassroots action that was organized by two or three dedicated people. I was able to be one of the spokespersons because I had immunity. I was protected by my collective agreement. I wasn't being libelous or slanderous; I was being very direct about some of the circumstances that were there. But I didn't have to worry about any kind of attack from my employer, because I had a collective agreement that protected me, and those other workers didn't. They did a lot of the work; they were a lot of the creative force. I was the spokesperson. It worked out fairly well until unfortunately they had to leave the area and eventually so did I. So it disappeared; we didn't have enough people who were prepared to take it on or feel confident in being able to challenge some of the authorities or some of the powers or some of the larger businesses without any kind of repercussions.

Q: There was an action that you did for the Bow Valley group and the Labour Council.

CM: That was another example of cooperation between the Calgary and District Labour Council and the brothers and sisters in the Bow Valley. That was when we were in the struggle against NAFTA. We knew that NAFTA would shaft ya. So the CLC had called upon labour councils across the country to engage in some activities. We had decided that it would be really good to do a hands across the border activity where we would involve labour councils from British Columbia, from the United States, and from Alberta. We had the great divide and that seemed to be a nice focus point. We met at the great divide just outside of Lake Louise. We had representatives from the labour councils in the communities on the other side of the border. The Calgary and District Labour Council organized a busload of activists to come up. The interesting thing about that is that event

almost didn't happen. That event almost didn't happen because the CLC decided at the time, even though they wanted activities to go on, that our timing wasn't that good. They wanted us to postpone after we had put in place all the plans and contacted Don Judge from the Montana labour movement and made all these arrangements. I got a cursory note one day from our CLC rep saying, your event has been cancelled. I thought, wait a minute, my event has been cancelled by somebody else? First of all, it isn't my event, it's a collective event that a number of us had been involved in and brainstormed. We've sent out press releases and done all this leg work; so it's not going to be cancelled. We're going to do it. A flurry of correspondence went back and forth between myself and representatives of the CLC, where I was trying to persuade them that it made no sense to try and cancel it. They tried to persuade me why it was not a good time. We decided to do it anyway, and I'm really glad we did. John Claude Parrot came from the CLC and was one of our speakers. It was a wonderful activity. I know that the delegates from Calgary enjoyed coming up. I think the transit workers provided a bus. There were confusing signs because there was the great divide signs going in different directions, some for the tourists and some for our demo, because we had picked the specific location. But it was good, it was a really great event, and we got lots of coverage out of it. It developed some solidarity among labour councils that normally we only get to talk to each other at CLC conventions or when there's a specific CLC event. This one was co-planned and showed that this was a model I think we should use more often. I don't think we use it nearly often enough in terms of having coordinated activities, instead of just saying one labour council has to do something in isolation. There's more power when we have larger numbers. Sometimes it's a little inconvenient to have to travel, but it's not like we're doing this every day. We could have more events where we could have that coordinated approach, and people feel really good as a result of it. I was glad I still have a lot of pictures from the AFL executive council. Sister Linda Karpowich was one of our great activists at that time. I remember her being there, and Brother Gord Christie and Brother Darren Steinhoff and Brother Dave Condon. They were representing their labour council, Dave from Medicine Hat, Darren from Calgary and a whole slew of activists. And children. Some of the members brought their children and for some of them it was their first demo. I had a big flatbed truck that we used as a stage and they climbed up there and

were the centre of attention. It was wonderful because we were talking about their future. The struggles that we were engaging in were not just about our immediate issues but they were about the future. As we all know, the impact of trade deals, like NAFTA, have really had a negative effect on a lot of people's future.

Q: When did that take place?

CM: That would've been in the early '90s because it was after the Free Trade Agreement was well entrenched, and it was introduction of NAFTA. So probably around 1992, thereabouts.

Q: And what time of year?

CM: It was in April and there was lots of snow. That was one of the reasons the CLC thought it didn't make any sense. They wanted us to postpone it to a warmer time when more people could be available. I think there were some competing meetings going on. I can't remember all the details now. They had a legitimate reason for asking us to postpone it, but I didn't think it was legitimate enough. I was really glad that the Calgary and District Labour Council supported me with that, and so did the other ones, and we carried on.

Q: What were some of the strikes you were involved in?

CM: I'm going to tell you about our strike in 1987 because it was the first one that I actually had a chance to lead in our local. I have a lot of fond memories from that. Leading up to that strike, our members had been told that they weren't allowed, that there was a provision in the National Parks Act that said that there was no picketing allowed in a national park. Our members believed this. I checked that out and my national director at the time said, well if there is I guess you're just going to have to violate it, aren't you? I went, okay, sounds reasonable to me, that's fine. Of course there was no provision, but that's what the authorities had told workers, that oh no this is a national park, you can't

have a picket line set up here. Just because there hadn't been one didn't mean that you couldn't have one. So we decided we were going to have one. The 1987 strike involved a series of rotating strikes at first until we were either locked out or went out on full strike, depends on who you talk to. We were getting the call, every day we were ready for the call. While we were preparing and different locals were going out and everybody was on strike alert, it was really exciting for our members. They'd been involved in strikes where they just went home for the duration and then they got called back when it was over with. But this time they were actually going to participate. This time they'd been leading up with some information, they'd been participating in demonstrations that I'd organized in the year leading up to it. So they felt a lot stronger and a lot more confident about down tools and out we go. So when we did get the call to go out it was in the middle of the day; so I ensured that everything was locked up and all of our members went out and we started picketing. We had at that point in time developed a pretty good relationship with our community and they knew what our issues were. It's not just about money, it's about creating decent jobs in the community and it's about making sure that the public post office remains a public post office and is protected from the damages and dangers of privatization. They were aware of all those things. So we had pretty good support. I remember that the RCMP immediately came in as soon as we set up a picket line. They were called right away by a panicky postmaster and basically were going to tell us where we could walk and where we couldn't walk. I remember the sergeant who told me to come down the alley with him. Of course I wasn't going anywhere with him so I brought the whole picket line with me. He didn't like that very much because I wasn't being obedient. It wasn't my job to be obedient, quite frankly. He was telling me that I would be arrested if I stepped one foot on post office property. I started talking to him in a very calm manner about the fact that I'm a resident of Banff, I'm allowed to walk anywhere within the community. Show me the provisions that tell me that as a citizen of this town I'm not allowed to step foot on certain property, show me. Well he didn't like that either because I was challenging him. He told me that he'd just come from the Gainers strike and he knew how to deal with troublemakers like me. I thought, oh I'm going to get arrested, holy cow. I said, well then you're going to have to deal with troublemakers like me because the ones behind me are going to follow in my footsteps. While all this was

going on, there was this sweet little old lady who lived in Banff, her name was Doris Gammon. She had an amazing history in the town. She heard this, she'd come to witness what was going on. It was drawing a bit of a crowd. She started pointing her finger at that cop and saying, you leave that nice lady alone, she's not doing anything wrong. It was so amazing. I thought, I'm being defended by one of the townspeople, this was so great. She intimidated that cop and he had to back off. All of a sudden he realized he wasn't just having a one-on-one with me and that I wasn't being intimidated by him, even though my guts were rolling and I was going, oh here we go. But I wasn't going to let him know that I was nervous. This little old lady, she had to be about 80 years old at that time, how was he going to deal with her? She wasn't going to be intimidated by him either, so he backed off. Of course he was just trying to intimidate us and it didn't work. I remember my mom was on the picket line with us that day. One of my sisters at the post office had brought her kids out on the picket line that day. We blew up a bunch of pink balloons and tied them to the antennae of all the taxicabs in the town that said, subs are substandard. One of our struggles was to stop the franchising out of wicket services in the post office to sub-post offices in the back of drugstores and the back of grocery stores, wherever they were appearing at that point in time. The taxi drivers all wanted to show support; so all these cabs were driving around with these pink balloons hanging off the antennae. That was wonderful. That made my members feel really supported. Before that they were just trusting in me to not get them into too much trouble. At that point in time they felt their own strength and they felt their own connection to the community in a way that I don't think they'd really felt before. In any kind of subsequent activities they didn't have the same kind of hesitation that they did. They stood up, they watched one of their own not getting intimidated by the cops, and realized the cop had to back away because he was feeding us a line of crap. When they realized that they thought, okay, we don't have to automatically obey authorities; we get to ask them questions. I think that was really good for them and I think it stayed with them for a long time. You wanted to know about other strikes too. There's been a lot of them. The nurses' strike in 1988, I think mentioned that, where the Calgary and District Labour Council sent a whole bunch of members, and there were a whole bunch of postal workers from Calgary who came up to show support for the Banff nurses when they went out on strike. It was the first time they had picketed. That

was the year after our strike. All of a sudden picket lines were starting to become a normal occurrence when workers were engaged in conflict. That was a really good thing. I know a bunch of us got frostbite on our faces as a result of picketing there. The boilermakers strike in Exshaw was really significant. Again, the Calgary and District Labour Council was an amazing resource and support. Activists within the Bow Valley were rallying to the support of the workers in Exshaw, but also the members in Calgary. Especially since the scabs were being bused into Exshaw from Calgary. When we found out where their location was we would set up picket lines there. We would engage in activities like have caravans driving out to Exshaw in front of the buses at very slow speeds. It was very frustrating. We were all within the Traffic Act, I believe, I'm not sure how slow you can actually go on the highway. We didn't find that out at the time. Sometimes when you have an old car you can't move as fast as some of those little hotrods. You have to be careful; you don't want deer jumping out from the fields or elk. Heavens, we know that too many of those animals have been killed. So we took our time. As a bus would try and pass us another car would move forward, because there were several of us travelling together. If I was in this car and Gord Christie was in the car behind me, we would see a bus come out and Gord Christie would come out in front so he could pass me. He would take his time passing me, we'd wave at each other along the way, and he would pass me and the bus would move back into line. It would come out again and then I would pass Gord Christie. We did this all the time and it drove them crazy and it was good. We wanted them to know that they weren't going to have an easy time of this no matter where. They weren't going to have an easy time of it at the scab pickup and drop-off location in Calgary or at the picket site in Exshaw, and that we were solid. It showed a lot of creativity. I know that those brothers and sisters in Exshaw really appreciated the newfound support that they had. That was because they had been involved in the Bow Valley Labour Action Committee and therefore had the link to the Calgary and District Labour Council. So they became part of the broader labour movement. I know boilermakers came down from Edmonton to show them support. The postal workers in Banff, we sponsored a picnic barbeque, so I rolled out my barbeque and made hamburgers. We did all sorts of things in that strike. They had a lot of really nasty security people. Really ignorant, something we hadn't seen in the Bow Valley before.

We'd seen it in other industrial struggles in other locations, but we hadn't seen the level of viciousness from the security goons that they brought in. It became a bit of a challenge for us to engage in those kinds of tauntings and back and forth. I know we got under their skin quite a bit because they didn't expect such disrespect from picketers. But we gave it to them pretty good. I ended up having to go to court for a couple of charges on slowing down trucks. Accidentally, I couldn't help it. I was walking a little slower in those days. I'd let a truck go by and then I'd have to stop it for a while and let it go by. We were all within our five minutes, but it was five minutes for each stop, so by the time that one truck got out there was another one coming out and before you knew it there was a backlog. We were using any ? that we could that the workers felt comfortable with, because we wanted to respect...although we wanted to do things that were fairly dramatic, we had to find ways that were creative that slowed down production that let the company that they weren't going to get out of this scot free, and make the workers feel empowered when they had small numbers. Those were fond memories. I had one of my friend's daughters with me. Darren Steinhoff, who's my brother and comrade, his daughter had come out to spend a day with me in Banff. I was on my way to bring her home and I thought, we just have to stop off at the picket line. I couldn't go past Exshaw and now hang out on their strike. Of course that's the day that I almost got arrested. I thought, oh boy, I'm not sure whether Darren and Linda are going to be happy with me involving Mary, although she wasn't actually on the picket line; she was in my car. She could've called home if I'd gotten arrested and she needed a ride back. But they were delighted that she'd had that opportunity, and that stayed with her too. As she grew up into a very conscientious young woman, those experiences helped frame some of the debate for her. She's seen I wasn't doing anything other than maintaining what the regulation was. All of a sudden the police were coming in because I was such a horrible threat. Those are the things that stick in your mind when you're showing through action what your principles are and somebody else gets it. Some young person understands what it is that you're trying to do and it makes a mark on them and how they view the world a bit differently as a result of it. That's a good thing.

Q: Do you remember what year that was?

CM: It was '94.

Q: Do you remember what the issues were? It was a lockout, right?

CM: Ya, it was a lockout. There were all sorts of horrible concession that the employer was trying to foist upon them. Health and safety issues were really big. I remember that, and staffing. Just the regular gambit. Cut back on your benefits, don't want to give you any wage increase, want to cut back on the number of people on your shift and therefore it affects your safety, also affects the kind of hours you end up having to work, all of that kind of stuff. There was a lot of solidarity from that group.

Q: Could you tell us a bit about S'ean Gillen?

CM: I'll try to without crying. I love that brother; he was a wonderful human being. Had a great sense of humor. I'll never forget I used to drive up to Edmonton with him every so often and he used to tell me this scary little joke that probably everybody's always heard. As I was getting tired in the passenger's seat he'd say, yes... I want to die like my grandfather in his sleep, not like the passengers in his car. I'm going, okay I'll drive now. He was a wonderful brother; he had a heart of gold. Any time you ever needed a brother in solidarity he was there. I was devastated when I found out he'd been killed. I was in Winnipeg. S'ean was originally from Winnipeg. So he used to always talk about Winnipeg with great fondness and he used to talk about some of the people I ended up having a chance to meet. I would always talk about S'ean to them and that developed the link when I was establishing my new digs in Winnipeg. When I found out that he had passed away and I couldn't come back for his funeral, I was absolutely devastated. I had so much respect for him. I miss him still. Every so often when I think about, I have a really great picture that I kept in my office and now I have it in my house. It's a picture of he and I at the CLC convention. We're at a demonstration and he's right there. It's a really nice; it shows his smiling Irish eyes and his great sense of humour. I think that the labour movement in Alberta certainly gained from having him there. It's funny because he



thought he was fairly conservative. Then he started hanging around with a number of us and realized that he could shake off a few of his restraints pretty easily. He was a real trade unionist at heart and we certainly saw that in all of his actions. I have a lot of fond memories of him.

Q: What was his position at the time?

CM: He was president of the Calgary and District Labour Council for awhile. So that's why he and I would go to Edmonton together on the executive council. We would carpool. He was involved in a number of the committees and so on, both at the labour council level and the federation level as well. He did a lot of outreach. One of the things that the AFL executive council did in our Jobs and Justice campaign was to have executive council members go out to different communities. He went to Drumheller with me and we met with PSAC members who worked at the prison in Drumheller, and talked about trying to build the labour movement, trying to build the common resistance. So I did a lot of travelling with him in that context. I was on the executive of the Calgary and District Labour Council for awhile as well when he was president. He had this easygoing manner in terms of chairing the meetings, but I think it helped sometimes to diffuse some of the tensions that existed among some of the delegates. I'm not sure.

Q: Can you talk to us about your awards during your time in the movement?

CM: I think it was the Calgary and District Labour Council that nominated me for both of these, if I'm not mistaken. I'm totally honoured by that. The first one was the Alberta Federation of Labour Women's Day award that I received in 1993. I shared that with a sister from CUPE. I think it was the first time that we had dual recipients, I think it was Connie Barnaby from central Alberta, I think Red Deer. She was retiring so the women's committee decided to award it to both of us. It's so typical of women trying to be inclusive. I was quite touched by this because this would've been her last opportunity to be recognized before she retired. But they also wanted to recognize my contributions. So, rather than make it a competition between the two of us, they decided to award it to both

of us. I felt really honoured to share that year with her. Since that time they've done that on other occasions, but that's the first time that had happened. That was wonderful and it was the year that I was provincial candidate in the provincial election, so it was actually something that got me some local media as well. The Federation of Labour had never given an honour to one of the trade union activists in the area before. It was something that we were trying to promote within the women's community in the Bow Valley, the recognition of March 8<sup>th</sup> and the work that needed to be done in terms of women's equality. So that was wonderful. I got to participate in Calgary, was given the wonderful plaque and roses from the Federation of Labour at the Calgary activities on March 8<sup>th</sup>. We got to march and I still have the little rose corsage and the plaque. That was the first one. Then a couple of years later I won the May Day Solidarity award, which was given on May Day to a trade unionist who was active in a broad sphere in terms of the labour movement. I was really extremely honoured to receive that award. I was the first woman, and as I teased some of my predecessors, the first one under 40 to be able to achieve such an award. I was really thrilled with that because that meant a lot to me. That was the recognition of my overall work as a trade union activist. So both of those are hanging up in our house and I'm pretty excited about that.

Q: Could you talk about the work you've done in the international solidarity movement?

CM: We could spend days talking about that work. I think it's been some of the most meaningful work of my life. As involved as we get within our own struggles and our own workplaces and communities, knowing the link that we have with workers in other countries and the struggles that they're facing, sometimes far more desperate than our struggles, makes me feel humbled when I see the kinds of challenges that workers take on in other places. It makes me feel proud when our unions connect with each other and show support and when we admit that we can learn from other people and not just teach other people or be so presumptuous as to think that we're going to give workers in other countries answers when they've been leading the way for a long time. My union has a lot of policies that direct our activists to get involved in international solidarity. It's caused a lot of difficulties among those of us who really understand the need for global solidarity

and really understand how we benefit from connecting, versus other workers who only understand the challenges in their own workplace and don't like to see resources of the union spent somewhere else, whether it's our time or our money or whatever. A lot of workers understand struggles and would rather act in a charitable approach, thinking that that's going to solve it. Let's give them some money, let's send ... Well that's not what workers in other countries want. What workers in other countries want is for us to engage in struggles here that connect with their struggles there, so that we're all engaged in one massive resistance against a capitalist agenda that's squashing and crushing and destroying our environment and people in so many parts of the world. That's the challenge within our union is trying to teach our own members about the fact that this isn't about charity, it's about solidarity, and that we actually gain. We learn so much in terms of our own struggles when we participate with workers in other countries. One of the ways I try to do that, first of all our union has been involved pretty heavily with Cuba for a long time. We absolutely support the Cuban workers and we send delegations on a regular basis. We encourage twinning of our locals with postal workers in Cuba so that we can have direct connections. There's a language difficulty that unfortunately not all of us are bilingual in Spanish and not all of them are bilingual in English. So it makes it a little bit challenging. But the human-to-human connection is what we've tried to encourage over the years. That's one aspect. My very first experience in Cuba I got to meet Fidel Castro. I have a picture in our living room with me and Fidel, and that was pretty wonderful. That was as a result of me having an opportunity to go, even though I was going on vacation. I went at May Day. Because I was an officer of my union the Cuban labour movement asked me to participate in some of their activities that celebrate workers. That was wonderful and I thought, oh I've got to get as many of my brothers and sisters down here to see how wonderful the effect of the revolution has been and to offset a lot of the American propaganda and the Canadian propaganda that takes place that tries to diminish what workers have been able to achieve in Cuba. That was the first step in terms of getting involved in international solidarity. We have some members who think we just go down there for vacation or just to get some sun. They like to try and diminish the work that we're doing. So I thought, all right, maybe I can have a different focus that might open up some eyes. We know what the impact of NAFTA has been on the post

office, the potential in terms of the lawsuits that were being filed by UPS against the government of Canada using NAFTA as a vehicle, trying to break up the Canadian public post office. So let's use that information and link it with workers who are also struggling against the impacts of NAFTA in Mexico. I thought that was a reasonable link for people to make. So I got involved with an organization called the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, and took a very small delegation to Mexico. We toured some communities and some workplaces and met with workers who were engaged in incredible struggle. I was moved; my heart was broken while I was down there. What I saw in terms of the movement of companies into these *maquiladora* zones and how workers are treated as less than dirt, it was like blinders had been ripped off my face. I knew all of the struggles. I knew all the reasons why we wanted to fight against NAFTA. I knew in my head, but having a chance to go down there and meet workers who deal with the impact on a day-to-day basis and the struggles that they face, meant that I now knew with my heart. I came back extremely emotional for the first little while. We were all, the five of us that went down on the first trip, were extraordinarily moved. I knew I had to take more postal workers back. I was really fortunate in having a chance to talk to some of my really good comrades in the union, and we sent another delegation. Some of our members paid their own way down there. If anybody ever thought we were on vacation, I beg them to go down and experience what we experienced. The stench of the Rio Grande, the militarization of the workplaces. The struggles that workers had when they tried to engage in any kind of action where they had the force of the police and the army on them like that. The terror as children and women faced gunpoint when they were just trying to get some recognition for their work or get paid for their work. We had a chance to meet with workers who make blue jeans and were engaged in some struggle in terms of trying to get some justice in terms of the work that they were doing. Their plants were being relocated and because of the laws, if you relocate a plant you don't have to pay severance pay if it's at a certain level. Mexico has some of the best labour laws in the world and none of them are enforced and none of them can be enforced when you don't have the resources to be able to take on some of these companies in the first place. Seeing how people who make nothing, make \$50 a week, try to feed their families on that, try to live on that. Some of the *colonias* that we had a chance to visit, which is where my heart got

broken when I saw families trying to live on the top of a dump, scratching and clawing to try and find materials to build their homes. Every one of us was moved. None of us could escape the impact of seeing first hand the way people have to try and survive, when right beside them are these industrial parks that money's no object. They have water to come in and water the lawns but they don't have any water to come in and provide workers who are working in 90 and 100 degree temperatures, ready to faint. Workers are charged for food that's infested with bugs. Workers are not given proper safety equipment and don't even know what kind of chemicals they're being forced to work with until they go home and end up having children who have all sorts of birth defects. But of course there's no link with the work that they do, it just must be something in their genes. The hideousness of the Rio Grande where workers try and escape the poverty all through Central and South America. They end up coming up through Mexico and try and escape in the United States so they can maybe make an income and send home. Looking at the kind of pollution that gets dumped into that river. You hear about the Rio Grande. Those of us from my generation who grew up with western movies and the cowboys riding around going to the Rio Grande and you think, it's a wonderful, amazing river. That river you can smell it for half a kilometer away. The stench brings tears to your eyes. The people from the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras would take us down to show us where the effluent was being dumped from the business park over here directly into the river. You couldn't get anywhere near it. We had to wear gas masks in order to get close to it. Some of the people who would get close to it would end up throwing up. Some couldn't see because their eyes were so badly watered. One of my brave sisters, Eileen Runstatler, and another brave sister, Shirley Classen, decided to go down and try and get water samples. I don't know how they got down that close to it without passing out and dying, I swear. But they were determined to try and get some proof so that we could actually have something statistical to show to those people who just think maybe we're being a little bit too emotional. Who needs clean water and air that you can breathe? People have been able to survive around that. We saw a fisher, a man who was out with his son on a boat, catching fish in this stench-ridden river, bringing it back and knowing that it was black inside, poisoned. So not only are we killing people, we're killing our environment and we're doing both at the same time in order for some of these huge corporations, that are now

with their hands out saying, now we're hurting financially, in order to allow them to have enormous profits at the extent of working conditions, at the extent of living conditions, at the extent of our environment. The lesson I wanted us to bring back home is that if it can happen there it can happen here. The only way we can stop it from happening any further down there is to fight it here and raise the level of awareness. That was our goal. I know that the members who went down on the tour with me came back equally committed as I was, in order to try and raise that level of awareness. The backlash that we faced was ridiculous. Some of the members who were criticized, of course behind their back because nobody wants to say anything bad about international solidarity up front, we heard from people, oh I support this, but. I want those people to go down and experience that. Those are the same people who will go to a five-day educational and they'll learn a lot of things hypothetically, a lot of things that will deal with their workplace. But that education was life-changing. The first group I took down when I made my report to our union, I said I took down trade unionists, I brought back warriors. The flame was ignited in all of our hearts when we looked at people face to face, eye to eye. We looked at mothers and children and people who were engaged in trying to support workers in the community. We saw what they were dealing with on a regular basis and we knew that we have a role to play. But the only way we have a role to play is if we can make sure that other people understand that solidarity is not charity. Solidarity means that we have to reach out to each other and we have to find ways to resist the same common enemy, those corporations that attack, first in Mexico and in Central and South America because they can, and then they come into North America where their base is in the first place. They've already been emboldened by the things that they can do in other countries, they've already devastated other areas. We've seen the impact in terms of the gouging, attacks on our public service, water. We're in a big debate about whether or not we're going to be able to maintain public access of water or whether it's going to be at some point in time totally privatized. Those are ongoing struggles that we have. We have to engage in those wholeheartedly because we know what will come at us if they have an opportunity. So that's what international solidarity has done in terms of my life, made me look at everything with a whole different viewpoint. Made me really proud of the work that people have done with extremely limited resources. When I look at those sisters and

brothers in Mexico in the very few *maquiladoras* that we got to visit. You could spend a lifetime listening to the stories of those workers and the struggles that they've faced and are facing on a regular basis. When we make those connections and I learn how they've organized around something, I can bring that back here and use that as a tool, then that's been a benefit. If they can use something that I've experienced and can share with them, then that's a benefit. That's a benefit for all of us. I would've loved to have seen on an annual basis a larger and larger expansion, not just within our union but with other unions. I know that in Winnipeg, for example, when I came back and talked about this experience with some brothers and sisters in CUPE, the Manitoba division has a global solidarity group, they really wanted to get involved. I was encouraged by that level of interest. Lives are at stake. Sometimes the struggle, whether or not we get paid overtime, whether or not we got a break when we were supposed to--those are all important in maintaining our power in the workplace, but overall our whole world is under attack and workers are under attack, and sometimes we don't even know it. One of my favourite analogies, it's been used a million times but I heard it at a research conference in New York. It's like when you have a pot of boiling water and you have a frog and you throw a frog into a pot of boiling water, it's going to hop right back out because it knows it's being hurt, it feels the pain right away. But if you put a frog in a pot of water that's cool and you put it on a slow simmer and it starts to heat up, it doesn't jump out of the pot, it dies. That heat has slowly taken over. It may feel discomfort and it may not quite know what's going on, but it's being murdered. That's what's happening to our world right now. Unless we rein in those large corporations that have had such a free hand and that have a continuing free hand with any kind of these trade agreements that have been going on, whether it's NAFTA or whether it's some of the bilateral agreements that give them totalitarian power, unless we rein them in, we're facing a much bigger disaster than we can anticipate. So that's what international solidarity means to me. It means making those links with workers. Businesses make links all the time. Corporations have made lots of links and they want to redefine the world in their own way. I want workers to redefine the world in a way that means something to us and that gives our children benefits and that makes sure we have a world that's going to not disintegrate within our lifetime or within

our grandchildren's lifetime because of the destruction that's taking place. That's what international solidarity can do.

Q: What do you see for workers in the future?

CM: I have great hopes for the youth. When I saw how the youth mobilized in Seattle in 1999 against WTO and when I see how youth are connected with the struggle around the environment, then I have great hope for an activist philosophy. But I'm worried about the state of workers right now and for the future. What's happened is we've developed a malaise. I've seen it slowly choking activism out of a lot of unions. I've seen it change the dynamics where some of our unions, including my own, start looking for different solutions as opposed to direct solutions because they're hopeful that the other solutions will create better benefits, whether it's for the short term or the long term. I think if we look at history, the only time we've been able to make change is when we're strong enough to take the change, strong enough to make the change, bold enough to do that work as opposed to trying to find ways to work within. I'm worried right now that it will take a huge disaster for workers not to just get angry, and not get angry at their unions but get angry at the external forces that are making these negative impacts on their lives. I don't want it to get to a point where it's out of desperation that we react. I want workers to understand that we have such power if we exercise it collectively, if we find ways to work together and overcome petty differences that seem to sometimes overwhelm us. Look at the main focus of what we need to do in terms of making sure that we have rights and dignity and respect in our workplaces, make sure that we have jobs that don't injure us, make sure that we have viable and sustainable economies that have a living wage component so that workers don't have to be the lowest common denominator in the capitalist situation. That's what I'm hopeful of. I see the youth having a spark that maybe has been a bit diminished within the mainstream labour movement and the mainstream social situation. I'm not suggesting for one minute that there aren't dynamic leaders and dynamic and principled people who really are struggling day to day for change. They're out there, they're all around us. But we need to make sure that we find a way to bring us all together with a common focus in terms of being able to actually make change as



opposed to being able to adapt to change that's being foisted upon us. Every single day we listen to the news we're hearing about job loss and potential job loss. What does that mean? That means workers face desperation. That means we start looking at each other, we start competing with each other. Everything spirals downward. That's part of a trap. Unless the labour movement decides to take a very strong role, not just lobby, not just develop briefs and have good discussions and dialogue, but finds a way to motivate and mobilize workers, I think we're in for a lot of trouble. I'm hopeful that the youth activism that's around the environment and some of these other issues will link in with the labour movement as more and more younger workers who want to maintain jobs find out those connections and those links. Then we'll have a chance. But otherwise, some days I really despair. Some days I have great hopes. Some days I have my natural optimism saying we'll find a way. Other days I go, I don't know. We need to stop letting things divide us and we need to start focusing on how to unite workers generally, so that we have one strong movement and one resistance and one strong force for progress. I think that's possible, I've always believed that that's possible. I'm looking forward to seeing those sparks come alive, and I'll be there.

[ END ]