

Joyce McArthur

JM: I'm Joyce McArthur. I work for the AUPE southern regional office, secretary, which I've done for 22 years.

Q: What do you do here?

JM: Lots. We do grievances, we do an accounting part of the job, we do arbitration summaries, we handle all the phone calls from members. I'm the first person to get yelled at or if they're upset with something I'm the first one to take the call and take the brunt of that call and have to know how to handle the members and deal with them in a diplomatic way.

Q: What's your background?

JM: I was a stay-at-home mom until my kids were 9 and 11. My dad worked for the City of Lethbridge and he belonged to the CUPE union. He was president of that local. He had mentioned to me that they were looking for a part-time secretary at the CUPE union office, and I should go and apply. I said, fabulous. So I went in and talked to the secretary then, and I got hired. I worked for her for probably four years doing summer relief. The secretary was Glanis McDonald then. I worked for her and then when CUPE moved to the Labour Club building--they built that building and all the labour organizations were in one building--I was working for her one summer and she said, you know the secretary down the hall, the AUPE, is looking for a part-time summer relief. I said, I don't know how I can do both. But she said, well go talk to her, maybe we can work something out. Fabulous. So I went down the hall to the AUPE, talked to Georgina Timmerman, and she said, that would be fabulous if you could work for me and Glanis. We'll get together and work out the schedules. So that year I started working for Georgina, and I worked for both. Then Georgina took a temporary rep position for a year and a half. So she asked if I wanted to work full-time for a year and a half, and I said oh definitely. At that point I had

to give up the CUPE job. After I worked for Georgina for a year and a half, a position came open, because she transferred to Edmonton, and I got the position. I've been here 22 years.

Q: That's interesting that you worked for both unions at the same time. Talk a bit about the differences.

JM: The employers we dealt with were definitely different. CUPE was more rural, city and of course AUPE was government employees. So there were lots of differences there. When you'd go to the two jobs you'd have to go, oh ya I'm at CUPE, oh ya I'm at AUPE. Those were the main differences. The grievances and such were all pretty much a grievance is a grievance in a union. Bargaining was a bit different at CUPE. Bargaining, the reps bargained at night more, and at AUPE the reps bargained during the day. So that was pretty interesting. I found that like, wow these reps seem to work harder at CUPE than they do at AUPE. So that was interesting. I dealt with a lot of employers, the CUPE employers and the AUPE employers. It was interesting, really interesting. I can't say that I liked one more than the other. The pay was better at CUPE though, than AUPE, definitely. Good group of people, both. It was interesting.

Q: What is the relationship of the union's secretary to the other union staff?

JM: As a secretary in a union office you do feel you are beneath everybody else. You're on the bottom of the totem pole. Like I said earlier, you take the brunt of the phone calls and you are the buffer before it gets to the rep. People believe that we don't work really hard, but we do. We put up with a lot more than is expected, just dealing with members. I think the reps believe we should do more than we do.

Q: What is the dividing line?

JM: The dividing line is secretaries are not allowed to go any further, no giving contract interpretation. That's the line right there; we don't do that. That is totally given to the rep.

We try to help the best we can, and we do, and sometimes we go beyond that and go, well I'll grab a collective agreement and look it up and tell you. I can read just like they can.

Q: What type of complaints and phone calls do you get?

JM: Not all of them are problems. People are just looking for a collective agreement interpretation or they're looking for something simpler, like member number or who they can contact for a problem. It's not always an issue that has to go to the rep. We can help.

Q: What problems are members phoning in with?

JM: Definitely problems with our employers. Harassment, definitely.

Q: What would a member tell you?

JM: They're just harassed on the jobsite by their employer and it just never quits, to the point where they have to file a grievance now. Yet they're scared to, for fear of being reprimanded. They phone and ask what will happen if they complain or file a grievance. We tell them, you have to if you want this resolved, or it'll just continue.

Q: So that's the type of advice you'd give about harassment?

JM: Yes, definitely.

Q: What form would the harassment take sometimes?

JM: That's a good question, I just can't think off the top of my head. Members are bullied on their worksite and harassed constantly, and the employer won't do anything about it. They just shove it off. If you don't like it, get another job. Some employers, if they do file a harassment grievance, it's just nasty for them when they go back to work. They get

harassed all the more. I won't name any employers in particular, but there are employers like that.

Q: Do we win some of those cases?

JM: Oh yes.

Q: What happens to the members when they win?

JM: They go back to work and generally it's resolved. Like I say, there are some employers where it isn't resolved and they continue to be harassed, and sometimes the member will quit because they can't take it anymore.

Q: What type of union is AUPE? Is it a top-down union, quite centralized, or bottom-up driven by the members?

JM: I would have to say AUPE orders come from above.

Q: What's your job as secretary? What do you have to tell members when they call you?

JM: In some instances that's exactly what we have to tell them. These are our orders from headquarters and if you have an issue you'll have to call them, because we're only doing what our employer is telling us to do.

Q: You also organize member functions. What role are you asked to play?

JM: Getting members together, especially to take union courses, sometimes is very difficult, very difficult. In the past, and even now, we've had to cancel courses because we just don't have enough members registering for them. That reason I believe is apathy. Yet they'll phone and complain, the union doesn't do this, the union doesn't do that. But do they take courses and get themselves educated? No, they complain. So it's difficult.

We probably cancel two courses a year because we can't fill them, and other times we have very good course registration. We're having a course coming up and we've got 12 registered, which is good for this area.

Q: What's your role in organizing?

JM: The course is scheduled, I take all the registrations, I send all the time-off forms, the letters, book the hotel if they're from out of town, book a lunch, make sure the room is available, set it up, order the kits from Edmonton and set that up on the day of the course. That's what I do.

Q: You're the person behind the scenes.

JM: Absolutely. If it wasn't for me it wouldn't get done; nothing would get done for a course. The secretary does it all. The rep just teaches, but the prep is done by us. Everything from taking the phone calls, taking registration, members complaining that why isn't the course on this day and that day, dealing with it all.

Q: Is there any other area besides education in which you take similar responsibility?

JM: For area council functions. They'll have a function; they'll put up a poster. Then they will phone me, say the area council president, and say, can we RSVP you for this function? Oh definitely, I don't have to do time offs or anything. But I take all the registrations for all of the area council functions. If they have a barbecue, if they have a Xmas party, I do all of that. Then they just phone me at the end of the day and say, how many people are coming? I give them that.

Q: And you do all the preparation for the function as well?

JM: No, the area council does that themselves. It's held at a hall; it's not held here.

Q: What is an area council?

JM: It's the social function of AUPE. All the members in southern Alberta can come to any function that's put on by the area council.

Q: Is there any other area where you have to take a lot of responsibility for making it happen?

JM: Like making sure that the reps are on time and scheduled at their meetings and such. I remind them--do you know that you've got that meeting? Ya, I've got it in my meeting maker. Good, I just wanted to let you know. And making sure they take their stuff with them to their meeting, I get that ready for them.

Q: What do you do with respect to complaint handling and grievances, besides taking the initial phone call?

JM: I give the phone call to the rep. Sometimes I might fill out part of the form and give it to them and get them to finish it up for me. Then they bring it out and I type it up and get it to all the right people, designated officers, grievors, our office.

Q: What are the steps you have to ensure happen properly?

JM: That grievance has got to get out. There's timelines, and if the rep doesn't keep track of it on their calendar I should be doing that, just to remind them, but that is their part of the job. They have to keep track of the timelines. Those are very important because if that grievance is lost because of timelines, that grievor is going to be very upset indeed. Just making sure it's followed through at all of the steps.

Q: What happens at each step?

JM: Each step is different. It goes to level 1, 2, 3, and then arb. If it gets to arb, then I prepare the, well the rep does up the summary but I make sure it gets done, the file gets gone through, sent to headquarters to the D&A department. That's all on me too.

Q: To go to arbitration, you have to establish a case that it should go to arbitration.

JM: That's the arbitration summary that gets sent to Edmonton that goes to the grievance review board where they review it and decide if it goes or not.

Q: That's a lot of paperwork and a lot of steps.

JM: It's a lot of steps.

Q: Have you messed up any of them?

JM: No, I haven't.

Q: In 22 years?

JM: I have not.

Q: Have you seen them getting messed up by other people?

JM: I haven't heard.

Q: Do you do anything when bargaining happens?

JM: I used to. But the rep that did all the bargaining was transferred to Edmonton. Before, I would prepare everything for bargaining, but we don't do bargaining in the office anymore because they've transferred all of that to headquarters. All the bargaining is done out of Edmonton now.

Q: Do you make any of the arrangements?

JM: If the rep is coming down here to use the boardroom, I set that all up. I make sure that if it's in the evening they have keys to get in. I make sure the room is ready. Maybe they'll come for two days; so they might prepare one day and have the employer in here with them for the next day. I just make sure everything's ready and coffee's on for the employer and them. People think we just sit there and do nothing, and that's so not true. Because the union is, some days it's slower, maybe it's because there's not many problems that day. But the next day... One day this last August we had 43 phone calls in one day. I would just hang up, pick up, hang up, pick up, 43 phone calls. It was amazing. Every person needed something.

Q: Can you think of any other things you have to do? This is basically your office; you run it.

JM: Absolutely. If it wasn't for me it wouldn't run, I'll tell you that.

Q: Do you have to handle any administrative bookwork?

JM: Just the petty cash, just the little books for the petty cash, because I handle that and I'm responsible for it. And I order all the supplies for everything, for all the equipment. If the equipment breaks down, I have to be the one that fixes it. If the reps come in, the Xerox isn't working, can you get it fixed today? I'll get right on that. That's all my responsibility.

Q: When you work for a union, why do you need a union? Do you belong to a union?

JM: Yes, we belong to a union. It was United Steel Workers but now we've moved to the Energy and Paper Workers.

Q: Why do you need a union? Your employer will take care of you, because he's a union.

JM: That's not necessarily true. He's still an employer. We still all have issues. ... If we have a problem, our union will look after us as far as if we have to grieve. Maybe we're being harassed by our employer. So we have to do grievances as well. We have to bargain with our employer to get a fair collective agreement. So yes, we do need a union.

Q: Won't your employer just give you fair pay, because it's a union?

JM: No. That's where people don't understand. Just because it's a union they think we get everything. But no, we fight for everything too, just like our members.

Q: What are some major gains that your union made for you over the 22 years that you've been employed?

JM: Better pay. We had to bargain for that. The one year we went on strike. Look at all we lost.

Q: Why did you go on strike?

JM: The issue was all of the takeaways the employer wanted. ... They took away our benefits to 65. If we retired at 60 we were still going to get benefits until we were 65; they took that away. They took away our paid out sick days. We had 40 sick days, and if we didn't use them we could get them paid out when we retired. But that was taken away. I can't remember the other one. We lost all of that stuff at the end of the day. We were on strike for seven weeks. That's what people don't understand either – when you go on strike there's no money, you don't get a paycheque.

Q: How did the union function while you were on strike?

JM: The management tried to handle the whole thing while we were out on strike. We picketed the office, me and the rep that worked here, Loretta. We had one member come and support us, one member.

Q: Management couldn't do the job out of the union office, because it was being picketed. So where did they work from?

JM: Out of headquarters.

Q: You mean management crossed the line at headquarters?

JM: They were always in there.

Q: Did the membership seem to think you were on strike against them?

JM: No, but they didn't support us either. The membership always believes that we make too much money.

Q: You do make more money than some of the membership.

JM: Some, yes. Not all.

Q: In Edmonton they moved their headquarters to a hotel.

JM: They did move it to a hotel; you're right.

Q: What sort of things suffered during the seven-week strike, as far as the membership were concerned?

JM: To tell you the truth it wasn't really spoken of a lot. There were a few complaints. When we picketed, there were a couple of members who came by and wanted to get this

or that. Could we do this? No, we're on strike. Well can't you just go in there? No, we can't. They didn't understand that. Some of them were so upset. Just go in and get a booklet. No we can't, don't you understand? You don't cross that line. The members didn't support us at all. It was disappointing; it was very disappointing.

Q: Why do you suppose they didn't?

JM: I don't know whether they believed we should've been out on strike. We had such great jobs. Why would we do this? Perhaps they believed what management was saying. So they didn't bother supporting us.

Q: What reasons did the union give you for asking for takeaways? Were they short of cash?

JM: I think that was mainly it; there wasn't enough money.

Q: Why did you switch from the Steel Workers to Communications Energy Paper Workers?

JM: We switched because Steel Workers were saying that we were raiding, that AUPE was raiding, and they said they weren't. But Steel Workers said, ya as far as we're concerned, you're raiding and we don't want to have you in our union, because our employer was raiding. Our employer said we weren't; so that was the end.

Q: But that doesn't make sense, because your staff union wasn't raiding, your employer was raiding. Did you put that argument to the Steel Workers?

JM: Yes, definitely. The Steel Workers said, no we don't want any conflict, so we don't want to represent you anymore.

Q: So the CEP took you in?

JM: Yes, just happened. The vote just went through.

Q: What is the makeup of your staff union? What job classifications are in your CEP local?

JM: Secretaries, MSOs which are membership service officers, union reps who just do the bargaining now, and D&A staff, disputes and arbitrations. And of course there's the accounting staff. All the staff.

Q: How many members?

JM: I believe there's 105.

Q: Have you ever had anything to do with the Alberta Federation of Labour?

JM: No, I haven't personally.

Q: Can you give me some idea of how the union has grown over the last few years?

JM: The last few years this union has probably grown 30,000 members.

Q: What sort of members are joining?

JM: Health care – LPNs, PCAs, NAs.

Q: In your area, how many members would you have?

JM: 5,000.

Q: When your union was accused of raiding, how did you see it from your point of view as a secretary?

JM: I don't think it was raiding. If you want to go and organize a group, that's your right.

Q: When does it become raiding?

JM: It becomes raiding if a group is already in there and started organizing and you come in there and try to take them.

Q: What if they're already organized into a union and you come and take them?

JM: That's raiding.

Q: So this union was guilty of raiding. Did you hear anything about that, as a secretary?

JM: No, we didn't hear any of it here in our office. We just heard through the grapevine, through the staff. But we didn't really hear about it here. None of the members complained.

Q: Did you receive any phone calls from people wishing to leave their union and joining AUPE?

JM: No, we didn't.

Q: What do you think of the union movement in Alberta?

JM: I think they're doing okay. I don't think they're doing wonderful. I think a lot of the private sector don't care for unions. I think they think we're overpaid and the members get away with too much.

Q: Do you feel any of that in the Lethbridge community?

JM: Yes, I do. Just talking to people, and when they find out you work for a union, they go, oh you've got one of those slack jobs, get paid for doing nothing and all the protection you need and you never get fired from your job.

[END]