

Dave Loken

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CSU 52 Office

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Camera: Ron Patterson

DL: My name is Dave Loken. I'm the liaison representative for the Coalition of Edmonton Civic Unions.

Q: What is your background?

DL: I guess you could say my life started out as a struggle. Although I didn't know it, my father died when I was very young, when I was five months old. My mother raised myself and five other siblings on her own. Very early in my life I observed what hard work was all about and dedication, but a lot of love as well. I did all my schooling in Edmonton. In 1989 I went to University of Alberta and was accepted into the faculty of arts; I was a political sciences major. I guess that's where you could say I kind of started to learn about labour and unions.

In one of political sciences courses we did a brief unit on unions and labour and labour relations, so that's where I got my first exposure. At the same time, the summer of '89, I started a job with the City of Edmonton as a labourer in the drainage branch. It was probably about two or three weeks into that job that I was approached by a gentleman who had worked in the department for a number of years. He was also the shop steward for the union, which was CUPE local 30. He said, "Hey, why don't you come to the union meeting?"

It wasn't actually that year that I attended the meeting, because in summer they went to just one meeting and it was just the executive and the shop steward. I came back to work for the city the next summer, the summer of '90. I think that was when I attended my first union meeting, about the summer of '90. Or I attended some kind of union event, I can't recall at this point. So as I progressed through university I kind of became restless at the end of my third year and decided to take a year off. Again I had the privilege of working for the city that summer. These were very good jobs for students. If you were a student and you had a city job, that was one of the best jobs to have. I decided I was going to stay on a little longer if I could, and make some money and then finish my degree part time or take a year off and go finish it the next year. Well that was my initial idea. I stayed on until September, and around November or December there were a number of full time positions that became available. I thought, it's great to have education and I can work full time and finish the degree part time. That would be the best case scenario for me. So I applied for one of the full time positions and I got one.

That's really where my union involvement really took off. I started attending more meetings. I really didn't know anything about unions. I remember going to my first union meeting and being impressed with the solidarity in the room. Years later, as you get

involved, you find out it's not so solid sometimes, but my initial view of it was very positive. Right away I was taken under the wing of a gentleman I'm sure many people know, Alex Grimaldi. Alex chaired the political action committee. I was on the political action committee with himself, people like Les Steele, who's now a CLC rep in Ottawa, a talented group of people. The local president at the time was very politically active, so he actually took me to my first City Council meeting. I'll get into that a bit later.

Q: Talk a bit about your job at the time.

DL: My first job was a labourer 1, doing draining dig ups, construction work, stuff like that. Repairing sewer mains, that sort of thing. I also did service truck work where you go into people's homes and unplug their clogged main lines. I drove a great big vacuum truck for a while as well, flushing sewer mains. So I kind of did the gamut there. I didn't spend my whole career there. In '97 there was a shakeup called City 97. My position was on the bubble, meaning my position could've been eliminated or I could've been laid off, or both would've happened. There were some permanent positions that were open in transportation streets. In the previous winters I had went over there to sand roads; they lent me to the department. They used to send 20 or 30 of us a year to go drive sanders. It's a pretty good job. You're in a warm truck, the overtime was great in the wintertime, so a lot of people wanted to be there. The shift work was a bit of a pain, but not bad. All the while, I'm working full time for the city, I'm continuing to finish my degree. I'm getting theory on things and I'm living it at the same time, and I'm active in the union.

Q: What degree were you taking?

DL: Political science was my major and, interestingly enough, drama was my minor. I had a real interest in drama so I did a bit of acting, a bit of improvisation, which actually taught me a great deal and has helped me even in my political life now. I'll get into that a bit later. I'm just trying to set up a chronology here. Come to the year 1999, which really was a pivotal year. In 1999 I had been active in the union for about five years, so I'd done a number of things political-action wise. I was well acquainted with City Council. I was getting very acquainted with the labour community in Edmonton, the EDLC, the AFL. So I was networking and making connections and meeting a lot of people and learning from a lot of people before me who had more experience. So in '99 there was a local election for president. At the time, there was some turmoil in the local; I won't get into a lot of detail there. I had a number of people approach me and ask me to run for president. At the time I was about 34 years old, very young. I was active for five years but I still didn't have a lot of experience. At least it didn't feel that way, because I was dealing with a lot of senior guys ahead of me.

So I ran and ended up beating the incumbent by two votes, who was very senior to me. He had about 25 years on me. To be honest with you, I didn't think I was going to win, so when I did win it was one of those moments where you went, holy cow, what am I going to do now? I immediately recognized that I needed to surround myself with people who knew more than I did and people who could navigate me through the waters. In union politics there's lots of sharks in the water, just like any other politics, maybe even worse

sometimes. So I had a number of people who mentored me. The guy I beat actually ended up being a big help to me. So those two years from '99 to 2001 were very pivotal. In 2001 I was nearing the end of my first term. I had had a very busy two years, very hectic. I thought, I don't know if I want to do this any longer. It just so happened the position came open here at the Coalition of Edmonton Civic Unions, this full time position. So I applied. What happened was, I was still president of local 30 at the time. It was February of 2001. I'd been sitting at the coalition table, I was the president of one of the locals that created the coalition and to this day is still part of the coalition. They agreed to let me act in the position. The fellow before me had left and it was vacant. They allowed me to act in the position, which kind of was a good testing ground for me and for them. A little bit interesting. I'm still a president at the table and yet I'm working for the organization, so that was a bit awkward at first.

The position was posted, I applied for the position, and was successful. That was another turning point, 2001. Because of the nature of the work I do at the coalition, it's very political so I'm very face to face with City Council. I know just about everything that's going on at City Council, not always. Sometimes they do things behind closed doors and things surprise you, especially of late. But anyway, it gave me a front line exposure. From 2001 to this day, I sit with councilors all the time, I meet with the mayor, I meet with senior members of administration. We're very plugged in to the higher echelon and we've been very effective in getting results for our members and representing our members, because we formed those relationships. That exposure to City Council then led me to start to look at the political arena, the public arena, which was civic politics. So again I had a number of people within the unions which said, Dave, you should run; we think you have the talent and the desire and you know what's going on at City Hall. People flatter you and shower you with compliments, that's the way they do it. I'm not sure any of it was true. But anyway, I ran in 2004 and 2007 as well, and came in third both times.

My work with the coalition. A bit of history on the coalition. There's a couple phases to the coalition. The first phase was early '90s. I wasn't around for much of this, wasn't exposed to it. The presidents of the day, which one of them actually, one of the original founding presidents is still a president of at the coalition table. That would be Marion Leskiw, who's the president of Civic Service Union 52. He's been around from the start. My understanding of how it got started is at the time city council and the administration were very anti-labour. There was a number of issues going on. There was a pension issue that was not favorable to the unions. There were threatened budget cuts going on at the time. These four union presidents had the foresight, and I don't know that they even knew each other that well at that point, because it was a fairly new thing and I think they were all fairly new in their positions.

The transit president, Bill Chahal, CSU 52 president as I mentioned, Marion Leskiw, CUPE local 30 at the time was Don McCaskill or might've been Ernie Sigaty, one of those two. But Don was right on the cusp of it. The fire president at the time was a very colorful character named Rob Hartman, who had been in a number of difficulties, very radical unionist in defense of his members, and he was fighting toe to toe with the fire

chief at the time. Labour relations in that area were terrible between fire and the fire union, they were absolutely horrendous. Everything went to mediation, a number of arbitrations, hundreds of thousands of dollars spent. So the climate was very bad, very negative. So you've got that going on and you've got this political thing going on, you've got a city council that's threatening budget cuts. I'm not sure what the pension issue was but it was a significant issue.

These four guys sat down for coffee one day across from City Hall. They were at a city council meeting. They said, we need to band together. We can't fight this on our own; we're much better as a group. That essentially is how the coalition was formed. The full time position, liaison representative, was not established until 1996. The conversation happened in late '92 or early '93 and then the coalition officially began in '94. Then in '96 the presidents at the time, who were the same ones who formed it, decided they needed a full time person. They needed someone who could look after the City Hall stuff and keep an eye on the management stuff and so forth.

The position when it was first established did not have much of a job description. The gentleman who had the position, his name was Don Mitchell. Don did a great job establishing what this position is. That was difficult. I talked to Don lots about that. When I took over the position, I continued to talk to Don a lot about the position and get advice from him. It was a position that they didn't really write a job description for. They wanted somebody to cover City Hall, keep them informed, and also dabble in the management side of it a bit. It was a little awkward for Don. He did run afoul of at least one president, and that would've been the fire president, which everybody did at that time. Anyway, Don established the position.

So when I came in and started in 2001, he'd been doing it for five years. He had established the name of the group at City Hall and the position, and he'd really formed some integral relationships. When I came in I was welcomed by a lot of people, councilors. The mayor of the day was Bill Smith. We'd already developed some relationships with him, so that was a given. So I didn't really have the kinds of challenges that Don had, although even to this day I still get reports and people asking me, what are you doing here? I'm happy to tell them what I'm doing. I'm sure some councilors don't particularly appreciate our presence there.

In any event, it's been an effective group and it continues to be very effective. We've been involved in a lot of issues. I should talk about 2002. That was a bit of a pivotal point. In 2002 we became involved in what was known as the Shaw strike. These were the employees who were being organized under the banner of United Food and Commercial Workers local 401. The gentleman who was the president at the time and is to this day, his name is Doug O'Halloran. Doug had a reputation of being very, knowing Doug like I know him now, I wouldn't say Doug's really that aggressive. I'd say Doug just stands up for his principles, and that's what he was doing. The Shaw Centre was run by the Economic Development Corporation, which is an arms length agency of the city, which basically means they're funded by the city but the city has really no control over them whatsoever. They showed that during the strike. The union was certified legitimately by

the labour board, they had a right to form a union. They were in the process of bargaining their first contract, which unfortunately in Alberta, we don't have first contract legislation.

There are big barriers, especially if you come up against an employer who does not want a union and they have money and lawyers to throw at you. That was the case there. But this was a little more tricky, because council did have a couple of councilors who sat on the board, and the mayor was very plugged into what was going on. Of course we had very good relationships with the mayor, and I did personally as well. That was integral in this whole thing. But in any event, UFCW called on us. They knew we were a civic coalition. I'd had a little bit of exposure to UFCW previously, not much. I knew Doug, I think I'd met him once or twice before that. They approached us because they felt we could help them.

So the coalition lent me to their disposal and for about six months I did very little else except work on the strike. That meant meeting with councilors constantly. I was actually feeding the mayor information, because he wasn't getting it from this group. I established some really good relationships, but also made things very awkward. I remember clashing with the city manager a few times, who thought that we were sticking our nose into something we shouldn't have. It was a very interesting time and it was a very good personal learning for me, under the mentorship of a guy like Doug O'Halloran, just watching Doug. Doug was very respectful to people who were respectful to him. Although some people said the union was radical and the union was this, I didn't see that. I saw the union as being very respectful, they played within the rules. Doug as very respectful to the officials, the mayor, councilors, the media. It did get resolved. That taught me that in labour you don't need to always be in the face, you don't need to be that aggressive. You need to be smart and strategic. It also showed me the value of this coalition, that as a coalition we had developed these valuable relationships that didn't directly help us but did indirectly.

As we evolved, the UFCW joined our coalition in 2002 right after the strike, and to this day they're still part of the coalition. So it just shows how we're a group that's not just an island unto ourselves. We welcome others and to this day part of my job is to liaise with other organizations, whether they be union or non union, who complement what we're trying to do. We have developed many relationships. We're part of a group called the Greater Edmonton Alliance, which is a big broad-based group. It brings in all kinds of diverse groups – churches and nonprofit groups and Somali groups and all kinds of people. So we've really engrained ourselves into the culture here in Edmonton. Currently we're dealing with the aftereffects of a privatization decision which the citizens of Edmonton were totally shut out of, and that was the selling off of the power component, which was a major asset of the city of Edmonton, owned and operated by the arms length group, EPCOR. So there's never a dull moment, there's always plenty of issues going on. As a group we're very political, so we're usually in the middle of something. It's proved to be very effective so far. The significant thing about the Shaw strike too was the day it ended was November 22nd, 2002, which of course was the anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. I remember thinking that that day. It was also Grey Cup weekend in

Edmonton, and we had had strategic plans to really mess up the festivities going on at the Shaw Centre, which one thing was the Grey Cup dinner. I'm glad that didn't come to fruition but I think it kind of would've been fun in a way as well. But I just wanted to put that in there. There were a lot of important moments there.

Q: It's almost a political arm of the civic unions in Edmonton, right?

DL: I think we're kind of evolving into that. When things are going on at City Hall, other groups will come to us. We're right now working with the Public Interest Alberta group. They're part of the EPCOR issue. They've been involved in other issues with us. We're working with the AFL right now and when they need to know stuff, they call me. I talk to Gil McGowan, and EDLC the same. The other more broad labour organizations tend to come to us when there's civic issues going on and they want to get involved or we want to get them involved. Ya, I guess we've kind of become known as that.

Q: So today there are five unions in the coalition?

DL: There's five, yes.

Q: Only two of the five belong to the Alberta Federation of Labour.

DL: That's true.

Q: A number of years ago we had an organization called the Edmonton Voters Association. It wasn't just a labour group, but labour was leading it, where we tried to influence the outcome of civic elections. Is this something that the coalition gets involved in?

DL: There's a number of groups doing that now. It's difficult to ally yourself and organize around this thing. What we've done as a coalition in that respect is we interview candidates every election. Based on our questions and our point scoring, we decide which councilors we endorse and which we don't. We promote the ones we endorse to our members, we publicize those, and we also mobilize members to work on campaigns of councilors that we support. We don't do a big media thing, we don't do a big public thing. Ours is more ground level support, grassroots support, and you really need those boots on the ground. That's how we get involved.

Other groups do other things. The Greater Edmonton Alliance, for instance, do a public accountability meeting with councilors, which is actually good. The problem with the civic system of politics is there are very few opportunities to actually debate your fellow – I was going to say combatants – but I should say your fellow competition. So the city sponsors two forums and, to be quite honest with you, they're quite poorly run. There's no time. What ends up is you get a group of people coming in there who want to make a political statement, and you end up sometimes battling with these people all night and nothing really gets through. So any group that offers anything else, like the Greater Edmonton Alliance, the NAIT Students Association does it, the U of A does it. Grant

MacEwan, I don't know if they provide a forum, but anyway there's other forums that you can get your word and message out there. But we don't get involved in those, it's a huge undertaking. I found in this business too, and I can comment about other organizations but I won't, but if you've got your hand in too many pies you don't do anything effective. You're running around doing a little bit here, a little bit there, you don't accomplish a lot. Maybe that's true in life. We really focus on civic issues. There are groups who try to pull us into lots of stuff and we just have to say, it's not that we don't support you, it's just that we can't be doing all these different things. We have to keep our focus on what's going on at City Hall and how that's affecting our members. In all the things I've described, it's all about the members.

We're not there for ourselves, we're not there to further our organization and say we're the great coalition of Edmonton civic unions. It's about our members and representing them. I've described it as being very friendly and cordial, but it's not. It can be very confrontational at times. We have developed a really good relationship with our management. What's come out of that is called the working relationship agreement, or the WRA we call it. It's a charger of seven principles that guide our behaviors. It's more about morality than anything. It's not contractual, it's not in our collective agreements. But it's really helped us behave with each other across the table. But there are some awkward moments as well. One of the things that happens when you develop relationships is sometimes it's not as easy to pull the trigger and sometimes it's not as easy to get aggressive when you have to. I don't personally have a problem with that, and I think some of the HR people in management can attest to that. But that is a factor. But at the same time I think we've gotten far more ahead by having those relationships and trying to get along than if we were to do it the old way it was done in the early '90s. In the early '90s labour relations were not good and as a result things didn't get done. That affects your members.

Q: Is a part of the coalition's mission maintaining the peace amongst the members?

DL: We don't get into that a whole lot and isn't a factor, but it has been a couple of times. AUPE was actively raiding CUPE local 30 a few years back. Because of some conversations that happened between the coalition presidents of the day and the president of AUPE, that was ceased. Basically the conversation was, we are part of the coalition, they are in the coalition, and if you're raiding them you're raiding us. That provided a big deterrent from AUPE going any further. In that respect, we have seen some of that. We do have from time to time some of the trade unions nosing in. CUPE local 30 and transit and fire have different trade certificates in their bargaining units. There are road unions, one of which is in the CLC and AFL, IBEW, who has from time to time nosed in a little bit and stuck their nose into the other jurisdictions. But again, so far we've been able to deal with those matters.

Q: Do you consciously try to support each other during bargaining?

DL: Definitely. I'm glad you brought that up. We have a very specific strategic bargaining strategy. We all get together and go over our different issues. We have a

strategy when it comes to common issues that no local is going to settle before the other locals are at least consulted, especially with monetary issues. We were able to pull off a very good settlement this last round when other locals, not just in the province but in Canada, were signing agreements anywhere from 2.3 to 3.1%. We were able to sign a two year deal for 9%, which is phenomenal at this time with the economy. That's because we stuck together. We have a strategy. During bargaining we communicate with each other constantly, and I act as the point person there and keep the locals informed. We also sit at each other's tables, so that shows the city the solidarity of the coalition.

The city of Edmonton very much respects the Coalition of Edmonton Civic Unions, not just in city council, but in management. They don't really like to get mucky with us, at times. They know that we can marshal the forces we need to and they know we stick together, that's the big thing. They know that they can't divide us, that's the big thing. As I alluded to earlier, we've recently in the last few years begun working with the Calgary people. The Calgary unions, similar to ours, have fire, transit, inside workers which are represented by CUPE and outside workers which are represented by CUPE. They've now formed a coalition in Calgary. We're not going to take all the credit, but we had a big hand in it. I'll give Marion Leskiw credit. Marion was instrumental because of the relationships he'd formed down there. He requested that we get involved more down there and try to bring these folks together. The reason we're doing that is not only because it's proven to be very effective for union members in Edmonton, but because of bargaining. When Calgary settlements came in notoriously low, they affected our bargaining table big time, especially in the round before this.

So this round we were in constant communication with Calgary as well. They were in a situation where they were being held in mediation with a gun to their head for 3.1%, and they were ready to sign it. We went, no, no, we're working on what we're doing up here. I hope I'm not giving away too many secrets here. Again, that's how it works; it's solidarity. You could say that we not only have a civic coalition in Edmonton, now there's definitively a civic coalition in Calgary established. They're not where we are at today but if they stick together they will be. They have a very tough task down there because they don't have a lot of progressive councilors and they're in the process of building relationships. But that's how we had to do it. We'll continue to mentor them and help them as much as we can. Who knows, maybe there'll be a provincial coalition of civic unions someday. I hope to be on city council by that point or doing something else.

Q: Does the coalition get involved in other aspects of unionism, such as charity?

DL: We do a little bit as a coalition in that respect, but we don't have a huge budget so our budget is fairly stringent. A lot of things come to our attention. We get sent requests. We'll donate some things here and there. We do donate people in the sense that we sponsored a couple and staffed some Mustard Seed lunches. We help out at civic events. There's lots of things we volunteer for. But again, it's kind of a central table and the city comments on it all the time, it's much easier to deal with a central body of unions than to deal with, taking the politics out of it, just simply sending correspondence. You can send it to one place instead of four. Same with groups who want our assistance. For instance,

we get lots of charitable requests. What happens is we look at the coalition table, but a lot of times what happens is CSU 52 will take it off to their union and they'll support it, or fire will take it to their union and support it. It works more that way. But we don't have a huge budget at the coalition, so we really can't expend a lot of money that way.

Q: What is the economic impact of this union culture on the economy of Edmonton?

DL: A couple of aspects to that question is the fact that we were able to get a better settlement here in Edmonton helped our Calgary people. Economics 101, the more money you tend to put in people's pockets, the more money gets spent out there to support the current economy. I never thought of it that way before, but we do do our part to support the local economy. Our people are not paid shabbily. We have some very well paid positions, and people stay here and live here and spend money in this city. We have been a big benefit in that sense. As labour unions as a whole, we hope that labour, being union or non union, and especially maybe for the non union folks, that when we raise the bar with wages and benefits, hopefully that'll raise the bar for them as well.

Q: What is the significance of CSU 52's 100th anniversary?

DL: It's significant in the sense that, as far as speaking from the coalition sense, CSU 52 has been a major part of the coalition. Without them there wouldn't have been a coalition, simple as that. Not to discredit the other unions in it, but 52 played an integral part in forming this coalition. It's significant - any organization that's lasted 100 years, it's significant. It means that this organization has been effective; they've been active. They've contributed to society, not just for their own members but for society as a whole. CSU 52 does a great deal of charitable work. They have probably one of the most charitable organizations in the city, and they receive a number of requests. This union has not only made a difference in their own members, they've made a difference for people out there on the street and those that are less fortunate. There's a real spirit of giving from this union. There's a real spirit of helping someone out when they're down.

I've established a very good relationship with the 52 people, specifically Marion Leskiw and Gary Iskiw and Leo Derkach and others. These people are very genuinely giving, supporting people. For instance, I couldn't ask for a better job than what I have now, and I probably will never have a better job. That just speaks to the support. For me, 52 has been very significant, because they've been hugely supportive of the coalition. We had our office, our first office, was in this building. Marion is very supportive. When an organization has been around that long, it speaks to the longevity and their effectiveness and the good work that they're able to do, not just with their members but out in society. I'm sure that 52, I don't know in every corner, but I'm sure that they're a known entity out there in a number of areas as being a very effective, proactive and socially active local.

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