

Beth Wiwchar

BW: My name is Beth Wiwchar, my maiden name is Shannon, born and raised in Kimberly, B.C., which is a mining town. It was Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company, which is now Cominco. My dad was a miner underground and the union in Kimberly was the United Mine Workers, which became the Steelworkers. My dad was quite actively involved in the union, so I had a working knowledge of them all of my life, what they did and what they didn't do and this sort of thing. I came to Calgary in September 1954, having graduated from high school in Kimberly in the spring of that year, and went to Mount Royal Business College, which was a fulltime residential school at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue at 11<sup>th</sup> Street down by the armories. From there, after completing my course, they found jobs for us. The top students, and I was one of them, got the so-called better jobs. I went to work with the City of Calgary in the personnel department, with a boss named Peter Thompson, who was a bit of a jerk. I don't know how long I stayed there – it wasn't long, a year maybe. A position opened in the City of Calgary garage department, which had been one of or part of the electrical system for some reason and still was included in the union IBEW 254. So I became a member of the IBEW 254. Myself and another lady called Alice, and I don't know her last name after all these years, were the only two women in that union. It was really quite a chore to go to union meetings. The only time we did was when it was negotiations, because we found that our positions were not, we didn't think they gave them the importance that they gave to their electricians or their wiremen or whatever you call them, because of course that was the majority of their membership. But when we did go to a union, and it was in the labor temple in the meeting hall down in the basement, the first thing they'd do is make an announcement that there were women at the meeting, watch your language. In 1960 the City decided that they were going to lay off all of their married women. When you got engaged you were on notice that your employment was going to terminate. At the end of February 1961 that was my last day there. I was going to go on Unemployment Insurance because my husband and I at that time were trying to get a mortgage. I thought, well I'll be smart and we'll get a mortgage when I'm not working and then we'll have all that extra

money. It didn't work that way. I had to have an income of a minimum of \$240 a month for a percentage to get us approved as a mortgage. So I went to work for Jenkins Groceries. I approached my union, the IBEW 254, about the layoff. Don't you know, they thought that was just absolutely what should be done, that married women should be looked after by their husbands so these jobs should be given to single women. After three months with Jenkins Groceries – it's the only time in my life I ever punched a time clock and wasn't about to do it ever again; I didn't like that at all – the electricians union phoned me. The business manager's name was Ted Stark, and he was looking for a secretary. He wanted a married woman, because his wife thought he was having an affair with his current secretary. To make things happier at home, he was gonna hire a married woman. It turned out he was, by the way, but that's another story. So I started work for them the Tuesday after the May long weekend in 1961. In 1963 I was off on sick leave for about a month; I'd had a miscarriage. It doesn't matter that much, but I was five months pregnant at the time. When I came back they had hired a single mom and they were going to keep her because she needed the job worst than I did, because I was a married woman. Here we go again. I didn't really want to work fulltime at that point because I wanted to try for another pregnancy. The bricklayers were looking for someone half days, and I applied for and got that job. I stayed with them for 26 years I think, until the recession of the '80s kind of killed the building trades and they let me go. I was 55 years old and I'll tell you, I didn't know computers. I worked around for about two years in the various union offices filling in for holidays, helping with newsletters, varying amounts of money what I got paid for one of the jobs as compared to the other. I did an awful lot of work for the Alberta College of Art and Design; they needed someone up there. It was really funny because they had me doing (and I didn't care, I was getting paid – ask me to do it and I'll do it), but they had me catching up on their filing and inputting things into the computer. As long as they showed me exactly what to do with the computer, I could do it. But they wanted me to come back more and more because they couldn't believe the amount of work that I did in a day. I couldn't believe that it wasn't normal. I wasn't doing anything that was different, it was just a work ethic and a difference between the ages, I presume. Anyhow, I was 58 and all of a sudden these jobs dried up or they weren't enough to get me weeks so that I could collect unemployment in between. I applied for a pension that I

had earned while an employee of the bricklayers, and that's the story. We worked in the old labor temple on 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue and McLeod Trail. The actual address I believe was 220 – 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE. Then the teamsters had their own building out at the back of the parking lot. CUPE 38 had bought the building that the laborers had owned, which was facing onto 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The transit union I think, maybe I'm wrong, but anyhow there were three unions then: the IBEW 348, the IBEW 254, and the ironworkers. They pooled their money and got a mortgage to build the union center on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW, and everybody was going to move in there. But the cost kept going up and up and up per square foot. Eventually the bricklayers, Peter Pittman, not the machinists, I can't think of one of the other building trades, it was part of the carpenters, the transit, both unions, the amalgamated transit for the city and the transit union for Greyhound, all moved into a city owned or a building that the city bought on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street SE. The city bought that building because the LRT goes underground there and there's a venting station in their parking lot at this building. The city could only get that done by purchasing that building, and it's still owned by them but it houses only city staff now. So with everybody moving over to the union center or wherever, then it was decided that the labor temple should be sold. The original shares to that in the early 1900s, 1920s, I'm not sure of the dates, had bought shares for a dollar when the original labor temple was built. We had all of these shares or names of people who had shares. My boss at that time was business manager of the bricklayers and light craftsman union, was Carl Victor. He was president, volunteer position, of the Calgary Labor Temple. So it became my job to go looking for the people who had bought these dollar shares. They're now worth \$10 each. Some only had one share, some had a few more, and most of them I'm looking for family rather than... But I found out a lot of things, like there's a school in Calgary named the Cappy Smart School I think it is. I didn't know until I went looking that he was a fire chief. So I learned a little bit about history that way too, and found some people. I poured through phonebooks when I didn't have anything else to do, and phoned people – are you related to Joe Blow? When there didn't appear to be any more action to be had, what was left of the money had to be turned in to the Government of Alberta public trustee. I have no idea what they do with it after that, whether they hold it for x amount of years and then put it into their general fund, or what they do with it; I have no idea. That's my story.

One other point, going back to when I went to work for the electrical workers in 1961, I was approached almost immediately by sister Kay Goaler to join the union that the staff belonged to, the secretaries, and that was the Office and Professional Employees International Union local 379. That has since become the Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union, COPE local 739. We have just this year amalgamated with the local in Regina, because we just weren't big enough to carry on on our own anymore. But anyhow, I'm the type of person that once I joined I became involved. I did get the name given or hung on me or whatever as the sergeant major because of the fights that we had across the table in bargaining. The biggest and always the longest was over pensions for women. The employers just did not believe that women needed pensions. Sister Goaler, her husband had passed away unexpectedly and she was left with twin boy babies and three older children, not that old but older. One of them, the eldest, was challenged. So are you saying to me that this lady doesn't need a pension or registered retirement savings plans or something for when her time comes to retire? Eventually we did get registered retirement plans. Then when the building trades got their benefits, they used to use an outfit called Funds Administrative Service, and an hourly amount for each trades was paid into this. They had coverage for dental and they did have a pension through that. So where it was possible, we got our people put into those plans so that some of them had coverage that way, some of them had coverage with a registered retirement plan, but eventually we all had coverage of some sort or another.

Q: What barriers did women face in the labor movement?

BW: I got an email though last week that said you had to be over 55 to understand this. It was a woman entering the workforce after 40 years of looking after her family or something. She's typing away and she goes like this and the computer monitor ends up on the floor. That was my life. I grew up on a typewriter. When I was laid off by the bricklayers they were just looking at bringing computers in. I knew nothing at all about them.

Q: What year was that?

BW: When I got laid off? I'd have to try to figure it out. I was 55, so it was 20 years ago.

Q: So 20 years ago they were still using typewriters?

BW: Yes. Some offices had switched but it was very new technology. We had an old, we used to have metal plates about the size of an address label on an envelope, and I'd put these metal plates into this old linotype machine or something. It had a keyboard just like a typewriter. You banged away at this thing and it made an impression on the metal, then you put that into a frame and then you put it into another machine, then you hammered it down and these things would fall and you'd be able to address envelopes that way. I was still using that when I left; it was our method of sending out mail to the members.

Q: That would be in the '90s.

BW: Yep. This is 2011 so take 20 years away.

Q: The City of Calgary started computerization in '82.

BW: When I got laid off, because I didn't know computers at all, under the Unemployment Insurance I was sent to business college. It was in Palliser Square, one of the well-known names, and I can't think of it right now, for a month of training. I learned programs like Word Perfect and this sort of thing. I'm still no expert on computers, but it was enough that I had, like when I worked for ACAD, the Alberta College of Art and Design, they had me inputting information on the computer. I at least had a basic knowledge of what it was all about, and as long as they showed me which keys to push and why, it wasn't a problem.

Q: How were you treated by some of the men in the labor movement?

BW: Well even to this day, in my opinion, employers of staff and trade union offices treat them like crap. Some of our employers used to say to us, well this is the way we get treated, you have to learn all about it. This is one of the reasons... We used to have a collective agreement, the OPIU 379, that was a master agreement with all of the employers, then each union had a sheet attached to it if they had special benefits or something. It got to the point where the fairer employers – Teamsters, transit are two I can name right away – just opted out of master negotiations because they did not like the attitude of these employers. As I said, there was always a battle over pensions. It was always a battle for equality for women, I suppose, the rights of women. The prevailing attitude then was if you have a husband it's his job to look after you and it's your job to accept this. Sometimes you just can't, you have to move forward. The City of Calgary, when they laid off all their married women, there were three of us left at the end and we all worked for the department heads – garage, transit, and city engineer. Within two years they had scrapped the policy and were rehiring based on qualifications, not on marital status, cuz they couldn't get anybody. The women who were looking for jobs were going to gas company, the oil companies. Any of these companies were all hiring and the city was competing. If you had an engagement ring on your finger you knew that you either kept it secret or you were gone.

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

BW: I don't know. I am fairly active in the Alberta New Democrats. My first time that I saw them was in the old labor temple. When you went down the stairs after coming in the front door, tucked under those stairs in a closet sized room were the New Democrats with Irene and Jack Dick and another couple, Baldwin or something like that. Anyhow, that was the first time I ever ran into them. In the mid '80s when the recession hit Calgary, particularly in the construction industry, where they allowed the employers to terminate contracts with a 24 hour lockout, I became political and have been ever since.

Q: Besides the New Democrats, can you remember who else had offices in the labor temple?

BW: Carpenters. Labor council painters, IBEW 254 and 348. When I first when there, the Alberta Federation of Labour had an office, then they moved it to Edmonton. I think Calgary had been their office and they wanted it in the capital, I'm not sure, but they moved out. The building trades had an office there, plasterers had an office there. I don't know.

Q: As I recall, the offices were all pretty tiny.

BW: One of the reasons why the union center was built was because there was no room for expansion. I know that right across the hall from 254 IBEW was the ironworkers 725, the construction wing of it. They had a big office compared to some of them. Joe Nichols was the business manager. Don O'shannock was one of the business reps, Anne Chakinda was the secretary. Her husband, Leo Chakinda, eventually became the business manager down there, then eventually he went over to one of the big steel companies and traded sides. But ya, one of the reasons for the three unions starting the union center was because there was no room for expansion in the labour council building, the labour temple.

Q: Is that sort of what brought about their demise?

BW: Yes. The teamsters were selling their building. There was the labor temple and then there was a parking lot beside it, and in the back of that parking lot was a little building that was the teamsters. It was teamsters both locals – the milk people and the other one was 362 teamsters. They were everything else, in construction and whatnot. I have to pause for a minute. . .

Q: What was it like in the labor temple?

BW: The first thing is that I'm not too sure if it's been given a heritage designation, but it has absolutely gorgeous terrazzo steps when you come in the front door. The foyer and

the steps up and down are terrazzo, and it's almost a lost art nowadays. You used to see terrazzo on the floors of hospitals. They don't do that anymore, they said that it was too expensive. The offices were not large, you were a bit crowded. The atmosphere was marvelous; we all got along really well. We used to have a ball on Stampede week. We used to go to the Noble Hotel, we called it the Hobblenobble. We would bring beer back from lunch and put it in the water in the back of the tanks on the toilets, and have cold beer. It was really a relaxed period of time. Everyone of the people within the building got along really well. We always had a staff Christmas party. Those ended when some of the wives that were left out got a little upset. I don't know if anything was going on other than there was an awful lot of poker dice being played. I know at one of them I'd gone home and missed the action, but one of the wives came down and got into a hair pulling match with one of the secretaries. But we got along well. There were meeting rooms there, most of the unions held their meetings there. Politically, I can't remember the New Democrats doing or saying anything that drew my attention. I knew by the time the bricklayers were out, they purchased a building with the transit out on 1A Street SW actually just off 50<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and that was where I was working at the time of the, it was actually a 25 hour lockout, not 24 hour. They had that extra hour to make it legal. What it did is that if they locked them out for that period of time the agreements became cancelled, the collective agreements. My employers, the bricklayers and tile setters, did not run into those problems. Almost all of our workers, there were only a couple of general contractors, and that 25 hour lockout affected the general contractors more – like Burns & Dutton and all of the general contractors. But they hired a lot of their men direct. With my employer, the bricklayers and tile setters, they were almost all subcontractors. But it decimated the trade unions. You could go where you wanted to now, you didn't have to belong to the union. I think this is when I first heard of CLAC trying to move in and some of the contractors inviting them in, this sort of thing.

Q: Can you explain what CLAC is?

BW: CLAC is the Christian Labor Association of Canada. They'd go in there and negotiate agreements with employers without consulting employees, and the employees

don't get a very good deal most of the time, not a deal they'd get with what I consider a proper union. But back to the building trades. When these collective agreements were terminated, they were in a real bind. In my opinion, one of the reasons was because they had never had to organize. They had collective agreements that if a guy showed up on the job and was hired and he was non-union, the union was notified and he went down there. If you wanna keep your job you sign a membership form. Well after the 25 hour lockout that wasn't the case anymore. Now you had to go onto these jobsites and convince these people that they wanted to belong to your union and what you had to offer them. In a lot of cases it didn't work. Dues were high. So then they started, I know the plumbers did it and I'm pretty sure the carpenters did it, they would take a large project that was going to be built and they would negotiate a collective agreement for that site only. If the general contractor had really low balled his bid, come in very low, then the union would be expected to give concessions on wages and benefits in order for the union men to be on the job. The only place where probably this didn't happen was on gas plant shutdowns and things of that nature in Fort McMurray. Now of course they're trying to destroy the unions, in my opinion, in Fort McMurray, by bringing in offshore workers because they're saying they can't get Canadian workers. They can get Canadian workers but they won't work for the same conditions that the offshore worker will. And politics, as I said. When the collective agreements were terminated I decided in my own little way that if we were going to fight back the government had to change. I had a labor background, as I told you before. I grew up in a mining town. So I joined the New Democrats and I signed up other people in the New Democrats. My story or my pitch was, look what the Conservatives are doing to you. Well actually, was Trudeau a Liberal or a Conservative? He was a Liberal, so it was him that brought in the, not the wage control, something energy. So I don't know.

Q: Was there talk about how it had happened in the past?

BW: I honestly don't know. I became involved, I was a delegate for a lot of years of the Calgary and District Labor Council and I was on their political action committee. A sister called Cindy McCallum got me involved in this, along with Brother Darren Steinhoff,

who were from the postal workers union. I actually was on their political action committee for a lot of years. Municipally, the labor council became political. They used to not notify the candidates if they wanted labor support to let the labor council know. But that didn't work. For example, Teresa Woo-Paw was one that labor supported down to the end, but when push came to shove, she's an MLA now for the Conservatives, there were others that wanted labor support but they weren't labor people. Whether they'll ever be successful in getting someone elected who will actually speak for them, I don't think so.

Q: We did have Helen Laroque.

BW: Helen Laroque was supported by, she approached the labor council. She actually sat on our political action committee for several months prior to the municipal election. She wasn't a member of a union; she was friendly towards unions. She only had one term, a three year term, and she did speak for the unions. She was heavily supported by them, mostly a lot by the city transit union. But I don't know, she lost the second time around. I heard that she didn't keep her community connections current and there was kind of a rebellion against her. She's still around. I think she's probably thinking about rerunning, but I don't really know very much more about her.

Q: Was that about three terms ago, when she got elected?

BW: She didn't run until, what was the name of the fellow that was there for years and years as the alderman? When he retired Helen ran. During the period of time prior to his retirement she had got really involved in the community association and the rest of it. John Schmall, that's right. She waited, she knew, she told us that there was no sense in running against him, that he was very well liked. She knew he was going to retire and she ran and got elected. As I said, she had one term and then I'm not sure who beat her out, was it Jim Stevenson? I think these people who are New Democrats that get on council find themselves in a really hot position. Hawkesworth is one, well he was actually an elected MLA for the New Democrats in Calgary. When he lost his seat there he went to

municipal politics and got elected. But a lot of people I think told him to hide his background or at least not to brag about it, and he didn't. There was a period of time there where he actually didn't maintain his membership. Brian Pincot is another one. There's a New Democrat that ran federally for sure, but Brian has been a little bit more outgoing about it. I think that Jack Layton has changed the attitude of a lot of people towards the New Democrats. That doesn't mean to say that they're going to turn around and elect a dozen next time around. All I'm saying is that there's a little bit more tolerance there for people. Except for the Sun media and Ezra Levant and his ranting column in the Calgary Sun, most people are much more tolerant now towards the New Democrats because they really respected Jack Layton.

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

BW: I have to say that it's been a good ride. I enjoyed my years with the trade union movement. There was always things that went wrong that I don't like. I'm still an advocate for things I don't like. Last week and today I got the return phone call. I got my Mastercard statement from the ATB. I don't use the card very much, and I had purchased some smoked salmon for the New Democrat house society. The ATB told me that I had used my money for groceries, and it upset me. I didn't figure it was any of their business to be tracking my money. They called me back today and I just threw my hands up. He told me that it's a government law so that they can watch out for money laundering. So there are all these little things that I still bitch and bind about, and try to keep everybody honest. I think that my years in the labor movement and being a member of a union and being politically active has given me the guts to speak my mind. I also received through the Alberta New Democrats for community service the Alberta medal when they presented it a few years ago.

Q: That's something to be proud of.

BW: Ya, it is. Other than that, I can't think of anything to say. . . .

I think I ran for office one year but that was all. My big committee was the political action committee, and I did the same for the Federation of Labor.

Q: What kinds of issues were you talking about at the labor council?

BW: The same as they are now really, not much changes. Employers' greed. . . . There's really an awful lot of unfairness towards workers out there, and some of the issues are being addressed. Labor does have representation on the EI board. They always did, but the people were not too swift to be supporting the workers. We have some really good people now sitting on the EI board fighting for the claimants that are being cut off. We do have people on city council who may be a little bit more labor friendly. Little bits and pieces are changing, but the bottom line is that the corporations still have to sell their shares. Their shares are sold by the amount of money that they make and pay out for shares. Until that changes, I don't see how anything's gonna change. As long as Safeway wants to make \$2 million in profit instead of \$1, and I shouldn't single out Safeway because I think they're all the same. We have Sobey's right now in Calgary with I don't know how many stores, a half dozen anyhow – three, four, five. Only one organized, and that one on strike.

Q: It's settled.

BW: It's settled? I'm glad to hear that. I phoned from their flyer and told them. You're gonna have to edit a sneeze, it's coming. . . . I left my phone number with Sobey's and told them that when the strike is over let me know. But all that's based on making the profit from the worker's back. They're all screaming that they can't afford the recent increase in minimum wage, and yet the minimum wage doesn't pay the rent or buy the food for the people who work those jobs on a part time basis. So has anything changed? No, it's still the old boys network running the country, believe me.

Q: Could you talk about your work negotiating on behalf of ? members?

BW: Well I told you earlier that I got the reputation of sergeant major from that, or the name sergeant major, because we really wanted to get some progress on pensions. Dealing with union employers is probably worse than dealing with outside employers. I don't know sometimes how they can call themselves trade unionists and sit across the table and be complete asses. But it happened many times over. It's still happening, but with my union COPE 379 becoming part of the bigger unit out of Regina now, they send, if they run across an employer that's not quite as fair or wants to argue or wants to fight or wants to be an ass, then someone from Regina comes in and deals with them. We don't have to anymore. I'm still part of the local as a retiree. This was my 50<sup>th</sup> year of membership this year. As I said, in May, the Tuesday after the May long weekend in 1961 I started with the IBEW 254.

Q: Do you remember what years were you involved in the labor council?

BW: No I'm sorry I don't; it was a lot of years.

Q: How many women were around the labor council when you started?

BW: I never noticed a disparity, I never noticed that it was loaded with men. There were two males, you can edit this out if you want. One was from local 38, the name has slipped my mind, you know him. And Louis Ruffo of the whatever he was. They were very outspoken and they were to me I wouldn't consider them a friend of the women. But other than that, I never noticed a difference. I never noticed us outnumbered or outshouted particularly. Now of course Cindy was involved all those years ago, Cindy McCallum. She's not gonna get shouted down, and there were others. I don't remember any problems in the labor council that way, other than those two that I mentioned.

Q: Were you around when the ambulance service was going to go private?

BW: I don't remember anything about it, but I was probably around for it. Wasn't it just recently?

Q: It was in '71 when they became city employees...

BW: Haven't they taken that away from them?

Q: Yes, they're under the provincial government, Alberta Health.

BW: It wasn't an issue that I was involved in. I know that there were many picket lines that I walked, and I don't even really remember them all now. The Herald was one, the Safeway over here when Safeway went on strike. I used to enjoy walking past their automatic door and letting it open and close, because it was cold. Little annoying things. But I don't remember the ambulance being a very big deal.

[ END ]