

Dennis Bennett, HSAA (formerly AUPE)

February 3, 2009

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Health Sciences Association of Alberta – AUPE VP & Representative – Civil Service Association - correctional officer – jail strike – Alberta Federation of Labour - Public Service Employee Relations Act – walking out on Labour Minister’s speech -

DB: I'm a labor relations consultant with the Health Sciences Association of Alberta. Health Sciences Association represents all of the paramedical professional and technical employees in healthcare in Alberta. I'm located out of our Lethbridge office and I'm responsible for the arbitration and labor board work that this organization does.

Q: Tell me about how you first got involved in the union movement.

DB: In 1974 I was employed as a correctional officer at the Cary Correctional Center, commonly known as Spy Hill Jail. The fall of that year the organization at that time, the union was still known as the Civil Service Association of Alberta. It hadn't transitioned into being the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees at that point in time. A fellow by the name of Bill Broad was the president of the union then. I remember a couple of months after just starting to work at the jail we had a province-wide strike, a two-day strike that took place, which resulted in about a \$50 a month salary increase. Shortly after that, still in 1974, I was elected as the secretary treasurer for what was then called branch 40 of the Civil Service Association of Alberta, and that represented all of the employees at Spy Hill Jail. That started my involvement. Between 1974 and 1980, prior to coming on staff with AUPE, I held a number of different positions within AUPE as a shop steward, chief shop steward, chairman of the Calgary area council, provincial executive member for the zone 3 council at that time, treasurer for local 3 which was the local that represented correctional officers and enforcement officers in the province. Then in 1979 I was elected as one of the four vice presidents of Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, in November of that year. Then the following year, November of 1980, I commenced working as staff as an occupational health and safety officer for AUPE.

Q: Do you recall having anything to do with the AFL in those years?

DB: I remember quite clearly my involvement with the Alberta Federation of Labor, which probably started at the first convention I attended of the Alberta Federation of Labor. ... My first involvement with the Alberta Federation of Labor, if I recall the year correctly, would have been 1977. ... I think we were talking about 1977 and my first involvement with the Alberta Federation of Labor. If I have the year correctly, the spring of that year the Federation had its annual convention in Calgary. Reg Baskin was the president of the Fed in a part time capacity, and if I recall Eugene Mitchell was the secretary treasurer and he was in a full time position. The convention itself was interesting because it was being heavily debated to create the first full time position. That

went through and if I recall correctly Harry Kostiuk was the first full time president. What made the convention memorable, it was held at the Convention Center in Calgary, Les Young was the labor minister at the time. Not long before that convention the Conservative party had enacted bill 41, the *Public Service Employee Relations Act*. By that point in time the CSAA had now changed to the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, and had convinced the delegates and the powers that be that when Les Young walked into the hall to address the convention we were going to walk out on him. As Les Young was coming in we were marching out of the hall as he starts to do his address. Some people thought that was a bad thing to do but it was a way of sending a message, not just from the public sector but it was all the private sector unions as well, that we weren't going to put up with that kind of thing. That same year, the fall of 1977, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees tagged along with the Alberta Federation of Labor and ran a week-long school in Banff at the Banff Center, a course on bill 41. Bill Finn, who was the director of education at that time, and his staff, ran that particular program. I can't remember all the other staff that were involved. It was a week-long analysis of that new legislation and the impacts it was going to have. So that was the start of my involvement over the years with the Alberta Federation of Labor.

Q: Why should the Health Sciences Association belong to the AFL?

DB: Up until about five years ago the Health Sciences Association of Alberta was not part of the house of labour. They were a very young trade union that had formed to represent the paramedical and professional and technical people in the province, but they weren't in the house of labor. A number of the staff had been trade unionists for years working for various unions and had some of the people had worked for the Canadian Labor Congress. It was only natural as part of their growth that they become part of the house of labor. Once they had also affiliated with the National Union of Provincial Government Service Employees. So it brought them fully into the house of labor and allowed staff like myself working for the organization to start doing things within the house of labor, like the Alberta Federation of Labor week-long school. So that brings me here.

Q: What are the benefits of being part of AFL?

DB: Our strength is in numbers. If we sit back as individual unions and try to take up the fight, whether its legislation, collective bargaining, better working conditions, accommodation issues for women, if we try to do it individually we're not going to get very far. But if we can do it as a collective voice and having one central lobbying point within the province, that becomes more effective.

Q: What's the benefit of the school?

DB: What's always good about schools, and especially Alberta Federation of Labor schools, is it brings members of various trade unions together. You have people at this week-long school that are professional employees. They could be working in diagnostic imaging, they could be working as nurses. But then you have people from unions like the

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, so people from the trades. You have people here that are working at mine sites. What it does is they start interacting. The downtime, the social aspect, is very important. They get talking with each other and find that the problems that they have at their workplace are the same problems that they have at other workplaces, and they're not alone. They develop a bond. The one thing I've found over the years with these kinds of schools, whether it's CLC, the AFL, is people develop contacts. A lot of them become lifelong contacts and they keep running across one another. Now today with the email age they're emailing back and forth, they're blogging, they're doing all this kind of stuff. More networking is going on. It might be their first school, it might be the fifth school that they've been at. They're taking that away but they're also taking away what they learn in the classrooms here.

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