

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Peggy Askin

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

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Index: Telecommunications Workers Union - Telus - representation vote - bad faith bargaining - Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) - 'soft lockout' - picketing - Calgary & District Labour Council - Women's Committee - tentative agreement - private security armies - scabs - 'Another Wrong Number' campaign - bargaining mandate - concessions - ratification meetings - workforce adjustments - Letter of Agreement - Darren Entwistle - renewed unions

Q: This is mid-November 2005. Tell me about the struggle that has been going on between the Telecommunication Workers Union and Telus for the last few years.

PA: I'm Peggy Askin, and I'm the retired president of Local 203 Telecommunication Workers Union, that was the largest telecommunication workers Local in Alberta representing clerical workers and operator services workers here in Calgary. Prior to that, I held various executive positions with Local 348 IBW. Generally in the labour movement, at this time on the executive of Calgary and District Labour Council, and also co-chair of the Women's Committee of Calgary and District Labour Council. I'd also like to explain to you why I've been very active in this particular struggle going on between the Telecommunication Workers Union and TELUS.

I took an early retirement in 2002, essentially because of health problems and wanting to spend more time organizing full time for workers' rights. But I became a lifetime member of the union, have rarely missed a union meeting, and considered it my responsibility as an activist leader in the workers movement and as a political person and activist, to keep up the work with the Telecommunication Workers and keep providing all the support and leadership I could. So we've been combining our forces to take on a monopoly that has been operating on the basis of dictate, a monopoly that has been operating on the basis of illegality. We've taken on this struggle because for five years you've had 13,000 workers in two provinces.

Originally, if you want to start from 2000, it's over 16,000 workers in BC and Alberta who work for TELUS corporation, who have been without a pay increase for five years, without a contract for five years. In 2002 and 2003, we had 6,000 people exiting from the company; many of the people who left were in call centres, mainly women. These call centres were targeted for closure in both BC and Alberta. So we have seen a massive deterioration in terms of our working conditions and in terms of decimation of our own

workforce. The CRTC at one point intervened because quality of service for the TELUS customer base was so reduced by the number of people that they'd cut in 2002 and 2003. So we certainly came to the point, after taking two strike votes, which both had an 80% majority, we came to the point where we realized that we were going to have to take on TELUS. So in April of this year, TELUS initiated what they called a 'soft lockout'. Nobody has particularly heard before in any kind of labour law, in any kind of legal sense, of a soft lockout. But essentially what they were doing was imposing the conditions of a new contract that they were getting ready to impose on all TELUS workers. They were imposing that contract early. They were taking pieces of the contract and forcing people to not be paid for the first sick day, and forcing people to work compulsory overtime. Then about a month after that, they stopped deducting dues for the union, massively tried to financially affect the union. TELUS announced that on July 21st they were going to impose this contract, which was in no way acceptable. I'll tell you a few things about it.

Q: Please take a minute to relate the circumstances and events that led up to this lockout by Telus.

I'll back up a bit in terms of giving you some of the background behind what went on in the last five years between TELUS and the workers, and the unions that represent those workers. In 2000 or 1999, TELUS bought BC Tel. Prior to that TELUS had bought Edmonton Telephones. Prior to that TELUS bought AGT. So Edmonton Telephones and AGT were both in; one was a crown corporation and the other was owned by the City of Edmonton, they were both privatized. TELUS bought all of these companies then in 1999 or 1998 the bought BC Tel. When they bought BC Tel they essentially wanted one union to represent all of the workers that worked for TELUS in Alberta and TELUS in British Columbia.

So there was a legal process that went on, and that legal process ended up in a vote with all the workers in BC and Alberta. The workers previously had been in several unions; in the IBEW, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Civil Service Union 52, Communication Energy and Paperworkers, and in the Telecommunication Workers Union. The British Columbia workers were represented by the Telecommunication Workers Union. A vote took place in June of 2000. In June of 2000 all of the employees that were employed by TELUS, all of the unionized employees, the majority of them voted for the Telecommunication Workers Union. That then became the union that was representing the workers at TELUS. Coincidentally, all of the collective agreements, all of the contractual terms that gave workers rights and benefits and determined their wages and working conditions, all of those contracts expired at about the same time. Even if they hadn't, the issue was that the Telecommunication Workers Union contract had expired, so they were ready to go into collective bargaining in the fall of 2000.

So everybody became one union in June of 2000. They went into bargaining in the fall of 2000. Telecommunication Workers had what they call a bargaining convention, where the input from workers across both provinces was taken into consideration. That is what made up, and that was voted on by the workers who'd been duly elected as delegates to that convention. It was a very democratic process. The workers from Alberta who had recently brought in, organized all across Alberta. I was part of that. Another man by the name of Mick Shields from the craft side, the technician side, he and I went from one end

of the province to the other and contacted people that we must go to BC and insist that we have our democratic right to have a say with our new union. At their bargaining convention they agreed with that. So we had people who were elected onto those bargaining committees so we could have people from BC and from Alberta representing the various unions, whether it was the people who had been in CEP, the people who'd been in IBEW, CSU 52, wherever they'd been, they had a right to be in that bargaining committee now. So they were elected, they became part of the bargaining committee. So they were the committee of people from both provinces who took a set of demands that had been put together by the workers themselves, and they went into bargaining with TELUS. For five years they tried to negotiate a collective agreement. TELUS at no time was interested or serious about discussing the demands of the workers.

Q: How did that manifest itself?

PA: It manifested itself in several ways. Telus would not put forward concrete demands in the beginning; they used generalized terms, but essentially they wanted to discuss their interests, they wanted to discuss flexibility. They would not put forward concrete demands; nor would they take seriously the demands that the workers were putting forward. In the course of those five years, TELUS was found guilty on a number of occasions of what they call 'bad faith bargaining'. For people who are not familiar with these terms, it essentially means that by various ways and means they either refuse to bargain with the union, or they try to discredit the union and interfere with the union's right to deal with the members that they are representing in both provinces. They had meetings with their employees, called "Facing the Future". in which they met directly with the employees and discussed bargaining. It wasn't just that they discussed bargaining, which apparently they are allowed to do within the framework of Canadian labour legislation. They consciously in those meetings discredited the union, making all kinds of statements that were untrue. In fact, the Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) themselves, when they found them guilty, used very strong terms to describe TELUS's behavior towards bargaining. While I'm explaining to you that TELUS was repeatedly found guilty of violating Canadian law, of bad faith bargaining, of showing over and over that they had no interest in bargaining; what it meant is they had no interest in seeing that their employees got a wage increase, they had no interest in seeing that their employees got job security, they had no interest in seeing that their employees had benefits. But what they did have an interest in was constantly putting forward this agenda to try to gut the collective agreement, although this did not come out until I believe January of 2004.

I want to explain something to you, that while the CIRB was finding TELUS guilty, there was no penalty. Nothing is done. TELUS continues to act with impunity. In January of 2004 Madam Justice Pinot of the CIRB actually ordered binding arbitration as a penalty for all of TELUS's bad faith bargaining. TELUS appealed that - or I should say, she ordered TELUS to offer the TWU binding arbitration. Considering what had gone on in the last five years, the TWU decided that the best course of action was to accept the binding arbitration. However TELUS appealed that, and it took one year for the CIRB to have a response to this appeal. After one year, in February of 2002, the CIRB overturned their decision. I shouldn't say they overturned their decision; they removed the penalty.

They still said that TELUS was guilty of bad faith bargaining, of unfair labour practices, but they removed the 'penalty' of binding arbitration.

So there you have it - it's going on for almost five years. At this time, there was an offer out there from TELUS. I believe that offer first surfaced around the time of the binding arbitration, or it may not have surfaced until 2005, but in any event, the significance of it is that the union did not take that offer out for a vote. The reason they did not take that offer out for a vote was simply because they had learned from the experience of Bell in 1999. In 1999 Bell kept giving CEP offer after offer after offer, and there was no guarantees on contracting out or job security. In the end, after four or five offers, when they kept sweetening the pot and sweetening the pot and offering more lump sums, by the slimmest majority that offer was accepted. The union knew that if they brought that offer out at that time that the same scenario could occur. So they made a conscious decision not to do that. They already had two strike votes, and they did the best job they could in terms of communicating the whole situation to the people. We will sum these things up afterwards, and I think our summation will be that particularly here in Alberta, a massive amount of work needed to be done in terms of explaining to people and convincing people that it was so important to fight on these issues of job security, and why, the whole possibility of outsourcing and so on.

In any event, you also have to realize that in 2002 and 2003 when TELUS exited 6,000 employees, they replaced a lot of those employees eventually when they were forced to because of their being dinged by the CRTC. They replaced a lot of those employees, so we had a lot of brand new people, a lot of people who were temporaries, a lot of people who were occasional workers. Many of them have come out on the picket line now in this struggle, but the reality is it wasn't the same workforce that had been there for a long time, in terms of knowing the implications of all these things. I may have missed some details, and all the details have been summed up extremely well in terms of how we got there, but essentially that is the history. The history was that you combine the refusal to bargain, with the fact that they acted with illegality and impunity. There came a time when, unless the TWU wanted a contract imposed on them, and what I mean by that is that contracts should be bargained, they should be voted on, they should be bargained. Then membership should have a chance to vote on contracts before their working conditions and wages are determined. But the long and short of it is this did not occur in this case. TELUS just said, we are going to force employees to start working under this new contract. This new contract took out all the contracting out provisions that had existed for telecommunication workers union in BC. Those provisions on job security had saved a massive number of jobs in BC. TELUS also had refused to give wage parity between BC and Alberta, when the workers in Alberta were doing exactly the same work, working on the same cues, answering the same calls. When TELUS took over Ed Tel, within a matter of months an agreement between the union and the company was negotiated, giving complete wage parity to all the Edmonton Telephone workers. In fact, there was \$3 and \$4 differences, the same differences as now between BC and Alberta, with BC Tel and with TELUS. The long and short of it is here you have it six years later, and there's still no wage parity. So there's a lot of serious issues.

Q: Talk about how events unfolded after July 21st.

PA: Early during the week of the July 21st, TELUS announced that they were going to force people to start working under a contract that they had not negotiated with the workers' Union. They were going to force people to work under a tentative agreement that gutted both of the union contracts in both provinces. One thing that I missed was that, in April, when TELUS initiated this soft lockout, they emailed a copy of their tentative agreement to every employee in the company, and sent it to their homes. This is a contract that had not been bargained, a contract that had not been negotiated. So they directly sent that to the homes of all the employees. Then they told them, this is what you're going to start working under. You are not going to have a choice to vote on your conditions, you are going to be told what conditions you work under. This is going to be imposed on you by dictate. So early the week of July 21st TELUS said it was no longer going to be just a soft lockout, that they were going to completely impose these conditions, but they wanted people to stay at work while these conditions were imposed.

So on the 20th of July the Telecommunication Workers Union said, we're locked out, and they put up picket lines all across both provinces. That's the situation at this point. I think the TELUS workers have taken and are still taking a tremendous fight stance against having their democratic right to vote on and determine their own working conditions through a legal process, as opposed to having their working conditions imposed on them. They've also taken a huge stand against this corporation they work for acting with impunity. They have also taken a stand against private security armies being used against them in Edmonton, in Calgary, in Vancouver, in the interior of BC, and all over both provinces. These private security armies that have been employed by TELUS, one specifically, AFI, based in the US, has provoked, assaulted people, followed women home at 2:30 in the morning, used surveillance against people every day on the picket line, followed workers to their homes, followed workers to second jobs. These are some of the things that TELUS workers have been facing. This whole struggle has been to try to maintain job security language, to try to maintain the rights that they had within their own collective agreements against discrimination, to maintain the right to a grievance procedure that allows the union to defend people in terms of incursions against their rights in the workplace.

Q: You mentioned provisions that the company is proposing to take out of the collective agreement.

PA: Right. With ensuing offers, particularly the last two tentative agreements in the last month that have been put out, has in fact taken out.

One thing that I'd like to explain to you is that, as well as maintaining picket lines in Alberta and BC, there are many other campaigns that were initiated by the union. This comes into play here. The union initiated what they call "Another Wrong Number" campaign. They encouraged people all over both provinces to have features removed from their phone, and to gradually try to remove some of TELUS's services, so there would be some effect on their bottom line. They also took out ads on radio and TV, and of course they were censored by various radio stations that refused to put them on. So the point that I'm making is that there were various campaigns.

At the end of August the union decided that they were going to escalate those campaigns and they were going to have a big campaign of lobbying MPs on Parliament Hill.

Parliament was about to reconvene for the fall sitting. The union and the workers themselves felt that it was critical to go and lobby the MPs and raise the whole question, particularly with the government MPs, that no service as serious as telecommunications should be jeopardized in such a way, and that this corporation should continue to act with illegality and impunity. So this campaign was being launched, and there was a lot of enthusiasm for it, lots of feeling that this may have some effect, that there may be some success in going to parliament and lobbying various MPs that this is 13,000 workers who haven't been working, this has been telecommunication services affected, this has been a huge sector that's using all this illegality and acting with impunity. The workers want an end to it. So in the midst of that, the whole campaign to go and lobby the politicians and to go down and raise this issue on Parliament Hill is put on hold, because the workers are told that negotiations are beginning again. Immediately people are happy that there are negotiations going on, but at the same time they're finding it odd that this whole campaign has been called off.

In any event, within 10 days, a tentative agreement was brought out to the workers. The tentative agreement that came out was the same agreement that was imposed on them in July, and it may have been worse. Immediately, as soon as the workers saw this tentative agreement, they were extremely upset, for a couple of reasons. One, because they had been locked out for three months at this point, and this is what the company had come back with, the same imposed collective agreement gutting all the agreements that had existed. That really bothered people. The second thing is the bargaining convention in 2000 had given a mandate to the union that there would be no concessions and that there would be no bargaining from TELUS's imposed offer, which had massive concessions. Among the other things I didn't mention is it cut sick time in half, it just was mind boggling the number of working conditions and benefits that were taken away.

So there were what we call 'ratification meetings' held all over both provinces. That means that the union committee has to come out and explain to the people why they have brought a tentative agreement out. And they have to explain why, after being three months on lockout, they are given an agreement that is the same thing that was imposed on them in July. Essentially what one finds out at these meetings, first of all I have to explain to you that this was a very hurried process. Many of the workers did not even have an opportunity to see this new tentative agreement. It was put up on the union's website after a few days. But the entire thing was not put up on the website until the day before the Edmonton ratification meeting, which was the 19th of October I believe. What I'm trying to explain to you here is there was a serious problem. The workers were feeling very seriously that they were not properly informed about what's going on. They didn't understand why there was this immediate about-face from a huge campaign to then accepting this offer.

So what came out at the ratification meetings and the Edmonton ratification meeting? Lila Hackett, who was a bargaining committee member, disagreed with the offer being recommended by the TW bargaining committee. She and two other people disagreed, so she issued a minority report. The President of the Union, who was also a negotiator, gave a majority report. I should start with what the President explained. He explained that they had brought this offer out because there was tremendous pressure from TELUS that, if they didn't bring this offer out, thousands of jobs would be lost in BC. If the offer was

brought out, they would guarantee that five call centres would stay open in BC and one would close. That would be Victoria for sure, there may have been one other that was going to close, but anyway, four or five others would stay open. Now it turns out that eventually, right at the same time as these ratification meetings are coming out, finally what they call a 'Letter of Agreement' came out, which actually stated that TELUS agreed to keep these five places open. But at the same time it said right in the letter that in the next five years workforce adjustments could take place. So this made people very suspicious, very cynical about the whole thing.

People disagreed with TELUS's threats of closures being a reason for bringing out a recommendation on a tentative agreement that was worse than was imposed on them in July. In a nutshell, in the course of the ratification meetings, it turned out that a massive number of workers did not feel that there was any justification for bringing this tentative agreement out. The minority report that was put out by the member of the bargaining committee, Lila Hackett, revealed that in detail, and by the democratic policies and norms in the TWU constitution, she had the right to issue a minority report, have it published, and the right to present it at every meeting.

So as well as the bargaining committee explaining why they'd done what they did, and answering various questions about the agreement, she also read this report in which she explained that there were several violations of their constitution. One, there was a violation of the mandate by the bargaining convention, which said no concession should be bargaining from. In labour relations terminology, that the union should not be bargaining off the company's offer. That was an offer that essentially imposed massive concessions. She also explained that the transparency and accountability that our constitution calls for was violated, because our constitution calls for no paid officer going and meeting with an official from the company without another paid officer or representative with them. In fact, Bruce Bell, the president of the union, along with Buzz Hargrove of CAW, went and met with Darren Enthwistle and two other people from the bargaining committee from TELUS. Lila Hackett raised that as being a violation of the TW convention, and that was openly discussed at all the ratification meetings.

Therefore, when the vote came out on this first tentative agreement, it was a 'no' by a narrow majority. But the vast majority of workers believed that those who voted yes, and there's been a lot of investigation to show this to be the case, were not people who believed that there was anything good about this offer. The vast majority of them were people who essentially were not sure if they could carry on under the present circumstances. I'll leave that alone, under the present circumstances, but in any event, a lot of investigation showed by many people that there was no approval for this contract whatsoever. So, when the vote came through, even though it was close, it was only about 57 people out of the 9,000 that voted.

At the same time I'd like to make another point that has been raised by all kinds of circles within the union. TELUS employed tactics in the course of this vote, such as bussing in people who were scabs and strike breakers to vote. Canadian law allows somebody who's been a strike breaker or a scab, but is still a member of the union, the right to vote. So they bussed in strike breakers, and we understand that many of them were paid. TELUS paid for the buses to bring them over to the meetings. They came and voted in the ratification meetings. On top of that, AFI, TELUS's security firm, had a headquarters set

up right outside the Calgary ratification meeting. So people felt that there was a lot of intimidation, and even the majority yes vote was a bit suspect under all these circumstances. In any event, the union, when the no came forward, they said, no matter what the no is, it's no. We are going to launch a huge campaign now. There was a tactical meeting in Burnaby, came out with all kinds of wonderful ideas about campaigns that could be launched against the CIRB, against the federal government, demanding that they deal with this whole situations, particularly of TELUS's illegality. The long and the short of it is, the workers themselves all over BC and Alberta met with their Locals and their tri-Local committees. They had strategy meetings and hit the streets. They lined the bridges in Vancouver, they lined the floating bridge in Kelowna. Hundreds of people marched in Prince George. In Calgary we had a big demonstration in front of Harry Hays. In Edmonton there was a big demonstration in front of Anne MacLellan's office. The TELUS workers were fighting and taking it all very seriously. The ideas that had come up for the campaigns that could be carried out, maybe a cavalcade to Ottawa. Well this is just literally going full tilt and people are working as hard as they can to do everything they can to win their rights and resolve this dispute.

Then, on Sunday November 6th the wind is taken out of peoples' sails again, because now the word has come down that there is another tentative agreement in the midst of all this, and it isn't any different than the first one. This one now, there's going to be a mail-in ballot, and it's a whole big rush railroading thing. The ballots have to be in by November 16th. As of yesterday, the vast majority of people in Calgary hadn't even received their ballots yet - that's happens tomorrow. But the union has now extended the deadline to the 18th. In Alberta we were used to mail-in ballots. But in BC, they have never had mail-in ballots in their history, they have always had ratification meetings. The importance of that is it gives people an opportunity to go and be informed, to discuss, for the union executives to be accountable if people aren't happy with the fact that they've again recommended something that was imposed on people in July, and not essentially changed in any meaningful way whatsoever. Furthermore, there will be no consultation meetings, and no information meetings of any kind.

Q: So there's no change of any substance in this latest tentative agreement?

PA: No, none of any substance, or the changes are utterly insignificant. Anyone from the executive council of the bargaining committee will tell you, they are insignificant changes. TELUS for some reason seems to be in an awful hurry to get this settled, whether it's what's going to happen in their fourth quarter or what, we don't know. We have not had any clear explanation from the bargaining committee or executive council why they have done this. We don't know. Strategy wise, whether they felt they could carry on or not, we don't know the situation. You're aware that there have been a large number of people cross the picket line here. But at the same time, virtually nobody had crossed the picket line in BC. But of course the buildings were locked in BC. In Alberta they had them open from day one, and they used the most massive coercion, the most massive threats, to get people to cross the picket line.

We don't justify it, we don't agree with it whatsoever. Myself, I wrote a letter in early August to those who had crossed the line, discussing these whole issues of the implications of letting the CEO of TELUS determine their contract for them, letting him make a decision, letting him decide for them what their working conditions were going to

be, and reasoning with them that this is not the path to follow. And what this would do to the collective, what this would do to Canadian workers, and so forth, to have people in large numbers cross the picket line. At the same time, we know in terms of the work that needed to be done with these people in this province, that it was likely another few months or another year things may have been solid in terms of not having that happen. But as I've explained to you before, there was no choice in terms of when we actually were locked out. Maybe conditions weren't prepared enough, but we had to go with the way things were. Even with the number of people who had cross the picket line here in Alberta, the vast majority of workers felt that it was viable enough if we had a fight in terms of having people cut their TELUS services really going on the political arena to raise this whole issue with all of Canadians, that we had possibilities for some success in this struggle. That's where we are. In another two or three days, we will know what the situation is. I think that some very serious questions have to be asked of the leadership of our Union as to who's calling the shots - is it TELUS or is it the workers?

Q: Why is the company doing this? Talk about the changes that happened in the company.

PA: There's no doubt about the fact that from the time Darren Entwistle became the CEO of TELUS, the style of management has been to simply dictate. There is a hat that's come out that you might see people wearing. It's called the Fee Fo Tel hat. You may see it on the picket lines, hundreds of TELUS workers are wearing them. That is because early on when Darren Entwistle became the CEO of TELUS, he was known to have said, fit in or F off. I won't use the word. That's why you have the hats that say Fee Fo Tel. The performance management that was being used in the company was so strict and they were managing by stats and they were using performance management. There was psychological terror being used against the workers, particularly the women in the call centres. They were creating an environment in TELUS so that even before they had these packages in 2002 and 2003, and before they started exiting people out, the working conditions were becoming so difficult there that they were driving people to want to leave or to want to take these packages. It was a very high stress, high performance culture, which obviously is the whole issue as the bottom line. The whole issue isn't customer service, it's making the bottom dollar off the employees, so that TELUS can be so-called 'competitive' on the global market.

I can give you one quick anecdotal story. There was a man in BC who had about 25 years seniority. He sent a letter to Darren Entwistle with that famous quote, "first they came for the Jews, then they came for the Catholics...". He used that, trying to reason with this CEO that anybody who speaks up is being singled out, and this doesn't make for a very good atmosphere in the company. Darren Entwistle had him suspended for a week even for writing the CEO and raising this whole thing. So there was a big campaign afterwards reacting against it. That's just to give you an idea of the management style. Darren Entwistle himself was in Britain before he came here. The story goes that he is used to go and try to break unions in various companies. I worked there. I have worked for the company for 26 years, first for Alberta Government Telephones, then AGT, then TELUS. I've seen privatization, I've seen a lot of CEOs. The environment there in the last couple of years, I have use a political term, it was just fascistic. There were no rights in that workplace. It was a battle every day for the stewards, for the union, for all the workers to

battle for any rights and dignity within that place. It was never a piece of cake. I was a telephone operator for years, and those call centres even then were run like boot camps. We had not easy conditions, but the rest of the clerical departments, the rest of the craft technicians, were not treated the same way as they were in operator services, and it soon became that the whole company was run this way. It became clear that their mandate was to try to break the union, so they could be competitive on the global market, and because I think we're living in an era where there is war on the unions.

We're not living in the same era where there was a social contract from the time of the Second World War. I don't need to go into all the details of that with you right now. I think that the whole TELUS situation is part of that. I think right from the time of privatization, there's been a whole change in terms of how these corporations are run and how the employees are treated. The customer service has also deteriorated. It's a well known fact in this province. In the last few years the amount of time people have to wait, the deterioration of their service. The fact that in the early '90s when TELUS was privatized, they went out of providing inside customer premise equipment. There are many examples showing how the greater the degree of privatization, the less service there has been for people. So this whole corporate culture in TELUS is very much an issue. Like for instance the way they conducted themselves in the course of this lockout. They fired 47 people for picket line activity, for things like calling out in defense of their rights or telling a strike breaker that they're a strike breaker, calling a scab a scab. There's somebody who's going in, taking your job, taking your livelihood away, and allowing a company to stay open. All this is being done without any punishment. TELUS is getting away with it. So they fired 47 people for doing nothing illegal. Now another thing about this tentative agreement that is very distasteful to workers, is there was no back to work protocol or agreement agreeing to bring all these workers back to work. Which, as you know, is usually the norm. If there has been a strike or lockout, there's an agreement that any of the workers that were fired in the course of the picket, because they're on lockout then, they're not under the same rules and conditions as if they were an employee. That's another thing that's really bothering people about this tentative agreement.

I will give you a couple of examples of both TELUS's activities and the CIRBs that are completely and totally unacceptable. In the course of this five years, TELUS bought a company called ClearNet, and they had about 1,500 employees in Quebec and Ontario. For a year or two or three, TELUS refused to even give the names of these people to the union so they could be unionized. It took a long time to get a ruling saying that they were part of the Telecommunication Workers Union, and then when they did, for a year or two TELUS got away with not giving the names of these people to the union, so they could let them know what their rights were, and so that they could constitute their own union Locals and so on. The union also put in complaints with the CIRB that there was prejudice on behalf of the CIRB. There was some issue as to whether or not there was objectivity from the chair of the CIRB. So there were many complaints put in, and it would take years and months for the CIRB to act on these complaints. Yet, as you know very well, in the course of this lockout and in many other examples in labour disputes it takes Labour Relations Boards a day or two to rule against the workers and against the union, but it can take them years and months to rule and find a corporation guilty, and then there's no penalty.

Labour Relations Boards are worse than gutless; they're allowing these corporations to act with impunity. To me, they embolden these corporations, in terms of using dictate, ramplung on workers' rights. So this whole struggle of the telecommunication workers is very decisive. It's decisive for their rights, for the rights of the workers all over this country. The thing that is so unacceptable about what's going on with these tentative agreements is about the fact that these last two tentative agreements were recommended, is that recommending acceptance of such behavior of TELUS and such imposed contracts, it conciliates with the impunity that TELUS has been allowed to act with. It conciliates with allowing TELUS to get away with what they've gotten away with. This kind of conciliation, it's very bad for workers' rights right across the country.

So when the workers from Telecommunication Workers Union, on the most democratic basis, have used their own constitution and policies to try to stand up to this kind of conciliation, to me it's also very significant for themselves and workers all over the country. It's been somewhat dismaying and disheartening for these workers to see what's happened lately. At the same time, it's been a tremendous wakeup call that we need to renew our own unions, and we need to make sure that our own unions are strong to fight against this corporate agenda of dictate and trying to smash workers' rights.

It's extremely important that we have strong and renewed unions that listen to their membership and follow the mandate of their membership. Like this whole idea that somebody knows better and that you should just listen and accept the word from those that know best, it's not good. It's not right. People, through the course of this struggle, have taken up a slogan on their own. In fact, I raised it at one of the earliest speeches in Quebec City. In the protest against the FTAA in Quebec City a few years ago, there was a slogan that emerged. It was "Who decides? We decide." I explained in that rally why that had come up in Quebec City in terms of defending Canadian sovereignty. All through this struggle the TELUS workers have taken up that slogan "Who decides? We decide." They've applied it directly to their own situation. Even when that first tentative agreement came out, at a huge meeting they had of Local 203 they said, we demand and insist on an informed vote. How can "Who decides? We decide" have any meaning if we don't have an informed vote. They were talking about the fact that they were being expected to vote and go to ratification meetings without even seeing the agreement they were supposed to be voting on.