

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: K.C. Conneelly

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

Kip Connelly. I'm presently the Executive Assistant to the Canadian Director for the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union, Canada.

I first got involved, I worked in a plant in Calgary, Canada Packers, at the time. I was President of the Alberta Provincial Council and a part time business agent. So I was exposed to different delegates representing that plant, probably from early 1972 right up until today's date.

I started to get involved in the negotiations moreso 1982 to 1999. Some of them, but certainly not all of them.

I really don't know too much about their strikes in '74 and '78. My involvement, probably because I was hired full time as an international rep for Alberta in '79. There was a merger between Amalgamated Meat Cutters and the Retail Clerks International Union in 1979, which formed United Food and Commercial Workers Union. Prior to that, the workers in that plant were members of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America.

I had some involvement with the local union with Swifts in around '82. My first serious involvement was with the local in 1984 with Peter Pocklington and the circus tent outside the plant and thousands of workers lined up. Talking with the local union, should we settle in 1984 or should we strike? Addressing the membership at that time. Then of course a more immediate involvement in 1986. As the international representative in Alberta, I had Fletcher's out in 1986 for a shorter period of time and, quite frankly, more successful. Because they were out for two weeks, no concessions, and regained some ground that they had given up in the past with respect to hiring rates for new employees. Then of course, dealing with Pocklington in '86 and meetings with Pocklington, 6-1/2 months of workers on the strike, involved in promoting the boycott across Canada, sitting in at various sets of negotiations with the local right until December of '86 when there was a settlement.

Well he [Pocklington] was always very charismatic, slick, fast-moving, wheeler dealer. I guess that goes back to his car sales days. So he was a very slick individual. Not a lot of room for discussion. Hurry in, let's get this over. I don't think he had a lot of exposure in the community that he was raised, with respect to dealing with unions and contract negotiations, and expectations of workers versus his business expectations.

Oh, no doubt. Leo Belains was hired from the US. That was the story going around. That was the story that we saw in '84 with the circus tent. That was the story we saw in 1986. We were out there stopping those buses and eventually they start to get through. The normal production of that plant was 7 million pounds a week. The scabs were getting better and better at their jobs. They were up to, towards the end, 5th, 6th and 7th month. We were assessing it. We had our people inside the plant, quite frankly, monitoring the situation, giving us accurate reports on the production. The concern came with the local union, once they started reaching 6 million pounds on a consistent basis. I was contacted by the local union Executive Board at that time and given the instructions that we'd better get back to the bargaining table because we're slowly reaching the point of no return. Unless we got back and re-thought our position, there may not be jobs for those 850 people to go back to.

The National Boycott was a tremendous success, in my opinion. We were flying workers all over the country, billeting them in other workers' homes, had very orchestrated meetings with labour counsels, other unions. We had trained our people on telling the Gainers story, telling the story of Pocklington, promoting the boycott. Until the end, it was so successful. And I've heard in the labour community that it was probably the most successful boycott ever undertaken in Canada, maybe North America. It really captured the imagination of consumers. The Gainers dispute itself, it captured the attention of the media. You couldn't pick up an Edmonton paper, which is phenomenal on a daily basis, and not see something about the Gainers dispute on the front page of these papers. So it was full attention, full attention by a lot of the television media right across the country. I think people, your general consumer, didn't like what was happening to workers.

It was tremendous. I don't think we've seen anything of that magnitude. Of course, we got into it with Maple Leaf in the last couple of years and we spent millions of dollars on boycott commercials during the Olympics. But we never reached the success that we reached during the boycott Gainers campaign.

1986? No, it was a difficult time. The membership meetings were wild. It was all very sensitive. Certainly in '86 the arraignment that we ended up ratifying still involved concessions. But, as I

said, the rationale at that time to pull in our horns was the production that the scabs were putting through and reaching a normal production, we were getting close to the point of no return. We started to hold pancake breakfasts and doing sausage or burgers up for the folks, to get another front at the plant, another frontal assault. Quite frankly, the workers were tired and not prepared. Some of them had been jailed one, two, three, five, seven times defending the picket line. They started to tire out eventually.

In 1988 I was transferred out of Alberta down to assume my new position at the national office in Toronto. Then, quite frankly, my assisting the local was on an as-requested basis, up to and including the last dispute. I think I went out and addressed the membership on one occasion, certainly gave my feelings to the local union executive with respect to the challenge that Michael McCain was posing our union.

We were under attack by Michael McCain in 1999. Unlike the industry in the US, we had been able to preserve our pork rates, our \$16 an hour rates on our kill and cuts right across the country, within the industry and all the major companies that we deal with. Michael McCain comes along and says \$16.50 down to \$10, and then I'm going to gut the entire collective agreement, I'm going to cut your benefits plans, and so on. So we realized that I needed to get as much of a united front as I could. So we ended up with three plants out on the street initially, then joined by the folks working in the Edmonton facility. Even with the threat of closure, 68% vote to hit the bricks. I certainly believe that those workers that voted knew what was at stake for the thousands of other pork workers in the industry. And of course, with the reality and the threat, and that threat coming through a plant closure, then we had the bad reaction. Certainly not by everybody, but we had bad reaction in Edmonton in the press and by some of the workers, because the threat of closure came to be a reality. But, at best, the workers in that plant know, because they were told this, that they had two more years work at best, and the plant was going to close anyways. They were told that my by management.

Our first major attack on our pork rates in Canada, and people forget this part of the history, I remember it because I've been around so long. But our first attack on our pork rates was actually by Burns Foods. In 1984 we struck five Burns plants, and the employer ended up closing Burns Calgary, 550 workers, in 1984. They ended up closing Burns Kitchener, 560 workers, all over the question of concessions. At that time the issue was the workers were earning \$12 an hour and the employer wanted to lower them to \$7. As a result, when the smoke cleared, we had lost 1100 jobs

over the question of concessions in 1984, but it preserved our rates. In fact, we made improvements upon those collective agreements.

I think it was important that you had plants meeting the challenge. Michael McCain comes from a notoriously anti-union family. That's his background, that's his life, that's his motive. Profit is number one. He had no immediate experience himself in dealing with unions. It was kind of bully-boy antics that he was using. There wasn't any sense of compromise during those negotiations in the plants where he was really going for the jugular, you know, \$16 down to \$10 an hour. There wasn't room for discussions. Isn't \$16.50 a little drastic? What about \$14. If nothing else, he's learned a costly lesson. You take a look at their sales the last couple of years, they've really been down. These huge buy-out offers that he's been putting on the table in order to entice workers to sell their jobs for cash lump payments is a costly proposition. He keeps going in. The Burlington \$14 million, Edmonton \$4.2, Shopsees \$3.2 million and so on. We see him slowing the pace a little bit because we're seeing some of the plants that he represents where he's going in there now and just asking for a wage freeze. So if nothing else, I think we brought to his attention that we're not about to be bullied. With these types of tactics he is going to be confronted. I think he's buying into a history of bad relations with his employees. Not only in '97, '98 and '99, but for years to come. I think what he's buying into is continual labour strike all across the country, with his workers.

God knows, you gotta say, the folks on 66th street, all these flippings and changings of ownership. Every time you met a different employer, whether it was Burns, the government, Maple Leaf Foods, it was always concessions, always a hard-luck story. That's been the history. That plant has been closing from the early '50s. Swifts were always going to close it when they owned it. Eventually that kind of runs thin, if you're a worker looking for wage increases, trying to keep up never mind get ahead. Accept concessions or we'll close. Accept this or we'll close. Eventually people have enough.