

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: John Ewasiw

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

I'm the coordinator of the action center. I'm one of two people who are on full time and will be in the action center as long as it's going to run. It might be 3 months, it might be 6 or a year or a year and a half. I hope it is a year and a half. As long as people are using this action center, I'm committed to be here to help them along.

I came to Edmonton in April of 1957. My first job was as a parts man at a little place called Burrows Motors. I worked there for about 6 weeks. I was hearing there were going to be some changes there, so I thought I would look for another job. I had a brother and a sister working for the meat industry. One of my brothers worked at Swifts. He brought an application home for me one evening, and I filled it out. The next day I got called to come to work. It was a good place to work. Because at that time, in 1957, the meat industry was about the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest industry of pay in Edmonton and probably in the province. So I started working in the department called the assembly packing cooler. I came there as a part time summer job, but it lasted for just over 40 years.

When I started working here in 1957 at Swifts, my salary was \$1.49 an hour. It's ironic that 40 years later I had an increase of salary exactly tenfold, because my salary was 14.89. But I must say I believe we were better off in 1957 at \$1.49 an hour than we are now with \$14.89. The cost of living, the cost of utilities, the cost of a house, a car. If you balance it over 40 years, you were better off with \$1.49 an hour.

It's not family owned. It was owned by Swifts, a big corporation. Swift is a big meatpacking plant even in the States today. They had the packing plants across the country. There was a Swifts plant in Vancouver and Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto. They had big meat plants across the country. The head office of Swifts was in Chicago, Illinois, and still is. That's where they started, and they spread across Canada.

It was a great place to work. As I said, it was a summer job for me. But I enjoyed working there, the pay was good. I got married shortly after I started working there. We raised a family. The pay was good enough. We earned enough to raise our family. Later on my wife Mary started working for Swifts in 1974 after the children were big enough to look after themselves at home. I would have never asked her to come and work there if it wasn't a reputable place to work. The wages were decent. The working conditions weren't all that bad, although in a packing plant no matter where you work it's all hard work. But because the pay was quite good, we were prepared to put in some extra work to earn a decent living.

I believe it was about 1979 that Pocklington bought a family owned meatpacking plant called Gainers. It was a smaller operation. They had 400-500 people working there. It was a beef kill and cut operation, the same as Swifts but smaller. He bought it in 1979 and decided he wanted to expand a little bit. Swifts was up for sale, so he bought it in 1980. Bought the whole Canadian operation of Swifts across the country, probably 6 or 7 plants, right from Toronto to Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton and Vancouver. There were also some smaller distribution centers. He bought the whole works. Then there were some merger talks, because he decided to close the meat plant on the south side, the Gainers original plant on the south side, and merged with Swifts. There was some negotiations. However I wasn't involved in the union. I was a union member but wasn't involved in negotiations or anything at that time. But there were some merger talks and eventually an agreement was made where the Gainers south side plant was closed. The workers came from the south side and took jobs in the north side plant. They would go to basically the same department they worked at and would merge their jobs according to

seniority. There were some troubled times while that was taking place. There were some ill feelings because somebody had more seniority came from another place to take somebody else's job. But eventually it turned out okay. Life goes on, and it worked out. But the business really at that time wasn't all that great. I would say that between what the 2 plants cut, killed and processed was now being done in one. The business wasn't booming around here. About 1983 Pocklington brought in a fellow by the name of Leo Bolains to run his operation. As it turned out later, Leo Bolains had a very lucrative contract with Pocklington. But eventually he didn't get it anyway, because Pocklington was one that would treat you well when the going was good, but when there was a few problems, I understand they got into a court battle between himself and Bolains. I don't think that ever was resolved, because Mr. Bolains passed away shortly after he left the Gainers meat plant. But I must give Leo Bolains a lot of credit because I believe he was also an American. He came out over here and brought with him a lot of contracts for a lot of American outfits. It didn't take him very long to increase the business tremendously. Then the 1984 negotiations came along and there was a major problem. We were on the verge of going out on strike within a minute or two of 4 o'clock of June 1<sup>st</sup> 1984. But the union and the company negotiators came to the conclusion that there wouldn't be a strike, that more negotiations would carry on. That really did happen, but negotiations really went backwards. We took a hell of an ass kicking in 1984 as far wages are concerned, benefits. This Bolains fellow come out and forced us into major concessions. Like the starting wage, there was a base rate. The base rate for all the people in 1984 was \$11.99. When he got finished, the starting rate was lowered to \$6.99, benefits were cut, the major workweek Monday through Friday was cut up, and there was no such workweek from Monday to Friday. You'd start from Tuesday to Saturday and Wednesday to Sunday or whatever. The contract was cut into all kinds of pieces. Our sick and accident insurance was literally taken away. We wound up paying for sick pay, and you couldn't collect any sick pay for 5 days. Alberta Health Care benefits were really cut for junior people. It was just hacked to pieces. There was no alternative. It was either take this, the union had gone through the time that you couldn't strike anymore, because you can only strike through the labor laws once. I guess there was a vote done on their final offer, and the membership agreed to accept it. But there was a condition. The condition was that if the

company recovered, they kept saying the company is in real bad financial shape, couldn't survive. But if the company recovered, they would be able to come back and share the profits with all the workers. So a 2 year agreement was signed. Then between 1984 and '86, Bolains increased the business tremendously. The workforce probably increased by a couple hundred people. They were killing beef and killing hogs and really booming. The profits went up. Of course at the same time, the Oilers were winning Stanley Cups. Peter Pocklington owned the Oilers and if memory serves me correctly, it's not too long ago that there was a court case going on between Pocklington and the provincial government where Pocklington is suing the provincial government for some money. Some information come out that actually Brian Partino, who was the financial person at Gainers in the '80s, admitted that he was signing cheques from Gainers account to pay the Oilers. So business recovered and the company started to boom. But of course Mr. Pocklington wouldn't want to share it with the workers. He wanted the golden goose and the eggs all. He wouldn't share it with them. Bargaining started for the new contract and we weren't going anywhere. So June 1<sup>st</sup> of 1986, that's when the strike started. Although some people say there was a lot of violence on the picket line, it wasn't our members who were causing the violence, it was the police that were causing it. They brought out the tactical squad many times. He decided to bring scabs in. The scabs were coming out in buses. Eventually they were putting plywood on the windows. Of course when scabs are coming in to take your jobs, you get quite hyper and do whatever you can to try and stop them. So there was some altercations. But I hear it was violent – I don't think it was violent by our members. It was the violence that the police caused.

The people in Edmonton supported the workers 100%. We put on a boycott and they couldn't sell anything here. In fact the boycott was so good that they could never sell any more Gainers product. It didn't take long after the strike was settled after 6-1/2 months, business wouldn't boom at all. Nobody would buy anything around here. Eventually they had to go out of the Gainers product line altogether. They wound up buying the Swift brand name back and started making product under the Swift name. After the battle of 66<sup>th</sup> St., which lasted until December 15<sup>th</sup> of 1986 from June 1<sup>st</sup>, we went back to work. Bolains was still around for a while. One of the ways that the strike was settled was that

Don Getty, who was the premier then, promised a bunch of loan guarantees for Peter Pocklington to carry on his meat business here in Edmonton. I understand there was somewhere in the area of \$55 million. He also was given a couple of loan guarantees for a plant that he was going to build in Picture Butte. My understanding is the only thing that ever happened out of that plant in Picture Butte is that the plant superintendent at that time, Bill Reese, had somebody draw him a picture of it and it was hanging on the wall. If you go to that trailer today, that picture is still hanging on the wall of that never-to-be-built plant in Picture Butte. I don't think that any ground was ever bought or turned. But the government of the day did give him some \$6 million for that plant. He was promised \$12 million, but when they seen that nothing was going to develop of it, they didn't give him the other 6.

That's right. Bolains and Pocklington got into quite a battle. Eventually Leo left here and went back to the States. The Pocklington got a very nice fellow by the name of Henry Beebin to come and run the business for him. Henry tried his darndest to get the business on track. But in all fairness, the boycott was that effective that it just wasn't working out. Locally nobody would buy it. They started to do some export to the States. One of the things Henry did is he was going to try and satisfy every customer. So if some customer would come along and say, I'd like to buy 100 cases of private label bacon or wieners, Henry had the philosophy we'll satisfy them all. There was times we'd have 150 brands of wieners and 100 kinds of bacon. You can only make a wiener out of so much product. It wasn't necessary to have 150 brands of any of it. Eventually business just wasn't there. Pocklington had all these loan guarantees. The Oilers weren't doing all that well either. That's right, and he lost an awful lot of money in real estate. He was putting profits from Gainers into oil wells and I think it was Patricia land. He also had problems with Fidelity Trust that went under, that he cost the Alberta taxpayers millions of dollars. It seemed that no matter what he did, if it went sour, the government would back him up on it. Eventually it caught up to him. So on October 6 of 1989 Don Getty, who was the premier at that time, stepped in and took over the assets of Gainers. The one share they had, the government bought it. Then the government ran it. Henry was still there. Like I said before, he tried his darndest to get the business turned around. Henry was a real nice

person that wanted to do the best he could for everybody. He treated the workers well. We went into bargaining in 1990 and I was involved in bargaining then. I was president of the union. We actually came up with quite a good collective agreement. We made some substantial gains in 1990. We got back our Monday to Friday week. You got overtime for Saturday and double time for Sunday, while before it wasn't there. We got a decent wage increase. From 1990 to 1993 I think we got \$1.41 an hour over the 3 years. We got our pension benefits increased. I thought things were improving and going quite good. But I guess good things weren't to be for us. I can remember making a comment in the paper in 1993 that if a person worked for Gainers for 10 years they'd go straight to heaven when they died, because they had spent the last 10 in hell working at Gainers. Then down the road Henry and the government parted. Henry was let go and they sent over a fellow from Coopers & Lybrand by the name of Ian Strang to run the business. Business was going quite good. They started to make some major changes though. They closed down the beef kill because they couldn't be competitive with the beef. They closed down the beef kill in September of 1993. They announced that they were going to close it 90 days later. The hog population started to grow in Alberta and there was some extra hogs, so they decided they would just go into the cut and kill and processing of pork product. Then bargaining was again to start in 1993. We started to bargain with the government management. Dan Harrington was in charge then. That didn't go too well. We weren't making too much progress. Then all of a sudden one day we heard that Burns had bought the plant from the government. The government decided they were going to go out of the meat industry, and sold it to Burns. Then when Burns took over, I'm quite sure it was mid-December of 1993, there was no more bargaining. They came out and said the best they could do is they would give us another 3 year wage freeze, or that the plant would shut. When I started there in 1957 there was rumors that the plant was going to shut. Then it still continued. Mind you it was always on everybody's minds since 1984 that it was going to close. So in 1993 when Burns came around and said, we'll offer you a 3 year wage freeze, there was a lot of, we were trying to negotiate something better. But Larry Harding was the president of the company then. They weren't going to budge. Eventually we had a vote. It was a close vote, by 56% the membership again thought, let's give Burns a try. They voted and accepted the 3 year wage freeze. That's one of the

biggest mistakes we ever made. The only thing that really was frozen was the wages. Burns came over here with Larry Harding and a fellow by the name of Don Bufort, and they started to bastardize our contract so badly that all our membership really regretted that they voted to take on this 3 year wage freeze. They made some major changes in it. Like one of the worst things that every happened was in September of 1994 they put on a policy of going to the washrooms. The first 37 years of working in the plant, I had never had a supervisor ever tell me that, John you're going to the washroom too often, you're spending too much time, you're loitering here or you're not at work. I have never had a supervisor tell me that. Then all of a sudden on September 7<sup>th</sup> of 1994, this new policy came in that if I needed to go to the washroom or the nurse or get a drink of water, I would have to go make that report to my supervisor. The supervisor would record the time that I left. I would go to the washroom, do what I needed to do, and then come back and find him again. He would time me for the amount of time that I went, whether it was a minute or 2 or 5. He would mark it down. Then if tomorrow I needed to do that again, or that afternoon or 2 days later in the same week, we would have to do the same. At the end of the week they would add up all the time, if it was 18 or 22 minutes. They would subtract that off your pay. It was done the same if you needed to go to the nurse for personal reasons. If you had a runny nose and you wanted some Sinutab or ...

As I mentioned earlier, there was all of 5 packing plants around Edmonton. Not only did north Edmonton survive on the Swifts plant, the businesses in the area survived because of the other meat plants around. We used to have national bargaining. One of the employers would go to bargaining with the union. At that time we were called Canadian Food and Allied Workers. It wasn't till 1979 that UFCW was born. One of the major plants would bargain. Whatever they were able to bargain with that employer, it was just an automatic thing that the other 3 or 4 companies would pay their people the same and the benefits would be the same. So when we'd meet up in the Transit Hotel for a beer, it wasn't only the Swifts people that we were friends with, it was the people from Canada Packers and the Burns. Not that much Gainers, because they were on the south side. I'm sure they had their own little pub in Strathcona. We were a close knit family. A lot of businesses survived for many years because of the packinghouse industry. In 1979 things

started to fall apart in the meat industry. Burns shut their doors. Then in '81 Gainers shut their doors on the south side and moved into the bigger plant on 66<sup>th</sup> St. Then in 1984 Canada Packers closed down the kill and just lived on a little longer with the distribution center. They would bring product in from other plants from around the country, and distribute them in Edmonton. That ended in 1984. But another one of my heartaches, not only am I little angry and upset with some management of Burns and Maple Leaf. It was also the Klein government in 1993 in my opinion didn't sell the Gainers meat plant to Burns management, I think they gave it away. Not only did Burns get about \$13 million in cash, they received all the inventory, all the receivables. They gave them all the machinery in the Edmonton plant. They did pay \$2.5 million for the North Battleford plant, because there was a loan to the Saskatchewan government. Pocklington didn't only milk the Alberta government, he also got his share from the Saskatchewan government. I'm quite upset that when Burns, who held the property for 3 years, and then turned it over to Michael McCain and his group, I'm really quite upset at the person, whether it was the premier or whoever made the decision, to give all the machinery and everything inside the meat plant to Michael McCain. For him to be able to dismantle the plant and take everything away. Whether they're using any of it or whether they just took it out in order to make sure nobody else could come in and take over the plant. It's my understanding that it's very empty. The people who made the decision to allow Michael McCain to take all of it, in my opinion are very lucky that they're living in a country like Canada where we don't have capital punishment. Anybody who gave Michael McCain the authority to remove that should be charged with treason.

We at one time had actually permission and had government people from public works meet us at the security gate. They were going to take us on a tour of the plant. But management told security not to allow us. They allowed politicians to go through it. They allowed people from the opposition to go through the plant. They allowed people from the Alberta Federation of Labour to go tour the plant and see what they were doing in it, that they were just dismantling the machinery. Of course it's easy to send somebody through the plant that has never been in it. But they wouldn't allow somebody that has spent 40 years in the plant to see what they were doing, because maybe we would've noticed that they were taking things apart that shouldn't have been taking apart, and there

may have been a public outcry to stop them. So in their wisdom they chose not to allow us to go in there. I was very disappointed that the government, who are the owners, who are the landlords of the place, could not show the place. Because at one time the union was very interested in buying it. We could've been potential clients, and we were not allowed to tour the plant. I feel very betrayed by the government for not allowing us to take a tour of it.

A lot of the north Edmonton small family owned businesses have closed down and are boarded up and left. People are gone somewhere else. You're losing smaller businesses. There used to be small hardware, small drugstores, corner stores around. Those are all gone now. When you want to go do shopping now you've got to go to the mega stores. You don't know the people working in the stores. I remember going to a drugstore and you could talk to the gentleman who was running it, and you'd talk to them on a first name basis. You go into Shoppers Drugstore now and you don't know who they are. You don't know their names. You go to Home Depot to buy something, you need some plumbing to fix up a toilet in your house, you don't know who the people are. They're just workers. At one time you used to know them personally. You'd go in and visit with them and have some conversation. Probably he lived a block away from you. Now it's not the same anymore. With the plants being lost to the area, it's making the community a lot smaller and a lot poorer. The people who are replacing us in the small corner meat shops aren't earning the same money that the people in the larger plants did. If you're earning less money, you're spending less money. The government is getting less money as taxes, and everybody suffers. I see north Edmonton is going to keep dying more and more all the time.

One example is our sick and accident benefits that we had prior to 1984. You worked in a plant for more than 5 years, which wasn't many years, and you needed to go see a doctor. You would get half of your wages if you needed to go see a doctor. Even if you took half an hour off you'd get 15 minutes wages. If you phoned in sick in the morning cuz you weren't feeling well, you'd get half of your wages at that time. It was a benefit that the employer paid for. We had a dental plan. Or even if you got injured on the job. I can give

you a very personal story of myself. If you got injured on the job, you could get rehabilitation at the Workers Compensation Board. If you needed doctor's care, the doctor would keep you at home. When you were rehabilitated fully, the doctor would then go send you back to work. The employer's rules were that if you weren't 100% fit, you didn't come back to work. I can give you a very interesting story of something that happened to me personally. In 1984 I was driving a forklift, at that time that was my job. I did something rather foolish. I tried to move a couple of pallets with my shoulder on the forklift. I had the misfortune of hurting my 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> vertebrae in my neck. I did the right thing, I went and reported to the nurse that I had injured myself, and continued to work. A while later when I wasn't getting any better I went to see the doctor. The doctor put me in some therapy, and I continued to work. Instead of getting better I was getting worse. I was 48 years old then and I didn't want to be a cripple the rest of my life. So I went back to the doctor and they took me off work. I continued with my therapy at the therapist across the road from the Transit Hotel. After 6 weeks of therapy, the therapy I didn't think was doing me that much good. The therapist would have 8 clients there in an hour, so that would give you 7-1/2 minutes of time with her. There was many times the phone would ring and she would have to go answer the phone, and I would do my own ultrasound. After 6 weeks there I went back to the doctor. He sent me to a specialist. When the specialist had a look at my xray he told me what I really needed was some firm good therapy. He knew a place that he could send me that I could get that therapy, and I was very interested in getting myself healed up. So he sent me. Lo and behold, the Workers Compensation Rehabilitation Center. I went over there for my therapy. I must say that the therapists there did their job. They would work on me. I can remember being stretched and twisted and turned. That's what my body needed, was some exercise, to put it back into work. I remember them, to get my blood circulating better, putting my elbow in some hot water for a while, then put it in some ice. Because that was the way you could get your circulation back to normal. I want to tell everybody in this world that after 6 weeks of that kind of rehabilitation, I have never felt better since.

Today the modified work, it's working for the employer and filling their pockets. Their compensation rates are a lot lower than what they used to be. But it's all on the backs of the injured workers.

How did I get involved? There are still some people in this world that do care. I can tell you that the United Food and Commercial Workers Union have people that care. There's people in other unions that care about workers. And there are employers that care about workers. Some more than others. When the plant was closed, the Canadian Grocery and Producers Council, in conjunction with UFCW, who are one of the 5 major unions in the council, started to try and get some funding from Maple Leaf to start this action center here and give some hope. Give the workers who lost their jobs at the Maple Leaf plant a new start. Change careers, get new training. Because the plant closed, we were all eligible for unemployment insurance. There's an opportunity, because being on EI because the plant was closed, was an opportunity to go through advanced education and career development to take some new courses. Go to school and get some retraining or training, and get on with life. Because this plant wasn't going to be anymore. So everybody would have to make career changes and get different jobs. So when the CGPC was able to negotiate with Maple Leaf to put some funding into the center, because without funding from the employer the government wasn't going to get involved, when they agreed to put some money into the center, then the CGPC was able to negotiate some money from the provincial government. Local 312A was committed to spending some money on the center to get it going. Some of us started to do some things, like cleaning up the building that we're in today. We started to paint it and replace some broken water lines and replaces some cracked toilets.

When we first moved into here, because the place we started our strike in, we couldn't get a lease renewed. We had to move in here very quickly. It was a building that was standing empty for over year. The water lines weren't shut off. There was no gas in the place, there was no power. But we needed a place to move into in a hurry. The first couple of days there was no water here. We would have to bring water in with buckets. I made many trips home because I live close by, I made many trips home with 3 or 5 gallon buckets of water and bring it back here for coffee. We first started out here with

propane heaters. There was no gas in it, the furnaces weren't working. We heated the place with propane heaters. It was a mess. The building hadn't been used for at least a year or more. There was dust all over the place. But of course, us good workers that we were, although Mr. McCain didn't think so, we started to clean this place up. Did some vacuuming, cleaned some snow around the place, washed the windows, did what was necessary, vacuumed the rugs, shampooed the place. We made it into what, we were very proud of the job that was done in the building. Cleaned up, it's a nice bright place, and it's a beautiful building. We're very fortunate to have a building of this nature. It's spacious, it's exactly what we need. And a number of us worked hard, many hours without pay, to clean the place up. We were getting EI and, while helping to clean the place up, were still required to look for work, and did to out and do some job hunting. But at that time of the year there was nothing available. Some people got jobs, others didn't. Then when all the funding was put in place, I'm very fortunate to have been asked by Horhay Garcia Orgales to be the coordinator of it. I'm proud to be the coordinator. I did have a bit of training earlier. The FCW visualized that it seems like this would happen. In 1991 I spent a week at a layoff and plant closure conference. We were trained, because obviously in some parts of this country this happens quite often. In Alberta when a plant closes, it's not that densely populated, it's a big thing. But I guess in Ontario these things happen on a regular basis. We actually had some people come out from Ontario to train us how to run the action center, how to run needs assessment, and how to go deal with schools if that happens, to bargain for our members to get some retraining. I spent a couple of weeks in training myself, along with Peter Holbein. There were some other people that were trained to do the needs assessment, operate the telephones, run computers. Today, 3 weeks after its grand opening, I'm very proud to say that we have ran through close to 400 people through needs assessment. We've got 60 some people who have already gone through Catholic Social Services for their skills level in courses for English as a Second Language, on their speaking and listening techniques. We have talked to the buildings trades unions and they're going to be bringing some of their expertise, their business agents, and people who are experts on the apprenticeship board to talk to our members how they can get started in apprenticeships and go into new careers. A lot of people want to take upgrading in computers. Some want to be truck drivers. As our needs assessments

are progressing, we can see what the trend is. It's amazing the number of skills that our members have. There's some very educated people, some people gone to universities either in Canada or Alberta. A number of Europeans who have some very professional skills that when they came to Canada 20 years ago, went into the packing plant industry. It was a good place to work 20 years ago and you could make a good living and raise your families. So they didn't bother pursuing their careers. Now when the plant is closed, I'm amazed at the number of people who said, in Europe I was an electrician, I was a millwright, I was a welder, I was a plumber. We're talking to the building trades people to see if they can put their expertise and their skills and their knowledge into play now, and get retrained and get their professional tickets in Alberta. And do tickets so they could work. Because the skilled people are in demand right now, with the oil booming and petrochemical booming in the country. They need a lot of these professional people. With some training in the new field, it wouldn't take them very long to get back on their feet. Start their new careers and get back to making just as much money as they did before, or even more.

...

As the coordinator I go through every file to check it, to make sure that the assessment was done correctly, and just for myself to see what people are needed. Very quickly I noticed that one out of 3 of our members can't read or write in English. They speak a little bit, but they can't read or write. In this country today, if you don't know how to read and write in English, you're not going to get very far. We have very quickly set up the skills test with the speaking and listening, and next week we're going to do the reading and writing skills test. We hope that in a couple of weeks, if the committee allows us to do that and I think that they will, we will actually be setting up English as a Second Language courses right here in this building. The people who cannot afford to pay their tuition and books, we will be able to negotiate with advance education career development that their funding will be free. They will be able to collect employment insurance while they're going to school, in order to feed and cloth their families and pay their bills. When the buildings trades people come, we're hoping that a number of them will be able to get on with employers who are willing to hire people to go through

apprenticeship programs. For those who need computer training, we'll try and get them into classes for computer training. We have the ability, through the action center, we work with a lady from Advanced Education Career Development, her name's Linda Harris. She's been very cooperative. She's been sent here to give us a hand to get these people going in new careers. When people are on EI they're costing the government money. The sooner they get back to meaningful employment and earning money to support their families, not only will they be off EI, they will be paying taxes and giving the government some money back that they were taking off in EI.

Absolutely. I was very proud on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March when we had about 250 members come through. I'll start that again.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March we had open house here. We had about 250 members come through, signed in. We had some lunch for them, we showed them the building. We had some coffee and soft drinks on that day. We had a great visit with a number of our members. Many of them brought their spouses and children here to have a look at it. We welcomed them in then and we told them what we are trying to achieve out of this center. A lot of them have come back and they're going through their needs assessment. We hope to achieve many good things for our members from this action center. Like I said, I'm very proud to be the coordinator. If I can help anybody I certainly will. No matter how much time it takes, I will be here to do the best I can for them.

I'm sure that they do. We have Kim Nguyen, who is of Vietnamese culture. He is here on staff helping us interpret the Vietnamese language. A lot of those people don't know how to speak or read or write, and he does. He talks to them and tells them what the center is doing. We're grateful to have him on board doing this. Because if I was to talk to one of them, they wouldn't know what I'm saying and I wouldn't know what they're saying. So he communicates, because I can communicate with him, he communicates with his people. I must say that Kim will stand up and say that they are my people, and I want to help them. We're glad that union members can help one another the way Kim is doing and the way the other people who are helping us here run the action center are doing. We're people helping one another.

We're all in the same boat. We're all without jobs. Maybe I was fortunate that I got the training 6 or 7 years ago, and I had a little expertise. I kind of had to jump on it. So I grasped very quickly what needed to be done here, and have had the other people helping me along with some people from Toronto from the Canadian Grocery Producers Council. Orhay did a great job, Ern is doing a great job. They have a new lady by the name of July Casha here is going to be working with us. I'm looking very forward to tomorrow's meeting, which is going to be the first meeting of the committee who are actually going to be making the decisions on what happens in this center. Then they will be giving us the direction of implementing the decisions they make, what's going to be happening through this center.

I wish I could guarantee it, but I can't. All my life I've always been very optimistic. I believe that optimism is a lot easier to cope with than pessimism. I'm hoping that it'll do good for a lot of people. If it only does good for a few, I wouldn't be as satisfied as if somewhere down the road most of the people can come back and say, well I've got a new career, and maybe one of the best things that ever happened to me in my life is that the plant was closed.

It was a sad day for me when they announced that the plant was going to close. I was very frustrated. I guess all the time I thought it could be a reality, but in my optimism I was hoping that it wouldn't be. That maybe things could've been resolved. But I'm going to work hard and try and make the best for all of my sisters and brothers that I can help somewhere down the road. And get on to some new, meaningful employment.