

**Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)**

**Oral History Interview**

Interviewee: Lorraine Stallknecht

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

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Location: Hinton, AB

Lorraine Stallknecht. I'm from Ontario. I moved to Ft. McMurray in 1979.

Back in '80 I worked out at the Catalytic Syncrude site. We were clerical at the time, and there was a petition going around for the clerical people out there to join a clerical teamsters union, which I partook in. Before you knew it, we went from making \$7.50 up to \$9 – almost a \$3 raise almost instantly. Progressions very rapidly, and benefits. My father and brother were from a union background, so I was familiar with unions. I was more than happy to be part of that.

My father was an operating engineer for steelworkers back in Ontrario, Ingle plant.

There's union in the background. My brother was an electrician. He was a business agent for the electricians. I had one brother that made the move out to Ft. McMurray. There was a lot out there, and another brother came out, and a sister. Then my mother came out. I thought, the whole family is leaving, maybe I should head out here and see what's out here. I came out here and it wasn't too long before I started a job down at Diversified washing buses, working for the stepfather. It was non-union, but it was good money at the time.

When I came here there was a population of just over 20,000. What really struck me about this town was the Syncrude high rise. It's only 4 stories high, and that was your largest building in Ft. McMurray. Even the hospital only had 3 floors. You only had one mall, which was the Peter Pond Mall, a puny little mall. It was small. I came from a small city, so I really enjoyed that. And the friendliness of the people here. Everybody was from somewhere; it was very rare you bumped into anybody who was from Ft. McMurray.

There was a little boom back in '78, '79, yes. Money was good. There was a slump in the '80s. In the late '80s that's when we noticed corporate greed starting to take concessions. I married and got pregnant, and back in '87 I decided to be a stay-at-home mom. Then 5 years later when my son was ready to start school, I thought I was bored and I'd go out and get a job. There was a unionized job at Safeway, and I joined Safeway. They were going through negotiations at that time, which was not very good. This is 1993. I don't know if you remember the big helicopter commercials where they were rolling down the prices and helicopters were coming in, and all this big to-do with the prices coming down, which never really happened. But that's what the promises were with Safeway. In their negotiations they were suffering apparently, and they needed people to take cutbacks. The union really believed them, and the president or CEO at the time was promising them that once they got their monies back, they would share the wealth. Of course that CEO no longer exists with Safeway.

Yes, Safeway is US owned. It's international, very broad. They've got different names out in The States, I'm not sure what they all are.

I was a cashier. I came in just after they took buyouts. They offered buyouts to get rid of long term employees so they could start down at the bottom rate of pay again. Safeway was after a new start back then. Buy out all the old employees, and their plan was to have a quick turnaround with short term employees and low paying wages and no benefits.

Which in Ft. McMurray didn't happen, because before long all the long term employees that took the buyouts were hired back and were at the top of the scale within 2 years, with all the overtime that was offered. Of course Safeway was the store in Ft. McMurray, so everybody shopped Safeway.

I started off part time, yes. Benefits, definitely benefits. Safeway was in no position to want to pay benefits back then. Once again, trying to keep the quick turnaround with the low wage.

Oh definitely not. Vacation pay, health care. Anybody over 13 years with Safeway was entitled to 6 weeks vacation pay, and anything over 18 years was 7 weeks vacation pay, and 3 years was 2 weeks vacation. I wasn't in that collective agreement.

It would be an average of 32 hours for 13 consecutive weeks. If you missed a sick day or something in between those 13 weeks, you had to start all over again. They made it very hard for anybody to get benefits. You never heard of full time back then.

The '93 strike, I've just come into the picture. This was new to me, to hear of a union that was taking back concessions. But after listening to the leadership of the union, it was apparently very necessary to protect the jobs of the people. They really believed that Safeway was going to fold and close the doors had they not. So the strong recommendations were the union's. It was Canada only.

In '93 people were promised that once Safeway had gotten their share of profits that it would be shared amongst the employees. That never did happen, so it just angered the people. Come '97, when we sat in for negotiations again, we were told that they wanted to take concessions and raises weren't going to be on the table. It was pretty petty cash they were offering for monetary. People were strong and angry back then, and said, this time we're not going to let it happen. So we went on strike. It was 75 days. Cold, long days. I remember blistering lips and frozen cheeks. It was nasty.

I personally would be on that line at 7 o'clock in the morning until 9 or 10 o'clock in the evening. I did it for 74 out of the 75 days. I was a picketing captain. Our lines got weaker, people were starting to weaken out and go and get jobs elsewhere. It was a first time strike for most of the people. Hardships were setting in. People didn't realize that after a month there's still bills to pay. So off they went. The cold weather, and people were angry and wanted things settled faster than they were happening. It was a tough job, keeping everybody's spirits up on the picket lines.

With UFCW, in the store the elect shop stewards. The shop steward tries to be the mediator between the floor personnel and management, or the peacekeeper, so to speak. We're given collective agreements. It's all volunteer, by the way. We report to business agents who are elected also through the membership. They also have 15 vice presidents who are also elected. They are the people that will decide where the monies are spent.

The approve the spending of the monies throughout the union. There is a financial secretary and a president position that is also elected through the membership. That's ever 2 years elections come up, and the membership, the rank and file, are privy to apply and get voted in.

What we did in the one I participated in, I can't speak on the ones prior to, but we had sent out surveys to the membership and asked them to prioritize what they thought would be strike issues, and what they wanted to see in their collective agreements. We got them back and had a committee get together (sorry, I shouldn't have looked up there) and just prioritize them in the order they were filled out. We used those for negotiation tools with the company.

I wasn't on the negotiating table at that time. We somewhere during the strike were called back to the table to negotiate. Being picket captain, I was one of the people with a telephone. I kept getting calls, this is what they wanted to put on the table. Which one is a strong issue for the people on the picket line, which one is a strike issue, which one isn't? That was circulated throughout the province, and that's how we dealt with negotiations at the table. It's hard to do it. In the store it's easier, but out on the picket line you want to get everybody's input. Unfortunately, after 75 days, and somebody mentioned earlier this evening that it's never a win-win situation. It's always somebody's got to lose, somebody's got to win. We stood for our rights, and took a stance. It set a precedent in the province, and it worked throughout and everything afterwards. So to me it wasn't a loss. Taking a stand is never a loss. I only wish we would've withstood stronger.

I think I got the years wrong. I was in the '97... oh ya, I was just in negotiations in 2004. My experience out on the line as a picket captain made me that much stronger to want to be involved with the next set of negotiations. During our negotiations the feedback in the stores were, we're never going to go back on strike again, we didn't realize how much it involved. Do what you're going to do, but get this over with. That was getting back to the company. We found we had to get back to the store and start telling people that the

company is hearing what we're saying in the stores. So we have to start getting strong and start saying, we're not going to take this anymore, we're going to go on strike. Once the store started putting those feelers out, then we finally started getting some active negotiations happening. We were 2 \_ years not getting anywhere. The company was just wanting to take and not give. They were wanting to hire off the street and give them seniority. It was ridiculous what they were throwing out on the table for us.

No, we didn't go on strike. It was very close to us going on strike. We had taken a strike vote, and people very strongly said in their strike vote that yes, they were willing to go on strike, which really surprised the company. They had been hearing that nobody was going to go on strike again, but all of a sudden the wheels had turned. It was like they weren't giving us nothing. Finally Doug O'Halloran, our president, sat in on negotiations, who wasn't up to that point. Two weeks into Doug sitting into negotiations, things started turning really quick. They walked away from the table, we walked away from the table. We threw the last offer on the table, and within 8 hours they came back to with an offer we thought was reasonable, compared to what they had been offering us. They weren't budging on the hiring off the street and seniority, but all of a sudden they did a 380.

Yes, there still is the big difference in benefits. The only problem is what they threw on the table just doesn't apply for Ft. McMurray. We have no people to put in our stores. If you're hired today, you're going to be full time in a week or two. If not, definitely in 13 weeks. If you can maintain 32 hours a week for 13 weeks, you automatically become full time. We can't keep them for 13 weeks, let alone make them full time. Safeway is hurting now. It's not just in Ft. McMurray, apparently it's in the Edmontons and Calgarys where

they can't keep staff. They've got to get with the program and start to pay people decent wages. You're not going to work for Safeway for \$9.50 an hour, when you can go over to Superstore for \$12. And they continuously called them their competition during our negotiations. They'd better get with the competition.

CLAC is just bad words for us. The Christian Labor Association of Canada is a non-union organization that likes to claim they're a union, who has moved into the grocery chain.

SaveOn Food is organized through Christian Labor Association of Canada. They're a non-union organization, but here in Alberta they have the right to call themselves a union. They have no rights. They have a collective agreement that's pushed upon them, they haven't got a choice to negotiate. It's already in place, it's not like UFCW where you sit and negotiate a contract. It's already made.

None that I've heard of. I know quite a few people that have worked at SaveOn Food. When they come over to Safeway they're more than happy to have a union and some protection. No strikes allowed, ya, that's part of their collective agreement.

My involvement with the Labor Council started when we were on strike with the Safeway strike out on the picket line. There were meetings every third Tuesday night. There was a lot of involvement from the district labor council, where they sent support on their picket line. We talked and I learned a lot about the labor council. From there I decided to get more involved, and participated with them. I started off as Sergeant at Arms, and learned how the structure worked within the Labour Council and throughout

the community, and thought it was a good thing. My involvement just progressed from there. I became an executive board member with our local. I now sit on the Provincial Women's Committee. It just keeps broadening. More hats, more work, no time, no social life. Lynne Gorman was the past president here, and she got a job offer which was non-union which took her out of the position. Then Jim Haywood with IAM stepped up to the plate and was struggling a bit with it, because Lynne wasn't really close by and she was big shoes to follow. Jim tried his hand at it and decided it was a little too much for him, and too much in his family at the time that he couldn't handle it. So he stepped down, which left the place vacant. Being strong like I am, well I actually got pushed into it, but it was either pick it up or let it fall. I wasn't about to let it fall at the time. I've been sinking a few times, but for the most part swimming. I've had a lot of good people behind me. IBW has been pretty strong helping with the Labor Council. Now they've sent me this godsend, Joanne Roberts, from the building trades, who's worked with me very closely with picking up the Labor Council and getting back all the unions that should be on board with the Labor Council.

With the anti-CLAC? It's very simple. We decided to have a town hall meeting, where we called the community and laborers. I knew that CLAC seemed to be an issue with UFCW, and CLAC seemed to be an issue other plants. They started moving in faster and they put up a big office down by Cano. They've got their own training center That's when you know they're moving in, and they're moving in fast. I sent out faxes to all the different unions and asked them if they wanted to come into a town hall meeting and talk about an issue that was a common goal to everybody here in Ft. McMurray. The people that showed up at that meeting was just unbelievable. I hadn't seen that many people at a

Labor Council meeting ever. So we knew we had touched on a common goal. That was my strategy, to find a common goal in Ft. McMurray so we can group people together and work with that. From there we created committees and started having rallies. People were wound up. We had a second rally, and people are still wound up. I'm still getting calls saying, where are we going from here and when's the next rally? We've got people pumped. It's thanks to good people like Joanne Roberts that are helping me with this. I couldn't be doing it on my own.

I probably should've mentioned this fellow, Dale Roberts, that was on the picket line with us on Safeway every single day. He's got a strong union background, both his parents were union. He was unemployed at the time. One of the picketers ran him over after about the 48<sup>th</sup> day. He got struck and had to be hospitalized. It's strong supporters like that that helped out on the picket line.

He was trying to slow down one of the vehicles. Every day we had management scabs that came in, thinking they were going to put in a full day's work for hard earned pay. I said that all wrong. In any case, he was struck by one of the managers that were scabbing on us. He was struck pretty bad and injured, and there was a lawsuit that happened. It took 3 years to settle. All he wanted out of court was the guy's name and address. It was given to him, but by that time management had moved. A very strong supporter. It just strengthened our picket line, knowing there were people not even involved in our union to be there on a regular daily basis, out in that cold. Unionists.

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