

Reg Basken

Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union
Energy and Chemical Workers Union
Alberta Federation of Labour
petrochemical industry
Alberta Labour Code
CCF/NDP

Q: Reg, tell us a bit about how you first got into the trade union movement, and some of the positions you've held, some of the things you've done.

RB: Well I got into the trade union movement after coming out of university in 1957, or 58, I'm sorry. A friend of mine got me a job at the Saskatchewan Power Corporation in Estevan. To make a long story short, I got into the union movement. I was going to go back to university and never did. I got into the union movement for 2 reasons. One, I had a boss, and he was primarily the reason I got into the trade union movement. Not because he was a bad guy, but because he was a good guy. I became shop steward in a rather nefarious fashion, because nobody else wanted the job. But I found a lot of people that I worked with needed somebody to speak for them. I always yapped and lipped off my mouth, and it just seemed natural. So they screwed me into being shop steward. Once I became shop steward, I had to meet with the boss, Flet Seimen. He did a lot of crazy things, and he and I got on to the point where I was sort of the co-manager of the district. Because before, he used to go out on a limb and do things on his own, and screw it up royally. He'd fire people, and then he'd phone me and say, "Get down to the office, I gotta talk to you". "Flet, what did you do now?" "Oh, I fired the son of a bitch, I got rid of him, I finally got rid of him." I'd say, "Well, Flet, now how do we get out of this? You know you don't have grounds to fire him, you just got mad, so we gotta get it over with. We gotta get you back in so we can have a reasonable situation here, and the guy goes back to work. Poor old Normie doesn't deserve to be fired, and you know it." "Ya, ya, ya," he'd say. He was smoking 3 cigarettes at a time: one on the desk, one in the ashtray and one in his mouth. So an hour or so, he'd go for a glass of milk, because his ulcers were acting up. Then he'd say, "What should I do?" I'd said, "Well call him in for a meeting, call me in, tell him you don't like what he did, and say, now get back to work." So he'd do that. One time he fired 19 people at one time and got them all back to work in the middle of the night, the same way. I just recognized that people needed somebody to speak for them, and I happened to be able to talk a lot and wanted to. So that was really initiation. That was with the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, at that time local 16649. I got more involved in the local and became first vice-president and then in 1963 I became president. In 1963 I went to Labour College. Then I went to the International Convention in 1963 in Chicago. I was elected chair of the Constitution Committee. It was my first convention, but I mouthed off a lot, so I got myself a job as chair of the Constitution Committee. I took on the convention on a dues and per capita increase, and things like that. Then in September of that year, I was hired by the Canadian Labour Congress. Before I went to work for the CLC, the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers asked me to be an international rep for them. So I said to them, "Okay, I'll take the job, but I've got a promise to the CLC to negotiate a couple of contracts in Regina, so I'll have to spend a few months with them." They said, "Okay you can have 6

months.” At the end of 2 months, they came to me and said, “You either come now or you don't come.” So I quit the CLC and joined the OCAW staff. I spent a year in Regina, 3 years in Winnipeg which felt like 30, and then moved to Edmonton in 1967.

Q: Then you became the director at one time, did you not?

RB: I became the executive assistant to Neil Reimer when the Energy and Chemical Workers Union was formed in 1980. So I became his executive assistant, which meant I had national responsibilities. Up to that time, I'd just been a rep. organizing and servicing, mostly Alberta.

Q: Back in those days the AFL officers were volunteers. . . When did you become a president of the federation?

RB: I became president in early 1972, when Roy Jamha was asked by Premier Lougheed to take over as chair at the Workers Compensation Board. I was first vice president; I fell into the position. I seem to have fallen into a lot of positions over my career. I fell into that position of president and stayed on for 5 years. But I was the last volunteer president. I still had my job with the Energy and Chemical Workers Union. So I was doing 2 jobs. During that period of time, I was active in the United Way and a number of other community organizations. So I had a busy time.

Q: How much of your time was occupied as volunteer president?

RB: I expect I spent 25 or 30% of my time on federation activities.

Q: So you had a union behind you that employed you but allowed you latitude?

RB: The important part of that was I never asked for permission. I'd get into trouble occasionally for spending too much time on Fed activities and not enough time on OCAW or ECW activities. But my locals were extremely cooperative. They saw the Alberta Federation of Labour as an important body, and they knew that if I had to cancel a meeting with them for a Fed meeting, my locals understood it. I had great cooperation there. And any time Reimer called me in and said, "you know da da da", I'd say, "Well okay, we'll get over that." And we always did. It was never worth a big argument.

Q: Of course, the presidents and the secretary treasurers and everybody else who kept the Fed going had all been volunteers, until after you were no longer there.

RB: Yes, as I retired from the presidency in '78, Harry Kostiuk was elected as the full-time president. That's the reason I didn't run again, because I didn't want to change my career from ECW into being full time president of the Fed.

Q: I want to come back to some of the AFL issues in a moment, but I want to ask you now about an issue that's happened more recently, speaking particularly about the closure of Celanese. But not just the Celanese question, but the pattern that seems to be developing across Canada of closing down industrial development in our own country. How do you see this use of the resources here in Alberta that seems to be going on?

RB: Well I start from the knowledge that a number of people in the United States look upon the tar sands and oil and gas in Alberta as their resource. They act like it as well.

They feel that as Americans and the need that they have for energy, it's a right that they have, and because Canada is a friendly little country without a big population living close and has reasonable democracy, that they have free access to it. They take every advantage of it, and have for years. The shutdown of oil refineries over the years, I think we shut down 27 oil refineries in Canada. Some of them were what we called teakettles, but over a period of years we shut down about 27 oil refineries to make 3 or 4 big ones. It was all done by companies that were controlled by the Americans.

Q: It isn't so much only that they control the refining and get their hands on our resources, but the very flow of the bitumen now across the border. Where do you see how that affects the future economy of this province?

RB: That has been a disgraceful situation long before the bitumen was going south. It was a disgraceful situation when natural gas started going south, because we did not keep the important chemical parts of the natural gas. We didn't strip it out of the natural gas before we sent it to the States, we just sent the raw natural gas down there, and they built chemical plants and used our natural gas. In natural gas there's ethane, methane, propane, pentane, hexane, heptane and octane, as parts of natural gas. The ethane is the chemical foundation, the chemical base. We didn't strip the ethane out; we still don't. Peter Lougheed talked about it; industry convinced him that it wouldn't be done, wouldn't be good for the Alberta government. We're facing a situation where we're giving away our resources as fast as we possibly can. Now there's an awful lot of oil in the tar sands, but it's gonna get over the years harder to get out, because it's deeper and because it's thinner, it's less dense in terms of the amount of it in the sands. So they're mining the rich ones first and we're mining it and sending it off to the United States. I don't look at the job situation nearly as seriously as many people in this province do. The bitumen going south, yes a refinery has jobs attached to it, but it isn't nearly as many as people think. You can build a bitumen refinery and run it with 100 people. So there's not as many jobs going south, but it's still wrong.

Q: But there are a lot of spin off jobs. For example, Celanese is an example of a petrochemical industry that was making a profit, and yet it's closed.

RB: Yes, well making a profit is not a criteria anymore, it's making more profit. In terms of Celanese, they made cigarette tow, which is the stuff that you make filters out of, and a number of other chemicals that they made there. They'd been cutting back over the years, then all of a sudden they said, "Most of the cigarette tow was going to China", and then they decided, well we can build a plant in China and use cheap labour, and we don't need this nice little old plant in Edmonton. So we'll close it down.

Q: But there was a time Celanese produced a lot of different products.

RB: Hundreds of chemicals, yes.

Q: Different kinds, I think even carpets...

RB: Yes. It was a very mixed bag of chemical plant. It was a very high level chemical plant. It had a lot of different units, I remember dozens of them. They had 600 or 700 or 800 employees there.

Q: So when a place like Celanese closes, and there have been many of them, what effect does that have on a community like Beverly, Fort. Saskatchewan, places like that? They're the people that built those communities.

RB: Absolutely. Many of the plants that have closed over the years came in a sudden death kind of situation when the plant closed. The announcement was made, and 6 months later everything was closed. The Celanese one, everybody knew for the last 5 years that it was closing. So it had less of a detrimental effect on the community, because people had the opportunity to look out and see what else there was. The economy was good enough that many people could get jobs in other situations so they could maintain their position within that community. And as Edmonton gets bigger, a plant of 600 members has less of an impact over the long term, because the economy is so good in Alberta. So it had less of an impact than it would've had had this happened in the '80s.

Q: Nowadays we hear a lot about security of one kind or another. How does the way our resources are being exploited affect our energy security as a nation?

RB: Remembering that all of the garbage that's going on now about building non-oil and gas based energy plants and things like that is crazy. Because governments are lying through their teeth, we've got the public convinced that methanol or ethanol from corn and wheat and all of the other vegetable crops can be cheaper and clean. It's clean. Even nuclear is clean now. But we talk about building clean plants to extract oil for a dirty plant. It's a crazy kind of a system because it costs more to produce ethanol; it costs more in gas and oil to produce ethanol than it costs to produce gas and oil out of a regular oil well. What you're doing is you're adding fertilizer, and fertilizer comes from natural gas. You're adding that, because corn takes an awful lot more fertilizer than most other crops. Then you're raising the price of all of these cereal grain crops, so that people are going to see huge cost increases in their food supply. Nobody's linking that together and saying, there's a lie here, there's an absolute lie here. And wind power is only going to cover 3 or 4% of the energy needs anyway. So we've essentially said, get rid of our resources as fast as we can. And to keep the industry desiring to do that, we'll collect low royalties, lowest probably in the world but certainly lower than Alaska and Texas and Norway and Great Britain. Even the announcements by the commission in Alberta to increase the royalties will still leave them below Alaska, Texas, Norway and Great Britain.

Q: So all this talk then about alternate fuels is a lie?

RB: Yes, a lie; it's a lie. If you see the damage we will do to the farmland by over-fertilization to try and grow crops simply not to eat, but to grow wheat and corn and barley for the purposes of making ethanol, and then we use all of the extra costs to produce the ethanol, it's not cost effective. I don't understand why governments keep on insisting that they're gonna spend our tax dollars to subsidize ethanol plants. That only brings it only close to parity. I'm not an advocate of just saying, use oil and gas. I'm just an advocate of saying, let's have some common sense here. If you use more oil and gas at

a high cost to produce ethanol to get away from oil and gas, you're being counterproductive and stupid.

Q: So what should we be doing to change this course, to change the policy of this government? What role should the trade union movement be playing, and are they playing that role sufficiently? Do you see the action out there that would satisfy you that somebody's standing up to them?

RB: My feel is – and I've always felt that, even when I was president – that we never did enough. When I was president of the Federation, we never did enough to get involved. I think the outward approach is necessary, and an inward approach. The outward approach is talking to the public about issues that the public are interested in, not just our issues. And talking to government, I've always been an advocate of talking to government. I got into poop on it for many years. I would have private meetings with Premier Lougheed with only my executive committee knowing that that meeting was taking place, because I wasn't going to meet without anybody knowing, but they encouraged me to do it. It was done on this basis. Peter Lougheed would say, “Here's in confidential terms, the general approach my government is going to take over the next 6 months. What's the general objection and approach that the labour movement is going to take?” We would have those discussions. They were on a confidential basis, but it gave me a bit of a leg up, and it gave me an opportunity to know him and to be able to sit down and argue with him. I always had the opportunity to do that in a manner that if you can talk to people, you can change their mind. If you simply swear at them or stand with your foot on their throat, you don't change a thing. I've always felt that you have to communicate, dialogue, continuing dialogue. And the basis of our understanding with Lougheed was to have no surprises. “Don't you surprise me with a demand”, he would say to me, “Don't you surprise me to try to change labour legislation to this here without consulting me, because I may not do it. If you just surprise me, I won't do it”. And by the same token, he said, “I won't surprise you by changing the labour law and not telling you what we're gonna do and give you a chance to get your thoughts together before you're asked to communicate publicly”.

Q: Going back to Lougheed's time, we seem to be on a downhill slide. The labour laws have gotten worse; the increase in rapid pace of the exploitation of resources, the giveaway has been going up instead of down. Where have we gone wrong, and what should we do?

RB: I don't know that there's an easy answer to that. We've gone wrong in deciding that we're just narrow little squeakers that simply oppose a few things. We seem to be caught up opposing those things just that the labour movement is involved in, when you know and I know that the labour movement is involved in the broader community as well, and we've gotta talk about issues that the public want to talk about and that our membership want to talk about. Not just the narrow confines of the labour legislation. The worst part of the Alberta Labour Code in my opinion is the fact that a corporation can commit any kind of unfair labour practice that they wish, it doesn't matter. The Labour Board can find them completely guilty of committing an unfair labour practice, and there's no penalty.

Q: Going back to the time you were involved in the AFL up to the point of becoming president, and being involved before and since, how do you see the value of an organization like the AFL central organization?

RB: It's extremely valuable, it's extremely necessary. It has the potential to be the cohesive group to speak on behalf of labour on not only labour issues, but community issues as well. Our own problems are that we're divided more often than we're together. The building trades are in or they're out, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees is in or they're out. Everybody gets a little dog in the manger attitude, and for some reason we've never been able to bring that together. There were serious disputes when I was president of the Federation with the building trades, with AUPE, at one point with CUPE. The serious parts are that a lot of people don't see the importance, or maybe even the need, for a federation. I do. I think there's an extreme need for somebody to be able to speak. But you have to get out and visit with the membership so that you know what they're talking and thinking about too.

Q: So what do you tell the members? ... How do you get them to understand that the AFL isn't that far away, that it's an integral part of what they need in order to advance themselves?

RB: You were president of the Federation. I think we equally failed in getting that through to where the membership sits, yes. A lot of times I talked about the United Way. I talked about other community activities. I talked about the Federation of Community Leagues, the different community leagues, encouraging them to be active, not only in their local union. You see, if you look over the activists, they're not only active, most of them in their own local union; they're active in their community too. I used to encourage that, and I think that's an important way to go. You're not just seen as a narrow tunnel vision pipeline point of view. As a leader in the labour movement, you're encouraging them to be active in other organizations as well. We were active for years in running people for council. My involvement with the NDP has always been to get trade unionists involved and active in the political arena, because you can do more. You have to do some political...we're never going to run the companies. We don't want to let them screw it up by themselves. We may run the government, but not likely in my lifetime. But you can do an awful lot by just being there. I've encouraged people to take an active role in politics. It's easier to get them active in local politics. But local is close to home. Community leagues are a tremendous place for people to start. Soccer clubs, baseball clubs, hockey clubs are tremendous places for activists to get involved in. If you go to get an activist involved in the trade union movement from the community league, it'll be easier because they know what activism is. Or if you go to get a trade unionist that is active in the trade union movement involved in civic politics, it's easier to do because they know what activism is.

Q: A lot of people think that collective bargaining is the big issue, getting the wage increase, and so on. But without the trade union movement, what social programs would we possibly have? Tell us about the role that you witnessed and being part of in securing and retaining social programs.

RB: My biggest involvement was Medicare in Saskatchewan. If the trade union movement hadn't stepped up in Saskatchewan, medical care would not have come to Canada. In 1962, I had a fantastic time. I was taken off my local union business and put on leave of absence to work with the Saskatchewan government to help implement Medicare. I had another interesting time; my son was born during the doctors' strike, and my wife's doctor would not come to the hospital. Then I became active. I became the first president of the community clinic in Estevan, which was a labour-sponsored group that was trying to bring in doctors from England and Ireland, because we didn't know how long the doctors' strike was going to take place. We established a community clinic. I was abused by the mayor and the citizens and the doctors and the big Chamber of Commerce in the city of Estevan. I was berated beyond understanding. My boss, the one I talked about earlier, he called me in one day and says, "Basken, you little bastard, you're in trouble this time". I said, "What did I do now?" He says, "You got all the Medicare stuff and all the CCF NDP stuff lying on the seat of your truck. Don't you have enough brains to put it under the seat?" I had that kind of encouragement from him. He was saying, keep up the good work. He would privately support me. If I needed to go to a community clinic meeting or something like that during the shift, he'd just say, go. I'd go in my power uniform and everything else. So it was my big thing, Medicare was my big thing. But there's been a number of others. If it hadn't been for the trade union movement, there would be no pension plans, there would be no minimum wages, and there would be no security provisions that are now entrenched in law. We got them in collective bargaining, so that's what makes collective bargaining primary. It's the one that breaks the ground. After you get enough people in collective bargaining that have it, then you can go to the broader public. But you have to be able to not only think narrowly about collective bargaining, but always be thinking about how you extend that to the broader population, even if they're not union members.

Q: Your union, now called CEP, has had a number of changes in its configuration over the years, and has been quite active politically. Some of that I assume comes from your roots in Saskatchewan, where everybody was involved in politics. How do you talk to your members to get them to believe they should support politics and get involved with supporting political parties?

RB: Very carefully; it's a very difficult task. One of the things is wear your name on your sleeve, wear your badge of being politically active yourself. You cannot get people to be active in a political scene unless you're active and you take a role and play a role. Everybody in Alberta, in the labour movement knew that I gave up the secretary-treasurer's position of the NDP to become President of the Alberta Federation of Labour. I didn't want anybody to think that I simply wanted 2 jobs. But everybody knew I'd been secretary-treasurer. Everybody knew I went to every political meeting, every provincial council meeting, every provincial and federal convention of the NDP, from 1961 to current dates, except I missed one federal convention already. So you wear your badge on your sleeve. Once they know of your political involvement, you can talk to them about it. If you don't wear your badge, if you don't put your money where your mouth is, you can lead that horse to water but you can't make him drink.

Q: Looking back over the whole period of time that you were active, particularly in the Alberta Federation of Labour, how do you see the Federation? How do you see it as an

integral part of not only the trade union movement, but of the democratic process in the country?

RB: I see it has two roles. The primary role is to speak on behalf of working people in all aspects of their community. The other role is to take an active role politically to make sure that they put their money where their mouth is, in how politics would be good for the average person, how being active in politics would be good for the average person. But you gotta nail down the first part first, and that is be a successful spokesperson on behalf of workers. And not only that, and this is where we failed a lot over the years, is we tend to speak vociferously about issues that are close to our heart, like labour legislation and things like that. In fact, the average worker can't be all that interested in the labour code because they are interested in their own collective agreement and something that's close to home. You gotta find a link between collective bargaining and labour legislation. There's a lot of links here, and the union membership's security is finally based in the labour code. But we've built a lot from collective bargaining on what you get from it; you can extend to the greater population. We gotta be able to show that and talk about it. I think we get involved too much in our own internal fights. It's funny; we can always fight with our friends. It's much easier to fight with your friends than to fight with your enemies, because you know all the warts on your friends, so you can kick the living daylights out of them. But the enemy out there that you don't know very well, you can't fight as well. That's why I've always said you should be involved in the community to get to know your adversary. If you don't know your adversary, you don't know how they think. In collective bargaining, in Federation activities particularly, put yourself in the shoes of your adversary to think about what's good for them; what they think is good for them. Then you can attack it, if it's not good for you. And you can attack it on a basis that makes it understandable, not only to them but to the public.

Q: I guess people like you and I have lived through a few ups and downs in the economy. Right now some people think that the future for the young generation is pretty bleak, when you think about the price of housing and the problems in education funding and so on. How do you see the future for younger people now breaking into the trade union movement if they're coming in, and just beginning to make a life for themselves? How do you see the future with the economy the way it's going?

RB: I think it's tough for them, because the rich are getting richer and the poor have kids. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting bigger every day. My feeling is that until we get a social democratic government in this country, it will continue to go that way. The roar of the Conservatives in cheering for the rich is deafening. In doing something for the homeless it's deafening as well, by the silence. They don't want to do anything; they don't think it's necessary. When you look at the economy of today, you tend to think everything is going well in Alberta. Well, it's going well for 85% of the population, but it's completely leaving out, more so than ever before, 15% of the population at the bottom end of the scale – the unemployed, the homeless, the under-employed. Raising the minimum wage is one part of it, but there's the whole question of social housing, affordable housing, that isn't being dealt with. I'm not pessimistic. In the overall, I still like to be optimistic. I think every once in a while, every few years, some groups come forward and shake up the system enough to get something done. But I'm not optimistic about solving problems of poverty and solving problems of homelessness in a short run,

because there's no interest in it. As much as I hate to berate the United States all the time, if they could get the amount of damage that Bush has done to his country and our country, because we're their neighbors, with the rest of the world, is discouraging. It has lowered the bar of common sense. Even though there's a majority of people in Canada and United States that hate Bush, there's still a lowering of the bar because he is after all the president. It's made it more difficult for the poor and it's moved the Democratic Party very much to the right in the United States, where they don't look Bush-like, but they look Republican-like, because they think that's the way to get elected. That's moved Harper to be friends with Bush and move closer to the right wing of the United States and the right wing of Canada. Harper hasn't shown his true colors yet. Stelmach hasn't shown anything yet, so we don't know just where he'll lead his government, but he'll probably lead it to one more term.

Q: I get the feeling you're not going to vote for these people.

RB: I have a strong suspicion. I even have my neighbors taking lawn signs now to match mine.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add?

RB: Well there are probably 101 things, but you don't think of them until you're asked to think of them. So I'll stammer along here while I'm thinking and talking at the same time. I think I would like to see labour people involved in every committee and commission, making representation here and there and everywhere, like to the royalties commission. I think that's extremely important that the labour movement make its position known on those kinds of things, so that we're not seen just as a one issue group. I'm proud of the labour movement and all of the things that we've done. At the same time, I'm pissed off with the labour movement because we haven't done enough, and I'm included in that. It was a wonderful career of 40 years as a union person. I had the best luck in the world. I fell into positions that I never asked to get into. Each one of them I became happier with. Every time I moved into another territory, I became more content that I was doing something right. I don't know what history will tell about me; it may say that dizzy old fart didn't do anything, I don't know. But one of the things that always kept me going was that I tried to be able to push labour issues with people that you normally couldn't talk to, because I wanted to talk to them. I felt that if I knew them, I had a better opportunity to find their weaknesses and take advantage of it, rather than just shout at them, spit on them, or step on their throat. [END]