

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewees: Bill Climie

Interviewer:

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the number one polluter in Canada,
Pure corporate greed
you're killing this industry
pipelines going out of the province, out of the country
as big a role in their communities.
what's happened in the communities
have to meet Canadian law?
to Dallas or Frankfurt
What do you mean you can't fire the person?
The pressure and the stress were just phenomenal.

Q: Bill, I want you to tell me how you came to be employed in the Celanese plant.

BC: That was a strange situation. I had just recently lost all funding from the federal government for my research grants at the University of Windsor, where I was in graduate school. I came west because of the employment boom in the early eighties in Alberta. I walked into Celanese Tuesday morning, and the ink wasn't even dry on my application and they were dragging me out to the lab to replace a summer student. I was hired for six weeks. The joke just got better as the years went by. In the end, I was hired for six weeks and stayed twenty-seven years.

Q: And what jobs did you have during those twenty-seven years?

BC: For the greatest part of those years I was a lab tech on shift and days, both in the unit labs and the main lab. I was the full time union chief shop steward for two years. I also was the full time union health and safety officer for two years. My final couple of years prior to shutdown I spent almost two years in the cellulose acetate unit as an operator, and then three months in the liquid chemical loading department, learning how to put methanol into railcars.

Q: What was the plant like when you started? Can you think of changes that occurred over those twenty-seven years?

Q: It was quite large and vibrant. In the cafeteria entrance were all these plans for expansion and new units and new development. There were probably 1500 employees. Everything was running maximum capacity, just about. People felt very comfortable, and confident. All these twenty-year-olds were hired and were talking about collecting their pensions and retiring.

Q: When did it become apparent that they were trying to cut back?

BC: I guess I'd been there six or seven years, and a new plant manager came. I was on the union executive at the time, and we were introduced to him. His previous job with the corporation was as a shutdown expert; he had shut down five or six plants prior to coming to Edmonton. So that was our first fear when he came. It was Dr. Ian Brownly. I'm not sure if it was because he acquired a liking for the city of Edmonton and wanted to stay there, or the fact that his kids were in school in university, but he actually started fighting the corporation to keep Celanese Edmonton open. Between him and the work the union executive did, we did keep the plant running for a lot longer than the corporation ever expected.

Q: So you feel the union did play quite a role in keeping that company alive in this city.

BC: Alive and viable, yes. The rules, the things we got through negotiations, and just the comfort level achieved through improving pension plans and benefit plans and wages. The turnover was over 100% when I started, and it almost went to zero by the time I was there ten years. People were happy in their work. It was a safe place to work. I was on the safety committee by then. We actually were the first company in the corporation to have an incident investigation practice that we developed ourselves at our joint health and safety committee. I actually chaired that committee in the end for almost 10 years. I'm quite proud to say that that committee worked as a consensus committee the entire time. I think once the company members insisted on a vote and it was the biggest disaster that had ever happened. It almost led to the disbanding of the committee.

Q: So with workers having these early secure jobs that they were staying in for a long time, I would imagine that many of them became involved in the local community.

BC: Definitely. A lot of people, you'd hear at work about things they'd done. A lot of the farm community kids ended up on volunteer fire departments in Ft. Saskatchewan or other small towns to the east of the city, because of the fire training they had every Thursday at work. Or things, just because they had the time off and the ability to do it, they got involved in their kids' sports, and traveled with them or... I'm still involved with the Juvenile Diabetes Association. I know a number of other people were involved with different disease associations. I was a team captain that led Walk for the Cure. We always raised a team at Celanese. The same with the Breast Cancer Society, I know one of the women in the lab, that was her big thing. I'm trying to remember a couple of the other guys, the things they were in. But they were in the bike ride for the cure, and a lot of that went on. United Way was a huge thing that a lot of people got involved in too.

Q: So basically what you had was a secure group of workers, in many cases with long tenure in the company, who were very involved in the communities in which they lived. What happens to all that when the jobs are gone?

BC: I find with myself, I had to call Juvenile Diabetes up and say, you can have my volunteer time, but I don't have a bank account anymore that can support the level of donations I used to put in. I'm finding it harder and harder to put in my volunteer time, because I keep joking with my friends, I didn't realize being unemployed would make me this busy. It's nonstop, going from meeting to meeting. I'm actually going to school now, so trying to get my schoolwork done. Everything, it's just nonstop.

Q: You were very active in the union. Tell me what positions you held and what they involved.

BC: My first position was as the cig tow unit area steward, which, in most unions, would've been called, like, a unit vice president, but we called them area stewards. So I represented the hundred or so people and lab techs that worked in that unit at the executive meetings. I would handle the initial grievance steps. Initially I'd just go in and talk with the supervisor or foreman and try and find out what was happening and try and get things resolved before it ever got to paper. Then I would do the first step in the grievance procedure, and then it would go on to the chief steward. I also, at the time, because no one else would do it, was doing the health and safety. I always used my time equally to look after things.

Q: Such a large group of lab techs. That means that there were quite a lot of well educated people working in the plant.

BC: Actually there were twelve lab techs, and the rest were operators in the unit. We had two shift workers per shift, and then two or three day workers.

Q: You mentioned that there were some innovations in health and safety while you were involved in the union. Could you describe a bit more about that?

BC: The biggest battle – and we had quite a large maintenance department in our cig tow unit as well, because we had unit maintenance – was the company would buy one source of welding leather gloves, gauntlets. We must've spent a year going around and around the table, at the joint health and safety committee, arguing about these stupid gloves. My position on the executive meant that I had more contact with the plant manager than most of the junior management that were on the joint health and safety committee at the time. I raised the issue: we've spent more money and time arguing about these gloves; we could buy a dozen different styles of gloves for the next thirty years. The plant manager agreed, and next thing you know, any kind of glove the welders wanted, they could order. The same with hearing protection. All of a sudden it became very important, because the people retiring were leaving the plant hearing impaired. Instead of them giving us heck because we were throwing away our valuable earplugs at each break, it became apparent through our safety committee, and we used to have three full-time nurses and a part-time doctor on site. Those disposable earplugs were supposed to be disposed of at the end of each use, so that you didn't infect your ears and go off work. So, all of a sudden, we had

massive numbers of earplugs available for everybody. It might not sound like a lot, but hearing protection, I don't hear, anymore hardly, of anybody that's hearing impaired coming out of there.

Big projects took a lot longer. Like I said, during that time we created an incident investigation process, and started investigating major accidents, any lost time injuries. Over the years, it eventually developed into we investigated right down to near misses, because the lost time injuries stopped happening. Then the corporation got involved because of their insurance carriers, and cooked up a massive incident investigation process, loosely based on ours from Edmonton, and took full credit for it all.

Q: The Celanese plant employed people of different nationalities. Were there ethnic tensions in this plant? What were relations among the workers like?

BC: I wouldn't call them ethnic tensions. There might've been before my time; I started in eighty-one. But in my unit, the cig tow unit, when I started in '81 it was called the retirement home, because the average age was in the sixties. So turnover was quite high in those first few years. On the jet floor where the synthetic fibers were made, in our collective agreement it was actually called the woman's job, because women had more dexterity with their fingers, they could work with the fibers better. But we were removing all terms like that from our collective agreement at the time I got involved. But still on that floor it was mostly women. The initial hirings were mostly German and Ukrainian women. Then a lot of women from the Caribbean Islands came in. You would think that would not be a good mix, but it turned out to be a wonderful variety of people. Most of the semi-skilled jobs, like, we had people from Egypt and Malta, and the European immigrants. Any accent you could think of we could hear in our unit. It led to some of the most wonderful potluck Christmas dinners I've ever had in my life. You could have everything from Caribbean, Jamaican stew inside a fold up bread...

Q: Roti.

BC: Roti, yeah, you'd have roti to hopoche and all the Ukrainian favorites. And the one guy was just wonderful at smoking turkeys. To this day I can't buy it 'cause it's awful stuff, but when Steve made it up and brought it in at Christmas time, it was the most delicious stuff you ever tasted. I don't know what the difference was, but he knew how to make it. He would do special orders for people. He ended up doing four hundred turkeys a Christmas for people.

Q: How active were people in the union? Here's a plant that had maybe twelve to fifteen hundred people. How many were active, at any given time, in the union?

BC: We always had anywhere from forty to seventy shop floor stewards. Some very active, some would attend a monthly meeting, that's about it. But being on the executive board, we really worked hard at education. We would teach them about the grievance procedures or health and safety or negotiations, and rely on them to keep the word out. Our plant had seven different units, and there was no mixing. I was in the cig tow unit for the first ten years I was there. When I became full time chief shop steward after that ten years, I didn't know anybody in the CA unit or the methanol unit or the acetyl units. So I had to get my face out there. At the time, I had free access to any unit I wanted, as long as

I wasn't violating any safety procedures. I could walk into control rooms and lunchrooms and sit down and, as long as they weren't busy, talk with the people. So that's how I got my knowledge of the plant as a whole. But some people spent their whole career in one area, so they would never get to know any of those other people, other than by attending a union meeting, or other social functions. We always had summer baseball leagues, winter hockey leagues, curling, and all that stuff going on.

Q: A lot of people would've formed friendships at the plant.

BC: There's quite a movement going on to try and stay in contact with each other. I'm not one of those people. I've gotten so busy with schooling and the changing direction of my life. I respond to emails and, if I get a phone call, I'll talk with the people. But I don't go out looking to stay in touch with people.

Q: What was your reaction when you heard the plant would close? Had you been expecting it?

BC: Because of my involvement on the executive, I kind of saw the writing on the wall. Still, it was sheer disappointment when I heard that it was shutting down. But you have to understand, the first announcement, if it wasn't in the year 2000 it was 2001 and '02. So it was quite a long time ago. The first announcement was our LPO unit was going to be shut down because it was extremely old technology. Our penta arithratol unit was going to be mothballed until the market improved. Well that was hilarious, because it hadn't even been announced yet, and parts were being shipped to the U.S. out of the PE unit. LPO was being dismantled. Less than a year later, the vinyl acetate unit and the SO unit announced they were closing. But that was really odd. I was sitting in the VA control room and an engineering company was in upgrading the control room while they were outside tearing apart the unit. The engineers had failed to talk to each other about what was happening. So the petrochem side of the plant shut down almost five years ago or more.

Q: What percentage of the workers?

BC: That was 20% of the workers. It seemed larger, because it also affected the number of maintenance people they kept, and the number on the staff side, engineering department and all that; 20% of the whole plant, not just production. Those are the people I knew and worried about.

Q: Did it appear at the time that this was part of a calculated move to shut the whole plant down?

BC: Not really. Our cellulose acetate unit and our cig tow unit were setting records at that time, for production. We had had KPMG and I wish I could remember the name of the program. It wasn't supposed to affect any union workers. They were cleaning up procedures and methods for staff people. They were clearing out the clutter, as they called it. A lot of staff people did lose their jobs when this headhunter company came in. But the lab had twenty-five employees total, with unit lab techs. It was six of us were gone. Nobody, not even the union executive, got excited. I had to point out that "those six

people are union people. You promised no union people would be affected.” That's when I really started questioning anything that came from management. They're gonna lie no matter what.

Q: How do you explain the shutdown?

BC: Pure corporate greed. The first announcement at the end here was that the jobs were moving to China. Some of that's true, but the majority of the work went to Mexico. They expanded their cellulose acetate plant in Mexico, they expanded their cig tow capacity, which were the big moneymakers at Celanese at the end. They had a long-term contract for methanol with Methanex. So they didn't even have to market their product there. But we were bought out by a group called Blackstone, which are three brothers in the Cayman Islands. It's kind of a black box company. I don't understand the business world that well, but what I understand is these three brothers are in kind of a global competition to see who can outdo each other. What they do is buy up aging industry and see what's profitable in it, sell that off, and get rid of the rest. They make their money that way. They don't run industry, they just kind of dismantle it.

Q: What do you think the provincial government might've done to prevent this?

BC: I know prior to Dr. Brownly's departure, the plant manager that was doing some fighting to keep us going, he approached the union executive and said, the natural gas going into the Alliance Pipeline, up until Lougheed's day, probably Getty's day, the feedstocks to feed the petrochemical industry in this province were stripped off before the gas went into that pipeline. Under Klein's government they ended that, so the butane and other feedstocks, pure raw natural gas is now going to Illinois in that Alliance pipeline. So all those feedstock products now, it increased Celanese's cost by over \$1 million a month to buy off the world market to supply our methanol plant and our LPO unit and our oxygen unit. So when we approached the government and Ralph Klein about, you're killing this industry; it's a big employer in northeast Edmonton. What can we do? He basically told both of us, nothing. That's the way the global economy goes.

Q: Where the global economy goes. But in fact they had altered government policies in such a way that encouraged firms to feel that they had no particular advantage to staying here.

BC: Yeah. The reason they moved here, and I like reminding people, Celanese was the first plant built to take advantage of Leduc #1. So it has extreme historical significance for the northern part of Alberta and the money it's put into this province. The Socreds in their day, and Lougheed in his day, did what they could to encourage this industry to stay here. That's why they stripped the feedstock products out of the natural gas.

Q: Both Manning and Lougheed were trying to induce good manufacturing jobs to the province. Do you feel that's being lost?

BC: Oh definitely. Nothing new has been built in this province in twenty, thirty years. The last major project I can think of was the styrene plant at Dow Chemical in Ft. Saskatchewan, and that's twenty years ago now. Dow Chemical is in the same process

Celanese went through for the last five years, of laying off people and shutting down. I live in that community in Ft. Saskatchewan and run into those people every day in the same boat as me.

Q: Do you think that with the so-called globalization that going back to earlier policies that try to keep resources in the province for manufacturing, that that's still possible?

BC: I would hope so. With all this synthetic crude being created, with all these upgraders being built, there's massive pipelines going out of the province, out of the country. That's all jobs. You send that to the U.S. or to Mexico.... I was just reading today, they assume Mexico is going to take over a much bigger role than Canada will ever get, just because of its locality. From upgrading these petrochem...the oil industry is one industry, petrochemicals are another. You have all that feedstock going out of the country, that petrochemical industry has to build somewhere. In the end, when I was an operator in the cellulose acetate unit, we used to have our own feedstock of acetic acid coming from the LPO unit or the SO unit, secondary oxidation. We were getting railcars of acetic acid cheaper than we could produce it, from Illinois, where the Alliance Pipeline ended with Alberta natural gas in it. They were using our natural gas as a feedstock to produce that acetic acid.

Q: What do you think the union movement should be doing to try and get policies changed?

BC: We have to play our role in lobbying the government and supporting people running for elections that will aim our direction. I've been a strong NDP supporter for the last thirty years, but I'm wondering, maybe you might have to look at the bigger picture. There is no real big social movement in the U.S. and you're going to keep getting stuck with flip-flopping between the Democrats and the Republicans. The Republicans down there are so hated now, you know a Democrat's going to win; even if they put Donald Duck up, he'll win. But in Canada we do have options, but I really don't understand.... I have to admit that I've only been in Alberta thirty years, which I guess might qualify me to be a provincial citizen. But I'm definitely not of the Conservative way of thinking, and I don't understand, well the polls that came out last week. Stelmach's driven the Conservatives down to 35% popularity. That 15 or 20% of the voters didn't go anywhere else but to "undecided" because they have such a hatred of the Liberals. And they still say the name Trudeau, even though he's been dead for ten years. Or the NDP, they say "communist," which hasn't existed for how long now? So some sort of education process... I don't know what. Personally, I'm fifty-one years old now; I've banged my head against the wall for the last thirty years. I'm getting tired. When you stop hitting that wall it starts to feel a little better (!)

Q: How do you think the workers in general reacted at Celanese? Did they see this as inevitable, or did they see this as something that was caused by government inaction?

BC: At first they did. A lot of them came to the realization: "it's an old plant, it's gonna shut down." It picked a good time to shut down, with the boom going on right now. They all thought they could walk out and get jobs. In the first couple of rounds of layoffs, because at a union plant it's by seniority, it was mostly the younger guys that went, with

least seniority. They all did walk into reasonable high-paying jobs in the oil industry, because they needed the people. But as we came to the end and the guys were getting from their twenties and thirties into their forties, they were finding it a little more difficult to find work. A lot of the guys in their middle to late forties wanted to stay in the Edmonton area. Well, these jobs didn't exist in the Edmonton area, or were tougher to get. Now the last hundred that went in June are like me; they're fifty and over. Well the guys that were fifty-five went straight to pension and kept their company benefits. Well I put in more years than a lot of those people. This is sour grapes. But because I wasn't fifty-five, I have no benefits, no nothing, just that I can collect a pension when I turn fifty-five. It's a comfortable pension, but still, why do they get benefits and I don't? It's the way things were negotiated and lined up. It's just sour grapes on my part. But I'm not taking that away, 'cause I've done everything I can, to stay as positive as I can, in all of this. I give some credit: people at work around me all worked really hard at developing their futures. Some went into business, some went looking for work or into education. My way of staying positive about it was looking at my interests and hobbies and what I do, and seeing if I could get the education to move forward.

Q: Individuals too try to make the best of something like this. But what do you think has been lost collectively, when people lose jobs of that kind. What's lost to the community, to that group of workers and to the larger community?

BC: In that area, I know northeast Edmonton, Sherwood Park and to a lesser extent probably Ft. Saskatchewan, a massive tax base has been lost, provincially and municipally. Those people that made anywhere from \$60,000 - \$100,000 a year are all gone. I know Celanese laid off a thousand people since January of 2000, probably more than that in the long run. But we had another, probably, and I can't verify these numbers, twenty-five hundred contractors that had a significant income because of Celanese being there, during our shutdowns or ongoing projects and whatever. They were all in that same part of the Edmonton/Sherwood Park/Ft. Saskatchewan.

Q: So there was quite a large effect from the plant closure?

BC: You're looking at four thousand people who lost their jobs and a significant income. If you start turning that into terms of families, you're talking maybe twelve thousand people that have been affected by this. Now they're not taking as big a role in their communities. They're not able to; they don't have the income anymore. I've learned through what my pension may be, I'm going to have to really curtail traveling or what I do, but it's definitely survivable. It's hard for people that actually are living on their pensions right now, and I have talked to some of the lab techs. Celanese used to have a partially indexed pension. As soon as they announced the plant closure, all indexing stopped. So there were four lab techs that were part of that initial six that went. That was almost six years ago now. They said the first two or three years they were quite comfortable with their pensions. But with inflation at 4% a year, they really started noticing it. Now, six years later, they really notice the drop in their income. With the increase in the cost of living and everything, that means they do less in their community, more looking after themselves. They might even have to find part time work. No, I don't envy what's happened in the communities. But the politicians didn't want to seem to want to pay any attention.

Q: No they didn't. Generally speaking, Celanese makes products that rely to a large degree on the natural resources of this province. Do you think the movement of this firm out of Alberta indicates further changes in the Alberta economy and the global economy?

BC: I think so. You're going to call me a conspiracy theorist or whatever, but I think I know the Conservative side of the equation doesn't support the Kyoto Accord and that method of cleaning up the environment. But the petrochemical industry since it was founded -- and Celanese was bought up by a company called Herxt -- well Herxt was a small town in Germany in the 18th century. It was the first probably petrochemical industry going, and it ended up enveloping the entire town of Herxt, Germany, and polluting them out of existence. Well, the petrochemical industry hasn't changed two hundred years later. We're still, I should say "they", I'm no longer employed in it... it's the number one polluter in Canada, the U.S., most of the third world countries and Europe. If you can't force them to clean up their act, 'cause you take a lot of hassle, the current government, the premier, then you kick them out of the province and you don't have to listen to them anymore. I think that's what's happening. Like I said earlier, it's been twenty, thirty years since any major petrochemical project has been built in Alberta. I think it's similar in the rest of Canada.

Q: Do you think the kind of general unwillingness of this province to put controls on industry contributes to the kind of ideology where they don't want to be more-or-less regulating an industry, and so here's an industry that's a guaranteed polluter, so they'd rather it just disappeared.

BC: I think that's the case. During the time that Ralph said they will not support the Kyoto Accord, it doesn't matter what Chretien did and what they signed. Mayor Bill Smith of Edmonton had to sit on an announcement that Edmonton was the closest in all of Canada to meeting the Kyoto Accord for a city. They had gone the furthest to reducing energy consumption in their buildings and switching over to the electric buses. I thought that was, when I found out that, that Edmonton had gone further than any city in the country, and couldn't announce it because we're the provincial capitol, and the current provincial government opposed all movement in that direction, it was disgusting.

Q: It would seem on the surface that pushing out of polluting industry, like petrochemicals, isn't such a bad thing. Is it the case really, that the industry can't be cleaner? Also by pushing it out to places like China where there's less regulation, isn't the ultimate result more polluting?

BC: Definitely it can be cleaner. In the last fifteen years at Celanese, we went from dumping our hot waste water, which was basically chemical free. But the heat is a source of pollution in itself into the river; not a drop of water for the last five years I was there or maybe more, went into that river. It was all treated and reused at the plant. Our city waste, the same as anyone else, from toilets and showers and stuff, went through the city treatment plant.

Q: So there have been significant improvements.

BC: And the same with the air.

Q: So there have been significant improvements actually in Celanese while it was here. Now they'll be expanding in other places like Mexico and China. Do you think they will continue these kinds of practices?

BC: I know there's a certain level of frustration in Mexico, because finally their government has stepped in and said there will be cleaner plants and things will be cleaner. They're still not at the level they were in Canada or the U.S., but environmental standards have improved quite a bit in Mexico, from what I understand. But I hear there are no environmental standards in China yet. Their federal government has virtually no control over what major cities do in that country. They have to answer to the federal government, but pretty much they run their city. There's no communication. Not like here where we have certain levels of standards as they come down.

Q: So to some degree you've got companies leaving an environment where there's at least some regulation of their environmental practices, off to places where there's very little and where they can save money on that, but add to the general pollution of the planet. Is that fair to say?

BC: I think so, yeah. But also, our product in China is probably 90% used in China. We made cigarette filters....We were never allowed to compete in Europe with the parent company, or in the U.S. with the parent company. Mexico produced its own cigarette filters. So we competed on the whole Pacific rim, including mainland China. We alternated between them and Taiwan.

Q: So the foreign control in this case did produce something of what the Watkins Report warned about in the late sixties, where a foreign controlled company wasn't really competing internationally. You're saying that the company here was forbidden to make certain kinds of products, to go into certain markets.

BC: It was hilarious. We used to make product for Egypt. But we packaged it in Canada with "Made in Canada" wrappers, the whole thing. Shipped it down to the U.S., where it was unwrapped, put in U.S. packaging, and shipped over to North Africa. I guess the same after the wall came down in Germany and the more free market in eastern Europe.... A lot of our product ended up there the same way, with U.S. packaging wrapped around it. Because we weren't allowed to go there. There's no way I can prove any of that stuff.

Q: It's just the way multinationals operate.

BC: Some of our own competitors would shoot us in the back. Things would show up in India or Ceylon or whatever, wrapped in "Made in Canada" Celanese packaging. Another form of cigarette filter material called propylene was stuffed into these packages. We don't make it. Where did it come from? It's amazing what happens in big business. You hear about it.

Q: How much can unions do to try and act as a brake on that kind of corporate greed?

BC: Internally in the plant, you work with your members and tell them what's going on in the world. I think Canada is a lot further ahead than some of the other countries in their union movement, and working as a social driver. But until you influence the population in general enough, like in the plants, the union has to do its traditional roles. As far as I'm concerned, we didn't cave in to the company to stay open, and I wouldn't condone any form of caving in to stay open. You know health and safety is going to disappear; you know environmental standards are going to go backwards. A lot of this stuff happens. I get arguments every day when I hear, the guys at Syncrude aren't union and they're making \$150,000 a year. Yeah, but the guys next door at Suncor are; that's why the guys at Syncrude have the safety standards they have and the benefits they have. It's the same in the Edmonton area. There's enough, the industry in Alberta, there's enough of a union movement that it's keeping the pay rates and whatever significant. It was announced yesterday in Alberta the minimum wage went up to \$8 an hour. But less than 2% of the population earns that minimum wage, because there's so few workers, they have to pay \$10 an hour for people to live. Well \$10 an hour nobody can live on, or \$12 or \$14. I'm finding that out very quickly as an unemployed person. Because I'm diabetic and maintain what's not paid for by the healthcare system, I'd have to earn about \$15 an hour just to pay for my healthcare.

Q: You do find when you're in a unionized job you're somewhat protected from the gaps in the health system. When you're employed you realize the incredible problem with having a Tory government on the social welfare side.

BC: Just one example. I was diagnosed as a diabetic twenty-five years ago. I was given a form called Aids to Daily Living. This is twenty-five years ago, and they paid \$500 a year towards your diabetes maintenance. When I was talking to my specialist about changes in my healthcare regime and that I was going to lose my job and things might get more difficult maintaining the costs for all these things, his nurse gave me a form. I forget what it's called today, similar to Aids to Daily Living. It's still \$500 a year they pay, twenty-five years later. It's never been changed.

Q: What are the real costs of your diabetes supplies?

BC: Right now it's between \$400 and \$500 a month for insulin, needles, tips, daily testing. I test my blood sugar eight times a day, and it's about \$1.50 a test. As well as oral medications. Some of them have been on the market forever and are as cheap as \$30 a month, some of them are as much as \$2.50 a pill and you take five of them a day.

Q: So you're out of pocket on a lot of this. The benefits disappeared for you the day...

BC: June 15th was my last scheduled day of work. On midnight on June 15th I no longer had benefits.

Q: After twenty-seven years with the company.

BC: Yeah. I was twenty-nine days short of twenty-seven years. I was hired on July 14th.

Q: Which means of course that there's no provincial law requiring them to continue benefits. It makes it easier for a plant to close down if they don't have to look after the workers who they let go.

BC: But that was the same thing, trying to get people to understand at the end – the politicians, some of the people in the national union – that this last hundred people that left the plant were the most difficult to re-employ. They were all in their fifties. The ones that are fifty-five got to keep their benefits and start on the pension right away, so they're subsidized. But the ones that are between fifty and fifty-four have to somehow survive the next four to five years.

Q: Also, when they start collecting pension, it's going to be a reduced pension, isn't it? It's not tied to the rate of inflation.

BC: No, there's no indexing whatsoever. Even though it may be comfortable now, I won't start collecting mine for four years. Like I told you earlier, those lab techs that left, it was the third and fourth year that they really started noticing that they weren't comfortable anymore; they were starting to penny pinch.

Q: The current rate of inflation in this province is 6.3%. If that continued for the next five years for somebody who was fifty, it would mean that the value of the pension would've been reduced by a third.

BC: So I have to find a job that's going to create more pension or more income for savings. At this age, I'm also guessing at this, I'm not guessing at this, I know I had over three hundred fifty resumes out for chemical technologist or technician type positions. Plus some other ones that interested me that I may have been qualified for. I had an interview with Suncor, who tried to insist that I sign a contract that I would relocate to Ft. McMurray within eighteen months. I couldn't get a down payment on a mobile home with what I sold my home for in Ft. Saskatchewan at the time. And an insurance company, because I knew twelve hundred people I could sell insurance to. So they weren't hiring me, they were hiring someone who could talk to all these people, because of my union experience. I forget who the third interview was... oh, it was filling airplanes up at the International Airport. I'd been trained to load methanol railcars at Celanese the last six weeks I was there.

Q: So a lot of what you're facing right now is probably on an age discrimination, isn't it? You're well qualified; you've got a degree in your area.

BC: I hope you can tell me I'm wrong, but I'm guessing my resume reads quite well. I've got a lot of training that these medium-to-small companies can't afford. I've been putting ...oh it was Emco, the building products people, was my last interview. It was for a manager's position. And that was because I knew somebody there who could put my resume on the HR guy's desk. But the majority of resumes nowadays go through one or two companies where nobody reads them; they get fed through a computer, scanned in, and key words are flipped out, and you get spit out. My resume has no dates on it anymore, because my university degree is thirty years old. Because I've been at Celanese twenty-seven years, they say I should say greater than fifteen years, the resume writers.

But all of that's a red flag. So my resume never makes it to a person, I'm guessing. Even these small and medium companies that could use my training and my expertise, they can't afford to hire HR people to review a thousand resumes, so they go through these companies. So my resume still doesn't make it onto their desk. I don't know how to find a way around today's technology. These companies spit out a hundred resumes for some real people to read before the ten resumes make it to the actual employer.

Q: So there really needs to be greater protection for the older worker in this society. In theory, it's illegal for a company to discriminate against you because of your age.

BC: Oh they don't think they are. They think they're meeting the legislation or have found a way around it.

Q: All the more reason why a pension has to be indexed to inflation to protect the income that you've earned. You've paid into your pension scheme all those years. You say it was indexed during the period when Celanese was operating?

BC: It was partially indexed. Celanese would take the inflation rate and the pension rate and average it every two to three years, and increase the pension by that much, a part of that average. It was better than nothing. It wasn't a full indexed pension, but it wasn't not indexed at all either.

Q: Now it is.

BC: Now it is. It's flat. They buy you an annuity when you say it's time to collect your pension. You're guaranteed x amount of dollars each month the rest of your life.

Q: So they get to actually save money on the workers that they've abandoned.

BC: Celanese doesn't have control or own it anymore. Well they may own it, but... and they have to keep it funded or topped up, and they say they will. I don't know if that's a guarantee either. That's a lot of fear that the people have. If Celanese no longer has a Canadian presence, what obligation does the international corporation have to meet Canadian law?

Q: When you were with the union, were you involved in negotiations?

BC: I was at the negotiating table six or seven times. Not the last few rounds.

Q: As this company became more enmeshed in offshore ownership, did the company become harder to negotiate with?

BC: Oh definitely. When I first got involved in negotiations back in the early '80s, you were negotiating with the people that you worked with. You knew they put the phone call in to Dallas or Frankfurt at the end of it and said, this is what we got. The international officers got nervous if negotiations took a little too long. The union could take that to our advantage. If Dallas was saying, "wrap this up, get it done," it was easier to put pressure on the local Canadian management and get it done. But it kind of turned around at the

end, where even though Germany bought Celanese, Herxt, the Texans were the ones who ended up managing Herxt. It was an internal takeover by the Celanese management of Herxt Corporation. All of a sudden the daily phone calls to Dallas were for instructions instead of to say what had happened. Because most of the Celanese plants in Texas are non union, and you could be fired for a safety incident, they couldn't understand why we'd have an incident investigation. A past president of the Celanese bargaining unit, Don McNeil, was very successful and I was proud, as his full time chief steward, to be part of this. We got the plant manager to put in writing that no disciplinary action would be issued once the final investigation started. That would free up the injured person or the person involved in the incident to say what they needed to say to get the safety improved. The Americans just flipped out when they found out about this. What do you mean you can't fire the person? So all of a sudden we had preliminary investigations and we had pre-preliminary investigations. These people, you'd be sitting in an investigation, one of the pre-investigations, and HR would show up with a letter and the person was being escorted off the plant site, 'cause they'd either been suspended or fired. At the final investigation they would undo it all because it wasn't the person's fault, and back pay them and bring them back to work. That was an American influence. Sometimes they didn't come back to work. They'd make you go through the grievance procedure and sometimes pay them off and make them go away.

Q: Sounds like there was a fair bit of harassment in the latter period.

BC: Oh the pressure got intense. In my own case, this is September, this is probably the most I've thought about Celanese since I walked away last June 15th. The pressure and the stress was just phenomenal. You didn't know what to do with your pension; do you keep it or do you take the lump sum payout? You didn't know where you were going, as far as benefits and whatever went. There were different things you could do to help yourself. I went in on June 15th and got 3 months supply of all my diabetes needs. I brought home a little tiny cardboard box from Safeway pharmacy that was worth \$1,450. I'm just starting to run out of all those supplies, so I'm going to have to spend out of pocket now for the rest of my life, or until I'm sixty-five. Everybody thought, well at least you save \$1,450. I said "whoopee! What percentage is that of the rest of my life? That's nothing, it's a token. I shot myself in the foot a little bit. I'm going to school now, doing distance learning. But that means I don't qualify for the student benefit program, which the school carries. It was nowhere near as good as Celanese's, but it would've been something. So that's where I'm going. Life at Celanese for the first twenty years was excellent. It was wonderful. We had a lot of good people, a lot of smart people, both company people and union people. I enjoyed going to work every day. Maybe not shift work and nightshift at Christmas time, but for the most part it was a good place to work.

Q: Then that changed.

BC: Just the attitude, and showing up at work was depressing. Every day you got to work, nobody knew what was going to happen.

Q: How did the union try to deal with that situation? Did they try and fight the company to pull things back to where they had been?

BC: There's not much you can do when the orders are coming... from Frankfurt and then from Dallas. All you can do is try to look after your membership then. Our social role out there, working with the Alberta Federation of Labor or the Aspen Foundation to make things better for workers and Canadians in general kind of got pulled back, and we had to start investing our funds in looking after the members. In the end we ended up just training and educating them for new jobs down the road. We gave them first aid training, or whatever they needed we tried to supply.

Q: With such an array of corporate power standing against it, could the union movement afford to retreat to dealing with the day-to-day stuff with members, rather than working in the political environment to get a more radical change in society?

BC: The Celanese bargaining unit retreated to looking after its members, 'cause that's what we had to do. But CEP as a whole is lobbying the federal government and provincial governments. We represent members in all provinces, and I'm not sure about the three territories but I know we're up there too. We're doing our best to influence political change and what's going on.

Q: What kind of changes in legislation is CEP pressing for?

BC: I can't speak for them totally. But I know we were one of the biggest movers and shakers in health and safety for the longest time. Well, now we have to fight just to keep industry working in our province. CEP covers such a wide range of fields, from film and telecommunications to petrochemical industry, lumber, pulp and paper. If they work in it, Celanese [sic] probably represents them somewhere.

[END]