

- ✓ Foreign Ownership
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### Eugene Mitchell

Q: A lot of water has passed under the bridge since you held that position (Executive Secretary/Treasurer of Alberta Federation of Labor). But the labor movement goes on and the struggle goes on. One of the things that's happened recently in Edmonton is a symptom of the kinds of problems the workers face these days, is the closing of the Celanese plant. Not only were a number of jobs involved, but also a whole community had been built up around that place. Tell us your recollection of living in Edmonton, and what that meant to the city.

EM: That was an established plant in this city. People had worked there since very young. People had worked their whole lives there, and some of them had retired. It was a good corporate citizen over the years. It was the same old thing – Canadian interests are sold out to foreign controlled companies. Now we find that, instead of processing our raw materials in Canada and in Alberta, they're being shipped across into the U.S. and processed elsewhere. So really we're exporting jobs the minute we start exporting our raw materials. We're doing the same thing with our oil. We're developing the oil sands. The other day the National Energy Board okayed a pipeline into the U.S. to feed U.S. refineries. Instead of upgrading the bitumen in this country, it's going to the U.S. Along with that goes jobs. We need jobs after the construction is over. I don't think those sort of things should be approved.

Q: What did any of us have to say about that? These kinds of deals are made in secret.

EM: Oh absolutely. I try to keep up on current affairs and what's going on. I heard absolutely nothing, that a pipeline was even going down there, until it was approved. Companies seem to do whatever they want, and our governments support them.

Q: Since you left the Federation, the trade union movements have had good times and they've had tough times. But when you were there, you experienced a situation where the building trades were part of the federation. Talk to us a bit about that, about the kind of unity that was built around the federation.

EM: I'm going back into the '60s and '70s. There was a lot of unity built. The building trades and the industrial unions were very cooperative. There were always some differences of opinion. The industrial unions would say that the craft unions were just

business unions and didn't care about the social issues. But the federation moved forward, and it was accepted in the province that you needed the united front in dealing with social problems, dealing with the government. Then the public sector unions started to emerge, and they had a lot of help from the other unions in getting established and taking their place. I've seen the labor movement sort of progress, especially dealing with political and social issues in society. I think we made a lot of gains in those years. But I've seen a regression in the last few years. I see unions splitting away, doing their own thing. They seem to have lost their social conscience that we had previously built up. I'm a little disappointed in this. I think there's a strong need for a central body that can speak on behalf of all the workers in the province. When you get various organizations going in different directions, I think we're playing into the hands of the corporations and the government.

Q: One of the questions that always comes up is, what about the young people? Some people have a feeling of hopelessness; they're not sure where these young kids are going to go. What future do you see?

EM: I'm really concerned for the young people. Working people seem to advance to a level where we're making comfortable wages. The average working person could purchase a home and raise a family. We seem to see that reversal taking place now. Prices have got to the point where the average working guy isn't going to be able to afford a home anymore. A lot of the things that we had gained, especially in the public domain, such as healthcare and other social programs, I think a lot of the young people fell into those things and took them for granted. But now, especially in this province where at the present time there's a big construction boom going on. But it's not long ago when we didn't have that. But now the wages are high. But it doesn't matter how high the wages are, people can't afford the price of housing and those sorts of things. Along with those types of problems, economically there's always a move to destroy a lot of the social programs that we have. There's still an attack on the healthcare system that goes on every day . . .

Q: You were saying about how we have to have jobs for people to support themselves after the construction phase. We see a lot of industries closing down and our raw resources being exported. What can we do about it? What should the unions do, and what can we say to young people, that how are you going to change that?

EM: We're in a situation where we've got international corporations controlling our whole economic system. If it's cheaper to do something in United States, it'll go to United States. If it's cheaper to go to Mexico, it'll go to Mexico. When the Mexican workers get their standards raised a little, they move everything over to Southeast Asia. Most of the goods we buy today are being imported from China. The corporations are headquartered mostly in the United States, some of them in Europe, getting everything done in China and are brought over here. But I don't see any of the prices of these goods being lowered because they're getting next to free labor over there. They're just as expensive as they ever were, in fact more so. So who's getting the benefit? And we're losing all these jobs. We used to have a lot of good paying manufacturing jobs in Canada. We're gradually losing them. So we're ending up with a lot of jobs just in retail trades and this type of thing. They're not jobs that pay enough for people to make a living at. So you find people

running around working 2 or 3 jobs, both wage earners in the family. And they're worrying about how we're going to look after our kids while we're at work. So we run into all these kinds of problems.

Q: So what is the future of a country like Canada, with all the resources? What is the future of the young people? What do we need to do to preserve their future?

EM: Their future could be very bright in this country if the will was there. But most of these decisions are going to have to be political decisions. I think the young people are going to have to get active politically. We're going to have to get rid of these rightwing governments that are beholden to the multinational corporations. The corporations finance these conservative governments that we have. I think if we could move the people more politically and demand some proper planning, both nationally and provincially, it would make a big difference.

Q: What do you say to these young people who say, ya I should vote. They have to vote, they have to get interested. What do you say to them when they say; well it doesn't seem to make any difference, and the same old government keeps coming back in. What should they be attending to? What do they need to do to change that?

EM: I suppose that's an age-old question. We've been struggling with that one for a long time, and we'll continue to. They've got to realize they've gotta get active politically. I would hate to see even the social programs that we have in this country lost before people start realizing they have to start fighting to get them back. But it seems every generation has to take the fight on again. People of my generation, we took a fight on in our time, and people before us. I don't see that same fight going on today. I see a lot of young people saying, I don't care, we can't do anything about it. But somewhere they're going to have to.

Q: The trade union movement can't do everything. But one thing the trade union movement can do and has always done is to organize and inspire others into action. Do you think that's happening now?

EM: I don't see it happening to the extent it should. Parts of the trade union movement have become very complacent. I refer to business unionism: just look after our little business and negotiate our contract, and don't worry about the other things. I think something's gotta happen to jolt the labor movement. The trade union movement today doesn't have the influence it had 20 years ago. We are so much influenced from the U.S. The U.S. labor movement died many years before it started to weaken in Canada. Our labor movement was very influential. We don't have that kind of influence anymore. Maybe the leadership of the various unions have to get together and start grappling with these problems and what they're going to do collectively. I think we have to build a strong Canadian Labor Congress. I don't hear from the Canadian Labor Congress anymore. They used to be a major influence in this country, and I don't hear from them anymore. I don't hear much from the Federation of Labor anymore. I hear individual unions spouting off about one thing or another on occasion, but not very often. I think it's important to build those central organizations up so that collectively the labor movement can go forward and have some influence in society.

Q: The Alberta Federation of Labor in 2012 will have existed for 100 years. Talk a bit about its role as an influence in Alberta.

EM: The federation over the years, I can be critical of what they're doing today or not doing. But if you weight the whole thing over the period of 100 years, the labor movement has been very influential. Most of the things that working people enjoy today, like workers compensation, minimum wage laws, that affect even the unorganized people, the hours of work, the fact that people are able to bargain collectively – these were all brought about by influence from the trade union movement. I think of other things over the years that we've gained, like our pension plans. Today we're losing a lot of them, that we fought for. The Canada Pension Plan was put in because of pressure from the labor movement. Our Medicare systems, these were all brought about because the trade union movement was a major influence, along with other groups that they partnered with to bring about pressure on governments. Overall I think the labor movement has been a major influence. But I would hope it would continue to be so. The Federation used to have some fairly significant influence with government. We used to make a point of meeting with them at least for an annual presentation, and also meetings in between with various ministers, as issues came up. We certainly didn't always see eye to eye with where the government was going nor did they see eye to eye with us. But the fact is they knew that we represented a fairly major constituency in the province, and I think we had some influence in some of their deliberations. I can remember when oil was at \$2 a barrel. We in the federation and the labor movement suggested that we should be getting about half of that. I think the government was getting 25 cents at that time. We met with the Lougheed government, the premier. In fact, he invited us to sit on the floor of the legislature in a closed session with all members of the legislature, and we made our case. It wasn't long after that that the premier of this province raised the royalty rates. That's just an example of the types of influence you had. I don't know whether the Federation is still meeting on that type of thing or not. Nationally, I know we used to, within the congress, we set aside a month ever year, I think it was February, and an issue was picked up on. We wanted to get the Canada Pension Plan established. So there'd be a campaign across the country within the unions to support this. Then there'd be a meeting with the government to put labor's position forth on these types of things. I don't see those types of influence going on right now. Maybe the trade union movement needs to reexamine itself and see how they can better influence things in society.

As far as the Federation influencing labor laws, that one's hard to measure. That one is hard to measure; because I'm still have the opinion that Alberta has the most restrictive labor legislation in Canada. It has had for the last 40 years or more. But I would hate to think what we'd have if the Federation hadn't been there to try to influence the government otherwise. Some of the governments that we had to deal with would've totally wiped out collective bargaining, taken away all rights of the workers. While we don't like what we have today, I suppose it's a lot better than what we might've had if the Federation hadn't been there.

I'd like to reflect on the occupational health and safety in this province. We were faced with a situation where the safety records in this province were atrocious. We were always of the opinion that the workers should be involved in determining health and safety matters in any worksite. We lobbied the government to get health and safety committees set up, and worker involvement. The Lougheed government at that time listened to us to

that extent, and appointed a commission, which was made up of a neutral chair and labor and industry representatives. They had hearings all around the province, which the Federation made representation to. In fact, we attended all the hearings around the province at that time. We came out of that, the government brought in legislation, and they enacted the recommendations of the commission. We had a very good occupational health and safety act. They set up all of the inspection services, educational services were set up, and everything started going. But over time the industry had more influence than the trade union movement. Of course they're the people that are supporting the government with their finances, and it gradually started whittling away. I think they're probably back to where we started. The worker involvement in health and safety programs today is just about back where it was, except there may be some select industries where the management and labor have agreed to cooperate. But in most work places in this province, there are no inspections, there's no worker involvement. We should have to go back to where we were a number of years ago when that act was first enacted. The trade union movement and the old CCF got together in the late '50s and decided we had to do something in this country to take away some of the power from the Liberal and Conservative governments we were continually getting. So we decided to form a new party. So in 1961 the New Democratic Party was founded, with full participation of the labor movement at that time, and the old CCF, which held together in Saskatchewan. From there on, the labor movement officially endorsed the New Democrats, tried to get people elected. Myself, I ran as an MLA in Edmonton Beverly in 1979. At that time I was supported by the Federation of Labor and the labor movement generally in the province. We had very good support. It was a tough thing to do. The Conservative government of Peter Lougheed was pretty well entrenched. Another member at that time was Grant Notley, who had a seat up in Fairview. I ran in Edmonton Beverly. I hoped to make some inroads so we could get labor's voice into the legislature. We made a very good showing. We came close 2<sup>nd</sup> to the Conservatives. After that, although I didn't run, the person that ran behind me was elected. So we did establish that base and held that seat for some period of time. In fact, it's still being represented today by Ray Martin. So that was some gain. I'd like to see some more New Democrats elected in the province next time around. I think if people would see what's going on, especially with our development in the oil sands and shipping all of our resources out of this province. The only party that's really saying stop this is the New Democrats. The labor movement should be hollering about this situation too.

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