

Key themes/phrases for this interview:

- Management of the company only acted to improve environmental and worker protection when pushed by the union or legislation.
- The goal of the company, like most in the increasingly globalized world, was to make money.
- "Poor management" — Managers were incompetent and were promoted far beyond their abilities.
- Getting involved with the union was meant to improve work conditions and wages.
- Despite most people hating their jobs, "All in all, it was a good place to work" — good community of workers, good benefits.

Louis Yakimishyn

LY: My name is Louis Yakimishyn. I live in Sherwood Park, east of Sherwood Park on an acreage.

Q: And this is Alvin Finkel interviewing Louis on September 25th, 2007.

Q: Just tell me how you came to be employed at the Celanese plant.

LY: At that time, I was working as an apprentice carpenter, which was unstable. There wasn't work. I happened to apply there. Being off a farm, they were always taking people that grew up on a farm, and I got in there quite easily.

Q: And that was what year?

LY: Fifty-nine.

Q: There was a recession going on at that point.

LY: And they generally hired everybody as an operator trainee. There were different seniority areas you worked, but you had to transfer. We started at 45 cents an hour. Comparable to the time.

Q: You worked at the plant for how many years?

LY: For 39 years in various departments. There's different departments with different areas. You worked in this unit, you worked in that unit, then you went to another department. You transferred to another department, units in departments, especially in the petrochemical area. There was a lot of different units. You wandered through those units as they seem fit to put you into.

Q: What unit did you work on the longest?

LY: In petrochemical. I worked in fibres when I first started for about a year as operator trainee. Then I started as second operator. I went to the products purification unit. It was basically distillation. We had about 20 or 30 towers that we distilled various chemicals — methanol, acetone, propanol, propane, pentane. There was about 25 products. A lot of these products were not used. They were dumped into a settling pond. They've polluted the ground-water there — uncontrollable today. It was just stepped up. There wasn't a line or anything on the ponds. That was the norm then.

Q: Did things change over the years in terms of the environmental protection?

LY: Things didn't change very much, but they did very slowly. In the petrochemical area, I worked there for about 10 years or so. The reason they came into this. . . Well, it was Celanese from the States, called Canadian Chemical at that time. Natural gas was 18 cents-a-thousand-cubic-feet. So that was why they come here. They had the vapour phase process, which was outdated. It was propane oxidized and producing a whole bunch of dirty chemicals. Afterwards, they went to another process. It was a liquid LPO — liquid phase oxidation — and that was using butane and heating it and quenching it. Similar reactions, but they produce a much cleaner bunch of chemicals. The main reason for this process was for acetic acid — to produce acetic acid — for processing of acetate made from pulp.

Q: You mentioned that they came up here because natural gas was cheap. But at that time they just couldn't pump the natural gas out of here into the U.S.?

LY: At that time, I guess it wasn't going. Natural gas wasn't being used that much. But I couldn't really say for sure.

Q: Were you active in the union?

LY: I was active at the beginning when I started work and I was younger. I was active for about 15 years.

Q: What kind of issues did the union focus on?

LY: The first thing that . . . We didn't until later on, and I was quite involved in the executive. We was always trying to get things done, like to get hearing protection and things. There was areas that were very loud. You could never get anything like that. It was until later on — I was involved as president of the union at the time — that we with our union — OCAW, at that time. And Reg did a lot of work with us on it and we finally were able to get the government with Dr. May, who worked for the government there. He was an English fellow. We were able to institute some basic needs for the workers in the plant. Many of the areas had a lot of noise. It took a long time to get any kind of hearing protection. But it eventually came that the province made a law of it, so they had to go along with it.

Q: So that was occurring in the late '60s or early '70s?

LY: Yeah, at that time.

Q: Were there other areas besides the hearing protection?

LY: This was one of the major ones, but we weren't — other than running a union there and you had your grievances and stuff. The company was actually, during those times of arbitration, was two-against-one — and you always lost. As you're probably aware of how that works. We had the company. They listened after they were forced into it. They were not a bad employer per se. Because there was a union there, people were treated more fairly than a lot of other places. We tried to keep abreast with wages. Wages were actually in the province until about . . . We had a strike in '74. Wages were very poor at that time. After that, wages seemed to go up and up and up quite rapidly.

Q: So the strike in '74 made a difference in wages?

LY: Not a hell of a lot. It was a very tight strike. When you went on strike at 58 per cent and get back at 63 or something like that. It didn't achieve very much, but the fact that we did go on strike, I think the company took note of that.

Q: So it was short-term pain with little result in the long term.

LY: One of the first things we did at that time is we negotiated their severance pay if the plant shut down. After that, it was subsequent improvements. That was the initial thing that was done. A lot of people benefited out here. I missed out because I retired early, but a lot of people benefit from it. You must remember this plant here in Edmonton was a carbon copy of another plant in Dallas, out in Texas. Talking with some of the managers afterwards when this thing happened, Ray Revere said that we had the same products and everything was made here — and the same in the States, and ours were always better. But here again, they chose to shut this place down and keep the people in the States going. I don't know if the States is going now or not.

Q: Was the American plant unionized?

LY: Yeah, the American plant — similar products.

Q: And it was unionized as well?

LY: Good question. I don't know. I wouldn't think so, not in Texas. That's a question I can't answer. Ask Reg, he'll probably tell you. But the plant itself, it was changed — the technology. The fibres used to be, there was over 130 women worked there. They worked with thread and produced a fibre — arnel and acetate. Arnel was a very beautiful product. But they slowly phased out and went strictly into cigarette filters. I wasn't working at the time, but they made good money on cigarette filters. They supplied the world with cigarette filters.

Q: You said at one time they were making 25 products.

LY: That's in the petrochemical division, that's a different one. The main one was acetic acid, which they used themselves and sold some. From this reaction you got a lot of methanol, ethanol and multiple products, and some very dirty products.

Q: What do you think was the impact on workers' health in dealing with these chemicals?

LY: I know myself. I got sick one time on this thing, and I'm sure it was the chemicals I was breathing at work. I know my wife complained when we were first married. She said she would wash the clothes and there was this horrible stink that come off my clothes. Of course, now you change your clothes at work. You didn't bring the clothes home after a while. Well, this was later legislation that was passed to stop these kind of things from happening, taking the chemicals home. I remember a girl who — her husband worked — she worked at Celanese and he worked at Uniroyal. They produced Agent Orange out there. But we'd have a social evening and go to dance with her, and she never worked in the place, but you could smell the chemical smell off her body. It was terrible stuff.

Q: Did a lot of people get ill?

LY: In there from work? That's something I couldn't quote you on. My impression was a lot of people took time off. If it were off sick or ... I remember the industrial relations supervisor said, you can go down the road and get a doctor to sign a form that you were sick, down in Beverly. But they never changed the rules about ... If they were abusing it,

they never changed them. They paid. You had a waiting day or two days before you could get paid. You had to lose pay for two days and then you get paid. There was one day, but they stuck with that same process. If a lot of people got sick from work, it's hard to say. I know a few people that worked with fibreglass and asbestos, they got destosis in their cells and they got sick from that.

Q: When you became involved with the union, what were the issues that you wanted to deal with?

LY: Well, during that time the main thing was everybody was looking for better conditions, and probably wages was the main thing. It was par for the course at that time. I was apprentice as a carpenter and was making 90 cents an hour. But that was first-year apprentice.

Q: But then that dropped to 45 cents.

LY: \$1.45 when I started working at Celanese. That was the base rate. Well, it wasn't the base rate, it depends on what you went into. Operator trainee, you could work your way up.

Q: The base rate was 45 cents or \$1.45?

LY: That was the starting rate — \$1.45. The base rate what they started at. Maybe the tradesman rate was \$2 or \$2.50 or \$2.10, I can't remember.

Q: By 1959, that would be about \$60 a week. Not a great rate.

LY: No. Well, a quart of milk cost a nickel.

Q: My dad was making \$60 a week on the railway in 1956.

LY: I worked a bit on the railway, too — switch yards, just before I went there. I tried different jobs.

Q: So, the wages you don't feel started to rise appreciably until the mid '70s.

LY: In the '70s and '80s, and the start going up. Now it's all percentages. And when you have a percentage on a low rate, it doesn't go up very fast. But you get into a higher rate, it's much more increase. So the rate right now . . . When they left, I think tradesmen were making about \$34 an hour.

Q: What was it like on the shop floor?

LY: On the shop floor — working conditions? Depends who you worked for. Your foremen, they were not too bad overall. You always found your pushers that wanted to make a name for themselves and get you to work more and faster. But we never were hurried to work like a sweatshop. As a tradesman, you had your work orders and had to do the job. When you were in production, you kept the line going — whatever you were doing. You were on a schedule. It was worked by time. Tradesmen, you have some slower days. Sometimes you were quite busy.

Q: You worked in different parts of the plant?

LY: I was steam engineer, then I worked in the powerhouse. When I became an electrician, they kept me in the powerhouse because I had experience working with boilers before. I didn't work in a lot of the . . . I worked in shutdowns when I worked in

the petrochemical areas. But the only place I went to other [than] units was on shutdowns we were working on them. But a shutdown is different than a normal condition. You have a lot of work to do them because it's on a schedule. A lot of people didn't like the jobs in there. The conditions were very noisy. They started pushing them and, of course, they wouldn't listen too much. They'd fight you back. But the government started passing regulations to keep the noise down. They made a law. In one area that was what they called the shredders, they would shred this pulp. It was unbearable. You would not hear me talking to you if I was that far away from you. After a while, they changed the shredders and how they cut it. You didn't have to wear earmuffs or anything. Most companies don't give a damn, but if they're pushed they'll do it. You have to push them.

Q: Do you think your hearing was affected?

LY: Fortunately, we don't have hearing problems in our family. Other people [that] have less noise and have hearing problems. My wife was a nurse and she's got bad hearing compared to what I have.

Q: And other people you worked with?

LY: Yes, a lot of people had hearing problems. That was for many years, but then we had earmuffs and earplugs and all the equipment that was available. So it was a help.

Q: Then after the law changed, they made changes that affected the overall noise level?

LY: Yeah. There were some places that they cut down. In the powerhouse and boilers and fans and that, you couldn't really quieten them down very much. But you had to wear the earmuffs. They provided everything. After a while, they even supplied the working clothes, washing machines to wash them at work, and everything. In that way, they followed the rules quite well. That they had to supply these things.

Q: Do you think the union had more success in lobbying the provincial government than it had lobbying management?

LY: We worked with the government, but the whole effort went on to the federation, the whole lobbying system that worked with them. The company itself, there was a change of managers quite early in the beginning. The last one we had there for 15 years was one of the problems — that they really never cared about upgrading the plant.

Q: When did this manager come?

LY: He left just before the shutdown started.

Q: And he'd been there about 15 years?

LY: Yeah, as plant manager. He was more into developing his own ego. He insisted that we call him a vice-president instead of plant manager. But the overall working conditions there were — it's hard to compare them against other ones that I've seen. But the company was always concerned about safety, because safety — if you get hurt, their premiums go up. They used to bring people in and sat around and didn't work, because they were being paid and their premiums don't go up on the amount of payout they have to make — workman's compensation. So they always took advantage of that. Small companies can't do that.

Q: But this question of upgrading — in the earlier years that you were there, they were upgrading the plant?

LY: Yeah, they upgraded quite a bit. They improved stuff. Of course, everything had to be passed through the States. They improved, especially when they went to the cigarette filters. That was a real good money-maker, and they changed the whole system. They laid a bunch of women were eventually gone from there. Maybe a handful were left, but I guess there'd be a lot. As far as the petrochemical, when they brought in, they shut down the vapor phase a few years after liquid phase was brought in, and a lot of these chemicals were gone. That was a much better — cleaner environment in the plant from not having those chemicals around. The worst thing about it is a lot of the stuff, the ground-water has been so badly polluted in there that I don't know what's going to happen. But they're going to spend — they're trying to clean it up right now to stop it from going into the river. At one time, we had 15 wells which I used to maintain the pumps on the motors. They dug wells along by the riverbank at the bottom to intercept the flow of water into the river and put it back into the deep well 3,000 feet below. They had two of those wells built. I guess it was probably in the early '70s they built those disposal wells.

Q: Were there not environmental inspectors who would come around to see what was going on?

LY: Well, this was approved by the province. This was an approved way of disposing of these things. Those wells are still there. Other companies have come and dumped stuff there, too. There wasn't that many, but a few that used to come. I know they came there. It was a vacuum ?? — a Nisku level, or whatever they call it — 3,000 feet below. It was a vacuum at that point because the pressure gauge always showed a vacuum down there at that time. By doing that, they wouldn't have to have those ponds anymore where all those chemicals were fermenting in there and going into the ground.

Q: Even in the last years of the plant, were there areas where they weren't following environmental practices?

LY: There were certain places at the river, all the steam. The government — they had added on in areas where stuff was vented, and it had hydrocarbons and other chemicals in there. It was then burnt. The government would come around and they checked for every kind of effluents you had going — vapor or water. They had to take samples of effluents everyday in the powerhouse, I know that. Sometimes guys spilt some oil on there and it got into the samples and created havoc. But they burnt a lot of the vapors that were going into the atmosphere. They were burning them.

Q: Starting [in] the '90s with this new plant manager, they weren't upgrading the plant. Did people suspect that they were planning to shut the whole thing down?

LY: No, I don't think it was ever a thought about upgrading. Their products, in some areas, the products were better and fibres and that. That's where they'd have a lot of improvement. But if you're distilling a chemical and producing that, it's not going to change very much. It's a matter of the markets. Being landlocked, it was a little less viable than in the States. They had a lot of petrochemical products from the petrochemical area — a small commodity. They produced propionic acid and tried to sell it to the low countries in Europe to feed to their cows. It fell through, it didn't work. They tried to experiment with different ideas.

Q: So they tried different things that didn't work.

LY: Yeah, to sell.

Q: When did they start cutting?

LY: Basically, cutting was going on. Well, the major one is petrochemical, when they shut the vapor phase down. The next one was when the cigarette filters come into being, and they shut the yard now.

Q: When was that?

LY: Petrochemical probably in about mid '75. And the fibres was probably about the same time.

Q: At that time, a fair number of workers would've been let go.

LY: Yeah, there was some people got some severance pay at that time. Amazingly, they let go management people with the petrochem cutback. There wasn't anybody from petrochemical that was getting a severance pay because they just put them into other positions. It was big — over 1000 people worked there, so attrition would get rid of a good portion of it, and they will fill their jobs out.

Q: Tell me about the social life of people.

LY: There was a lot of good people there. I used to know all the hourly at one time. There was a lot of people. The people who worked in the units, they didn't mix too much with other departments. They were supposed to go there and stay there — what maintenance you wanted around the plant. All in all, they had a social club there which functioned quite well.

Q: Was that organized through the union?

LY: No it was just the workers there, social club.

Q: What kinds of things did that do?

LY: Well they had dances and kids parties and stuff like that. They were always promoting something or other. Everyone paid a fee into it and you're a member of it if you wanted to. Overall, there was a lot of people working there, so it's hard to say. Most people didn't like working there, but the wages were comparable and good so you just did it. This is the way most people in a lot of jobs like that. It's a boring job on ?? It's like putting shock-absorbers on the front.

Q: In terms of community involvement, did a lot of the workers live in the community?

LY: Yes, but there, some people drove from the west end, some people drove from Spruce Grove and all over the place that people come from there. It's hard to say, everybody had their ... On the job, like I said before, the people in the plant, most of them hated the job, but they did it. I guess a lot of people socialized together from there, some did that.

Q: What community did you live in?

LY: I lived in Baldwin, just on 79th Street and 130th Avenue is where I lived.

Q: Were you involved in community leagues?

LY: When my kids were small, I worked in the community. This is when I worked in the union, and it was tough because I worked shift at that time. It was quite hard to get involved in a lot of things, because I had three kids. Working shift doesn't put you on par with doing a lot of functions in the community.

Q: No, it doesn't. But did you find there were quite a lot of people from the plant who were involved in community activities?

LY: I can tell you right now, the people where I lived right now, Ed Ewasiuk lived by my place for a while. But I wouldn't say that they're overly involved in the community. Most people I knew lived in our area, and it's really hard to put a finger on it. It's a big city. You can hide very easy, and you don't know where everybody is. But the social club, the dances, there were certain people [who] always came and some people did not come. That's how it goes in most places.

Q: Did people of different ethnic groups get along?

LY: I think so; there was no problem there. You mean Scotsmen and Englishmen? Well, I think basically there's one thing: the Scotsmen and Englishmen always got the promotion. The company had a problem that every time there was a contract signed and it was tough going, they would move up a president into a supervisor's job. This happened to about five people that got that situation, and they weren't very good in management. They take that job as a prestigious job sometimes.

Q: These were people who moved up from the union?

LY: Yes, especially if they were president during negotiations. When I was president, we went on strike. They got rid of me, the members did. So that was just fine with me, I let somebody else do the work. It's like working in a community. Your kids get older, you quit working and somebody younger takes over.

Q: So the members got rid of you?

LY: Well, I lost the next election.

Q: Why, because people didn't see any results from the strike?

LY: I couldn't put my finger on that. I guess they voted for it, and they voted to go back. They went against that recommendation and then they accepted the next one, so there's nothing I can ... Politics are a funny thing. Some people can make changes quite easily with them not knowing the facts.

Q: So, the first offer from the company was not recommended by the union?

LY: No, it wasn't recommended to the file. Reg was ... at that time. There was a few people in there in the meeting, and they lied, of course. There's always another offer in the back, there's another offer. The women at that time were not keeping at par with the wages because everything's always based percentage-wise. Percentage-wise doesn't give you so many more dollars as the higher one does. Like I said, we went out with 58 and went back with 61, or something like that. It's not a very strong strike when you have that kind of vote to go on strike.

Q: How many weeks was the strike?

LY: Six weeks. It was March 14th, '74.

Q: A six-week strike, and you only saw minor gains at the time.

LY: There was some improvement, but not a hell of a lot, because you had no bargaining with what we went on strike on, didn't have much room to move.

Q: But as you say, the company took note and wage increases did occur in the future.

LY: Well, we belonged to the national bargaining program with the union across Canada, was based on oil. We got into it and sort of followed suit with them. This is what we went by. OCAW national bargaining program — oil was pretty well the one that set the pattern. But then it changed to chemicals start coming up. They would target one company, the union, and then everybody would take the package.

Q: So you were the company chosen for the pattern bargaining?

LY: No, we weren't. It was mostly the oil companies. At one time, we had a very bad problem. We had four unions in there. We had the millwrights, we had the pipe-fitters, electricians, and there was another union. No, three unions and OCAW. The craft unions come in and we finished bargaining. Let's say we got 15-cents wage increase. They said, "Well, we want 20 cents." It left the company in a position that they were. It's hard to operate that way. So they got the government at that time, and this was back in the '60s, to reconsider all the applications for certification. They recommended everybody be put into OCAW, and that's what the government did.

Q: Did that work out OK?

LY: Oh, I think it was better than it was before. That's a big problem the unions have today anyway, with multi unions. Like, Air Canada was multi unions in the company. You can't settle, because everybody wants the same.

Q: It certainly does help to have the craft unions inside the main union ...

LY: Industrial union, oh yeah. There was one time that pipe fitters wouldn't accept. For a year or two years, as long as the contract ran, they contracted out the pipe-fitting work to Catalytic. The company didn't bend. After that is when they were able to get the government to change the certification that was granted.

Q: Do you think the movement of Alberta's natural resources out of the country reflects a change in the broader economy?

LY: Oh yeah, it's a matter of profitability. If a company comes here and doesn't make any money, if markets are dropping off. It's an ever changing market. I think one of the things that happened to Celanese, they went and showed the Chinese how to make cigarette filters. The Chinese built their own factories and shut the orders off, and that's what broke the camel's back.

Q: Had China been a big market?

LY: The main one. There's half-a-billion people smoking there. So that was the start of that. All these countries, Canada goes all over the world and helps people do things. All your animals and stuff that's produced here, they go all over the world. I forget the name of the company that used to be competing against Celanese, but Celanese used to produce all the cigarette filters for Canada, and they export 90 per cent of their stuff. It slipped my

mind who was the company that used to make cigarette filters that competed against them. Their product got much better than the other ones, and they went international.

Q: So cigarette filters aren't being made much in this country?

LY: I don't know where they're getting cigarette filters from now. There is still a process that's still being made someplace, because there's still cigarettes around. But you'd have to do that research yourself, I don't know who. Probably from the States.

Q: Do you think there's any steps the provincial government could take that might ensure that more manufacturing was done here?

LY: Well, the products that were produced there, one of the things is, you're landlocked. But the thing is that right now I think what hit them a lot was the price of gas. They kept the methanol plant running as long as possible. They were making \$1 million a day — a quarter-million dollars a day with the methanol plant running. Natural gas was down to \$5 or \$6 instead of \$13. I guess the provincial government can encourage more to the products of natural resources they use was wood and propane, butane and natural gas. It's a very hard question for me to answer, what the provincial government can do.

Q: Would it make a difference if they had a differential price for natural resources used within the province versus resources exported?

LY: Of course, definitely. That's a beginning, but we don't seem to be thinking in that way.

Q: So you think, for Celanese ...

LY: The price of natural gas really hurt them. But before they shut down, if gas would've stayed at \$6, maybe they would've held on longer, I don't know. ...

Natural gas, in the Arab countries, they're flaring natural gas like crazy; they got no use for it. The feedstock for methanol is methane, natural gas.

Q: So we would have to provide cheaper feedstock here to keep ...

LY: Yes, you would have to provide that, providing it was made in Canada if you weren't exporting it. But, you know yourself that today that's not the thinking when we're sending our bitumen to the States. Do you make the pollution here or send it to the States? What do you do? If we create more jobs in Canada we'll get more congestion. The goddam prices of houses are ridiculous, and it's all the result of the oilsands. It's a tough call.

Q: But the loss of these jobs ...

LY: Yeah, they're higher-paying and better jobs. But working in the service industry, you don't get the wage you were making up there.

Q: You're retired, but ...

LY: Yeah, I've been retired nine years already.

Q: Have you talked to some of the workers who've lost their jobs?

LY: We had a party after, the social club had a party. Everybody was in a joyous mood; they were just waiting to get the hell out of there and get their severance. It wasn't very painful for a lot people right now, because there's a lot of work around. You can walk from one job to another if you want to.

Q: For the short term, the closing of that plant isn't causing ...

LY: No, it isn't. Maybe the odd person that doesn't want to go out of town or something. But a lot of guys quit their job and didn't take their severance pay, because they had a job already.

Q: What about in the longer term, the loss of jobs of this kind?

LY: Steady jobs, yeah. It has some effect, I guess. It has to. Not everybody wants to go to Fort McMurray.

Q: I guess it's harder, too, on workers who are a little older.

LY: Yep. But working at Celanese, what we did there, as far as I looked at it, it's why I got involved in the union. You try to improve the conditions yourself that you're faced with there, the wages and everything. This is why I got involved in it.

Q: And you feel the union did have some success?

LY: Oh yeah. I think it's a strong bearing. You increase the wages for vacations, management all get it so they're quite happy about it. But they're trying to keep a straight face.

Q: Did length of vacation time increase?

LY: It hasn't changed since 20 years now. There's six weeks vacation after 10 years service or something. I can't remember now. But they haven't improved that at all. We were very poor at one time. The union gets credit for doing that all the way through. The union, as far as I'm concerned, served the members well and served the company well.

Q: Also sounds like the federation served you well, in terms of legislation.

LY: Yeah, well, it worked. You have been on lobbies. I remember going on lobbies with Loughheed. He was quite a diplomat, because he shook everybody's hand and he wasn't like the drunk we had before. But all in all, it was worth the effort, as far as I'm concerned. I didn't benefit from the severance pay. Shortly after I retired, the plant manager that was there, he retired a year after I did. But he got a big severance pay.

Q: When were these severance payments introduced?

LY: They were incorporated into the union in '74 after the ? strike.

Q: That was one of the achievements of that strike.

LY: Well, it wasn't the issue, but it was an achievement. Most of the time it's wages and working conditions, but this was one of the achievements we got there. It did subsequently improve some during the years. We started off at one week's pay for a year of service, and they got up to about two weeks pay for a year's service. Then they doubled it at the end to keep the people. They would stay because that way they wanted to have ... 'cause who's going to go to a plant and to have to train them and all that, and they're going to be shutting down. So they have to keep them. It worked out, I think a lot of people were quite satisfied; they stuck around just to get their severance pay.

As far as the training in the company, upgrading and training, technology and maintenance fields, they were very stingy. Other companies I hear spend money on

training their employees, upgrading new equipment, new stuff being introduced. They were very stingy on that, they wouldn't do it.

Q: Was that true all along, or was that something that developed?

LY: No, I think it was pretty well the norm all the way along. They were just tight on that. I remember them throwing a drunk party at the hotel on Fort Road. They carried booze like crazy; the guys were taking booze into their cars like crazy. I couldn't believe it. But socially, they did quite well that way. They always had them damn doughnuts, and that's why I think my blood pressure went down. Doughnut parties. I got so I can't even look at a doughnut now.

Q: Do you think the American ownership made a difference?

LY: It was German, but Americans ran it. Herst owned it. And, of course, Blackstone got involved with it, but I don't know what the hell Blackstone was involved for, and nobody knows. But the ownership of the Americans there, these young people down here didn't have a clue. They were duds. That was one of the problems — they sent a lot of people down here. When we were on strike, it was an American was the plant manager.

Q: So this was a company that didn't much listen to what the workers had to say?

LY: Well, depends on what you're talking about. Safety, they always had safety meetings and that. But if it cost money, they would shy away from it. But the union got involved, if it was the law they'd do it. They complied with the law.

Q: So, if you could get the law changed, you could get them to comply. But they didn't recognize the kind of intelligence that existed on the shop floor that might help them ...?

LY: No, they used to give awards for people that would go and give some ideas. This guy said, "We should have a telephone in this here manhole down below here, when people go to do readings and that." I guess this guy got a bit of money for it, and I had to do the work. So you see how that works. They tried things like that, but they would always peter out.

Q: They were looking to make short-term profit.

LY: Yeah, it's always costs. You had managers that ... I remember one time there was a situation in the powerhouse. This one guy who was a superintendent there, he wouldn't fix nothing, wouldn't fix nothing. Things were falling apart. Then he quit and the next guy came in. It cost a hell of a lot of money to undo, to fix everything up. So there was no gain, there was a loss in the whole thing. It's always that buck that they have to spend, if it's too much, we can't do it. Too much money, too much money. It's poor management. I do feel that this company had very poor management, especially when they're bringing managers from the States to run the place. Some people sat around too long, too. You know yourself, these here international companies, they're not making money, they want to keep the costs down all the time. Look at Conrad Black's partner there, he wouldn't even give pencils to the people. They had to bring their own pencils to work. He made his glory from that, but how about the people who suffered from that? I can't see that happening at Celanese, they weren't that tight; you could always get a pencil.

Q: But you couldn't get equipment fixed.

LY: Well, it depends. I always felt, after they had, it varied, but who was running this thing. Sometimes they would get repaired, and sometimes stupid things were repaired and sometimes not. I didn't keep track of all these things. There was a lot of stupid things done, but I didn't log it, so I don't remember that much of it.

Q: But you do feel that it was a poorly managed company?

LY: In a sense, yes, it was. A lot of people got promoted to positions that couldn't even spell the name of the place they were going to, let alone being the manager of it. They created their own hierarchy. If you golf, and, of course, if you were a Mason. A lot of guys joined the Masons so they could get a foreman's job. The Masons had ? in that place.

Q: That was a common thing in that period in a number of occupations, that it seemed that people who were of British background and Masons ...

LY: Oh, we had some dummies that were British that were in there. They just didn't know what was going on at all. I know our ? went down there when we were short. We brought about 25 or 30 of them back from England. It was only a handful were any good, the rest were just dummies.

Q: Did that change over time, people from East European background being promoted?

LY: There was always a mixture. It wasn't exclusive. But some of the people who moved up into positions of general foreman or superintendent, they should've been a janitor. I know one guy that should've been a janitor, shouldn't have ever moved up. But he had the connection and he had the mouth.

Q: And they pulled people out of the union ...

LY: Well, if you settle a contract. There was five people that got positions — supervisors — when the contract was settled. How they did it, why they did it, I can't tell you.

Q: You led them out on strike and they didn't promote you.

LY: No, in fact, I got hell from a lot of them, too. "How much money do you want?" Well I said, "You guys are making double when you're running the plant," because they ran the plant for a couple of weeks, they shut it down and started it up again. But they didn't produce nothing that was any good. This is what they ... I remember distinctly my supervisor in the powerhouse said, "Well, you're back now, aren't you getting a lot of money?" I think we went to about \$5, geez.

Q: That was at a time when ...

LY: Everything's relative. If you don't keep up with the flow, you fall behind. This happens to unions. It's happened to packing plants. With the cheap wages in the States, four or five packing plants in Edmonton all went to the States. We've got a cheap country that pays no wages. In the States ... I remember when we were going to the States on a convention, and we were trying to get these flat-rate union dues to pay on the basis of your wages. The people working there, the representative convinced him they were making \$4, and we were making at that time about \$8, and the people making \$4 would pay only ... but they were paying \$8 dues instead of paying \$4, because we were paying by your wage. We were trying to change it. But they kept it in the States, that's the way the people in the States are — they're not too smart.

Q: But in the earlier years before the free trade agreement ...

LY: Oh yeah, the free-trade agreement came in '90s sometime.

Q: Do you think that had an impact on the companies staying in the country?

LY: I don't think free trade had a very big bearing on it. But with free trade, that's when the gas started moving up, and that started affecting it. That was the one biggest factor, was the price of natural gas. That was one of the big factors. I don't think there was the will to keep the place going. The plant manager, I don't know what went on the board offices, how they decided on this. It's mostly management that makes these poor decisions. It's management's fault, but they never ? for it. It's their decision. All in all, it was a good place to work compared with some other places. We were on strike and some guys working other places said the buzzer would go and everybody would run off to work, and here you just wander off to work 10 minutes late, nobody pushed you.

Q: So, being in a union shop did make a difference in terms of how management treated labour?

LY: Yeah. They couldn't be too push, whereas other places they could do it.

Q: So even though the grievances take forever to go through ...

LY: I remember Baskin tied up this lawyer, and he had nothing to say, and we still lost the bloody grievance. It was always two against one; you couldn't win in those cases. I think it's still that way, isn't it — two against one?

[END]