

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Don Aitken

Interviewer: Jeff Taylor

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Location: Edmonton, AB

My name is Don Aitken. I was with the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) for a total of 14 years. Six were as a research director, 4 as secretary treasurer, and 4 years as the president. I'm originally from Toronto. My father worked with the post office for 30 some odd years. I guess my first commitment to the labour movement was when I quit school quite young and went to work in a plant in Toronto, Elinson Armitures. And the steelworkers were handing out literature. This would have been in 1953, actually 1952. Of course I was completely ignorant of the labour movement and I took the literature and read it at work. Not surprisingly, within a week or two I was laid off. They were moving the plant and they gave the list of people who were moving, and I was not on the list. I kind of wondered why. I asked around, and people said, you were taking that literature and reading it at work. I said, well what difference does that make? I was pretty naïve at the time, I was only 15 actually. I never forgot that I had lost a job because I had just read a piece of paper about getting together with our fellow workers to speak out for ourselves.

Then I went in the army. I spent 21 years in the military and kind of carried that same collectivism idea on. I can remember that during my last few years in the military as a sergeant I tried to unionize the military. I was not very successful, obviously. But I wrote letters and protested and so on about various things.

When I left the military I went to work for Statistics Canada as a computer operations supervisor, and got active in the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). That was in 1974. As soon as I was able to get active in the union I became the shop steward and the president of the local in Edmonton. But I got involved in the area council and a number of fightbacks on the federal issue on the indexing of pensions and Bill C22. I gained some notoriety from them I guess. And I organized a number of things.

As a result, Harry Kostiuk, who was the president of the AFL at the time, asked me to come and apply for Winston Gereluk's job when Winston was leaving. So in 1979 I went to work for the AFL as research and education director. One of my first tasks was to organize the Friends of Medicare. The very first week I was on the job, Harry Kostiuk sent me off to Ottawa to a Canadian Health Coalition meeting. Within a matter of a couple of months we were organizing the Friends of Medicare, which is still active today. The main successes that I felt I had within the federation were to get that organization up and running and having fought to bring in the Canada Health Act. Alberta played a major role in the Canadian Health Coalition in doing that, and still does today. I think it's really a tribute to what the labour movement has carried on since that time.

I was research director for 6 years and then I became the secretary treasurer. I did that for 4 years and then when Dave Werlin stepped down I ran as president of the AFL.

The times were changing. There was the Gainers strike and the Suncor strike in Ft. McMurray. There were a number of strikes of, and I guess some of them were pretty violent days. There was a lot of protest. I recently watched what went on in Quebec City and it reminded me very much of the Gainers days in 1986. We were against foes like Peter Pocklington who had swindled everybody to amass what appeared to be a fortune. Basically all he did was steal from people and, as proven now, he's gone down

the drain. I think that's in no small part to the effort of the labour movement, who exposed him for what he was. So I think that was a significant change in what was happening in Alberta at that time.

At PSAC I was the job steward for about 6 months and then took over as president. I was there for 5 years, I was president for 4 of them. My active involvement there became in the area council, the PSAC area council here in Edmonton with Doreen. I had worked with Doreen since 1974. The first fight that we had was the indexing of pensions. Of course my military pension was also involved in that, so I was very concerned about that. We organized major rallies here in Edmonton, which was the largest rally in Canada actually. We organized the military and the RCMP and all the public service. We turned people away from the Edmonton Inn at a rally, that was how large it was. So I think that was really the catalyst that kind of projected me into other things where people said here's a guy who's an organizer, and we should take advantage of it.

Bill C22 was another large one with the public sector unions. I was kind of in a unique position because I was a supervisor and I had 25 people working for me. I was the president of the local and still doing that because of the setup. Bill C22 was in fact to remove people from the union, like myself, who would no longer have a collective voice. That was a difficult fight to bring other people into. Because nobody thought everybody was affected by that. However, the other implications of it were quite extensive too. I had written a brief on that which was presented in Ottawa and had significant effect. In fact, the bill was killed. I certainly didn't play the major role, but I played a considerable role in that. At the same time the post office was going through the crown corporation thing. I organized a fair deal seminar. We dealt with the indexing of pensions, Bill C22, and the crown corporation of the post office. Those were the three. I'd organized the school on it, and that's where I was approached by Harry to come and work with that. Those were the kind of events that I worked on there.

The workers' bill of rights was one of my first tasks when I got to the AFL. I took information from the U.N. and from every piece of human rights legislation in the world and tried to put it into this. That was one of my major accomplishments I think. Of course, as a researcher I did the annual brief to the government and the policy papers on solidarity. When the Solidarity union got going in Poland we started solidarity in Alberta. I was on staff at that time and worked very much to help to get that going as well.

I felt very much a part of the momentum that was moving at that time. There was always another challenge and we were always building the rear guard behind us. Every time we went into another strike or we went into another fight, we had people who hadn't been active before who were now saying, hey this next fight is worthwhile because the last one was. I think that it's kind of that snowball effect that people start to feel that it's, hey you know why haven't I been around, why haven't I done this before? I didn't realize that there was this great need to do things. I think that's one of the things that people tend to be complacent about or they tend to think that it's inevitable that things are going to get worse instead of getting better. And that there is a way to take out your frustrations and there's a way to improve things. I think that the whole idea of advancement is something that the labour movement didn't feel for a long time. They certainly did in the 1930s and 1940s. But there came a kind of a stagnant period, I think, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Then people started to say hey, we can do something about this and we should do something about this. And when Dave Werlin took over as president of the AFL he brought behind him his politics which said, I'm not afraid to take on the world. I'd always felt that in a way and tried to do that. When Dave was there I felt another ally. Now we're really going to go and accomplish things.

Dave and I had our differences as people do, but I think we complemented each other quite well in that we had different experiences and came from different political backgrounds. At the time he became president of the AFL I was the president of the

NDP. There were of course some differences with him and I on that. But when I became the secretary treasurer I didn't step down from that, but as a staffer I was president of the party.

When I was in the military I was active in the party and used to be told by my officers that I couldn't go out and canvass and I couldn't put up signs. I'd say, well if you want to charge me I'm prepared to go and fight it. I used to put a sign up out at Camp Borden. I had an NDP sign in the back of my car. They said, "you can't do that." I said, "it's my wife's car, what do you mean I can't do that?" So I think I came from the NDP to the labour movement instead of the other way around.

As I said, when I first started with the AFL in 1979, my first task was to try to put together this coalition on the Friends of Medicare. I wrote letters to the Alberta Teachers Association, the Consumers Association, the Alberta Council on Aging, and so on. As a matter of fact I ended up going on the Alberta Council on Aging and sat on their board for 6 years as a result of this. When we started I think we had something like 30 organizations that we got together and talked about the need to fight for health care. It dwindled down to about 20 because some of them couldn't accept the fact that the labour movement was providing the leadership. The social justice commission of the Catholic church, the Unitarian church, and the United Church were very active. We were also involved in the fight against nuclear proliferation. So I think that when it came to the Gainers strike, friends whom we had supported in other struggles were prepared to support us in ours. The people that you saw on the picket line were the people from the Catholic Social Services, the Catholic Social Justice Commission, and the United Church. These were the people who were holding the daily prayer services.

There were some disagreements among coalition partners. The Consumers Association is a good example. They thought that there should be changes in health care, but they didn't necessarily like the way we did it. So in the end we agreed to disagree. They sat on the board of Friends of Medicare, but what they did basically was just do some research with us. They had this kind of loose connection to us because most of them were conservative people. One of them, Rose Rosenberger, was active initially. I remember one time we used to call the Legislative Watch. We assigned people to go and be in the legislature at night and during the day to watch what was going on on the subject of extra billing. This time it was her turn to go at night, and Grant Notley was speaking. As usual, he did an excellent job, and it was on a major bill at the time. The next day we had a meeting and she was so angry with me. I said, why? She said, "you knew that he was going to speak." I said, "ya, did you agree with everything?" "Well certainly I agreed with everything," she said, "but you know that I don't support him." She knew what was right, but because of her own ego, politics, her ambition more than anything, it made her vulnerable. So that was the kind of thing. They exposed people to things they wouldn't have been exposed to before. I think that was really one of our major accomplishments, because we educated them.

I saw coalition work as an opportunity to learn from both sides. For instance, I went on the board of the Alberta Council on Aging; Neil Reimer took my place when I went off and he's still on. And Doreen is going to take his place. So I went on as a labour representative in 1979. One of my first chores was to work on changing their direction. Whenever we went to their annual meeting, I would take resolutions from the NDP and from the labour movement. Over the 6 years they did change their direction, at least in policy, but not necessarily in their leadership. But when Neil Rimer took it over, the groundwork for this revolution within the organization was already laid, and he was able to say, well this is our policy, we've gotta fight it. Neil and I were just talking about that this morning. So I think we had a chance to influence people in different areas. Of all the boards I've sat on, and I've sat on quite a few of them, the one that I found the most educational was the Alberta Council on Aging. Because you get in a room with 30 people, most of them seniors, who can just bring so much experience to the table,

including how to run a meeting and other things. So I learned an awful lot from those people, and now I'm one of them.

I think the labour movement is a great place to spread your wings and to learn so much and to share so much. That's what I always remember and treasure, because it's meant so much to me. Where else can you live out your beliefs? The labour movement has been an excellent career.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada has become far more aggressive and more politically involved over the years. When I was involved, and I tried to talk NDP, they were, whoa we can't do that, we can't talk politics. Well who says you can't talk politics? That's a bunch of crap. Everybody can talk politics. You can use that as an excuse, but they can't stop you. So I found that progress, and I worked quite closely with Darryl Bean [past president of PSAC], particularly during elections when they started to decide that they were going to start choosing their employers [i.e. choose the government] and that kind of thing. And found it was quite a change from what they were before.

When I was the president of the PSAC local and I tried to talk about politics or that we should become aggressive on things, people would say whoa, we can't do that. But meeting those same people 5 years after that, when I would go and speak at a PSAC event or they would come to the convention, they were quite different people. So I think they have matured in that area, which I think was overdue.

In looking back at my involvement in the labour movement, I think we put in the best effort under circumstances, which are very difficult in Alberta. It is very, very difficult to fight. It's an uphill fight all the way. I'm sorry we didn't win more of them. When I was president we had the strike at Zeidlers, for example. It went on for a couple of years. The strike was here in Edmonton and also up in Slave Lake. We went many times on the picket line here and a few times up in Slave Lake. One time we had an executive meeting up there, and we'd gone to the picket line in the morning. We had agreed to come back to a meeting after about 9 o'clock. We got out there and we actually stopped the workers from going in. Then when it was time to go back, some of our people felt, oh we got a real win here. So we stayed there until we had a loss. I think that was one of the things. One of the guys got into a fight, well one of the scabs hit one of our guys. The next thing the police were involved. I think we kinda snatched defeat from the jaws of victory there. I had quite a discussion with the federation executive about it. I had told them to leave and they refused to leave, because they were caught up in it. They weren't too pleased with me. But I always said, if you can't follow, you can't lead. Some people think all you need to do is be a leader.

That's what happens when you get on a picket line. People start to do some things and in the end that goes against you. That's what becomes the headline, that's what becomes the problem. So unfortunately, it was shortly after that the union just kind of gave in and it was over. I'm not saying that was the key thing that did it, but it was just another thing that happened. They had had a bad incident up there where some of the strikers had turned over one of the cars. Shortly after the strike started, some members of the management were in a car and they turned the car over. There was some concern it might catch fire. So Zeidlers really had their heels dug in. That was one I think we probably could have handled better, the overall strike. But the employer in the end hung out and hired the scabs.

We had another one we lost down at Lakeside Packers. That was another one where we went down to demonstrate outside the gate. A day or 2 later the scabs had come and knocked over a trailer that some of the strikers were in. Shortly after that the strike was lost again. We've lost a number of strikes. Won more than we lost, I think. But I think there are some things that, in hindsight if you look back, could have been handled a little better. The violence comes on the picket line when you least expect it because one or two people just do it. But it's such a hard thing to fight, to get back, once you lose that ground. Because people say, oh those nuts, I wouldn't have them working for me, and

that kind of stuff. So I think there's a few things like that. But having said that, I know what it's like when you're on the picket line.

I remember the Gainers strike well. One of the most important parts of that strike was when I went on TV with Peter Pocklington. We went on the CBC national network with Barbara Frum, bless her soul. For a woman who always interfered with everybody on a program, she just let us go at each other. He called me a communist and told me to go back to Russia. He thought he was talking to Dave Werlin. I think he actually did. He was in Toronto and I was in Edmonton. Every time he would say, this eastern union is telling us what to do and they'd show Peter Pocklington in Toronto and Don Aitken in Edmonton.

Before the interview I'd been given a brown envelope, obviously from management in Gainers. In it was all the information about Bollains, who was the manager of the plant. They had a short strike the year before and, as a result of that strike, Bollains had got \$1 million life insurance on him and his grandson, two new cars, and 10% of all the money. He got this humungous package as a result of knocking the workers down. So when I revealed this of course his jaw dropped down and he didn't know what to say. He didn't know that anybody would get this. Then of course I was able to go after him on this. I think of everything I did, I probably had the most satisfaction from that. The next day I was flying off to Newfoundland, because we were doing the labour law review: Dave was doing the west and I was doing the east. When I was on the plane in Halifax people were saying: "You were on TV last night taking on Peter Pocklington. Good for you." And when I got to Newfoundland it was the same way. This was only 5 days into the strike, but that just propelled the boycott. The boycott just became such an enormous thing from one end of the country to the other. So I think that TV show had a lot to do with it. Then I remember I went to the world's fair in Vancouver a month or 2 after that. The parking lot attendant said the same thing. I'm boycotting Gainers, he said. I think it was one of those flukes with the timing and it just really worked out well. I think it had something maybe to do with doing the old guy Pocklington in the end, because people remembered him after that. Besides trading off Wayne Gretzky, he also had Palm Dairies. We never even organized a boycott against Palm Dairies, and nobody was buying it because everybody hated him so bad. I think if there was ever a moment of satisfaction, that was it for me.

One thing that I always emphasized to people is that we're all in this boat together. If we rock it too much, we're all going to fall into the water. I think a lot of the problems were not so much between the public and the private sector. Although there was a bit of that, when I think about it now. When I first went to the AFL there was a public sector council. When I was with PSAC I had quite a bit to do with organizing it. After awhile it became pretty powerful within the federation. They were wanting to ensure that the public sector had more of a voice, which they already had anyway. In 1982, when Dave Eastly ran for secretary treasurer, a number of people wanted me to run. I didn't want to run, but he was being supported by the public sector council. Anyway, I threw my hat in the ring. I really didn't want to do it. I was a staffer. But we got together with people like Paul McTeer and I agreed to withdraw providing they disbanded the public sector council. We agreed, and I stepped down, much to a number of my peoples' chagrin. But I said, we can't have the federation fighting like this. That was basically within the public sector. It wasn't so much the other. But the industrial side was a little concerned about this monolithic thing that was coming in.

The members of the public sector council were AUPE, PSAC, CUPW, the Letter Carriers and CUPE. CUPE and AUPE were the strongest. And in those days they were talking to each other.

In those days we had Harry Kostiuk as the president and Gene Mitchell as secretary treasurer of the AFL. But Gene wasn't an elected officer. They wanted him to be elected so they could defeat him, rather than saying Gene we think you should go, just being up front. So we agreed that if I withdraw, and I went to them with this proposal

basically. I said look, if I withdraw, we're going to stop this nonsense, we're not going to have any more of this infighting and everything. They agreed. As it turned out I ran a few years later. It was never my desire to be an officer. I always felt I could do more as a staffer. I always feel very lonely at the top, and what you need is people behind you. I always felt I was a good guy to have behind you, because I'd never leave them alone. I still believe in that, which is why even as secretary treasurer I would have preferred to stay there than be president. You've gotta have that depth and you've gotta have people who are going to say, it's a good idea but... And if you're the person at the top everybody's prepared to do that. Not everybody's prepared to say, I don't think you should do that. I think it's really important to have somebody to say, I don't think you should do that. One of the guys who always did that for me was Winston Gereluk. Winston always said, I know you're the boss and I know you can do what you want, but if I were you I wouldn't do that. I always treasured Winston as probably the most valuable person in the labour movement. He was never afraid to tell me when he disagreed with me. That's what you need. You don't need yes men, you need people who are gonna say, this is it.

Because of my military background I always thought you had to be firm but friendly. You had to exercise democracy as much as you could in taking advantage of the fact you've got people you're paying good money for and you should use that talent. I think that sometimes becomes cumbersome and sometimes becomes difficult. But I always felt that you valued the people who work for you, because the biggest asset you have is people. You want to ensure that you hear from as many sides as possible, and from people's experiences. I think that too often people hire people for one thing and then use them for something else. In fact when I went to work for the AFL I had a chance to go for PSAC. But PSAC has this philosophy that once you're a staffer you do what the elected officers tell you to do. I felt well, they're going to clip my wings. I tried not to do that. I probably did do it sometimes, but I basically felt that I'm going to utilize the people that are around me and take the best from them to make me a better leader.

I always admired Dick Martin. I knew Dick Martin when he was with the Manitoba Federation of Labor. I think he's the only labour leader in Canada who came to a working agreement with the NDP and made significant inroads in respect to government and labour in Manitoba. And I have great admiration for that. I don't think he's ever been given enough credit for that. He's one of the few people who was able to do that. Of course he had good NDP leadership as well, in Howard Pawley, and that really helped. So I think that was something that was certainly overlooked in Ontario. When I was president of the party here I worked to bring together all the western provinces, and had Dick come out and speak on that because they were having a similar problem in BC, about how to do that. To me, Dick Martin is one of my best examples. Harry Kostiuk was a good leader who knew how to motivate people and keep people together and so on.

Audrey Cormack took over as secretary treasurer of the AFL when I left that job. We had a few growing pains but we've always worked as a team. I'm so pleased to see how successful she's become, because she's come a long way as we all have. We're only as good as the people who teach us.

I think Dave Werlin was a good leader. Dave and I worked well together, had a lot of disagreements. But in the end we always come out united. I thought we were a great team. I was sorry to see him step down, because I would have been pleased to stay as secretary-treasurer for a while longer. And, on the national scene, Bob White was a good leader.

I think those people are people that I feel have really helped me along the way, and vice versa.