

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Donato Colangelo

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: Fall 1998

Location: Edmonton

I was a shop steward for six years, yes. But then I gave it up in '78. When I went into maintenance is when I gave it up.

My name is Donato Colangelo. I started in September 28, 1966 until ??.

My first job was in the cellar. The foreman come pick me up from the time office, bring me down to the cellar. He said, what was my first impression. Then he said, what you gonna do? There was an A-frame and a chain conveyor was hooked up from the back, which is supposed to bring over to the A-frame for drainage and dry-up. He do two or three by himself just to show me how to do it. Some ? was left on the hide. It was so greyish, so shaking, which I was afraid to touch. If I didn't built up myself with power, I wouldn't be able to touch. From then on I was ?? I was a baker before. Then from baker into the high tower is a big step. I make an application and they got me. In about a week I was called in.

Well, I always get the same pay with the baker. But I was going far away. It was 11 miles one way to go to work. I was working at Lynnwood Shopping Centre and I wasn't close to the plant then. On 130 Avenue was 11 miles one way, and to work at night and have problem to sleep in day time. I thought it was too dangerous for me to go back and forth. But pay was more or less the same, which I was making \$2 an hour over there, and I start with \$1.89 at Swift. Then I got a .10 raise after 6 weeks. So the pay was more or less there. On the other side I had a benefit, but the benefit of Swift was much much better.

Well then I was work there in high tower for a while, then they take me to the tank house. There I was a machine operator in the tank house, and expeller, and so on. The tank house, that's where all the salvage, all the crap from the animals which they can use in

any other way, they would cook them. Dry them and cook them, then expelling, which means ??? ...

We were doing all kinds: sheep, hogs and beef, at that time.

I was trades helper. I was helper of the tradesmen and millwrights, plumber, carpenter.

Whoever I was needed the most, that's who I was going with.

A little bit of change was gradual. Here and there they were changing, remodeling a little bit things, some machinery came in. There was gradually a change. The most change came in Pocklington's heyday, 1980. When Pocklington now take over. They make smoke house, which is a big one, and that was the biggest change. Then there was some other change, I'm not familiar with it.

Well, speed-wise, it was always there. They increase the speed of machinery, which you have to speed up too. That always was there. But lately they were doing in a more ? way possible. Then when the problem with Pocklington came with '86, actually '84. The works there was no good anymore. People were doing their job, but not with passion anymore. Before we used to work like a family. Whoever was need a hand, he move to the other guy, give him a hand, that's it. After that, there was no such thing. Just the feeling of the people there was not the same. It get a little bit better, but then when McCain came in and started twist things again, the worst part was when he take us out away from break. That was the worst part I could never swallow. It never was the same after that anyway, never.

it was a company which you could feel more secure. Even you never have any Christmas gift, they said that from the company. But we had better passion to work in that place, but not after.

I came to Edmonton in '63 from Province Potenza, and the region is Basilicada.

Well, my sister was here, my uncle and cousins were here. So they make application for me and I come here too. I been here since.

I would say around 15, 17 people. . . . ?

... there were quite a few work in the plant there, which was living in the neighborhood of the plant. Ya close, I had some. It was a little stinky smell. Because the rendering plant was right there close to it. And the grain elevator and the packing plant, they were there.

Sometimes depends what wind direction was blow, sometimes was a little smell around. But other than that, I didn't see anything wrong with the community.

Yes, when I was in the tank, we were 28 guys who work in that department. We would get together 2 or 3 times a year with the foreman and some divisional men in the department, as a stag party. We would spend like a Sunday. Most of the time it was a Sunday, because we were working Friday and Saturday to finish up the job. We would get together 2 or 3 times a year. Very friendly, very family. And the mechanical department too, they would get together sometime and go curling and some other things. ... we were like a family, more passion to work in the plant. But after...

... \$1.89 starting rate. Actually, for matter of fact, in '66 Canada Packers was on strike. In October, I start in September, in October Canada Packers settle the contract and we get .20 increase if I remember right. Twenty cents raise. I get that right away, so I get ahead by beginning of the year.

I was making \$15.50 when I left. Ya, but when I started I was 0 and when I left I was 12. I was a final blend operator and a mix master.

... there was lots of change. We were using more or less by hand, and the hand that they were, not by the machinery but a different system, which will produce double of the production with the same amount of men.

Safety, it was always a good place for safety. The company were looking for safety all along, all the time. If a worker see something unsafe, he refuse to do it or call the boss say, look this is not safe, right away they were try to resolve the problem. But many times some problem was never solved. That's another thing. But they were quite covered for that.

... I got hurt two times. One time I hurt my back. That was a man's fault. When we were pulling those ice from the vat. They work in beef, there was about 350 ice of beef a day. All those ice were going in one vat, most of them. We had a second vat, but that's for if we would kill more than that. Once the ice were going in, the water was coming up. So they had to pump the brine out. Then when they were fishing those ice out, then the water was going lower, then they had to pump back in. But there was the last ice we were looking for, because we know how many there were going in and we were counting.

There was a bull ice, there were over 200 lbs. The water was low so we didn't want to

pump any more brine in it. At least the boss didn't want to do, because then we have to pump out again, cuz then they start put the ice back in. When I went to hook that, I twisted my back. I was young at the time. A week and a half on compensation and I come back to work. One more time, I had a helper. We had one of two wheels wagon and it was full of crap. That was on Monday that was left over on a Saturday last shift. All the crap was going in this garbage wagon. On Monday we were supposed to dump into the garbage bin. ... all the ? freeze up, there was solid crap in there. So this wagon had two wheels and two legs and two handles of course. When we come to dump it, the guy beside me helped me to lift it up, because it was heavy. The wheel was a little bit too far to the back, it was more weight on the front than the handle. So this guy helped me. Instead of stop when I started tilting, he was going all the way. No, I make a mistake. We dump already and then the garbage truck came in and said, hey wait, don't dump that in there because it's already too heavy. Otherwise we won't be able to lift. So we supposed to bring back. I tried to hold, to not bang the legs down, and this guy was going all the way. I snapped right behind my shoulder blade. That time I was 2 months on compensation. I still was coming back on and off, but never serious.

Funny. I don't think there was any funny story there.

Well, let's put it this way. In the old days there was not much machinery. We work harder than later on, which we get help from some other equipment to work easier. We were more happy when we work harder than when we were not.

Ukrainian, Hungarian, German, French. One black guy. That's about all I think.

Dutch. We all got along very good, yes.

In the high cellar in the tank house, rendering department. I was a shop steward in the tank house in the rendering department for six years.

Actually, my English was very poor then. But I handled it very well. To be six years, they voted me in. First time nobody was run so I took the job. Nobody wants to run. After then I had some competition, but they voted me in. So even with my poor English, they must have been satisfied with me the job the way I was doing.

Well if the case he had if he was right to fight for I was doing. The first step was going to my higher union person. Then I was going to the foreman and say, what you're doing here is not right for this man, so we have to accommodate this man in a better way.

We were working quite a way and talking with one another, yes. In fact the one time was one guy got mad at foreman and they throw the fork on the floor and they take off. And he was start 4 or 5 months before me. He was a very good worker, very good man. I was sorry for him. He had already 10, 12 years in the place. I says, why you want to quit? So I tried to convince him no way that they can do nothing. Then I went see the time office. I was talking to the manager of the time office. I says, look, I know he's quit, (this was on a Friday), I says, during the weekend I gonna visit this guy and see if I can convince him coming back. He gonna give the old seniority back? He says, if you can do that, I give him all the seniority back. So that's what I did. And he was living in Morinville. So I went to Morinville and I talked to him. . . I can't remember who was the time office. But he says, okay, if you can get the guy back, it's just like nothing happened. So he came back on Monday and he kept on working for another 10 years or so. Then he got full of ? in his hands and start missing time. I didn't say any more after that. So then I change department, so the time we were going for dinner or coffee break was different time. In ? department our whole cafeteria there, I was not going to the main cafeteria anymore most of the time, so I didn't see that guy for a long time.

There were two strikes with Swift. One in '74 and one in '78. Then of course there was the one in '84, that's the one that screwed everything up. When he wants to do a cut from \$11 to \$7 an hour for starting rate. He wants starting rate cut by \$5 and were not want to comply with that. We didn't like the idea of having a two-tier wages in the plant. So then we went on strike. On Friday at 4 o'clock, that's when strike was called completely.

While we were going home, the union says, look the company wants to negotiate again. If we avert the strike now, the company wants to talk to us and seems to be they will talk. But if we go on strike, that's it. So the called a meeting right after work to get to this place, to meeting, and they tell us same thing. The company wants to talk again, but we have to go back to work right away, because the night shift is supposed to go in the shop. Those guys supposed to go in a 4 o'clock. Then they convince us to do it. But the problem was they never tell us, the law is if we go on strike for one day, then you can't go back and strike for another year. Then you are stuck. That was the time when we lost quite a few benefit clause and they end up with \$7 an hour starting rate. Then in '86, which we already have that two-tier system, we went on strike for that purpose again. We

want to eliminate that two-tier system. That's why we went on strike for all those things, for six months.

How long were you on strike in 1974, and on what issues?

Six weeks. Money. That was the booming time, and everything was going up at that time. We wanted more money according to the cost of living. So we went on strike. Also in '78 the same thing. But we didn't get much either time.

Peaceful. No action whatsoever. The first two there was no problem whatsoever. The plant was closed and that was it. Then in '86 that's the time they called replacement workers to come in and that's when all the problems started. It was six months. I was picketing all the time. There's always a mis-feeling here and there. People were faithful with union. But in '86 we were more together than ever in '86. Because we went on strike and we knew, they tell us before, if you go out I can have replacement workers. But everybody was in favor of go out. Then they lock us out. So it was on strike and also locked out. But last one was a different story. Last one, the vote went 66/44. That's 44 people were against going on strike and they were create some problem for the other strikers and for the union system too. But I have to say, in a way they were right, in one way. But in other ways they were wrong. Even the other day I met a guy who was there also around 30 years. He said, I used to have a job about \$14 an hour. Now I need 3 jobs for \$14 an hour. And I said, and you understand what the union is all about? You're still against the union? He said yes, cuz I had \$14 an hour before, what have I got now? I says, that's a problem, because not very many jobs ?? the union is weak.

The other day I met a guy which was work there also many years, 30 years or so. He said he had a job before which was pay \$14 an hour and now he has to have three jobs to make up. I told him, is he still understand what his union is all about? Before it was union job they were paid \$14 an hour. Now without union, he needs three jobs to make up that much money. You see where I'm against the union? For example, McCain, he came up with idea to close the plant or reducing from \$6 to \$9 an hour job, because the other outfit, which they didn't have a union, they were working for \$8, \$10 an hour, \$12 an hour. So he says, I employ 3,000 people. Why I should pay \$14, \$15, \$16 an hour? For him I think it's logical. If somebody else can produce for cheaper, why I should pay more? But he took advantage one plant at a time. With us, actually, he give us .28 cents

an hour increase. But we were already \$2 below the other plant that they were working. What he was going after was the Villeneuve plant. Those guys they offer buy out the contract up to \$25,000 if I remember right, according to the seniority, then start \$10 an hour. The cut was from \$9 to \$6 an hour for workers. And they maintain that premise. After five months the guys were on strike. What happened? They ? a little bit more, not much difference than to begin with. I think they went up to \$30,000 for buyout. Then they exclude the maintenance department because they have ? of tradesmen. And some other little things, I can't remember now. And 56% of the people, they grab it. Otherwise, they says, if we don't take this, they shut the plant. The union didn't do a good job with them, with the workers, that's why I'm against the union now a little bit. If the union would do better job with the workers, or if the unionized workers themselves would understand the point, they wouldn't do it. But because they buy out some older guys, like me for example, in the late 50s and begin 60s, they took that lump sum of money, they sold their own kids, their sisters and brothers. Now those guys work for \$10 an hour. \$10 today, you can't make a living. You can't raise a family. You can't buy a house, you barely can eat. So as soon as he finish with that, then he went to Winnipeg. Did same thing. Either you accept the \$6 an hour cut or I'm gonna close the plant. Red Deer, the week after ? settle, he says same thing to the guys. So McCain he had everything going up in his sleeves with the other corporation, with the other outfit, to kill for him, to make production for him... Now that guy still would understand the point, we have to be unionized to survive, otherwise the whole entire community, not only packing plant but also any other outfit, they would follow the same procedure. Everybody would work for minimum wages. This is a ? of everybody.

That's what I believe, that's my belief. I think they didn't explain the guys hard enough. Like I said, even the guys around my age, they were thinking to grab those greedy one, grab those money, \$20-\$30,000, whatever. Then I retire, I don't get it from the rest of the others. Even those ones, if it was somebody which could explain a little bit better, I think would be a little bit different. And I read in the paper the other day, was Monday I think or last week, I think was Monday. Our union leader from Toronto there, Kokavinko, whatever his last name is, he says, Mike McCain, he was a nut bastard. He just wanted cheap labor. To me, for him, what he said, I have to say this, he must get part of the cake

to settle that way to, to say this. Because if that is right, you're a bastard. I don't know who is.