

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: May Fingler

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

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Location: High River

Index: packinghouse worker - Swifts' Canadian - working conditions - Canada Packers - United Packinghouse Workers of America - CIO unions - Canadian Congress of Labour - national packinghouse strike 1947 - chain bargaining - Canadian Food & Allied Workers - joint board administration - Burns - Robin Hood Flour Mills - Stanley Knowles - David Orlikow - Irene Dyck - Tommy Douglas - Roy Jamha - Workers' Compensation Board - Office & Professional Employees International Union

Q: Where do you come from May? Tell us something about your background.

MF: I was born in a little town in Saskatchewan. The only person who ever heard of it was Woodrow Lloyd, the Minister of Education in Saskatchewan. I moved to Winnipeg when I was five to look after my grandmother - she was having cataracts at the time - and I never got back home to Saskatchewan, but grew up in Manitoba. My mother was 48, my father was 62 at the time I was born, so they weren't much of an influence on me. My mother thought she was really out of the loop and used to tell me, you do what you think best, my dear. She really didn't know about the education system and didn't encourage me in that direction, so I went to work in a packinghouse, because they were paying 30 cents an hour as compared to \$30 a month in an office. That's all. I was looking after my mother at the time. She was 60, close to 70, and I was 18.

Q: Talk about the packinghouse that you went to work in.

MF: I worked in the cooler, and originally had no idea what that was about. This was in Swifts' Canadian in St. Boniface in Manitoba. It's the place where they put all the raw meat and sausages. It was packing into cartons. That was pretty cold, a little bit above freezing all the time, and wet. You had to dress in winter boots all the time. I can't think of anything that might have swayed me into talking about the union, but apparently I was active in it, because the girls in the department used to call me 'Union Baby', meaning they had enough of it. I thought maybe on principle it was a good idea, people working together instead of individually. I'd seen enough of the conditions there to know that some of them needed improvement.

Q: Talk a little more about the conditions.

MF: We worked in the wet and the cold, because of the fact that it had to be cold to keep the meat fresh. Naturally it was wet, because we were handling raw product. It was also quite heavy work. The girls themselves loaded the kubasa, the rings of sausage, and

boxes onto the trolleys at the back. It was quite a process; you put these things up on the trolley. I had quite heavy muscle development in here, because you did this and that, all of which was probably good for us. There would be about 30 girls working in that department. After about a year I moved over into the pressed meats department, which was then processing cooked meat rather than handling the raw meat. I worked on packaging mostly, tying off sausages, and stuff like that. We used to hear terrible stories. I didn't ever see any of it when I was there, but some of the stories involved foremen and female employees, that they got taken advantage of. That's about enough that I can say about that. So there was a need. We worked 10 hours a day and didn't get a coffee break or anything like that. We got 20 minutes to eat lunch and get back up to the department. No traveling time or anything. Swift Canadian was a very paternalistic organization, so it was going to be a difficult thing to get a union in there. Canada Packers got organized much easier, because they're a Canadian company.

Q: What years are we talking about here?

MF: I started in 1943 and then worked for five years in Swifts'. I became the local union secretary and my name is on the charter of local 219, United Packinghouse Workers of America. That was a CIO union [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. The CIO was formed, I understand, because some of the union members at that time were dissatisfied with the way unions were run. They were run by a business agent who was elected, and who therefore pretty well what you can imagine by the term "union boss". He got to say what was going on in that local union; that's why the CIO was formed. The very early unions like the Packinghouse Workers and the Steelworkers broke away from the American Federation of Labour in the United States and formed their own unions. One of the things that they did in the early days was that everyone helped everyone else.

In Canada, for instance, the Packinghouse Workers were formed first, and then they helped organize the Steelworkers and Retail Wholesale and several other unions in the Toronto area. Then when they got to Winnipeg we did the same thing. We had a very unique organizer at the time, a nice big Ukrainian boy from Toronto and a Canada Packers worker, who was an organizing fool. He was just wonderful at it. He got everybody involved in organizing everything. So in our packinghouse office, we had Retail, Wholesale and Department Store union, people who worked in Hudson's Bay, people who worked in the schools as janitors, the Steelworkers from Westeel in Winnipeg, and several smaller plants. All the packinghouse workers, even the little ones with 30 or 40 people, got organized into a union.

Q: When you say the old unions were run by a union boss, talk about how the new unions were run.

MF: The difference is that the union representatives were appointed rather than elected, which meant that they had to answer to a governing body. Our Union was divided into two to administer the Western District and the Eastern District. So there was a Canadian director and two sub-directors, and then union representatives in each province, eventually when we could afford it. When I moved to Alberta in 1955, there was only one man who serviced the whole of Alberta.

I saw quite a few changes during the time that I was in Winnipeg. For example, instead of an appointed representative in each department, which was the Swift's method, we

elected our own stewards. Stewards had a council separate and apart from the plant. The packinghouse locals got together and put per a capita amount into a fund, with which they were able to set up a little office and hire a secretary to look after the paperwork and phone calls. That left the organizer, Adam Borsk, free to go out and do whatever he did, which he did very well.

Q: How did the union help in that plant?

MF: The first realization that the people in the plant had that they had a union working for them was when they got a raise all of a sudden without realizing it was happening. The work week got cut down, as well. I don't think we got overtime for the first contract, but after that we did. Instead of working for 10 or more hours straight, if we worked more than 9 hours, we got overtime rates. Then it was gradually cut down to 8 hours a day. In busy summertime we used to go in on Saturdays at 7 o'clock, our usual starting time, and work till about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, and at first, there was no extra compensation for Saturday work or overtime. But it was also wartime, and you were expected to do that sort of work.

Then Adam decided that women should go to Canadian Congress of Labour conventions; this is one of the things he recommended, let's say. The local unions had just as many free thinkers as anyone else; if they didn't agree with what he recommended, they wouldn't do it. But they went along with his idea of sending women to that Congress Convention, including me - and I was just 19 year old, when I went to Quebec City. Three girls -- one from Canada Packers, one from Swifts and one from Burns, went to the big Congress convention, and you can see by the picture there that there were only about 14 packinghouse workers from the whole of Canada there. It was a young Union, and because it was wartime it was a very dangerous thing to even think about striking. Anyway, there we were having our little session before the big Convention. Our District Director was a very canny guy. He looked around at this bunch and he said, you'll do. I was a little sweetie faced 19 year-old. "You'll do," he said. "You'll make the speech tomorrow." I thought, "I'm going to be sick tomorrow. No, no, no." Anyway, I made a bargain with him. Okay, I'll do it if you'll hire a kallash and take us around Quebec City. He wasn't very concerned about that and agreed right away. There I was, at a huge convention, trying to think of something to say. Our Director warned me that it may be necessary for our Union to go on strike. This was something that was brand new because it was a brand new union and it was wartime - so, it was going to be very difficult. So, we were going to need all the sympathy we could get, so 'you're it' - and that's why I got to make the speech at the Canadian Congress of Labour Convention in 1944.

Q: What sort of response did you get from the delegates?

MF: Oh I good response - except the electrical workers, who weren't very polite anyway. They were always on the edge of getting out of the Congress anyway.

Q: Your family wasn't union minded at all?

MF: Not a bit. As a matter of fact, they were a bit disturbed that I would ever do that. They were good old Scots Presbyterian. Things were as they were, and you weren't supposed to question them.

Q: When did the United Packinghouse Workers of America change its name?

MF: They didn't start to change their name until the '50s. Do you know about the big concentration of packing plants in Chicago? - around 52,000 people worked in those big plants. At one time, it was the policy of the packinghouse workers to have cattle and animals shipped to a big plant, and they processed the whole carcass right from the beginning. Remember, they used to say about a packinghouse, 'they used everything but the squeal, and that was the whistle.' Then when the cost of transportation got to be so high, they began to build small processing plants like the one here in Lethbridge. There were two major packers and Swifts built just abattoirs in some places, and farmed the carcasses out to other places to be further processed, to be cut and packaged and sold. So that was what was happening in Chicago, as the plants were very old. I have a book here called *Out of the Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair. I don't know whether you've ever read it or not.

Q: Let's go back to that 1944 talk of strike with the United Packinghouse Workers. Tell me how that went.

MF: I don't remember exactly. We didn't actually go on strike ourselves that year. Let me explain the purpose of the strike vote. It was because Burns and Packers and Swifts were all national organizations, and our Union naturally thought that it would be a sensible thing for everybody be covered by the same contract and organize and negotiate at the same time for the whole chain. That's the purpose of the strikes, and I don't remember much about the process.

However, we didn't actually conduct this national strike until 1947. I'm sure we didn't get into actual national bargaining until 1947, but it was that sort of thing that they were striving for a long time. As I say, I was the Secretary of that local union. - and as you'll notice in a lot of these pictures, there weren't too many women who were active in the union. There was one other woman at that time, who happened to be the steward in my department. We got to be friends and stayed friends for 50 years. She and I mostly were the only two who ever did any sort of work. As I say, my executive were very protective. They wouldn't let me stay there at night. I'd ride my bike out and be on the picket line and do all the things. It started getting dark and the President would say, go home, but I'd say, no, I can stay. He'd say, go home, but they other girls are staying - they were not girls, they were women - go home. So that's the way they were.

Q: Do you remember some of the discussions that were going on when you were preparing for the strike? Were there people who were worried about it?

Oh indeed. I was on the Finance Committee, and I was really surprised at the number of people who asked for help, who had always looked and dressed and acted as if they were prosperous. But during that strike, they said, "No, it's payday to payday!" That's another thing that happens with working people that you don't realize. When you're supporting a house and children and school -- and a lot of the women didn't work in those days, they stayed home -- they just made it from payday to payday all the time. So that's something that I didn't realize at the time, because I was single. It surprised me.

Q: Was it a fairly peaceful strike?

MF: Yes. There were always a lot of pickets. That was mainly because of the isolation of the plants; we were a long way from the major road, so we picketed in front of the gate,

and it was a great distance between us and the plant. There was never any attempt to have people cross the picket line that I can remember. That may not be true. There would be trucks coming to try and deliver things, but those we were able to control.

We won that strike - I don't remember how long it lasted. We won the principle that we could bargain nationally instead of each plant by itself. We always tried to get the same benefits for each contract for each chain. But with this principle established, we could set a standard minimum wage and standard working conditions on all the plants. Each chain bargained separately. I was always with the Burns committee, because their head office was in Calgary. I'm getting ahead of myself here. After the strike in 1947, the Union office in Winnipeg that was operated by the joint board of the packinghouse locals in that area needed a secretary. The other one had decided to move over. She used to do everything, so she decided to move over to Steel, and I moved in and worked for the Packinghouse Workers. A month after I worked there I called the joint board together and said, I think I'll have to quit. They asked, "Why? You just got started." I explained that it was useful to have one boss, and that I couldn't have 16 people coming in and asking me to do stuff. So you can decide which man you want to tell me what to do in that office, and then I'll agree to do it. They said okay, "You pick one." - so of course I picked my local president. Afterwards I was so amazed, because I said, "Furthermore I'd like a raise" and they said, "Okay." So afterwards, I was walking down the hall with one of them and said, gee, that went easily. He said, "Listen kid, if we haven't taught anything about this union, we've failed".

Q: Why was there a joint board?

MF: The joint board operated well to get the administration done. At one time, we used to get lists of employees, which said who had paid dues for that particular month. At that time, it was wartime and we had about 550 people at Swifts, and 780 at Canada Packers. So the office secretary got these long lists of pages of people who had paid dues. This all had to be looked after, so it was entered into an account book. That sort of thing had to be kept track of, because whoever was the financial secretary of the local had to pay per capita, and had to keep track of the books. In some instances, for the smaller locals, the secretary in the office kept the books and helped with the bookkeeping. So that's when I went to work in the local office, the Joint Board Office in Winnipeg, as the secretary rather than be a Swift girl anymore.

Q: Where did the packinghouse workers go from there? You're still in the '40s?

MF: This is when they had to get serious about chain bargaining. It was up to each local to send a delegate to a Policy Conference for that particular chain. All of the local unions drew up proposals for the next contract and submitted them to whoever did the contract negotiations for that chain. Then we had a policy meeting in which dealt with all those proposals, threw out the more outrageous ones, and concentrated them into common proposals, because each local would probably send in the same thing or very close to the same proposal. Those were adopted by the policy conference and submitted to the company as proposals for negotiation. The important thing is that those proposals came from the local unions, not from the representatives. It's a little bit more democratic way to operate, that a business agent kind of thing.

Q: At what point did the United Packinghouse Workers merge with another union?

MF: Well, to go back to talking about *Out of the Jungle*, the numbers of Packinghouse members in the United States began to decline quite a bit because of the situation I described, and it got to the point where they thought it might not be feasible to operate independently anymore. Of course, I guess that they probably had offers or advances or whatever from the Meat Cutters' Union, because they were suffering the same problems, because things were getting more automated in the plants, So merger talks were going on back and forth in 1953.

The Meatcutters were one of the older unions that belonged to the AFL. They were the original union that organized the meatpackers. The other thing that the CIO believed in rather than the way the AFL did it, was to not segregate units of workers. If you worked in a plant, everybody belonged to the one union. In the Amalgamated scheme of things, the electricians joined the electricians union, and the plumbers joined the plumbers union. They were all little units. The only people who were in the plant who could be together in one unit of the amalgamated were the workers in the plants themselves, the actual production workers.

As you can see in that book there, the merger started in '53. I can't remember when the Convention itself was, but I was at that one. It was probably in 1955 by the time of the Convention to ratify the merger could actually be organized. I used to get to go to the conventions, because they used to take me along to work. As a result, I didn't know a great deal about what was going on on the floor, because I was stuck in the back somewhere doing typing and running off stuff for the delegates.

Q: What name was chosen for the union in Canada?

MF: In Canada, it was called the Canadian Food and Allied Workers. I don't remember what it became in the United States; they probably kept the name, Amalgamated Meat Cutters. But it understood that it would be merged. The offices were also merged, and because we were smaller, we were allocated so many people on the executive board. They moved the head offices to Washington or someplace down south. Their main office used to be in Chicago, and then when all that collapsed, they moved over to the East Coast.

Q: When did you move to Calgary?

By this time, I was working out of the office in Calgary. I had worked in the local union office in Winnipeg from 1947 until 1955. Our Western Director used to travel back and forth, and we all got to know each other over a long period of time. That's the way that union was, we'd known each other for many years. After the merger happened, and more production was concentrated there, he said, "Why don't you come and work for me in Calgary?" My husband and I talked it over and said, well okay we'll move to Calgary. So we did in 1955. So then I worked for the district office rather than the local union office. I was not working directly with the locals anymore; I was just the secretary to the Western Director and then for the Alberta representative, who worked out of our office.

Jack Hampson was the Union Representative, and Norm Richards was the Western Director, when I went out to work in Calgary.

Q: What did the meatpacking industry look like in Calgary when you got here?

MF: At that time in Calgary, there was Burns plant, a Canada Packers plant, a Swift Canadian plant, and several smaller ones. By this time, we'd also organized a number flour mills, so we had Robin Hood Flour Mills in Calgary. We also did the negotiating eventually for all of our flour mills out of the Calgary office. We had the same sort of process for chain bargaining for them. We had policy meetings where they drew up proposals, proposed amendments to the contracts, got the agreement of the locals, and went from there.

Q: When did you first become involved with the CCF?

MF: The very first time I got to vote was in Winnipeg North, and I voted for Stanley Knowles. I can't remember how I got involved, or how I got to decide that this was the other union for me, but it was definitely the CCF. I worked on a couple of campaigns for the Party in Davy Orlikow's office in North Winnipeg. Mainly we were involved with Alistair Stewart, who was the MP for Winnipeg North before Davy Orlikow. He was our union auditor because he was also a CPA.

The main thing that I remember about the CCF and the NDP in those days was the people. They were the kind of people that you liked to work with. They not only had a common purpose - well sometimes they didn't - but they were also able to work together, and you had that feeling about them.

However, through most of that time, I was mainly involved with the union. I worked with the CCF on the side. It wasn't until I got to Calgary, that I became secretary of the little CCF organization here in Calgary.

Q: Who were some of the first people you met in the CCF when you came to Calgary?

MF: I remember Elmer Lieshmer, Margaret and Bill Hanley - Margaret's still my friend, by the way. However, there were two people who kept that little office in Calgary going, and they were Everett Baldwin and Irene Dyck.

Irene Dyck is the lady who left \$1 million to the party when she passed away. She and her husband had a little farm on the outskirts of Calgary by the airport. That property eventually got to be very popular money-wise. Her husband died and she was out there by herself, so she inherited quite a bit of money, and when she passed away, she left some of it to the Party. But she and Everett pretty well ran the Calgary office for a long time, just the two of them. They were both retired at the time I was there.

Q: What was it like trying to sell the CCF in this city? Many people think this is the 'Texas of the North'.

MF: The people that were involved were, for the most part, older people. I think there were only three or four younger people. There were a lot of teachers, Elmer was a teacher; the Smiths were teachers also. As well, there were some union people, although only Packinghouse and Steel were really active at that time. The AFL didn't believe in getting involved in politics apparently, but we were always involved, because the people where I came from in Toronto were from the very beginning. They worked together. So we absorbed that more as we got organized out West.

Q: Do you remember when the CCF became the NDP?

MF: Yep. I was at the convention. The pictures are here. I'm not talking about Alberta - I was talking at the first National Convention of the NDP in Regina.

Q: Who do you remember from that convention? Did you meet Tommy?

MF: Yep, but not in Regina. I met him in Edmonton at an affair that we attended. I was having breakfast with Everett Baldwin, the chap who worked in the Calgary office here. He and Tommy were old friends. Tommy came in and said, hello Everett, and sat down and said, how are you. I was having oatmeal and he said, oh good for you, and he had oatmeal. So that's what I remember. I said - I couldn't help it - my name is McCall.

I remember that Tommy was sweet - very gentle, very nice. My husband used to say, the only time we ever went to church in Winnipeg is when that man was preaching a sermon. And that was right. Very often he'd preach the same sermon, about the working people being the "Salt of the Earth." One of the things they always had to do for him was get him something to stand on. He was about my size. He always made a joke of it - he was always sure to bring it up. He'd stand on anything they could find, I guess. He'd say, "I hope this thing holds me up, I got quite a bit of weight up here, I'm carrying quite a load on my shoulders." We didn't ever have meetings in Calgary with as much attendance as we did when Tommy was here. Even in Calgary, which is, as you say, different. When I moved to High River they said, "For heaven's sake, don't talk politics down there. You'll be ostracized."

Q: When did you move to High River?

MF: That's another story. When we moved to Calgary, we'd been here several years working in the office. The reason we thought this was such nice country was that my husband was a golfer and he wanted to join the High River Golf Club down here. You couldn't do that unless you were a resident. So we bought some property down here, which made us residents. We had it for a couple of years and then decided that's good enough, we'll start building out there, in 1972. So, in 1975, we made plans to build a cedar log house out there, and arranged to have the logs delivered to the property on a certain date, June 1st. My husband and my brother were going to be building it with some other help. The long weekend before, the May 25th birthday, my husband had a heart attack and he died, 49. That's my first husband. So there I was with 20 raw acres. Had the power in and that was about it, and the house in pieces out there. I phoned Cedar Log and said, would you please take it back? I said afterwards, I thought they had been dealing with hysterical women all their lives, because the manager said, "We can't take it back, it's custom cut. There, there, what we'll do is we'll put it on the back of the lot and when you get to the point where you can deal with this, come and see me." So eventually that's what happened.

Q: Now we're going to take you back to 1955. Talk about your involvement, and your life as a union person.

MF: In 1955 was when I moved to Calgary, out to the Western District office. That was quite a change for me; the only time I ever dealt with local people was when we had our policy conferences. Otherwise I was just ran that little office. One of the things we always did was office work for other people. When Retail Wholesale didn't have a secretary, they used to bring stuff in and I would do it for them. The same happened with

steel. So that's one of the things that I remember about our unions; they always shared what they had. Shortly after I got there, the Steelworkers were using our office to organize Westeel plants in Calgary. So they did all those campaigns out of our office. I did all the pamphlets and everything for the CCF too, out of our office. They could always rely on us.

Q: How well was CFAW doing in Calgary at that time? Were those good years for the union?

MF: Yes. The bargaining pattern was pretty well established by this time, and we were bargaining nationally. What we did in that office was deal with grievances that had reached a certain point. The plant got organized in Swift's originally, because a grievance procedure was what people really needed. When they needed a union - the perhaps didn't know it perhaps at the time - but they had no place to take their grievances. If you go and complain to the foreman, sometimes that's it, that's as far as it goes, if there aren't actual repercussions. But when you deal through someone else, the union steward manages to take all the trouble. That happens in the plants, then when the grievance process reached a certain stage, they all got sent out to our office. That's what our western director did. He traveled around to all the different Burns plants and met with company at a different level, with the managerial people rather than the local superintendents and so on, and settled grievances. Sometimes they went to arbitration, in which case we did the paperwork too.

Q: So members were quite happy with the union in those days?

MF: It was a good organization. Yes, I think so. I remember that one of the plants we had organized was Standard Brands. One of the things that they did was process molasses. They had big tanks here in Calgary, I guess they did whatever they do to sugar and it came out molasses. One of our members was there when a tank sprung a leak. Rather than just run, he waded through this hot molasses and turned the valve off so that it was no longer running, and then waded back out, He burned his hands something awful because everything was boiling hot. He got out and shut the door, and did whatever else he had to do, and was in the hospital for an awful long time.

He used to come up and visit with us. He told us that the Compensation Board eventually wanted him to go back to light duties - in spite of his heroic work. He was still wearing those elastic things right up to his elbow. But we helped him; we had one of our packinghouse workers on the Compensation Board at that time, a man by the name of Roy Jamha. He got to be the Chairman of the Board because of Premier Lougheed's work. We had Pete Kolba from our Swift plant up there, and the two of them were able to do a great deal for everybody, not just us. They took up this man's case, but this was not something that was decided at that level anyway; it would be administrators, a bit farther down the line. But in the end, they said, "Okay, you've been off work for such a length of time, time to go back to work." He never worked again.

Q: Did you go to any Federation of Labour Conventions?

MF: Oh yes. I just arrived here in 1955, and by this time, I had known Jack and Norm for a long time. We were driving up to Edmonton where Jack was the Federation President. They said to him, "Okay Jack, you go buy the booze for the hospitality room,

and bring it up to Edmonton. We started to drive - I'd never been to Edmonton in my life. We're driving along, and all of a sudden he and Norm got into a discussion about something. They stopped the car and said, here, you drive. They got in the back seat, and I was driving a car full of booze. We got to Edmonton, and I asked, "Which way do I go now. You go up that hill. What?" Going up that hill to the old MacDonald Hotel. Oh dear.

Q: That was when we still had two organizations in Alberta, right?

MF: Right. The other one was the Industrial Federation of Labour. But the two organizations got along very well, they worked together very well.

Q: Do you remember the convention when the two organizations merged?

MF: Not really. That would've probably been the convention where I was lugging the booze; but again, that's the thing about being the worker in the bunch. You didn't get to be on the convention floor, you would be doing all the paperwork somewhere. But that's what they paid me for. As the kids say now, that's what I got all the big bucks for. But I was well paid and I liked my job very much.

Q: Who were some of the people you met down in Calgary during the time you were working there?

MF: You'll find my name on the Charter of the OPEIU, the Office Workers Union in Calgary. One day Norm came into the office and said, I've just been over to the Labour Temple and those girls need something. I said, how about a union? I belonged to the Office and Professional Workers Union when I had been working for the Toronto local, but we didn't have anybody to organize us out here. So, because I worked for District 10, I just joined that particular union. So, I went over and talked to the girls in the Labour Temple and told them what kind of agreement we had. They asked me to help them get organized, and I said, sure, but that I'd have to transfer my membership because we didn't have enough members - I think you needed 10 at the time to apply for a charter from both the Union and the government. You had to have a certain number of people to get recognized as a local. So I transferred my membership from Toronto out here, and I got to be a Charter Member of this local out here.

Q: Who are some of the people you met in that union?

MF: Actually there aren't too many around now. Lucille Fedkiw would remember some of them. Beth Wochar was one, and you're going to meet her tomorrow night, but she wasn't there at the time. Joyce Patterson was the only one that's still left now that was around at that time. She was working for the Labor Council. Bill Paterson later became her husband. When Bill got to be the secretary of the local, she moved over and worked for CUPE. That's where she finished her career, in office work as a CUPE worker.

Q: What was OPEIU able to do for those women in that office?

MF: We firstly, we go a first contract. I think they needed a union for the same reason that everybody needs a union in the first place - because they had to have a process. Without a union, they didn't have any protection at all, that's the other thing. They needed the protection, they also needed a place to go to get their views across. If they had a

complaint in the office, they went to one of the officers of the union, who worked in another office. So it could be objective.

The OPEIU local is still working, still operating as a local. They used to invite me back to their annual meetings, even after I wasn't with them anymore. There'd be 20 or 25 people, so they're much bigger now than the original ten that got me to help them. But of course unions have expanded now. They're bigger and they don't do all their work at the labor temple anymore.

Some people don't like the idea that people who work for a union form a union. They think that they are disloyal if they want to belong to another organization. I had trouble with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters because of that. You only belong to one union, they said. After we merged, they wrote letters to tell me that I couldn't belong to two unions. If you're an Amalgamated person, that's what you are, and you don't belong to another one. But I told them that, "I'm an office worker also, and therefore I belong to the Office Workers Union and I'm not going to quit."

My answer to the people who say you don't need any union at all, because you're working for a union, is that we need a union for the same reason that anybody needs a union. When you're dealing person to person and you have a disagreement with that person about something, you have nowhere to go. You have no intermediary. You have no one to say, OK, I think you're right. If your immediate supervisor says no, that's all there is to that. There's nowhere to go. You can smile and put up with it or you can quit. Those are not alternatives that a worker should have to deal with.

Q: You've seen a lot in your life in the union movement. What are some of the things that have made you the happiest and made you think the union is really doing its job?

MF: I remember the elation we felt when we finally had that meeting in Winnipeg, during which we achieved national bargaining. It's one of the things we'd been working for a long time. It saved not only time and effort, but it saved the union a lot of money, and we were able to achieve much more for the members, as a result. That's something you have to consider. You're not spending your own money; you're spending other people's money. This way it could all happen at the same time. Grievance are fought which the company never heard of otherwise, because in some cases it's a principle that happens or some conditions that aren't necessarily suitable for a grievance. A general thing might come up which applies to everybody across the board. So you can say that to the company, this is how that clause doesn't work. It applies not only to this local union but you're talking to the talk management also, the people who eventually authorize the money, the agreement itself. Also it's the same way with locals. If you have local people dealing with local management, again it's the same problem. You either go out and pound the pavement, or you convince the 'man', which is sometimes very difficult to do, that you're right. Or that at least there should be some movement between you. So when you're dealing nationally that's one of the things you can avoid. You have an overall committee, you have people from all over the country who are all saying the same thing. It's not just a local problem, it's the agreement.

Q: Where do you think the union movement is going?

MF: It's different now than it was. Older people always say that, don't they? - but that's quite true. It's the same thing that's happening to society. We've all become little political blocks. I don't mean that politically, I mean 'political block'. Firm, where we think 'that's that'. Just a little example here: on the Burns committee we had one man from Northern Ireland and another man from the Republic. What happened? No matter what issue came up, it didn't matter, they were opposed. They were both great fellows, really working for their local unions, but each one had this thing in the back of their minds, they brought it with them from Ireland. Just because you say something is right doesn't necessarily mean that I think it's right, whether it had any relation to the question at all. That's one of the examples that I see. The other thing that we noticed in the early days, any of the union people that came out from Britain didn't really understand negotiation or compromise.

That's the thing we found, they could be very set and stubborn in that way. The company was somebody else. We got to the point in our Union that we were able to see that they were not just 'the company' - they were workers that we are were dealing with just like us. There's always room for compromise if you look for it. That's what I found in the Burns committee. The people that Norm and I dealt with in Calgary were younger. Maybe that had something to do with it; they were sort of the same age. I know when our first meetings nationally were a bit stiff and stilted because they were older people, original guys, who owned Burns. We started this, and you know how they are in the west here. You've run into that situation, but when they retired and we got the younger generation, it was much easier to deal with.

Q: Are you optimistic about the future for unions?

MF: For one thing, where we're living has a great deal to do with it. The things that happen now with strikes in Canada, I don't really like. I can't really talk much about it because I'm not there, but what I observed is that we just don't have the kind of protection we used to have. We're back in the same situation we were with the Socreds. When I moved to Alberta I was really thinking that Manitoba, Saskatchewan were moving quite a bit to the left, but not the Socreds. Now, we're getting the same kind of government in Alberta; static and really paternalistic. 'We know what's best.' They're right back to the old business of asking what we need a union for, as you say. The people that are the strong unionists are people who recognize the need for it; like the people in Brooks, those who supported the union. They were immigrants, people from the Sudan.

Q: Was it same in your younger days in Winnipeg? Was it the immigrants, or was it the locals who supported the union?

MF: It wasn't the same, because that generation thought that everything we had in Canada was a heck of a lot better than they had 'over there', so 'don't rock the boat'. Mostly the movement was a bit ethnic, with Ukrainian people and Polish people who worked in the plant.

[END]