

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Clarence Lacombe

Interviewer: Dave Werlin

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I was born in Calgary in 1934. I was the third of 4 children in my family. I have 2 older brothers and younger sister. During that period of time, which was the late '30s or early '40s, my father, who was a CPR engineer, but at that time was a wiper with the CPR, he had been cut down to very few hours of work. Not enough to raise a family on. So we made a decision to go homesteading in the Peace River country. We moved up there in 1938. Lived there for 4 years homesteading, and then returned to the city of Calgary in 1942. Upon moving back to the city of Calgary, we took residence in Victoria Park, which at that time was a real strong working class community, not like the horror it is today, what the exhibition board is doing to it. My dad used to tell me stories back in the late '30s, early '40s of a person who had part influence on his life, and who he used to go and listen to speak quite often on Sunday nights. A gentleman by the name of Pat Lenihan. It's very coincidental that my dad made references to Pat Lenihan and his leading the unemployed workers of that particular time. Because eventually when I did become involved in the labour movement, one of the people I was most connected with was Pat Lenihan. He had been the regional director in the Province of Alberta and had just retired. It was his predecessor, Jim Murrie, who was responsible for hiring me on with CUPE in 1971.

I started working with the City of Calgary in 1953. I spent 18 years working with the City. My first job with the City was a rod man with the surveying department. I worked on that for 3 years. Back in those days, usually the rod men got hired for the summertime only, and were laid off in the wintertime. However, I was very fortunate, because at that particular time they had a couple of big surveying jobs that needed done on the storm and sanitary sewers downtown, which had been scheduled to be replaced. So I wound up staying on full time for the first 3 years I was with the City. My fourth year with the City I was asked by the engineering boss to take a job in the traffic department as an accident statistician. I took that job and wound up working about 5 more years in the office with the traffic department. It was during that period of time that I got turned on to the labour movement. One of my coworkers, who was a draftsman, was laid off by our boss. This

was after he had just hired 2 new people. Both of the new people he hired were both going to be involved doing drafting. Yet he laid off the full time draftsman, saying there wasn't enough work for him. There was 2 CUPE reps that came to process his grievance. One was Harley Horne, and the other Art Roberts. When I seen how Art Roberts and Harley Horne were able to take an unjust situation, turn it around and win the person his job back, I was very impressed. At about that time I decided to move out of the office and take up employment in the outside. I switched then from Local 38 to Local 37's jurisdiction. The first job I did was volunteer to become the shop steward in the traffic department outside shop.

That would be in about 1961. I then became very active in the local. I worked my way up from shop steward in my own department to chief shop steward for the local, and then subsequently became the secretary of the local.

I then became secretary of Local 37. Held that position for 3 or 4 years. During that period of time, myself and the other 3 table officers for Local 37 thought it would be a move of wisdom to buy a building. We bought the old Labour Star Alzar Temple and turned it into a union centre. A building on 13th Avenue and Centre St. South. They've just recently sold and set up a new office building on 50th Ave SE.

Again, during that period of time, there was a gentleman who was the financial officer of Local 37, Stan Collier, a Welshman. A very, very strong trade unionist. He was another person that had a great influence on my views and opinions, and was a person that advocated honesty. He said if you're always honest about what you're doing, you'll never have troubles. He said it's only when you start lying that you wind up in trouble. I remembered that for a long time. Also during that period of time, and upon my being hired and becoming a rep for CUPE in 1971, it was coincidental that just in my declining days as a worker with the City of Calgary and my first month as a CUPE rep, I ran in the provincial election as a New Democrat in the provincial election of 1971. That was the election where Peter Lougheed ousted the Socreds and the Conservatives became the government of the Province of Alberta. Which they remain to this day, to the dislike of many people. But at that time it was looked upon as a movement to the left. Because we were kicking out the Socreds who were a miserable bunch of people, extreme right wingers. So most people saw electing the Conservatives as a slight movement to the left, and possibly better government coming to the province. But it really hasn't improved. It's just been a hodgepodge of leadership changes ever since.

So the people who had, at that time and in my early years of the labour movement, had the most impact on me were Pat Lenihan, Harley Horne, Art Roberts. There was a rep with Local 37 at the time by the name of Freddy Spooner, who was a very good guy. I learned from him. And I think I would be doing a real disservice and making a huge error if I didn't say that 2 other people had a very huge impact on my career and my learning in the labour movement. Two women by the name of Kate Raw, who was the secretary for the CUPE regional office. And Joyce Patterson, who wound up being the Local 37 secretary for close to 40 years. When you've worked with people of that nature, I think it's very important to make a point that I believe that reps learn from secretaries and conversely, secretaries learn from the representatives. Because you become very close in your relationship. To just back that up is the fact that when I was in Red Deer, spent 14 years in Red Deer, a person that I hired from off the street, Dianne Lemke at that time,

who is now Dianne Wyntjes, has moved up through the clerical end of it in CUPE, and then became a national rep. She's now the regional director for the province. They certainly don't lack the ability to be very, very smart and good leaderships.

I was going to use this as a sort of summation of my comments at a later point. While I was with 37 and before I became a CUPE representative, I got very active in the Calgary Labour Council. While I was with the Calgary Labour Council, and I served there in many positions, my first one being the assistant secretary position. Because at that time the Labour Council had a full time officer, and that was the secretary treasurer, Bill Paterson. I tease Bill repeatedly that during that period of time when I was his assistant secretary, he was my mentor. I joke and tell Bill anything I do wrong in the labour movement is the result of his training. He was also a person that had a great impact on my life and things I wound up doing. I think during that period of time my greatest memories are of the California grape boycotts that were going on. I wound up being very instrumental in leading a lot of the rallies, the picketing, that sort of thing. It was rather funny, because at that time I was married to a woman who worked in Safeways. The executive had to make a decision whether we were going to picket the Forest Lawn Safeways or the Forest Heights Safeways. My wife worked in the Forest Heights Safeways, and she said if I picketed their store not to bother coming home. As it turned out, the executive decided that we would picket the Forest Lawn one first. So that's where we had our first California grape rally, was at that particular store. We moved from there down to one on 4th St. W, then eventually a Dominion store in the North Hill Shopping Centre. There was a lot of good memories from that. I have a picture on my living room wall of my self later on when I was a rep in Red Deer, and also the president of the Labour Council in Red Deer. We were collecting money for the California farm workers. Caesar Chavez made a trip through Canada and we were giving him the money directly. That's one of the pictures that I pride more than any other, is the one I had taken with myself and Caesar Chavez when he came to Red Deer. So there's been a lot of people, both who I knew personally and others that I didn't know personally. But like Caesar Chavez, I did get the opportunity to meet and have an opportunity to talk to him. I consider him to be one of the brightest leaders in the labour movement, and somebody who's example can be looked to by other people as to what can be done when you have a strong enough desire to do something.

One that some people weren't quite prepared to get involved in. That's one of the reasons why I look back on that particular struggle, and it being so important to me because of the fact that I think there were people on the leadership of the Calgary Labour Council who conveniently kept on not showing up. As vice president, I wound up being the one that took the brunt of the action. But it was well worth it.

That's one of the things I look at and I mention it. Just before becoming a representative with CUPE, one thing that comes to my mind very clearly was myself traveling with Jim Murrie and going out to BC to a BC division convention. I was sort of shocked when I attended that convention in BC. Because the air at the BC division convention was so thick you could actually cut it with a knife. That was because of the fight between the left and the right. At that particular time, I can't remember whether it was the left that had the one vote advantage or whether it was the right that had the one vote advantage. But just about every major vote that came to the floor at that convention was decided by one vote.

A couple of times it was reversed, but only because maybe there was a couple of people from the other side that were out having a coffee at the time the vote was taking, or something. But all the votes were decided by one vote. It was quite an experience for me, being a laid back type person and somebody who hadn't really come into context in experiencing that type of fight. It was interesting that much later in my career, after I'd been fired by CUPE and reinstated, and then being ordered to go to BC as part of my reinstatement, I then became much more aware of the whole political aspect. I have some comments and stuff about those times when I was in BC. I recall very clearly a staunch member of the Socred party, card carrying member of the Socred party, who was a national rep in Victoria, taking me out for a beer and telling me that I had to have less to do with the people on the left and become more politically involved in the New Democrats. Little did that gentleman know that I had just 4 years before that ran as an NDP candidate in Alberta. He was a card carrying member of the Socred party and telling me that I had to disaffiliate from the left. What he was clearly telling me was I had to disaffiliate myself from the Communists. I think maybe I should start my experience in BC by talking about the fact that during my period of time in Alberta, one of the people I became very good friends with was a person by the name of Dave Werlin. When I went to BC as a staff member, I used to go down to Vancouver quite often for divisional executive meetings. I'd get on the phone and phone Dave up and invite him down for a beer. We'd go out for a drink or two. All of a sudden my boss and all the other reps in the province were jumping on my back and telling me I had to stop seeing Dave Werlin. Stop talking to the people from the Communist party. I withstood the attack and told them these people were my friends and that I wasn't going to back off. If they wanted to take action against, to go ahead and do so. I was quite prepared to take them on and fight any arbitration or anything else I had to do. Clearly made it understood to them that I had my personal friends, and my personal friends were my personal friends, and had nothing to do with my work with CUPE. And I could care less what the peoples political affiliation was. If a person was a friend, that was it. I persevered that situation. Then after I had some interesting experiences in the province of British Columbia, job dispute wise. I had never been involved in a strike as a member of Local 37 or a rep in the year and a half that I was on staff in Calgary. I wound up going out to Trail BC. I went there in December of '73. By August of '74 I had 8 locals on strike. I tried to tell them that I had absolutely no experience. They said, don't worry, we'll teach you. They certainly did. But you have to understand what the, not only union movement, but the employers movement in the province of BC, was like at that time. It was just automatic. If you didn't have a new collective agreement before the other one expired, you were either automatically going on strike or you were locked out. There was no way you were allowed to work without a collective agreement. That was just the reality of the day. You learned to live with it. I wound up having and becoming involved in a lot of disputes the 5-1/2 years I worked in BC. I think I learned and became a much better rep as a result of some of those disputes. I had one walk out in the east Kootenays, where the employers decided to lock out my 6 locals. The dispute lasted for 10 weeks. For whatever reason it was, and I still to this day don't remember, but the first day we got locked out I wrote a letter to the Minister of Labour, decrying the fact that the employers had locked us out the first of August because they knew they didn't need our membership working at that time. Because the schools had all been cleaned, the buses had all been repaired, and they could

save a months' wages by locking us out. I didn't think it was very fair, so I wrote the minister of labour and told him so. I got an answer back from him. He very flippantly told me that the lockout was the employer's strike weapon and that they had the right to use it. And that it was part and parcel of the negotiating process, and that he wasn't too concerned, and that the dispute would be resolved and settled in its due time. Well lo and behold, it got into September and school went back in. And the dispute continued. About the 15th of September my boss, who liked to interfere in my life quite often, phoned me up and ordered me down to Vancouver to meet with the Deputy Minister of Labour. I didn't want to go. I said the dispute didn't involve me, it involved the 6 locals. I said if the Deputy Minister of Labour wants a meeting with us, then it should be the 6 representatives from the 6 locals, and myself. Not myself alone. However, I phoned the 6 locals and they all gave me permission to go down. They said they trusted me enough that I wouldn't go down there and sell them out. So when I got down there, I found out that the Deputy Minister of Labour, my boss was very concerned and wanted to know what I was prepared to do to get the dispute settled. I said I'm prepared to do exactly the same as the Minister of Labour. The dispute is going to take its course and it'll settle itself when it's settled. The Deputy Minister was not aware of the fact that his minister had sent me a very flippant letter. I had the letter with me, and handed him a copy of it. That ended the meeting. I got up and hopped on the plane and flew back to Cranbrook. We did get the dispute settled. As the snow started coming down in the mountains in October, as it does in the interior part of the province, day by day you could see the snow coming down lower and lower. I started telling the people when we're bussing the kids or carpooling the kids and taking them to school, that their insurance wouldn't cover them. If they had an accident they might wind up getting sued because their insurance wouldn't cover it, they'd have to pay it personally. Then the parents really got upset. There was an average of 15, 20 letters a day, phone calls, telegraphs a day. Victoria was being flooded. We eventually settled that dispute in the middle part of October and went back to work. Upon my settling in the East Kootenays, lo and behold there was a strike lockout that developed in the West Kootenays. The minister made sure he didn't write any flippant letters this time, and immediately ordered the workers back to work and set up a binding arbitration process. The 2 disputes wound up with the BC co-trustees association disbanding their labour relations department the following year at their convention. Our disputes had caused them so much disharmony, there was so much pressure on them, that they decided they didn't want to be involved in the bargaining anymore, and turned the bargaining back over to the individual school boards. So I guess the 2 disputes had quite an effect on the future of bargaining in the province of BC, because of the fact they disbanded their labour relations department.

My memory of the accreditation now is quite vague, but I know it was not very good. As I recall, the provincial government legislated a provision in the labour act know as accreditation. What that meant was that all the CUPE school board locals were forced to bargain with a central school board employer organization rather than through individual local bargaining. That made it virtually impossible to bring the lower paid locals up to par with the higher paid locals. As well, it took away the locals ability to win public support from the people in the school districts.

When we had those 2 disputes, the BC school trustee association themselves said they don't care what was in effect, they no longer wanted to have anything to do with the

bargaining, and said that's independent and up to the individual school boards. Then the East Kootenays, for example, went out and hired a person. It was one of the people who was previously working with the BC school trustee association in their labour relations department. But that person had to move to Cranbrook. He lived in Cranbrook and would have been part and parcel of that community. His decisions that he made were going to not only affect him but affect his family. Whereas previously he could fly in from Vancouver, go back the next day, and not really care what he had done. That was one of the injustices of that whole bargaining system that was in effect at that time. There were 6 or 8 reps for the BC school trustees association, and they would fly into the various different parts of the province, do the bargaining, and make the school boards take positions that maybe some of them didn't want to take. That's what wound up resulting in some of these disputes.

The NDP had just been defeated again by the Socreds and the Socreds had got back into power. Bennett and his friends. Unfortunately the NDP never stayed in power that long. I had the opportunity in the first part of my years out there was under the New Democrats. Then the Socreds went back into power. It was quite different, having an NDP government. I know some of my organizing that I had, it was quite different than the province of Alberta having a lawyer come to chair the arbitration or chair the labour relations board hearing who was an NDP card carrying person, rather than having somebody from the Conservative party or, in that case, the Socreds, which eventually got back in power. It made quite a difference. One dispute that I remember clearly, and I don't know if you want me to have absolute clean language throughout our discussions. But I had organized a group of workers in Creston. Two of the workers had been fired. We were having a hearing to have them reinstated. We had a coffee break. The chairman of the board came over to me and said, Mr. Lacombe, you are doing an excellent job of making a real presentation. But when the fuck are you going to give me the goddam evidence I need to reinstate your people? Two of the women that were very closely connected with the organizing of those workers were standing close enough to hear the chairman when she came over and made the statement to me. They just stood there and giggled and laughed. My mouth dropped open. I stuttered and stammered and didn't know what to say. But when we went back in after the coffee break I gave her what she wanted. We got the right decision out of the board very clearly.

A female lawyer from Vancouver. NDP. It was quite humorous.

I had several disputes when I was in BC and then got transferred back to Red Deer, Alberta in '79. Then I wound up working in Red Deer for 14 years until my retirement in '93. I had very few disputes when I came back to the province of Alberta. Somebody told me my reputation had preceded me and the employers were well aware of what to expect if they wanted to have disputes, that I was a person who was very knowledgeable in disputes and had quite a few when I was in BC. I didn't back down from disputes, so I had very few. It was coincidental that 2 of the 3 disputes I did have both took place at the same time. I had a strike with the municipal workers in Drumheller, which lasted 7 weeks. And I had a strike with my County of Wetaskiwin employees. They were both going concurrently at the same time. We won both disputes. Both groups got the settlements they were desiring. The one in Drumheller was probably the one that was the

worst of the 2 disputes. It was one that never needed to take place. I had sat down with their appointed representative, her bargaining committee, and their bargaining committee, and we reached a tentative agreement. When we went back, our people accepted. The employer's guy went back to the council and they rejected. As you're well aware, Drumheller was the labour community in the province of Alberta at one time. Real staunch labour town. All retired people who were past union card carrying members came out and supported the workers. The council took a pretty good beating over that particular situation. After I was no longer involved in the bargaining and servicing of Drumheller, and Mary Chuckry from Calgary took over, she organized a group. She asked me to come down when they were having a meeting with the employer and the council members for this particular nursing home. When I went down there one of the council members was one of the council members that was there at the time we had the municipal dispute. All of a sudden he walked into the room and seen me there, we very quickly got a settlement. The labour relations board reinstated a couple of people. That same alderman made it very clear to our legal rep and Mary Chuckry that there would be absolutely no problem in negotiating a first collective agreement, and they were quite willing to sit down and get thing underway very quickly. They didn't want another dispute. The previous one I had maybe stopped another one taking place.

In Alberta, my most notable dispute was with the Westerner employees. I organized the Red Deer Westerner employees at the exhibition grounds. It was only 8 workers. Because I had the support of Local 417, the municipal workers local, we organized the 8 people into their local as a sub-local. Then Local 838, the hospital workers in Red Deer. Because of the staunch support, those 2 locals were prepared to give to those 8 workers, and what money we collected from the rest of the labour movement with our appeal, we were able to keep those 8 workers out with full pay for 7 months while our dispute lasted. The employer eventually caved in. They knew they weren't hurting these people because they were receiving full pay. As a matter of fact, that wound up being my biggest problem. When we did finally settle the dispute after 7 months, the hardest part of the job I had to do was convince the 8 workers to go back to work. They said, why should we go back to work and work 8 hours a day and bust our butt, when we've been getting paid full wages for walking the picket line 4 hours. It was kind of humorous. We won that dispute, and it was against one of the biggest anti-union people in the province, Gary Johanson, who has caused the labour movement an awful lot of problems. We put him in his place in that particular case. I had previously negotiated with Gary and I had no problem with him. But in this particular case, he was working with a very anti-union bunch of people. Both Gordon Towers' sons were part of the western directors, absolutely a bunch of hateful people. And all cattlemen and farmers on the board of directors totally anti-union and real strong right wingers. But we did get that dispute settled. That was the only 3 I had in the province of Alberta in 14 years after I came back to Red Deer. In my period of time in Red Deer, I became the president of the Labour Council. Became very active in the Federation of Labour. When I came back to the province of Alberta I was quite amazed that one of the people who had been chastised for meeting with out in BC and all of a sudden becoming a CUPE rep. Dave Werlin. During my period of time and my activity on the Federation of Labour, I supported Dave. The rest of the people in our organization and we eventual got Dave elected to the president of the Federation of Labour. Quite frankly, in my view and opinion, the years when Dave was the president of the

Federation of Labour, the working people in the province of Alberta have never had better leadership. I think Dave personally got more people to become New Democrats, to become active in the NDP movement. Even though Dave himself has long admitted that he's a communist and has never hidden the fact. To maybe summarize my 22 years in the labour movement, my biggest influences have been Dave Werlin, Pat Lenihan, Harley Horne... they had more influence on me than any others, that is that they were all card carrying communists. I have remained a New Democrat all my life, still am. Took out a lifetime membership in Saskatchewan during the 6 years I was over there after I retired. Still support the New Democrat movement. But it's sort of coincidental to me that the 5 people who have probably affect my life more than any others are 5 card carrying members of the communist movement. People who have done more for the working people in the province of Alberta than any other people I've known in my life. It's unfortunate that people are so scared of the word communism, because some of the greatest trade unionists have been people who've been members of the communist party.

In the first election in 1971 when I ran provincially, one of the opponents I was running against was Normie Quong, ex football great with the Calgary Stampeders and Edmonton Eskimos. The riding took in Chinatown. I fortunately had an English professor from the University of Calgary walk into my campaign office. He said he could work behind the scenes on my campaign, but nothing out front and up front. So I had him working on my campaign. He could read and write 7 different languages, one of them being Chinese. So I had him take my basic pamphlet and put it in Chinese. We passed that out in Chinatown. One of the things I found so interesting about that pamphlet and the affect it had on people, was I walked into one store and asked the store owner if I could put my sign up in his window. He already had both the Conservative and Socred sign up. He was hemming and hawing, and I passed him one of my pamphlets. He opened it up and seen that the inside of the pamphlet was in Chinese. He thought for about 2 minutes and said, where do you want to put your sign? Do you want me to take those other 2 down? It impressed him so much that that pamphlet was in Chinese, his language. It affected him tremendously. I wound up in that election beating Normy Kwong in Chinatown, and I got more votes out of Chinatown than Kwong did. So Kwong wound up being the Chinese candidate, and he got the least amount of votes in Chinatown. The ex speaker of the house, who won the election, got more votes than me and I got more votes than Kwong. So Kwong being Chinese wound up getting the least amount of votes from his own people, which I thought was very interesting. In that same election, another one of the highlights of my political career was when we had a rally at the Western Canada High School. I had an opportunity to personally meet Tommy Douglas, David Lewis, and Ed Broadbent. These are the 3 people that I personally think are the 3 greatest leaders of all time of the NDP movement, particularly in the federal aspect. When you stop to think as working people today, the legacy that these leaders have left us. We have Medicare as a result of Tommy Douglas. Even though he received a lot of static because of it, we have the Canada Pension for working people as a result of action by David Lewis. When he supported a minority liberal government but also got some good legislation passed for working people. Having personally been able to meet those 3 people, who I held so high in my esteem, was a great experience for me. In that election I had my 3 children, who at that time were 12, 11 and 10. I had a couple of other nieces and nephews working in my

campaign. They all had t-shirts that had Lacombe across the front. We wound up at the rally at the Western Canada High School. After he shook my hand, the first thing Tommy Douglas did was go over and talk to the young people. That really impressed me. Tommy said later on to me, those are the people we have to have and those are the people we have to get into our movement to remain alive. I think that's just being overlooked and forgotten by far too many of the leaders of the party. It certainly is one of the real truisms that we have to look at.

I then ran a second time for the New Democrats. That was in 1984 federally. In that election, Gordon Towers, the incumbent conservative won the election by 67,000 votes. But I managed to finish ahead of the Liberals. For the first time in that history of that riding, a New Democrat had finished second in that riding. That was in Red Deer in 1984. So I ran twice on behalf of the New Democrats. I just raised shit with the leader of the party today. I've been back in the province of Alberta for 4 years. I had asked the people in Saskatchewan to pass on the information to the people in Alberta that I had moved back to Alberta. I have yet to be approached by anybody from the party. I jumped on the leader and gave him a bit of a blast today and said, if you can't look after the militants who are some of the leaders of the movement, how are we going to be able to do anything for the working people? Maybe I'll end with that comment, because I think that's one that's very fitting.