

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Bill Paterson

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Date: February 2003

Location: Calgary

Index: British immigrant – tradesman (painter) – business agent – Executive Secretary, Calgary & District Labour Council – labour educator – organizer – spokesperson for a public ambulance service – working class politics – maintaining membership

Early life and background

I was born in Medicine Hat Alberta. When I was 2 1/2 years of age, my parents went back to the old country (England), just before the Great Depression. They knew very well that social services over there were much better than here. I lived there for a total of 20 years and was educated in a little town outside London called Southend-on-the-Sea. We started school there at age 5, and finished at 14.

When I was 14, the Second World War was already on. It began right when I quit school to get involved in work. Rather than go to high school, I went into the War to work. My father was an ironworker by trade and a member of the Engineers' Union, and I went to work doing the same job joined the Engineers' Union and went to a couple of meetings. But after a couple of months I realized that this job wasn't for me and I quit – and like any typical young kid, just jumped around from job to job. One day, I was repairing houses which had been bombed by the Germans. We were putting up wallboard in the place that was all grey and black, a filthy place. But then, these guys came in to paint, and started painting these window sashes pink, green, blue. I was enthralled by the colour and decided that this is what I want to do. After all those grey dirty years, it suddenly brightened my life.

So I applied for painting apprenticeship and ended up as a painter. In 1949, when we came back to Canada, my dad told me not to go to Medicine Hat but to go to Calgary, because it was a bigger city and the opportunities would be greater. When I got to Calgary in 1949, the population was 120,000 people. You couldn't even have a drink with your wife on Sunday. Here we were coming from London, where we got bombed a few times – a City of 6 million people to Calgary with 120,000 people. I made up my mind I'd stay here a year and if I didn't like it, go back to England and take out English citizenship. But I never did give up my Canadian citizenship, because something happened in that year. I don't know what it was - I liked to see the mountains in the morning, and the people were so friendly. So I stayed. A year later I got married. That's pretty well it

In 1955 the painters went on strike, so I went with them. I was just an ordinary member in those days, and didn't hardly speak at meetings. One day after the strike began there was a meeting at which the chairman said he was looking for a person to be in charge of picket line duties. The guy that did it doesn't know how and they needed somebody to organize the picketers - any volunteers? Without even thinking, I jumped up and said, I'd do it. I knew very well I could do it and I kept the whole thing going, kept everybody in line. After 2 weeks the strike was over. In those days, in the construction trades, you didn't go by percentage; you went by cents per hour. We were asking for 15 cents an hour increase from \$1.30 an hour but settled for 10 cents. It took us 2 weeks to get it. The employers had offered 5 cents, and that's why the strike took place - over a nickel.

In the following year, the business agent of the painters was stepping down; said he'd had enough of it and recommended Bill Paterson for the job. They asked if I would accept? but I had to go home and ask my wife first. She said, 'why don't you try it? If you don't like it, you can always go back painting. But try it and see what happens'. So I did. By the time I retired, the membership jumped from 35 to 406. While I was business agent, I became a delegate to the Calgary Labour Council. In those days, we used to meet twice a month on the 2nd and 4th Fridays, and the executive meetings were on the 1st and 3rd Fridays. One of every 5th Friday we had a night off.

I was on the executive of the Labour Council and also business agent for the painters, but after 7 years, from '56 to '63, the Executive Secretary of the Labour Council retired and went back to work as a bus driver. He had planned to go back to the City for one year, then reapply for his job - you could do that in those days. So there was a vacancy and I applied for the job - being on the executive, I knew very well I could do it. I became Executive Secretary in '63. It was very tough in those days, especially for me, because I was a progressive left winger, and most of the delegates were right wingers. In those days, when you became Executive Secretary, you automatically were elected as the Treasurer, however, that year it came time to an election and I got beaten by one vote - the only time in history that the executive secretary was beaten for the Treasurer's position. The President was angry because the person that run against me was the Office Secretary, who's supposed to work under me, but as the treasurer, she ranked above me. This was on a Friday. So the President told her to either resign the job as Treasurer, or on Monday or you're out of a job. On Monday she stepped down and I took over. I was facing a crowd of people that didn't want me in the first place; it was by luck that the executive picked me. Therefore I had to prove myself, and I worked hard, and after 2 or 3 years doing all sorts of work, things that the other guy never did. After 2 or 3 years one of the most rightwing members of the council from the transit union came up to me and said, "Bill. I don't want to brag about this, but this is part of my life. You're the best Secretary we've ever had."

It wasn't very pleasant, though, and the only thing that kept me going were my beliefs. Regardless of what they thought, I knew very well that the most important class in this country was the working class. What concerned me, however was that the working class in this country had no concept of being working class. So they wouldn't vote for a working class candidate. They would vote Liberal, Conservative, or Social Credit, but they wouldn't vote for their class.

Labour Council activities

If there was a strike in our district, we would pass a motion to support it, and then notify our affiliates to help the strikes in any way they could with bodies as well as money. We would organize and help on the picket line, but always remember that the union on strike was the one in charge of it. All we would do is help, but not could control it. It was their business, and that's what we did every time. We would march with them and support them in any way we could, including asking for money – but only if they asked.

One of the many things we did was to be involved in the mediation process. We would be called in to sit on a 3-man board consisting of labour, management and government, which would decide an issue and bring back a recommendation. It couldn't settle the strike, but could bring in recommendations. I sat on many of those boards on behalf of Labour, and sometimes we won, and sometimes we didn't. We were involved in many such instances, as automatically the labour council rep would represent labour on these.

Specific boycotts or campaigns

Oh absolutely. We used to get many resolutions or letters from the Canadian Labour Congress asking for boycotts of certain items and employers. Every issue of the minutes of our meetings had a list of the products we boycotted. It was always included on the bottom of the minutes.

There were so many of these boycotts. Kraft Cheese was a big one. Grapes were another. When Caesar Chavez came to Calgary to promote it, Dave Werlin and I met him. He was asking for help. We condemned one organization, the Retail Clerks because they wouldn't let us picket outside Safeway, and they had a contract with Safeway. We tried to urge them to allow us to picket, but they were opposed, and we had to be very careful, because that union was a big contributor to our funds. We couldn't picket Safeway, but we did picket the other grocery stores where California grapes were being sold, whether it was union or otherwise. But the grapes were a big, big issue.

Did you know that the Calgary Labour Council was responsible for the formation of the public ambulance service in this city, that we were primarily responsible? When I came here in Calgary in '49, there were 2 private ambulance services. One ran on the north hill and one on the south side; that was their jurisdiction. They got \$100,000 a year from the City to run their service, which wasn't very good. For many years we went before city council and pleaded with them to form a properly run ambulance service, but we were turned down. What brought the whole thing to a head was one particular instance in the late 60's, in which a man had a heart attack on the 7th St. bridge. The ambulance from the South got there first, but as they were taking him away, the ambulance from the North came along, and there was a fight - a big fight because a guy died on 7th St. bridge half way across the river. They were more concerned about their money they'd get from picking the guy up. So, I went before City Council again and urged them to form a properly run ambulance service. One thing led to the other. We got support from some of the aldermen who finally realized something had to be done and formed a committee to look into the whole matter. Art Roberts, one of our delegates, was appointed to this Committee. We went before this committee with a brief, outlining the reasons why there should be a publicly run ambulance service where no profit would involved. The most important thing would be the service, with number one people and all that. After about 2 more years of lobbying, in the late '60s or 70s they finally brought in a publicly run

ambulance system. After that, other cities followed. But we were the ones who did it, because we kept plugging away.

Labour Council Education

We used to run what we called 'weekend schools' twice a year, in the spring and fall. We'd hold courses on 6 or 7 different subjects; public speaking, parliamentary procedure, negotiations, politics, health and welfare, these sort of things. In those days, the school was strictly union members, nobody else. You paid the fee and did that.

Another part of my job – and I loved it - was going in and lecturing high school, university and SAIT students over the role of the labour movement in Canada; what it was all about, why we formed it, and the advantages of unions. I'd go whenever the teacher would call, and the word got around, so quite a few teachers called me. We knew very well that business people were doing the same every day of the week, with the way the lessons are given to the kids.

When I became executive secretary, and even before that, I had some ideas about how our Labour Schools should be run. When I first started running the schools myself, I first used to run them at the old labour temple. However, the crowds got bigger and bigger, and we finally had to leave the labour temple and move into regular schools. We would pay the school board a fee for using their facilities on Friday night, all day Saturday and all day Sunday. We used to wind up with a banquet. In those days it was easy to do so because there weren't so many evening things going on as there are now. We finally ended up at the Alberta Vocational College, where we can go through the whole weekend for free, because the provincial government paid for it. We had about 8 classrooms, all available to members for a small fee. They were better informed members when they go back into the world of work.

We used to hire our own people. If we decided we'd have a class on elocution, we'd get a speaker from a school to come in and he would be paid by the Congress, because this is a Congress event. Most of our instructors were from within our own ranks, however. They would come from all over Canada, because the congress would call people in from all over the country. To my knowledge, they still do that today. Self education? Absolutely! The most important reason for the schools was to get the unions together so they'd know how the others worked. As it turns out, they're basically all the same, all looking for the best wages we can get, better working conditions, better vacations and things like that. Students would realize that they were all in the same boat.

Some memorable people

Art Roberts was originally a Welsh miner, who came into Drumheller many years ago. He was also a communist; he never concealed it. He was a very articulate man, very well spoken, and an inspiration to the labour movement. If you were a left-winger, he inspired you. He used to shake up quite a few Conventions when he spoke, especially Alberta Federation of Labour conventions.

Harley Horn was another guy I remember. He was a very well educated person and was also well respected. Some people didn't like Harley because of his manners and the way he acted at time, but he was a basically real good guy - another person who was a good influence on the labour movement.

Dave Werlin was another one. The first time I met Dave was in the back room of the Labour Council. Dave started to talk, and I noticed that he was talking the same language as me, politics-wise. I got interested in what he had to say, and I think he got interested in what I had to say. Probably couldn't understand me half the time because of my accent! We got together as friends, and we've been friends ever since.

So I would say Harley Horn, Art Roberts and Dave Werlin were the 3 people in my experience that really influenced the labour movement in this city and this province. There may be others, but those 3 that come to my mind.

Why he 'stuck with it'

I worked full-time for the labour movement for 35 years, 7 years with the painters and 28 years with the Calgary Labour Council. I went from one job to the other. When I was business agent for the painters. I got re-elected by two votes. In those days, economics in the construction trade were really bad, and so the union got blamed for it. That's not fair, but we were the ones whose heads rolled. Then, when the opportunity to become Secretary of the Labour Council came up. I applied for it and got it. I left one job on the Friday and on Monday I was secretary of the Labour Council - was there now for 28 years. One issue we had in those days that we're still fighting for today is the 40-hour week. They were fighting for the 5 day week 8 hour day way back when I first started, and they still haven't got it. It's getting worse than it was before; I don't think things are improving, in fact I think things are getting worse. I feel sorry for working people today. In many instances they have to have 2 jobs to make ends meet, or both have to go out to work full time to make ends meet. That is a poor reflection on the economy of our country, even though I think Canada is the greatest country in the world.

It's because of the people. I just love working with people.

As I said before, I'm a member of the working class. I've always been a member of the working class. I've always worked for wages. Even though I was business agent, I was still working class; I just joined a group of people that supported and were fighting for better improvement in their wages and working conditions. That was my life, and I loved it. Even though I didn't always agree with people on politics, on economic issues we're all in the same boat. We fought that way - for better legislation for everybody, not only for organized workers, but for everybody. We were all working for the same goal; the improvement of the working people. That's the same thing unions doing today. I'll fully support them until the day I die.

The struggle to maintain membership

When I became business agent for the painters, I looked through the contract that we had with the employer's organization. One of the clauses said all employees shall make application and join painters local 583 within 30 days of appointment. I went around to see all these people and found out that some of them were not even members. So, I went to see the ex-business agent to ask why he didn't enforce. He said that it was unenforceable? I was pretty sure that it could be enforced, because it was right there in black and white. So I got in touch with the international rep, who lived in Vancouver. He came out to see me and said, 'Bill I support you 100%. I've been trying for years to get that thing implemented.'

So we went before the arbitration board and pointed out that the contract says that all employees shall belong to the painters union within 30 days of commencing appointment. We wanted it enforced. One thing led to another, and the arbitration board ruled in our favour. Once that happened, I went right to the employers and pointed out that all the people who were not members of our union, from this day on had 30 days to join or go 'down the road'. They flocked to me, boy. That's what happened. A good example of how serious it was, which is why I often used to work till 9 o'clock at night. In one place, I said to this guy, 'you've been here 30 days, are you gonna join the union?' He said 'no, I will not.' So I said, 'you're down the road. I went to the employer, the employer fired him. On another day, I was sitting in my office one night, and a guy walks in who was one of these Polish freedom fighters. He came in, yapping away like crazy, mad as hell because I said that if he wants to carry on working, he would have to pay me initiation fee and one month dues right now. He pulled out a knife ... but then he put it away and walked out.

The union negotiates a contract with employers for certain wages, working conditions, holiday pay, and things like that. By doing that, we were improving the lot of the painters, so if they wanted to work for that company that has a contract with us, they would have to pay for the privilege (I don't like to use that word)... They work for that company under conditions set out in that contract, and if it says that they have to belong to the union as a condition of employment, same as they say the hours of work are from 8 to 5, that is a condition of employment. If they say the wage will be so much per hour, that is a condition of employment.

Where there is no union the employer could pay whatever he wanted, and subject workers to miserable conditions. For painters, there's a lot of high work with painters. We have to make sure we have the proper scaffolding, and that the rigs are in top shape. If our members aren't sure, they can call the inspectors from occupational health and safety, and they'll come down and examine it. Until that happens, the painters have a right to not work under those conditions. They couldn't get fired for insisting that things be safe. Same as using masks in places with fumes; they must have them. We made sure that these were installed by the employer. In non union places, dangerous practices are just carried on, some are very dangerous. Many times people would get hurt and then the Board would be called in, but by that time it was too late. So we tried to protect our members as best we could.