

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: John Ventura

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

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Location: Edmonton

John Ventura. I started in early '74, I believe February or March of '74, and then I went on leave from the plant in '92.

I was actually working at Dominion Tanners at the time. I was working there. I was working for a foreman, he was a good guy, but I couldn't understand him. He was German. He spoke very poor English and I had a hell of a time understanding him. So I thought to myself, I ain't gonna last here, cuz I can't communicate with this guy. So I thought I better start looking for some work. So I went and decided to apply at Swifts. They called me up, I started working there and quit the other place. I started in Table Ready Meats. It was a good place. I was fortunate. Most of the foremen that I worked for, with the exception of maybe one that was a bit flaky, I always got good supervisors. When I worked in TRM I had Paul that was a supervisor. He was a pretty good fellow, I never had any problems with him. I got laid off and went into Pork Cuts about 6 weeks after I started. I guess in TRM what I did is I used to hang ham on trees, which were these metal square racks. It wasn't a difficult job. It was steady doing the same thing over and over, but you had lots of time to joke around with fellow workers so it wasn't bad. When I went into Pork Cuts it was probably one of the best departments from the point of view of temperature, not too cold, not too hot. Just a nice place to work, on the 3rd floor. I worked there for quite some time. Well basically I was at the end of the line. In Pork Cuts we had this system where, when you first started, you'd work at the end of a line stacking boxes on pallets. Then after you had a little bit of seniority and a younger guy got hired, you'd move up one stage and slowly progress until you got into the knife position. I didn't get as far as the knife, I wasn't there long enough. Basically I started off stacking boxes on pallets, from there I was on the strapping machine strapping boxes, then I went up to scaling to product that went into the boxes. Then I ended up

doing the grading. The grading was a little bit higher, paid a little more. You had to select whether the product was a certain grade for the purpose. Which was a very difficult job, because it was always subjective. If they were really short on lines, all of a sudden they allowed a lot more to go through. So you were being too selective. When they weren't needing as many, all of a sudden you were letting anything go through. It was a difficult job. For only a couple more brackets, it really wasn't worth it. But I did that. From that point on, there were some layoffs. I went into the Beef Department. It was a little bit colder but it seemed to be a little bit steady, so I refused a recall back to Pork Cuts and I ended up staying in the Beef Department. At that time it was the combination department. Later on it merged and became one beef department. But they used to have block ready beef upstairs on the 5th floor. Cuz Pork Cuts used to be on 3 different floors, 3 being where I worked. I worked a little bit on the 4th, basically pushing hogs into the cooler. Very difficult job, but again it wasn't bad. On the other side of the 5th floor there was a small beef department where they used to do block ready beef style. On the main floor, which you'd call the 2nd, the basement, what was called the Pickle Cellar, was actually floor one. So the main floor was referred to as two. On that level is where we had beef dept. which was the C&C beef, canners and cutters, that type of beef. There was the SCR, that was where the more skilled senior employees worked, where it required more skill. It was the more expensive cuts they would work on. I worked in the C&C and at the very later end, before the beef basically disappeared, I was working a little bit in the SCR side. Then we merged with block really and things really went poorly. They did a lousy job of designing the floor so the beef dept didn't have a chance of surviving, based on the poor engineering that was done.

Just to give you an idea, when I worked in the beef department before I started working as a knife man. I mean, again, when you start in any department you always start on the lowest job. So again, my job was packing, scaling, doing the shipping at the end of the line. Which was lower rates of pay. The knife men were getting back at 15. So if you had some seniority that's where you'd want to go. The saw jobs, until later we increased the rates, they used to be in the middle. That was dangerous work and physical, heavy work. But because management felt it took less to train a saw man, it paid less. Consequently, once a guy learned how to become a good saw man, he moved into knife as well for a little extra money. Because there was always a problem keeping trained people on and eventually we got the right?. To give you an idea of how bad the engineering was in that beef dept., when I worked at the end of the line packing, one

person could do all the packing, shipping and basically handle all the meat that was coming from the line. You'd have probably 20, 30 boners supplying the meat coming down table. On one side you had all the fronts being done, front cuts, and on the other side you had all the hind cut products being done. It was a moving line coming down. At the end of the line it would go onto a belt where you'd have to select a different product for the orders. Stuff that wasn't for orders you had to fill in standard sizes of box for different products, one person could basically run the end of the line, it was that smooth. It was really well designed. The meat came on top of the line. Underneath you had the boxes. Once you filled your box you shoved it underneath on a separate belt. It was very slick, very well done. Some of the products that weren't used you'd throw up on top of another line. Everything was very slick. Once person could easily handle that with very little difficulty. Then they decided to change things a little bit. It got to the point at the end, that nothing worked. You'd require sometimes 5 or 6 guys at the end and you'd still have to hold up the line because everything would get so congested that it couldn't be done. So it was just very poor engineering. The very first day they started running, we were laughing, we knew it wouldn't work. Because they didn't ask the workers. We just thought it was hilarious. We also used to do bulls. Bulls, when you take a little bit of meat off a bull, it's a lot of meat. They had these time little holes and you couldn't get it in there so you'd have to chop it into tiny little pieces to get it through the square hole. What would happen is if too much went at once it would plug up on the other side of the belt. It was just chaotic. There was more meat falling on the floor. The bone belt wouldn't work. None of the belts, everything was just a mess. It was such a joke. Initially when they were doing some of this building we tried to give some suggestions because we could see some things didn't look right. We were told, what the hell did we know, we weren't engineers. These guys knew what they were doing. They may know engineering, but they didn't know the meat and how much a crew of men were capable of producing. And they may have thought the belts were going to run fast enough to do the meat, but when you have a large line of people, one guy throws the meat, another guy throws a piece, by the time it gets to the last guy you've got so much meat it's just unbelievable. But the whole thing was a mess. It didn't have a chance. They spent all kinds of time trying to fix it. At the very end it still required a minimal, I don't think it ever worked with less than 4 guys at the end, and it just didn't work very well. With the 4 guys you'd get behind. We were doing less, they also changed it. So we used to do shifting, which was selecting where you had to do an order for a specific customer.

After that they changed it. Customers were required to order certain quantities of certain products. Even with that, that made the shifting easier, but even with that it was just a mess. There was no place for the boxes we had. You'd have to turn around and put the boxes somewhere else. Everything was just a total mess. If they had taken the basic concept that we had and lengthened it to have more boners and make a few small changes but had the same concept. I'm always of the opinion that if something works well, take advantage of it. You don't screw it up when it's working well. If it's not working, then you fix it. They took a slick operation that worked very well and they destroyed it. They made it so nothing worked. The production just kept going from one thing to another, just worse all the time.

The beef closed, I believe it was around I'd say '91, '92. I wasn't working in that department by that time, but in the later end I ended up getting involved in the union. Even though I belonged to that department basically I spent most of the time doing union business. With a plant that size, there's always so many different problems so I didn't spend a lot of time there. Prior to that, at the very tail end before I left the plant, when there was some layoffs, I ended up going into receiving, then I refused a recall so I stayed in Receiving. So when the beef plant actually closed, I wasn't there at the very tail end. I'd say it was about '91 or '92.

... There wasn't a department that didn't have, there was a lot of people that would start couldn't speak any English and you'd basically help them along with their English as they did the job. For example, I remember teaching Angelo how to do some scaling. He was a knife man. I had to help him learn how to scale. He couldn't speak almost any English, and it was kind of difficult. You'd have to just kind of point to the scale as to where you wanted him to fill the box to, and basically with some sign language to get the job done. And you'd write out a word of what you wanted him to write or stamp on the box. Over a period of time he picked up more and more. A lot of guys started that way. They started with absolutely no English skills. By the time they left they learned a bit. With me it was actually to opposite. I'm from a Portuguese background. By the time I started at Swifts, I couldn't speak almost any Portuguese, just a little bit. By working with a few fellows next to me, Jack Mendez who was excellent in the language, he would tutor me and if I'd say something wrong he'd correct me. My Portuguese actually started to improve there. It was something that I learned quite well. Not a lot. But in my department we had probably 6. My dept had quite a bit. The killing floor, there was 1 or 2, there was not many in the killing floor. There might have been more, maybe 4, but there wasn't a lot.

There was quite a few in cleanup. A lot of the Portuguese people, they used it as a part time job. They worked in the cement finishing during the day and they'd be working night shift in the cleanup. They'd use it like as a part time job. I never actually tried to figure out how many there was, but there was I guess a reasonable amount. There was a large group of Ukrainians, then towards the end it seemed like over a period of years, they'd hire a certain type of worker. If you look at the most senior employees, a lot of them were of Ukrainian background. Towards the end there were more of the oriental background. So I'm not sure what it was, but it seemed that there was a certain period of time where if you were a certain nationality you'd get hired for sure. Then later on they were looking for somebody else. I'm not sure what it was, but that's what it appeared. I don't think there was a language or nationality that you wouldn't find in there. It was quite a mix.

Yes there is. If you go into the cafeteria. For example, when I first got involved in the union, I used to look after the night shift where the cleanup people were. You'd have all the oriental people would sit and play cards during lunch and have lunch together, the Portuguese would be in a unique other area doing their thing, the next group would be somewhere else. So there was these little communities and they'd basically hang around together and they'd stick up for each other, like these little gangs that would work together.

It did quite a bit outside the plant. I didn't hang around with any of the Portuguese people, which was why I lost most of the language. Because most of my friends, I was brought up here, I went to school in Canada. All my friends were Canadians, so consequently that's who I hung around with. I did have the odd Portuguese friend, but very few. The Portuguese had their own community dances, the Croatians had their own special community dances and stuff, I didn't attend those. But I'd say probably 99% of the Portuguese would attend all the Portuguese functions, and the same with everybody else.

Londonderry. When I first came to Canada I lived in Jasper Place. But while I was still going to school we moved into Londonderry, and that's where I was living when I started working at the plant. It was a 5 minute drive for me.

Like I say, I started in early '74. I had no interest in the union, I didn't know anything about the union when I first started. I had worked at the McDonald Hotel where there was a union and I wasn't aware I was paying union dues. I thought it was more of a social fund till after I left.

Down the road I started to understand a little bit more. But when I was working at the plant, you

got to learn about the union right away because if somebody got into trouble and a grievance was handled, through the grapevine you would find out that somebody had had a problem and it had been resolved. And you'd know that the union was instrumental. So you got to know a little bit about it. But I didn't really have any interest in it at first. I went to a couple union meetings when I first started. I thought it was something like a dictatorship. I didn't understand the process: So I thought to myself, this is not for me. So I didn't go to any. They had some really good Xmas parties, I'm sure you heard about that. We were second to none when it came to throwing a bash. So I went to a couple of those functions. The music wasn't to my liking. It was always the same old song. It all started the same. They'd always have this Ukrainian style music, which is alright for a couple songs here and there. But when you don't understand some of the lyrics and the music, it wasn't my kind of music. So I didn't go to some of the earlier functions. Then over the years they started to get better bands and, as the social committee chair people changed, they started having a better mixture. But like I said, we had the best parties. And they were large parties, that anybody wanted to go to, of any work place. I would say it Was about in '78 is when I first got involved in the union. Basically what happened at that time was we had a new superintendent. Over the years we had different management people world come and the thinking would change from one extreme to the other. You'd go through a phase, for example, that if you got hurt they'd go out of their way to find modified duties for you and you couldn't go, even if you wanted to go on to comp, they'd accommodate you somehow, whether you did absolutely nothing. Then you'd get a different management style that they didn't care how minor your injury was, if you got hurt you don't come back until you're 100% fit. It was always from one extreme to the other, depending on the management. We ended up with this manager called Fleming came in and he decided that he'd put some policemen at each washroom and he'd check you in and check you out. It was a real hassle. So my department ended up going for lunch and refusing to go back. We engineered it in such a fashion that I got blamed for it, that nobody was going to go back to work until this issue was resolved. It spread. It started with our department, next thing you know each one of the other ones joined us. By the time the cafeteria was full, the president which at that time was Jerry Beauchamp couldn't get anybody to go back, even after they had the issue resolved. But we got it resolved. But not totally to my satisfaction. It seemed that our particular department ended up with some discipline out of it. So I wasn't satisfied with the way it was handled. So I decided to get involved. That's how I actually got started. So I

because a shop steward in 78. In 79 I became the chief shop steward after one year. Because of what had happened there, I wanted to get more involved. I was involved in one degree or another throughout the rest of my years at Swifts and then later on Gainers. Absolutely. Well the way it was when you worked for Swifts, the foreman, the individual foreman had the ability to resolve issues. So consequently a lot of things that would occur at the department level were handled at the department level. If the foreman and shop steward weren't able to resolve an issue, 99% of the time it would then get resolved at the next level, divisional manager. After Brvant Kidd came into the picture, a different management style, none of the supervisors were allowed to resolve any of the issues. The division men were scared. He ran it in such a fashion that everything had to go all the way up to the manager in order to be resolved. So until it got to that top level, nobody had any authority. So all of a sudden there was a lot more grievances, a lot more arbitrations, everything just skyrocketed from then on.

... Bryan Kidd was already into the Pocklington period, or right around there. Things drastically changed during Pocklington, that's when things really deteriorated. During the Swifts time we didn't have those type of problems. The superintendent that we had under Swifts was George Holisky. He was a good guy to deal with. Prior to him we had good management people, plant superintendent, plant manager Things got resolved. You could go for years without an arbitration, In fact, when I first became a chief steward, looking at the old files to get a history and a feel of what kind grievances we had on file, I found years where there was only 3 or 4 grievances file for an entire year. After the Pocklington era or anywhere throughout from that time forward, we never had less than 100 grievances per year. So there was quite a change Oh anything. From all types of things. Attendance became a major issue. Back when I first started, there was always a certain amount of attendance problems, but they weren't quite treated in the same way and it wasn't such an issue. It was a lot of stuff that we would term as chicken shit, things that just didn't make a lot of sense. Some guy forgot to put on his hair net when he went back. Instead of telling him to put on his hair net, the guy would get a written warning. I remember a guy was tapping his foot while he was waiting for the truck of bones to fill up. The supervisor decides to give him a suspension because he's disturbing the gang, which was totally ridiculous. All kinds of things started to happen which weren't, normally those type of things wouldn't happen. If you went to the washroom and you took a couple extra minutes cut somebody asked you a question or maybe you'd end up talking about the hockey game or

something, you'd come back and work a little harder to make up for your time and it wasn't a problem. A supervisor might bring it to your attention that you took a little bit too long or whatever. But next thing you know, everything becomes formal. You get hauled into the office. If you came a minute late from the washroom you'd spend an hour to 45 minutes arguing about it in the office, which didn't make any sense. Those type of things. It seemed like anything, it didn't matter what it was. If a person bought a pair of boots all of a sudden he wasn't getting reimbursed for them, he'd have to put in a grievance. It was a little bit of everything. The grievances were so diverse, there wasn't one type of issue or another that wasn't challenged by the management. Things that had been accepted, practices that had occurred for years, all of a sudden they would be challenged. It started to be a problem. Not only that, a lot of things were in language. They would take the language and they'd try to twist it around. The biggest problems came towards the end with Pocklington and mainly with Burns, is they started trying to read the old Burns language into our agreement, which was totally different. I'm sure you heard about that we had a master agreement and all the other agreements kind of followed. Each of the main agreements were slightly different from the other. And how our seniority applied was different in Canada Packers, which was different than Burns. They all had a lot in common, but there were differences. When Burns came in, they tried to read our collective agreement the way Burns functioned, so we had all kinds of problems.

I believe it was in '85 when I became the president of the local. Prior to that I had been assistant chief steward and chief steward. I had done that position for a number of years. Then in '85 is when I actually became the president of the local, I was president in '85, '86 and then in '87. Then after that I took a year off and went back to being the chief steward, which I preferred: There was more action with grievances, I kind of preferred that.

There was a strike in '74. There was a strike there in '78, and then there was a big one in '86. There was almost one in '84, I guess we went on strike but it was resolved. We were actually were actually out there with pickets but it was cancelled before it started, we just didn't get the news. The big thing was, most of the other strikes were always short. There was no scabs, no replacement workers. Normally lasted for 6 weeks, those were the typical strikes. By that time you'd sit down and hammer out an agreement. But when Pocklington used Bolains for the '86 strike, they weren't interested in resolving it, they were trying to break the union. The people were working strong together, it just wasn't going to happen. Well I don't know if it was their

policy, they just never did it. Up till then I don't believe anybody had done it, at least in Canada we had never seen, at least not in the meat industry, there had never been any replacement workers, The reason is, it's a difficult line of work. To try and replace their whole plant was fairly difficult to do. Nobody ever went with that extra work to try and do it. Then in '86 their intent was to break the union. Prior to us going out, Bolains had told us they were going to get so many people to cross the picket line and once that happened the rest of the members would go. He was basically going to get our own people coming in. But they weren't successful. That was their game plan, was to try to get their own people to cross the line with the experience and the knowledge of how to do the work, but the people weren't prepared to do that.

I think what did that, I think there was a couple of reasons why our strike was successful in '86. Number one, in '84 we had given them some concessions. Pocklington had come across saying that they were in real financial problems that they needed to make a few cutbacks here and there. But as soon as things started to turn around, that they would share back to the employees. The employees bought into that. He had a big meeting up in the cafeteria and gave everybody the spiel, and they managed to get a lot of people convinced, well we'll give the guy a break. But what happened between '84 and '86, the company made nothing but money. The productivity doubled, tripled in some departments. They were in the black in '84 prior to these concessions, although they were whining that they were losing some money and needed some help compete with some of the bigger plants. But after that the production just increased like crazy. There wasn't a department that hadn't doubled and even tripled their production. They were obviously making money. But when it came to share in '86, he wanted more concessions. I think that's what got the people. By the time they got to '86, the average worker was so ticked off at the way they had been abused by management, that we couldn't have prevented a strike. The people were pissed off to the point that they wanted to go out and strike. So that was the thing. Back at that time, we had a feeling, based on the way things were going, we knew it was going to be a different kind of a strike. We had tried to prepare our members that it wasn't going to be a 4 or 6 week strike like in the past. This was going to go into months. In fact, we didn't know for sure it was going to go into 6-1/2 months, but we did say it was going to go into 3 to 6 months. Sure enough, it went to 6 _ months. We were expecting a much longer strike based on the dialogue and different discussions we had with management. We truly believed they were out to try and break us. So we figured it would take at least 3 to 6 months for something to happen. I believe

the reason everybody across the country jumped in on it was because of the fact that they knew we had given in some concessions. We had given the company an opportunity to turn things around. They did. And instead of doing what they told us that they were going to share, all of a sudden they wanted more.

Each department is slightly difference and we all have some commonalities. Just from my perspective, I worked in the TRM a little bit then I worked in the Pork Dept for quite a while, then I worked in the beef at the tail end and receiving department. I worked in a few different areas. When I first started, the strongest department that basically set the tone for the rest of the plant was in the pork cuts. Basically they had a system that would work really well and everybody else would copy it. Later on it was kind of the beef dept was kind of setting the trend as to how things were done.

Like I said, because of the fact that everybody was aware in the community and I think all around, the media was quite aware of the fact that we had given in concessions. There was a lot of publicity in '84, in fact a lot of the unions thought we were crazy that we had given these concessions. Those didn't come about easy. And those concessions were not large. We weren't the first. Like we ended up getting branded as being the ones that started the downward spin in the meat industry, which was not correct. There had been some previous concessions which were more substantial than what we had done. Our concessions were actually not that large. We tried to minimize anything. We didn't want to roll back the wages, which we didn't. So our concessions were a lot more minor compared to some of the other concessions that had occurred. But it was still quite well known and we got a little bit of heat over that. Everybody knew we had given these concessions. Then 2 years later, after the plant was making money, he wants even more concessions. I think the media was quite aware of that, So they would put on the little part after giving concessions now the employer wants more. I think we got a lot of sympathy. Pocklington came across as just being a greedy bastard, and it was easy for people to give their support

Basically around the time that Pocklington gets in. What happened was. It didn't just stop. Basically it gets to the point there's consistent bargaining throughout, Then in the early '80s, even though they weren't doing the same type of bargaining they were before but they were still following each other, all of a sudden by about '84 is when employer starts to, or '83, '84 as the different collective agreements are coming up, some of the employers are trying to deviate from

the main pattern. But prior to that, although they weren't probably the last true master bargaining was in say the '82 agreement, which was kind of the same national ? pattern. As the different agreements started coming up all of a sudden different employers, if their agreements expired in '83 or '84 whenever it expired, each company was trying to do things a little bit different. Until then there was still quite a bit of a pattern. The thing was, technically, I guess from a legal perspective, master bargaining was a voluntary thing. The employers didn't have to put all the plants bargaining together, but it made a lot of sense. It made it easier. Instead of taking an entire year to handle a bunch of collective agreements, they were all basically settled at the same time. So it was better for the employers as well as for us. You'd get all the negotiation done in a much shorter period of time. And it kept all the employers on a level playing field, so I think it made a lot of sense all around. Then when they all started to not cooperate with each other, that's when things started to fall apart. I would say when it started to really be noticeable was around '84 when we were one of the ones, we weren't the first, but we were one of the ones that didn't follow the main pattern. Definitely. I believe that he didn't just bring in Leo Bolain, a very high priced manager to come in from the States because he like him. He brought him in because he had a history in the States of breaking unions. That was why they paid him the big bucks. He had that history of going into a plant and breaking the union. He basically told Peter he could do the same here. That's why he came to Edmonton. So it was no secret there. Peter was the one that, he was following the agenda that Peter told him. So there's no doubt in my mind that Peter was the one that was trying to achieve breaking the union. He was just using Bolain. Bolain, although he has all the credit for running it, he ended up in the hospital at the very beginning of the strike, cuz he had a heart attack. After the 3rd day when we didn't cross like he said we would, when that didn't happen, he ended up with a stroke and was in the hospital. He didn't die at that time, but he didn't last much longer afterwards. The guy who actually ran the strike for them was Bill Reese. Bill Reese was not a bad guy. Management didn't like him, but from the union's perspective we liked him, because he was tough but fair. If you could convince him that management was doing something wrong, he'd fix it. He had the guts to do that, where a lot of the other management people, even when you could show them they were wrong, just were not going to change it. After '86? It wasn't bad, The morale after the strike wasn't bad, The people had fought a good fight at that time, and the morale wasn't bad at all. Where the morale really started to change and get worse was after the Burns management gets involved in trying to rewrite the entire collective

agreement. That's when things started to really further deteriorate. Things had scaled down. We were a really good place to work with when you were with Swifts. People were proud to say, I'm a Swifts employee, And I understand, I never worked at the Gainers south side plant, but I understand the same thing, the old gainers employees will tell you it was the best place to work. It was a family operation, everybody got along well, It was an excellent place to work. And Swifts was the same thing. You were proud to say you were a Swifts employee. Then it deteriorated a little bit after Pocklington took over and tried to break the union. But the atmosphere bounced back. After the '86 strike things weren't too bad. We were making some progress. But when things started to really really deteriorate again was when the Burns style management comes in, and they just refused to accept any of the understandings that we had in the collective agreement: They were trying to twist everything to their way of putting their own slant on the collective agreement. That's when things started to really deteriorate.

Like I said, Fleming had tried that. But he was smart enough to see it was a major with the people and they removed him. Until the very end. I'm not a mathematician, but I don't understand how they could figure that they were saving all this money. Because the reality is, when I worked on a line, if I went to the washroom and came back, I had extra pieces of meat waiting for me to do when I came back. So I had to sweat to catch up. So whether I had stayed there and worked at a certain speed or I had to go a bit faster to catch up to what had piled up, they weren't getting any more work out of me. You're still doing basically the same amount. If you were a shipper for example, you have times in the day when you're working like crazy and you don't have time to make a phone call or do anything. And you have other times when you're waiting for an order. So basically when you're not busy and you need to go to the washroom, that's when you go. And when you're busy you don't go. It's not like they were really saving any money. I don't understand where they come up with these numbers, On paper you can make anything look good. But it was just a way to demoralize. Basically the Burns management style is we can do what we want. One of the sad things was the mentality of some of the higher ups in management. When Don Dufford set up one meeting we've gotta take the plant back. Well, they've always had control of the plant. But they were taking control to the extreme. For example, when I started working there under Swifts, a foreman would come up to a group of guys and say, okay guys, go run a particular line. He wouldn't be telling you, you go run the boxes. The employees would automatically go over to the line, the group that he would send over, and the senior guy would

pick his job, the next senior guy would pick his job. The foreman wasn't interested in who did what. He was interested that these 6 guys were going to go run a certain line because he needed a certain product. People did it by seniority, everybody was happy. All of a sudden with Burns, they're going to try and rearrange things their way. They're going to tell who's going to do what, and things that shouldn't matter to them. Those were the kinds of things that two people bid on a job, it was automatic by seniority in the old days. All of a sudden with Burns, they're going to decide who does a particular job, and just try to change everything from what was the standard in the collective agreement.

And that's what brought us to where we ended up. We didn't end up going on strike because of money. We were offered money while we were trying to get concessions from everybody else. Our people weren't stupid, they knew he was offering money to us when we're already at, the base rate is \$14.13, They're telling everybody else across the country that they're expected to work for \$8 to \$10 an hour. We've been told that we're on borrowed time. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out the only reason he's offering us money is because we're not gonna be there. So we could see that on the wall. But that's not why we went on strike, because we were looking for more money: The money wasn't an issue. Why we were going on strike was to try to protect layoffs by seniority. Burns was of the opinion that if we shut down a department they go to the street. But under the old Swifts agreement, the junior people in the plant would go to the street and the other people would go somewhere else in the plant. Again, which I can never understand, as long as the work gets done, why would the company care whether person A or person B does a particular job, as long as the job gets done? At Burns they were control freaks, they had to do everything their way. We were used to having certain say. Seniority was one of the few things you had in that plant. The money wasn't great but it wasn't bad. But the seniority you got an opportunity over the years to pick better jobs and to work maybe a better shift. You had certain little choices. They weren't a lot, they weren't big things. But they were things that people were accustomed to. And they were treated with some respect under the old management. All of a sudden everything just totally changed

Oh no doubt about it. I've worked in places where there wasn't unions. Basically the biggest thing that we seen there was the money was a little bit better, but the most important thing was you got treated like a person. If there was a safety concern there was a mechanism to try and get your issue heard. You don't get that, I know some of our workers that ended up working in non-

union plants. They just couldn't believe it. Simple basic fundamental things, everything's gone. And if you make a complaint you get hurt you get terminated. That's why when they tried to keep the union out of it, one of the major reasons the union got in there was simply because of that. If you got hurt and went on compensation, you no longer had a job. If you were one of the gals that got pregnant and had a maternity leave, when you came back you had no job. Those are the things which some people consider basic fundamental rights. Without a union, you can't enforce any of that. It's great you've got a legislation that says that there's a parental leave, but if you don't have a union to secure in your collective agreement, you can't tap into it. You can't take it. It doesn't cost the company any money. But you can't even do that. If you try to take advantage of it, you got no job.

If you had a concern or if you had a particular problem, there was no way to address it. If you're being disciplined for something that totally was out of your control or not your fault, there's no mechanism. There's nothing you can do. If you complain, you get terminated. That's the big thing there. With the union you have an opportunity to have somebody look objectively at your concern. We didn't win every grievance that we put in, and our members weren't right every time they put in a grievance or made a complaint. But they had an opportunity to have their voice heard, That's important. Like I say, I was fortunate. The majority of supervisors that I had, I had one that was a bit wacky, he still wasn't bad compared to some others. I always worked for good supervisors that you could talk to. They weren't bad. You hear some horror stories in the plant. But in a lot of departments we had some good supervisors. Some supervisors, I can remember Tom Kirkin that worked in the lard room. There was almost never any grievances there. Not that there wasn't discipline. When somebody got disciplined they had it coming and he knew it and accepted it. In other departments it was just like more of a power trip, and they were disciplining people for whatever when there was really no cause. But there was a lot of good people there, and that's what you've gotta remember. People enjoyed working there, it was a good place to work. Unfortunately in the last few years, particularly with Burns, it was ridiculous. You can't even go to the washroom, it's pretty sad. What do you do? I can tell you, some of the current Canada Packers management, although they may not agree, but I'm talking about the higher ups, they couldn't believe that policy. They didn't agree with it either. I'm sure they won't go on record saying it, because management tend to stick together. But on the side, talking off the record, they couldn't believe those type of things. I'll tell you one thing too that I think maybe I

should just point out, we always get criticized or pointed out as being a very militant union and that's why the plant was closed. But you have to remember, the same union that was negotiating with Pocklington negotiated with a bunch of other units, including the old Canada Packers and we had an excellent relationship. The last few negotiations that I was involved in with Canada Packers would last 2 or 3 days and you'd end up with an agreement that both sides were happy with. Master Feeds now, used to be Suregrain, a division of Canada Packers, we have an excellent relationship there with management today. We had an excellent relationship when it was Canada Packers. Mind you it wasn't Maple Leaf Foods, the McCain Maple Leaf. It was the old Canada Packers. And Canada Packers treated people like people. And when they did shut the plant down, they gave people what was in the collective agreement plus. With Maple Leaf, we couldn't even get full severance. Under the old Canada Packers, not only would you have got full severance, they would have enhanced it. The last agreement that we had with some of the plants that shut down in the old Canada Packers, they increased the pensions, they bridged them to give people extra money, they paid for their benefits up to age 65•Totally different management. The point I was trying to get at, we also were the same union that negotiated several other collective agreements. We didn't have these strikes and we didn't have that kind of relationship that we had there. So I don't think it was us. It was the management that caused it. A combination of things that happened. Some of the management changes. Even if you look at the plant over the years, depending who the manager was and who the owner was the relationship was better during certain periods of time. The union was the same.