

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: John Wilgus

Interviewer: Joan Schiebelbein

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Q: Start by telling us about your background.

JW: I was born in Toronto, went to public school there. Moved around quite a lot as a child, so went to several schools. Went to high school in Toronto. Had many, many jobs. For the majority of them, they were non-union. There were a couple that were union, and to be quite truthful with you, I wasn't impressed with them. Came to Calgary in '75.

Worked at Atco. Had the carpenter workers union there. Never really saw anybody from

the union in the plant. Wasn't impressed. Went to McGavins. At first I wasn't impressed there either. But then I had a problem. The problem was seniority. I was a full time employee, and someone who is a part time employee, because they started work before me, had more seniority than I had and could pick holidays ahead of me. I didn't think that was right. Back then, they had union meetings every three months. I went to the union meeting and stood up and complained about that. The people agreed with me, and something was done about it. I thought, 'Holy mackerel, this is unique.' At that time, in the contract it stated that if you hadn't been there for 90 days you weren't eligible for stat holidays. I worked the stat holiday, so I didn't know if I was supposed to get paid time and a half or straight time or whatever. So I went to the stop steward. The stop steward says, 'I don't know, but I'll go and find out.' And he went and found out. I forget what he told me, but I do remember these words. After he told me what the decision was he said, 'If you have any other problems at all, my name is Robby, and I work on the mixer over there. You can come to me any time.' I thought, 'Holy mackerel, a union that really tries to do something.' I was really, really impressed. Later on they asked me to be a shop steward, which I became. Then after becoming a shop steward, the person who was the president at that time, Jim Ross I believe his name was, quit and went to do another job. So they asked me to become president. I became president. Then in 1979 we went to a western Canada council convention. What that is, is the people from all across Canada, the locals in western Canada, meet and talk and party and have a nice week's holiday. But they used to get things done, because there were a lot of things to get done. One of the things that we wanted to do was to get a business agent for Alberta. At that time we had plants in Calgary, a plant in Lethbridge, Safeway stores in Calgary, plants in Edmonton,

Co-op stores in Edmonton, and a plant in Grande Prairie. It was all done part time. The person worked in the plant and tried to run the union at the same time, and was given a very small stipend, \$100 a month or something. So we got together and decided that if we went together we'd be able to afford to get a secretary, an office, and a business agent full time to work for the union. I ran for that position, and was elected the first business agent. That was January 1, 1980. After I got elected, the general manager of McGavin's, his name was Mr. Miller – and that's how you addressed him, Mr. Miller – the day that I got elected as business agent, I walked in with my leave of absence application and said, 'Here you go Len. I won't be here after January 1.' Made me feel good doing that. The difference in the union in going from a part time working in the plant to a full time person was like day and night. We had higher morale. We got more things done. We had shop steward courses. It was a big, big difference. And to be quite truthful, there was no one there to help me because no one had done it before. I could phone people in the other parts of the country with the bakery workers' union, but besides that, it was all stumble and do the best you can.

Q: So shop stewards had no training?

JW: None whatsoever. You were just someone who people could go and bitch at. I used to really enjoy it, because after they told me what the problem was, I'd go to the supervisor. His name was Carl ?. I'd rant and rave at him and show him the places in the contract that he broke. He'd get so mad at me that he wouldn't talk to me for weeks. I thought that was wonderful. It got to the point when he started talking to me again, I'd go and find something to take to him. It was a very precarious thing, because he was your boss. The difference between him being your boss and the membership being your boss

was like day and night. I didn't have to go and look for anything. You'd go around the plant and say, 'Hi, how you doing?' and they would tell you. It wouldn't be, 'Hello John, I'm doing good today.' It would be, 'You know what the son of a bitch did to me today?' And they'd tell you, and you could actually do something about it. The first contract I negotiated as a business agent was with Canada Safeway. We just had the one store in Calgary. The UFCW had all of Alberta, but they had four locals at the time - two meat cutting locals, one in Edmonton and one in Calgary, and two clerks, one in Calgary and one in Edmonton. We got together and said, 'We're going to negotiate together.' So there'd be 20 of us in the room and 2 people from Safeway. We ended up going to mediation. Did a marathon thing for 36 hours or some phenomenal amount of time. We ended up getting a relatively good contract. But the one wrinkle that was in it is the company said, 'Here's our final offer. Go and take it and give it to your people.' We said, 'We won't recommend it.' They said, 'Fine.' So everybody took it back to the people. All of the UFCW people accepted it, and the bakers turned it down. A couple of days later we accepted it. But it gave our people - they sort of walked a little taller in the stores - so that was good.

Q: What year was that?

JW: That would be 1981. When I started off as the business agent, we had three plants in Calgary, Safeway stores, three plants in Edmonton, the Co-op stores, Grande Prairie, and Lethbridge. That was a total of eight plants. We now have three plants in the province. We have no in-store in Co-op, but we have a lot more in-store Safeway here in Calgary than we did before. When Woodward's was taken over by Safeway, we went in and signed up the bakers there. When we negotiated with Safeway, we didn't just negotiate

with Safeway. We negotiated with Safeway and Super Value. We also had the Super Value stores, I believe there were three or four in Calgary. I don't know why they negotiated with Safeway, because they couldn't afford Safeway's rates. They ended up going out of business. Basically, Safeway went ahead and did the majority of the stuff. In '82, back then we used to negotiate the plants all at once – McGavins, Westins, Lucerne. We'd sit down with all three of them in each different city, mainly Calgary and Edmonton. Edmonton had the Grande Prairie plant. When I became the business agent, because I was not knowledgeable to be quite truthful with you, we had a thing that was set up with the Western Canada Council where we had a ? who was at that time Huey ? from Vancouver, who was the business agent there, and had been for 20 years already. After the first two or three meetings with the company, I called in all the executive from western Canada, from Winnipeg, from Regina, from everywhere. They all came in. We went into the meeting, and after we were in the meeting, they walked in. The company went, holy shit. People were going, 'Who's he? Who's he?' We ended up with a three-day strike. We went on strike on the Friday – the day the Stampede opened – signed the contract on the Sunday, and went to work on the Monday. After that, the companies refused to negotiate together ever again. Up to today they still won't negotiate together. So that was a great strike. We got a \$1.65 raise each year, a two-year contract, and some nice language in there that we never had before. It worked out pretty good. I became an international rep in October of '84. When I became the rep, the person who was the president at the time – his name was Bob ? – became the business agent for Alberta. He lived in Edmonton, but he was down in Calgary more than he was in Edmonton. He found that the job was too stressful for him, so he only lasted about a year. Then he just

went back into the plant. He was a great union person, did a great job when he was there. He just found that it was too stressful and it was affecting his family life. After him we elected Dave Gilbert. We elected him in December of '85. He was the business agent up until 1998. During that time, there was a strike at McGavins that lasted quite some time, a lockout at McGavins. We ended up losing, but had fun doing it. It did make the people more militant. One of the things that I got from the people more than anything else (because the international assigned me here because everybody knew me) was their realizing that the government had screwed them. It was the government more than the company that had taken their rights away. They weren't really allowed to picket. We tried to set up information things. The cops came along, 'Get out of here!' So it changed their political view. I don't think I've ever heard anyone say that they're sorry that they'd gone out. It gave them a lot more knowledge than they had before, and made them understand that, as far as the company was concerned, you're just a number. You weren't a real person. They proved that by taking the two supervisors who'd worked 24-hours a day and lived in the plant when the strike was on, and they fired them. Their own people.

Q: Why did they fire them?

JW: They wanted to go in a different direction. They'd been with them for 20 years. Just terrible. So it made the people realize that the union was the only one they had. They couldn't really trust the company. The old adage that unions were good back in the '30s but they'd outlived their time and they're no good anymore – these people saw for themselves that that's not the truth, that given half the chance, a company would do them in.

Q: How long did that lockout last?

JW: I think it was three months. It was in '86, two or three months. Then we had a strike with Safeway. It was a joint venture with the clerks and the meat cutters and ourselves. It again was for three months. We sat down and negotiated as a group, which I thought was a good thing. We found if we didn't do that, the company would turn around and say, 'Well the meat cutters thought it was okay, the bakers thought it was okay.' But if we're all there, they can't use us against each other, which is what they tried to do for a long time. They couldn't do that anymore, so it gave us more strength. The company did a fantastic job of screwing the people back then. They turned around and called meetings before we went on strike. They told the people that they had to settle for rollbacks, and if they didn't they were going to shut everything down. And that, yes, it was all management's fault, but it didn't matter. They straight out... so the people were quite downtrodden and worried about it. I gave them a lot of credit for sticking to their guns and staying out. We had a few members who crossed the picket line, some of the clerks and the meats, but the majority stayed out, and stayed out until we ended up with a settlement that we could agree to. It was a fairly peaceful strike. It wasn't quite as much fun as the one at McGavins. But anyway, that was in '86, and the business agent, Dave Gilbert, ended up signing...In the period from '85 to '98 the business agent was Dave Gilbert. Again, he was someone who was not that knowledgeable, but was willing to learn. Did a reasonably good job at first. Then all of a sudden, for some unknown reason, he settled Westins for a 10-year contract. For some funny reason my jaw went, 'What? How can you figure out what's going to happen in 10 years?' Of course the other companies got in line so they could get their bit of the apple too. Then, for some strange reason that I have no knowledge of at all, he went to work at Westins as their personnel

manager, the dirty rotten bastard, and quit the union. Then we got intelligent and hired a woman. She wasn't from the bakery workers union. She was from nurses union. She had more of a knowledge of unions - union work, grievances, things that none of our members had - but she didn't have a knowledge of the baking industry. She's been at it from 1998, and now she has a knowledge of the baking industry plus the union knowledge and has done a very capable job. I retired in '95 for health reasons. I had an extremely bad heart attack. Typical union person - too much cigarettes, too much booze. I'm a lot healthier now than I was then. I still like to consider myself a union person. As a matter of fact, I am. I believe in the principles of unionism as they were then, and as they should be even more now. I get very upset when I see some of the changes in the law that have happened over the years. They're not for the people, they're for the companies. It doesn't seem to matter what, we still keep on electing the big cats in, and not helping ourselves. When I retired in 95, I was given six months to live, and I'm still here now. And very much enjoying my retirement.

Q: Are you still involved in the labor movement?

JW: I'm involved in the local, more on a drop in and say hi thing, phone calls. I've always been willing to answer any questions that I possibly can, and to help out if I can. My wife works part time for the local. My daughter works full time as the secretary, and my friend works full time as the business agent. It's funny. The majority of the membership I knew, most of them have retired or are retiring. It's a new group of people who are going in. The younger people I find are a lot more intelligent than we were, as far as education goes. But I find a lot of them have gone from school right into the bakery. That's the only job they've ever known. They think that the companies give them

that. That's the way it's always been. They've never worked at a non-union place, so if something happens, it's the union's fault. Where if you were out in the real world back when I was, some of the things the companies did were unbelievable. I tried to organize a plant in Winnipeg. Walking into a house where these people were sleeping on the floor and finding out that they were scared to join the union because the boss owned the house. So they were paying rent there, and if they joined he'd kick them out. These things still happen even today, but you don't hear about stuff like that. All you hear about is strikes and it was violent and stuff like that. You don't hear anything about education for our younger people who are growing up. I never heard anything about a union when I went to school. Nothing. All I heard about was what I read in the paper. I'd like to see a few changes like that, but I don't think it's going to happen in my lifetime. Another thing that really bothers me, you hear about a strike and you hear that the union went on strike. The union didn't go on strike. The membership of that union decided to say no to the company, and that's the only possible way they can do it, is by withdrawing their services. We're not slaves anymore. We're allowed to do that.

Q: After you were elected first business agent, were there changes in the way the business agent was selected?

JW: After I was the business agent, we put in a thing where the executive board hired the business agent. The membership basically said, 'We really don't know what's going on.' We set up a way for the membership to get rid of a business agent who wasn't doing their job. So after me, basically they were appointed. I was elected twice, and then everybody was appointed after that.

Q: Could you explain what an international agent is?

JW: The majority of the work that I did as an international rep was organizing. I organized in western Canada. In the wintertime, I'd go to Vancouver, in the summertime I'd come to Calgary or go to Winnipeg and Regina. I basically worked there for quite a few years. We had two international reps, and the other international rep retired. When he retired, I also did some negotiations. But my main job was to assist the locals in any way to try and organize. I became a trustee on the pension plan for Canada, so that occupied some of my time. There was a big change in our pension. We went from a pension run by the United States basically, to a pension run totally in Canada and by three of us. There was the president of the region, or the vice president of the region, myself and Hugh ? of Vancouver. Then there were three company trustees. We had two lawyers and two accountants. It was a big job, going from having basically nothing for Canada to writing bylaws and wording. Plus another thing – here I am, no schooling to speak of. I'm dealing in millions and millions of dollars. I'm going, holy shit. They're saying, 'You're a trustee. You're the one they're going to go after if you do this wrong.' It could be very stressful. You had to make sure. And the companies, they would hire lawyers outside of the pension fund to look through to see if they could get something in the wording. So we were meeting there at one time just about every two weeks. But we ended up bettering the pension, bettering the pension for retired people. Setting up things where I would go in and give seminars on pension for the membership, so they would understand their pension. Gave bonuses to people who were working at the time, so that when they retired they ended up getting more money. We got two bonuses that way. To get the two bonuses, we had to cut the rates down so the company got something too, or we wouldn't have got the bonuses. But I think it enabled some people to retire before they really had

to, when they could afford to. It's still being run by the union. The chairman is from the union, and we're taking care of the people, we really are. It's a good union, this union.

Q: You were saying that when you became a shop steward, the union started offering shop steward training. How was that set up?

JW: It's funny the way that was set up. I did this before our international did it. I didn't know what to do, but I knew that we needed to give the shop stewards training because I didn't have any training, so I didn't know. I should paraphrase this by saying that I once was a salesman. I could always talk. Talking has never been a problem. Knowledge was the problem. So I decided that I was going to do this. I was going to take them out of the plant and pay them to come. I told them if they didn't come, then they weren't shop stewards again, simple as that. A couple of people actually quit as shop stewards. But the majority came, and learned something. The course that I gave, I went to the UFCW and they had all this paperwork. They even had one with all the answers. I was the most intelligent son of a bitch standing up there. I just photocopied everything and took the answers... But I never told anyone that before, but that's where I got it from. Since then, the international has hired people to go around to locals in the United States and in Canada and give shop steward courses. They've also taken business agents and financial secretaries, whether they're full time or part time, and set up courses down in the United States for them where they can go to the George Meaning Center. So we're educating our people, where before it was just by the seat of our pants.

Q: What do you think is the impact of that added education?

JW: I always was very truthful with myself. I always felt that out of 10 shop stewards, if I could get two who actually learned something and were willing. They all learned

something. They all learned the same thing. But it was the willingness to do it, and sometimes the courage to do it. It can be pretty scary when it's your boss you're going up and talking to. So I always felt that if I got two people out of 10, who actually did the job afterwards, I'd done my job. I found it very fulfilling, too. After that I taught some courses even in The States.

Q: How have working conditions change over time?

JW: Safety was a big concern back then. You had a hard time stopping the line for anything. I saw a person's finger chopped off because they wouldn't stop the line. After the union became more militant. We had it if you were working on a machine you had to go and shut off the power, put a nameplate on it, and then go and work on the line and shut it down. It was more of a hands-on type of work back then. When I was telling you some of the plants that we had, we had two plants in Edmonton for McGavins alone. We had the Westins plant here, which used to be right beside the Stampede. The mixers were up on the second floor and the dough would come down a chute. Now you have these huge gigantic buildings where people are pushing buttons. One of the jobs was to pick up a 100-pound bag of flour, cut it open, put it in the hopper. That's the guy's job. That's all he did all day. We called him ?? [sound goes bad] They don't have that anymore...I got told by an old fellow a long time ago... would rather see a company modernize the plant then wait until it's so old that they just shut down. When they modernize it, we still keep our membership working. ...but we're still going to keep the majority of them working. But if they shut the plant down, that's it. I think modernization is the biggest thing.

Q: What types of grievances were you involved in?

JW: Just basically common ones. We've had a few... with me back then. People who got fired didn't care. They walk out the door and walk across the street and get a job there. It's getting to be that way right now, isn't it? But when we had the bad times there, we had lots of grievances for dismissal. But back then, someone got fired, they didn't care. I'll just go work at ... everybody was crying for bakers. Then when the bad times come, it's almost good for bakers, because people, instead of going out for lunch, take a sandwich to work, so more demand for bread. One of the biggest things that has changed besides modernization is part-time people. We had very few part-time people in the plant and no part-time people in Safeway, in the bakery. Now we have a large number of part-time people in the plant and in the baking industry as a whole.

Q: Does that have an impact on the union?

JW: Yes it does, because these people, when you're part-time, you're always trying to find a full-time job. You can't support a family part-time and you don't get benefits for the most part. In our union, if you're part-time you still get pension credits. But that's basically the only thing they get if they're below 24 hours a week. And the company tries to keep them below 24 hours a week so they don't have to pay them benefits. There's all kinds of wording in contracts now related to part-time people, where there wasn't before. There just wasn't any wording, because it wasn't a problem. I think it is a problem now. It's something we're going to have to work on.

Q: In the '80s and early '90s, what issues were raised in the union as a result of the ethnic diversity in the plant?

JW: For the most part, it was mainly Canadian when I was in there. There were a few ethnic people, but there wasn't the influx of Oriental people. That didn't happen until after

I became an international rep. The Vietnam people started to come over. The government was offering the companies money to hire them. Then we started getting a large amount in the plant. One story I can tell you that's rather humorous. I went into a plant as the business agent. [sound bad]... went around a curve, went into a machine where the dough was cut and dropped into the pans. The pans were put on a rack and then the rack was manually pushed into a proofer, which was a heating box, and was pushed right through until it came on the other side already risen, and you'd put it into the oven by hand. The supervisor came over to me and said, 'Look John. When the pans come along the guy isn't putting the racks in the proofer. I've tried to tell him and he won't do it. I don't want to get him in trouble. Do you want to go and talk to him?' So I said, sure. I went over and said, 'Look. When you have time, I know this is hard work, but when you have time, you have to try and put the racks ?' He said, 'Don't have watch, don't have watch.' I said, okay fine, and walked away. . . . It was a lot more manual back then.

Q: You referred to the lockout at McGavins as being fun. What does it mean for a strike to be fun? What kind of stories can you tell us?

JW: I forget who did this, but there's a gas line that went into the plant. There were some mechanical people there. They figured out a way to take the lid off the top of the gas line beside the picket line, put a long rod that had a crooked thing on the end down, and turn the gas off. The ovens weren't getting gas. They called the gas company. The gas company would come, we'd turn the gas back on. It took them forever to figure this out. When they finally figured it out, they came over, cursed and swore at us on the picket line and ???. We also had a camper that we put on the picket line right beside the sidewalk. It was city property from the fence out to the sidewalk, so we were allowed to put it there.

A guy donated this camper. There was a lot of drinking went on in that camper. And there was a lot of ???. We couldn't afford real parties, so we'd have pot luck and you bring your own booze. This one guy had a warehouse and he said, 'C'mon and use it.' We had two or three parties. The people were right behind each other. Everybody was together. You always had one or two guys who weren't, but the majority of the people were there on a principle. They weren't there for more money. The papers put in "Bakers want more dough". The money was never an issue. We had other issues that we went after. One of the issues was that they wanted a double scale, where they wanted to hire people at a lower wage and they'd only come up to such, and the people who were already there, it didn't affect them until they got fired. They were making lots and the other people were making less. They understood that and they didn't agree to it. It was a good group of people.

Q: Did the company try to bring in replacement workers?

JW: They ran it with management as far as I'm aware. Of course we did go over to the hotel that they were staying at. Got thrown in jail that night. They said that I slashed somebody's tire, which was a total falsehood. When it came time to go to trial, I had 12 people from McGavins, which meant they had to shut the plant down, who were the witnesses who said I'd come to the plant for my truck, which I had. So when I walked into the court and these 12 witnesses came in behind me, the judge dismissed the charges and apologized to me. As I was walking out, the person who had the flat tire was sitting there. I said, 'Hi Jerry, how are you doing?' and kept on walking.

Q: Did you notice any differences in the provinces in terms of how easy or hard they were to organize?

JW: Yes. I found that in BC the people were either really into the union or really not into the union. I found in Alberta it was extremely hard to organize because of the anti-labour laws that we have. In Saskatchewan, there wasn't too much to organize, but what was organized was very easy to organize. The government was not anti-union. Manitoba, boy they were up in the air. Sometimes they were great and sometimes they were ...? Same as anything else, if you work in Manitoba for a while, you learn a lot. ??? we wouldn't hire lawyers to go to the board. I would go to the board. I would just go down and go to the library they had. After a while you'd walk in and they know you. Hi John, how are you? And you'd know them. We were able to organize a fair number of things in Winnipeg.

Q: In what ways were the Alberta labor laws anti-union?

JW: Way back then, if you had a certain percentage signed up, then you were unionized. They then changed that to now where if you have 100 people signed up, you still ? later on. All that does is give the company, if they've got any brains whatsoever, to scare the bejesus out of the people. When you were signing the people up you had to tell them that this is going to happen. After you put the certification in, you'd have to do more work with the people between the application and the vote than you did getting them signed up. If you're an ethnic person who doesn't understand the language that well, you can be pretty intimidated, especially when in some of the countries they come from, union is not a good word.

Q: Do you know of some of the tactics the company would use?

JW: Fire people. That's the best tactic going. All they have to do is fire the ringleaders. Joe is the one who told me to join. Joe's gone the next day. I had one thing in Winnipeg where I organized a plant and went to the Labour Board the next day. The day before I

went they'd found about it and they'd set up a program with the government where these people would be working part-time because production had slowed down. The next day they fired every single one. We ended up losing the plant. We got a vote ?, we ended up losing it though. Two years later, I got the plant.

Q: What was going on in 1986?

JW: The battle cry of all the companies was, 'This is hard times.' If you looked in the paper and on TV, that's what they were saying too. The reason that we had a hard time in '86 is the year before, the people who deliver the bread went on strike, and we refused to cross the picket line. If we didn't cross the picket line, they couldn't make any bread. They didn't realize we would do that. When it came our turn, they never let us set a date when we were going to go on strike. They just locked us out when they wanted to. When the truckers attempted to not cross the picket line, they took it to the Labour Board. The Labour Board forced them to cross the picket line saying, 'It doesn't matter that you have in the contract that you do not have to cross a legal picket line. If the company orders you to go in, then you can file a grievance and go through the grievance procedure, but you have to cross the picket line.' So that basically benefited them, because they were running the plant and getting the bread delivered too.

Q: That's what happened at Lakeside too?

JW: Yes. ... and if they had allowed them to stay out, I guarantee the UFCW would've got a better contract.

Q: What are your thoughts about the future?

JW: I have a big scare for this government here, for them to bring in right to work. I feel that if they do, the union movement in Alberta is going to be in bad shape. I also think

they're going to screw up our healthcare. If they do, down in the States, the unions have a lot more power than we do up here, because they run their own health insurance, so the people want to belong. That's why you have unions in right to work states, because they want to belong to the union so they get their healthcare and pension. But it's a difficult, time consuming, hard way to row. For the majority of southern states, they don't have any unions at all. Some of them don't even have minimum wage. I think our government, the way it is right now, would love to see that. I'm happier to see some of our union people still coming from the union. We're not just getting people that are university graduates, and at the same token we have some very intelligent, knowledgeable people that we didn't have before. We didn't really educate that much before. The first educational thing I went to was in Banff, run by the Alberta Federation of Labour. I think it was one of the first ones they had, the Federation school. You learned something. I can remember being in the same class with three or four guys from the UFCW, who ended up being financial secretaries and presidents and stuff. We were all young people back then, trying to learn how to do the job.

Q: Anything else you'd like to talk about?

JW: Not really. I hope I get to see some of this stuff. I'm hoping that people don't realize that if we don't have unions, we need unions as much as we did in the '30s. The only difference is the unions looked more powerful and more needed in the '30s and stuff like that. They had tangible things to fight for: the 8-hour day, the 40-hour week. It went from seven days a week to six to five. Now these are things that are taken for granted. If we lose our unions, we're going to lose a lot of these things that we now take for granted. It's

not just all about money. It's also about quality of life. That's what I think we'll lose more than anything, is the quality of life. I think that's about long winded enough for me.

[END]