

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Bill Ferguson

Interviewer:

Dates:

Location:

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McCarthyism, Red Baiting – Canadian Labour Movement, Montreal –
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I was born in the back seat of a 1928 Chev car in Vancouver, heading up Commercial Drive to the hospital. That's where it began. During the depression which followed, my parents moved out to Aldergrove and bought a stump ranch out there. That's where I was raised. It was a pretty tough time, but we just eked out an existence there. I left school at an early age because it was just after the war, and they were paying 50 cents an hour for setting chokers out in the woods on Vancouver Island. So off I went and worked out there in the camps for quite a few years after that.

We lived out in the camps for two or three months at a time, depending how close you were to town. Some of the camps I worked in, we got home every weekend. Like up around Hope and Harrison Mills. I worked in Englewood and out on the Island, Cowich Lake and places like that.

I went out there in the late '40s. That was during the height of the cold war. The IWA, Nigel Morgan was the president at that time. They wouldn't allow him to go across the border because he was a member of the communist party, him and Harold Pichette, to attend a convention. So what we tried to do at that time was to form an all Canadian union, which of course failed because of the red baiting that went on at that time.

In 1953 we had a long fire season on the coast and I wasn't doing anything. So my father-in-law owned a ranch by Kamloops and he wanted me to drive a truck up there to use on the farm. I loaded my wife and baby and chainsaw in my pickup and headed to Kamloops. I never left there, I stayed there till now. That was in 1953. I worked around there in the woods and some road construction, driving heavy equipment and working in the bush. In 1959 I went to work for the City of Kamloops and started my involvement with the union that was involved at that time. That was the National Union of Public Employees. We were on a program then, the left was at least, of getting the two major unions in Canada in the public service to merge and form one union. Eventually that happened in 1963 at the merger convention in Winnipeg. I was there as a delegate. So I'm a charter member of CUPE. I worked for the City of Kamloops till about 1968 I guess, and then I was on leave of absence to work full time for the local union in Kamloops. I worked mainly organizing and negotiating collective agreements, and working on and off as a national staff rep for CUPE part time. I went back to the City of Kamloops in 1982 and worked until I retired in '94.

It was formed in 1948, the National Union of Public Employees, NUPE. Mind you, there wasn't many members in Kamloops at that time. It was a pretty small city at that time. The union was formed mainly by the veterans that came back from the war. That's how that started.

I attended all of the conventions and conventions of the BC fed. There was Harry Green and the local in North Vancouver was quite political. Local 28, Vancouver Outside Workers, weren't in, but we were involved with them in lobbying and struggling for formation of CUPE. I can't remember all the people involved, but we had a fairly good left caucus. Jack Phillips was there, Don Guise, Pat Lanahan from Calgary, Obrey Burton from the Kootenays, Harley Horne came out after CUPE was formed, as a national rep. Oh indeed we did. And we had quite an influence in the policy. There was tremendous resistance at all levels of NUPE to forming the merger to start with. Right from the top, in order to get the thing consummated, we had to guarantee the top officers of the two unions four years without being subject to being elected to any democracy. The right wing element in the union in NUPE was afraid of dues going up. That was the big

argument against it, was that it was going to cost too much money, and the lack of autonomous control and stuff like that.

I think it was more a gradual thing. They had to justify every dues increase. It wasn't automatic, they had to justify it at the convention. They fought like hell to get dues increased, as they still do today.

I know more about how it worked in the West here. It was largely a business agent structure where the larger locals had their own staff and the district councils hired staff. It was more servicing close to the membership, had more control. The other system, NUPSE, was designed more from control from the top, similar to steel and those other unions. It was a different set-up. Basically what CUPE is today, it sort of followed that pattern. The business agents, Jack Phillips, Don Guise, and Harley Horn were absorbed in and became national staff reps.

It was a growing operation and they needed extra staff. Then staff would get sick and get in car accidents and things. I was more or less just temporary. Or when there was regional negotiations going on that involved all the unions, then they'd put me on staff for special projects mainly and to fill in for staff that wasn't there.

I didn't like it very much. I didn't like filling out all those forms. I was always invited to bid on a regular staff job, but I didn't want that. I liked to stay close to the workers.

I went back to the city. Our local union was placed under trusteeship by the national union. I lost my job as business agent and went back to work.

That was all to do with McCarthyism, red baiting. It's a hell of a long story, too long for this interview. I guess it all mainly started when the national union made an attempt to split the whole labour movement in Canada. Grace Hartman and Lofty McMillan and all those were going to set up a separate union structure.

No, the design was to create a whole new Canadian labour movement, which would involve the Canadian unions. That failed. The convention was in Montreal. You and I went down three or four days earlier and started lobbying. The left really blocked it. Harry Green got up and spoke eloquently at the convention. You did. I believe I spoke there too. We gradually, during the course of the convention, turned it against them. I haven't been forgiven for that. So they sent a guy they found out of the Don jail, his name was Kelly out there to do me in as a national rep. They sent McIsaac out first, and he saw that we were doing a hell of a good job there, and he wouldn't go along with them. So they sent another guy out, then another. They sent three people out there. They couldn't swing the membership against myself or the left there, so they imposed an administration. They couldn't find a thing wrong. There was no money missing or anything of that nature. They sent that auditor out and he found a lot of picky things in the minutes which didn't match expenditures, but there wasn't any money. It was mainly a campaign which the media got involved in as well, and just imposed the administration. They got the power to do that, and there's nothing you can do about it. In a couple of years they lifted the administration and had elections, and I got elected president again.

I never went back full time. Actually they might've saved my life. Being business agent of a local union of fourteen different units, by that time we'd organized all the peripheral areas like Meriton, Princeton, Clearwater, and everything that could be organized. I found going back to work in the city was a relief.

Yes, I did most of the organizing. I also organized amalgamation with the school employees into the one local. We had a composite local. We organized the wildlife place and the BC Fruitlands Irrigation District, things like that. It was a pretty good sized local, about 1500.

No, of course the national tore that apart. Under administration, they engineered it and divided it up. They pulled out the school employees and the two units down in Princeton I had organized – the municipal and school employees. Logan Lake up where the mine was, and the regional district, they pulled that out. So they fractured it up, that's what they did. Control. That's the only thing I can see why they did that, just to have control over it.

Yes, I'm sure it is. It sometimes is regarded as a mistake. I'm not sure there was much alternative. I think they would've done something like that even if that attempt hadn't happened. That's what they had in mind, was to destroy the left. I know I was in Camp Woss in Englewood in 1948 when that happened. I was just a kid at that time, not very old. I used to attend the union meetings. When they took over, the IWA switched the leadership right away. They came in and expelled the guys that were running the IWA, the left. First thing I observed as a young fellow, these people that were very close to management in the top jobs, all of a sudden became union people and became officers of the union and running the union. It became virtually a company union, almost instantly.

The IWA, yes of course. I can recall when I first went out to the camps, Harold Pritchett coming into camp and he had to walk up the tracks. They wouldn't even let him ride the speeder. The dues at that time were collected by the job steward, who'd come around to the bunk house and collect the dues. There was no check-off. We had a 44 hour week, we had to work half a day Saturday, which kind of screwed up a young guy's weekend. But in '48 when the split came, I was in the bunkhouse with a bunch of young guys. We were all gung ho, all of us joined the WIUC, Woodworkers Industrial Union of Canada. But that didn't pan out, we were beaten.

Oh yes. The organizer would come to camp and you had to steal a bit of food out of the kitchen to feed him. There was hostility. Except after the split came they kind of became buddy buddy. We got a nickel an hour increase after that, old Joe Morris. They called him Nickel Joe.

No I didn't. That was the boat they had that the organizers used to go up and down the coast in. I didn't have anything to do with that. I rode the old union steamships, the old Comosan and some of those boats.

No, I don't. It was in existence when I was there. They just had a boat that they went into, a lot of the camps were float camps. Everything was on floats and they used A-frames to bring the logs in all up and down the coast.

When I was a boy I used to listen to my uncle Jeff, who was a member of the communist party, and my dad, who was an old CCFer, an old social democrat, arguing for hours. I was quite interested in it. Then when I went out into the logging camps, there was a lot of intelligent, well-read people out there, Marxists, Leninists in the camps. There was a lot of good discussions. But being a young guy, I never stayed in one place too long, so I never joined the communist party until 1959 in Kamloops. But there wasn't much happening in Kamloops, not like being in a big city. When the Vietnam War was on, our house was a safe house for the deserters and dodgers from the US. So they would stop there on their way to Vancouver or wherever they were going to hide out.

Yes, we had a peace movement there. I can't remember what we called it in those days. We were both active, and the kids. We formed the first annual event that still goes on there in Kamloops, the Peace Walk. It still happens there, of course it's a lot bigger. But in those days we stuck out like sore thumbs. I recall a store burnt down on the main drag across from the Leland Hotel in Kamloops. The entrepreneurs at the store, they sell cement blocks. They brought these cement blocks and piled them up and put a couple the other way and stuffed sacks in there and advertised them as a bomb shelter. There was a threat of nuclear bombs. We picketed that. How stupid it was.

In '59 I joined the party. No I never ran in election. But I was active. I don't think I was there. I dropped out of the party just prior to that. I stopped being involved, so I wasn't actually there when that division happened. I just couldn't get along with some of the brass from Vancouver and Toronto. I don't think it was anything ideological, I just felt I was wasting my time.

I retired in '94. I was seventy-four in July. Five kids, not kids anymore. The baby is forty some. Five kids. Two boys, a girl, then two more boys.

I despair sometimes. Then when I see the mobilization that took place over the Iraq war, I get a little bit optimistic. I think it's a very difficult period of time that we're heading into for these younger people. The contradictions in the capitalist world are becoming sharper

all the time. The people that they've hitherto exploited for their resources are becoming more resistant. I just don't know what's going to happen.

Oh indeed a phenomenal change in the picture. I think we're going to see a lot develop out of that. I think the Internet is very helpful it seems, in communications of the resistance to what's happening.

It's a whole idea that they have to fight against. The capitalist world is also faced with fighting a whole idea in the struggle against terrorism. The people are just not going to stand for what's happening. What's happening too with the Iraq situation, you're seeing that military power is becoming a bit redundant. They can beat the hell out of a country but they can't win. They can't subjugate the people it seems. That kind of power is becoming obsolete. There's a bigger power, the power of people, resistance. So I guess we can just hope that we can pull through it. There's still whole stockpiles of nuclear weapons stacked around the world in a number of countries, and that's still a worry. We heard about it several months before the convention was to be held in Montreal, I think it was 1973. Because Harry Green was on the executive, general vice president at that time. He alerted us to the fact that this was under serious consideration where they were talking about forming a new labour centre in Canada of the public employees. So that's how we found out. Some of us, yourself Dave, and me went down to that convention three or four days ahead of time and started lobbying to see if we could turn this thing around. We'd done a lot of work on it. The left had done a lot of work on this thing, because we saw it as a disaster for the Canadian working class. We got to the convention and lobbied. Then when the issue hit the floor, there was a number of speeches made both ways. I recall myself speaking. Shirley Carr was standing ahead of me in the line-up to the mikes, pontificating about how this should all happen. I was getting angry as things went. Finally when it came my turn, I talked about using our heads rather than following pretty ladies in flowing white gowns. Lofty McMillan had made a big speech earlier in the convention about sending \$25,000 to BC to help kick the Socreds out, which we did. I argued to the convention that the \$25,000 might've helped alright, but it was the unity of the labour movement. We had all those unions that were outside the congress at the time, the Teamsters and others. We all got together and, with a

concerted effort, we were successful in ridding BC of the social credit who had been in there for 20 years. That helped, and the convention went against the executive and voted the proposition down.

Well it would've been chaos, it would've been open season raiding by all the other unions, the craft unions. It would've generally weakened the labour movement, totally weakened it.