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On the Line

The Struggles of Alberta's Packing Plant Workers

**The Alberta Federation of Labour, 1912 - 2012:
A Century of Struggle and Solidarity**



ALBERTA PACKERS

On the Line

The Struggles of Alberta's Packing Plant Workers

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Union Vote after slowdown strike Edmonton 1944 (Photo APA)

On the Line

The Struggles of Alberta's Packing Plant Workers

Edmonton once had a Packingtown. A rugged neighbourhood on the city's north side, it boasted three major meat-packing plants and some of the most hard-nosed unionists in all of Canada. It also had a south-side Packingtown in the working-class neighbourhood of Ritchie, where butcher John Gainer built a major slaughtering operation. Together, these slaughterhouses made Edmonton the meatpacking capital of Alberta and of Western Canada. The battles for labour recognition and decent contracts in those plants are legendary, and their impact still echoes, although the noise, the smells and the fierce standoffs have faded.

You don't have to travel into the past for stories of exploited workers, picket-line bravery and struggles for better treatment and basic dignity. Just head down to the meatpacking centre of Brooks in southeastern Alberta, where determined immigrant workers won recognition of their union in 2005 from anti-union Tyson Foods in a strike that vividly replayed the battles of the older Packingtown.

You could stop at Red Deer too, where employees of Fletcher's Fine Foods fought off company attempts to break



Swift's packinghouse Edmonton, 1912 (Photo GAA)



their union in the 1980s and went on to build one of the most vigilant local union movements in Alberta. You could travel to High River, just south of Calgary, where employees of giant Cargill Foods fought picket-line battles in the 1990s to preserve their union and job conditions amid a wave of anti-union attacks by meatpacking companies across North America.

In Edmonton, the old Packingtown faded away some years ago. The slaughterhouses that defined the city as a blue-collar meatpacking centre shut down, one by one. First to go was the Gainers plant on the south side, bought by entrepreneur Peter Pocklington in 1978 and shuttered a year later (Pocklington kept the Gainers name alive when he bought the north-side Swift's plant on 66th Street in 1980 and re-named it). Amid the economic dislocations of the next decade, the remaining plants gradually closed their operations, in Calgary as well as in Edmonton. The workers' unions—the United Packinghouse Workers of America and its successors—could look back on old battles with pride, but with little else. By the 1990s, the bulk of the industry had packed up and moved to rural plants, where beef and pork were closer



Canada Packers workers Edmonton, 1947 (Photo APA)

at hand and the communities could be counted on to be indifferent to unions, if not outright hostile.

Yet many stories link the legendary struggles of packing plant workers of the past and today. In 1920, workers at the Calgary plant of millionaire cattle king Pat Burns risked their livelihoods in a strike for basic union recognition and a contract, and suffered a tough defeat. In 1937, workers staged sit-down strikes at Edmonton's plants, challenging the plant owners who controlled meatpacking, not only in Alberta's capital city, but in all of Canada. The workers sought relief from dangerous

work and poor pay, and they sought basic recognition of their right to organize. They, too, were defeated.

Those defeats were temporary. Packing plant workers in Edmonton and Calgary regrouped and organized in the 1940s, aided by a wartime economy and growing markets for meat and labour. The United Packinghouse Workers of America, born in slaughterhouses of Chicago and in other big U.S. cities, arrived in Canada with a message of change and progressive rights, and soon claimed the loyalty of Alberta workers. Together with coal miners, Alberta's meatpackers helped

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to build a union movement that challenged owners and their cozy relationship with the provincial government.

Workers at Brooks in the 1990s sought the same basic respect and recognition as these earlier workers. Many of the Brooks workers had recently arrived from nations in Africa, and were ill-prepared for the harsh working conditions, low pay and anonymous trailer housing that greeted them when they signed on at Lakeside Packers, the vast Tyson-owned slaughtering plant. They faced bosses as hard-hearted and tight-fisted as any of the meat barons of the past. Yet these meatpackers and their union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, had a proud history to draw upon. Staffing the picket line at Brooks and facing buses loaded with strikebreakers, they could look to the example of determined Gainers workers on a cold picket line in Edmonton in 1986, or of Fletcher's workers standing up to their employer during an eight-month lockout in 1988. The Brooks strike succeeded in part because it was built on a foundation consisting of the sacrifices of earlier generations of slaughterhouse workers.

Dangerous Work

Meatpacking is hard and dangerous work, made even more dangerous by owners who have constantly squeezed more profits from their factories by mechanizing and speeding up the

slaughtering operation. In the early days, it could be a backbreaking job with workers lugging man-sized carcasses by hand. It could menace fingers and limbs, too, as kill-floor employees wielded knives at close range on lines that ran ever-faster at management's insistence. Meatpacking plants in the United States pioneered the single-task assembly line that Henry Ford later adopted so successfully for automobiles – although in the packing plants the process involved disassembly lines, since the object was to take animals apart as rapidly as possible. Inevitably, the Canadian plants adopted American methods and practices.

Job conditions in some cases were deplorable. George Kozak, a Swift's worker born in northeast Edmonton in 1920 and raised in the shadow of the packing plants, recalled the arbitrary hiring and firing of workers in the years before the Second World War. Swift's at that time owned the plant on 66th Street that hockey club owner and pig baron Peter Pocklington eventually bought and turned into a theatre for war with his workers.

In 1938, when Kozak was hired on, Alberta was still in the grip of the Great Depression and even the lowliest plant jobs were in high demand. Kozak and others would line up on 66th Street, then a road made of cinders.

"You couldn't get through for people waiting for work," he recalled. The



1890

Pat Burns moves to Calgary, builds city's first slaughterhouse

1904

First meatpacking plant in Edmonton built by John Gainer

personnel manager at Swift's, a man named Cotton, would walk along the line checking the muscle strength of prospective workers. "He'd come out and feel your muscle and back and neck. He'd turn some away, those poor skinny guys flexing their muscles. He'd say okay, you come on. Not you." Kozak started in the pickle cellar in 1938 and was paid 18 cents an hour.

Jack Hampson, who became a union representative, remembered a similar system, called a "shape-up," at the new Canada Packers plant. Potential workers were required to show up early in the morning, but hiring for the day depended on the number of hogs that arrived for slaughter. A plant foreman hired the workers according to his whims. "You'd see some guys sitting there that worked for Canada Packers many years, and some kid that came off the street yesterday would be sitting there and he'd get a day's work." Those not hired that day would be told to stick around, without pay, in case work arrived. If they left the premises, they were fired.

It was no picnic inside the plants. Alex Goruk, who went to work for Canada Packers in the 1940s, recalled working conditions in the plant's tankhouse in the early days:

"This is the department where we cook all the bones, the guts, the hooves, all the inedible products, and we manu-



facture oils and fertilizer out of that," he said. "And it is a pretty dirty place to begin with, you know, all the guts and the blood and hair."

One of the worst jobs involved drying the blood to turn it into powder for use in animal feed. When the blood was dry, workers scooped it into gunny sacks. "After about 10 minutes of this operation, you couldn't see the fellow that's holding the bag and he's only standing about two feet away. The whole air, the whole room, would be just thick with fine dust, blood dust, and sometimes you would do this for four hours non-stop. And all the time you're breathing this. For two days

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1908

J.Y. Griffin of Winnipeg builds second Edmonton plant at 66th Street, sells to Swift

1911

Burns Meats builds Edmonton plant



Making sandwiches for Swift's sit-down strikers Edmonton, 1937 (Photo GAA)

after that, you're spitting and choking and coughing blood out of your lungs.”

Imagine the hog shackler's job. This meatpacking worker had to capture hogs by a leg and chain them to a large wheel with hooks on it for transport to the slaughtering floor. He could not rid himself of the smell of his work, Goruk remembered. “No matter how many baths, and he took a shower every day after work, when he sat in that streetcar, everybody was angry because you could smell him all the time.”

Goruk saw people faint in the heat on the kill-floor line while trying to keep

up with the mechanized chain that transported carcasses for butchering. For those who faltered, the remedy was simple: they lost their jobs.

Lacking a strong union, Edmonton meatpacking workers rebelled against such treatment in 1937, staging sit-down strikes at three of the city's four plants – Swift's, Burns and the Gainers plant in south Edmonton – in an attempt to win union recognition. The fourth plant, Canada Packers, had opened in 1936, but its workers opted to stay on the job. The strikes quickly collapsed because of harsh employer tactics, including the shifting of production elsewhere, coupled with anti-union public and political sentiment. At the Swift's plant, management brought in strikebreakers assisted by police, resulting in picket-line arrests of strikers. It was a gloomy hint of the conflict to come in the 1980s when Pocklington bought the plant and turned to similar tactics.

Solidarity & Victory

The Great Depression and the coming of World War Two changed both the outlook and the economic situation of Canadian workers, especially those in industrial sectors who had seen their hard-won gains wiped out by economic collapse and then restored somewhat by the necessities of war. Meatpackers learned in the Depression that they had to stick together for survival.

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1912

Alberta Federation of Labour formed

1920

Burns workers in Calgary strike for union recognition and are defeated

When war came, and the demand for meat suddenly made their work an essential service, they resolved to unite.

The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) union, like many other industrial unions in the United States, appeared in the years after New Deal legislation made organizing easier and workers turned to industry-wide representation to improve their bargaining power. The UPWA rapidly organized the big American plants and entered Canada when wartime legislation here removed some obstacles to union recognition.

To win the attention of the Canadian government, the UPWA organized strike votes across the country. Meat-

packers widely supported the union in these votes. In response, the federal government ordered a disputes inquiry. The results were inconclusive, but the investigation led to the recognition of unions as legitimate representatives of the employees. The first nationwide bargaining was conducted under wartime legislation. When the war ended, the UPWA was ready to bargain for workers at plants located in most Canadian provinces, a position that made it difficult for any company to defeat a strike by shipping its production to a plant somewhere else.

From the beginning, the UPWA drew strong support from workers in Edmonton. As one of the most concentrated groups of packing plant workers



Union Vote after slowdown strike Edmonton, 1944 (Photo APA)

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1936

Canada Packers plant built in Edmonton



1937

Edmonton workers set up Local 78, chartered by the Trades and Labour Congress, to represent meatpacking employees with grievances

Profile: George Kozak

George Kozak went to work in 1938 at the Swift's plant in north Edmonton, where both his parents already worked:

"(Dad) came over when he was 16, from Romania. So did my mother. They met here at Swift's and got married way back in 1918. He was shoveling coal, had the contract to shovel coal in the back there. Mom was working in the trimming room, they trimmed meat there. In the early '30s, the company put in gas instead of coal, so then dad didn't shovel any more coal. So he was out of a job. Things were

pretty tough for a while. Then he got a job back at Swift's to work in the pork guts. He was cutting hogs with a big cleaver. He kept the whole pork gut gang going, cutting them hogs."

"I started in the pickle cellar. I worked for over a year, they laid me off. The war started, and they called me back. That year before the war, they didn't count that in my seniority. So anyway no matter. I was there before there was a union or anything."

in Canada, they developed a reputation as among the most militant workers. They had been politicized by the sit-down strikes of 1937 and prepared to act on their demands as the war ground down and workers began to hope for a different kind of post-war world and a measure of job security. Edmonton workers joined a national slowdown in 1944 to reinforce contract demands, and they took part in sympathy walkouts in support of UPWA members involved in disputes outside Alberta.

George Kozak explained the high level of solidarity among the Edmonton workers in this way: "All the people were good. They were Depression people. That's why it was a good union. I don't know the guy on the other end of the plant, but [if] he's got a problem I'm willing to walk out for him. There was a lot of cohesion there, one would stick up for another."

In 1947, Alberta workers joined UPWA members nationwide on the picket line in an illegal strike. The strike was strongly supported by Ed-



Cartoon courtesy "Canadian Packinghouse Worker", 1954

monton workers. The Swift's plant, for example, tried to stay open but only five of more than 500 workers crossed the line to report for work. The strikers faced open hostility from the provincial government, however, including calls by key members of Premier

1937

Workers at three Edmonton plants stage sitdown strikes but fail to win recognition of right to organize



1943-44

United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) organizes U.S. plants, expands to Canada. In Edmonton it quickly replaces Local 78, regarded as a tame union

Ernest Manning's cabinet for workers to cross picket lines. The Manning government, which viewed unions essentially as a Communist threat, went on to rewrite labour legislation the following year to stiffen its anti-labour provisions, setting the tone for future Alberta governments in their relations with the union movement.

Yet the strike demonstrated to the packing plant owners that the union had the strong support of its members. Not only that, but the plant owners couldn't ship production around to undermine strikers at an individual plant, because the strike was industry-wide.

The Big Three companies decided—in practice although not formally—to accept a union demand for national pattern bargaining. This meant that in future a deal would be negotiated with one company, usually Canada Packers, and the other two major packers

would fall in line with the same wages. Smaller companies found it prudent to follow these settlements, if only to discourage their own workers from organizing union locals. In this manner, the UPWA succeeded in raising the pay and improving the conditions of packing-plant workers nationwide—especially the semi-skilled or unskilled workers who had little bargaining power in non-union times.

“So the union was good,” Kozak said. “First of all, when I came back from the war, people looked down on you because you worked in a packing plant. But through our union, we ended up in the best paid job in the city.

“Pretty soon everybody wanted to work in a packing plant.”

This bargaining success held up for nearly 40 years. It served the companies by stabilizing labour costs, ensuring that no company among the Big Three had an advantage in those costs. And it served to raise the wages and improve the job conditions of meatpacking workers across Canada.

As Alberta's meatpacking centre, Edmonton had plants belonging to all of the Big Three packers and also its homegrown Gainers operation. Cattle, hog and sheep farmers from rural areas shipped their animals to stockyards in the city, where plants five and six stories high carried out the slaughter,



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Cartoon courtesy “Canadian Packinghouse Worker”, 1953

1947

National meatpacking strike establishes pattern bargaining between Big Three packers and UPWA

1960

Canada Packers builds ‘new breed’ single-storey plant at Lethbridge

1966

National strike at Canada Packers plants disrupts two decades of labour peace

Look for ...

**Quaker Oats
Strike Victory**

Page 10

Savage Shoe Strike

Pages 12 & 13



VOL. 2 NO. 7

AUGUST 1963

Entered as second class matter at the post office at Chicago, Illinois

'BIG THREE' PACTS SIGNED

packaged meat products, and shipped them by rail to markets in Canada and abroad.

It is no exaggeration to say that meatpackers walked with a swagger in Edmonton, especially as their wages rose to become among the highest paid industrial workers in the province. As the market for their products grew, the influence of their union increased. Edmonton workers actively supported a 1966 national strike of Canada Packers plants. In 1974, amid one of the periodic booms in the Alberta economy, Edmonton workers rejected a contract offer that was accepted elsewhere in the country, leading the Big Three packers to lock out the Edmonton workers. Eventually the workers' demands were accepted, resulting in larger-than-expected gains for workers across Canada—thanks to pattern bargaining and the militant attitude of the Edmonton workers.

“The wage rate was excellent,” said Dave Mercer, who grew up near the south-side Gainers plant and signed on at Swift’s in 1969. “So coming out of high school, I graduated early out of

high school at 17, and wanted to make a decent wage. So I applied because I was looking for money. What I got in return was much more than money.” Forward-looking union members encouraged the young Mercer to attend Canada’s Labour College and eventually to become a lawyer. He went on to represent Gainers workers in their 1986 strike.

The 1960s and 1970s were a high point of influence for the Edmonton workers, who became known widely as aggressive and united members of a powerful union. It was a deserved reputation, but it had an unexamined side for many years.

Women worked in Alberta’s meatpacking plants for generations, and walked the picket line beside their male co-workers, but they were often confined to the lower-paid positions in the plants. Over the decades, the women lost ground. In 1945, women made up nearly 30 per cent of Edmonton’s meatpacking workers. By 1979, they represented just 14 per cent of plant workers – with half the jobs they held in wartime—and their opportunities were too often limited.

Consider the story of Ethel Wilson, a single mother of three children who worked at the Burns plant in Edmonton. Wilson supported policies of the packinghouse workers union that were meant to help women,

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1974

Lakeside Packers opens small beef plant at Brooks

1974&78

Edmonton packing plant workers buck national trend by voting against proposed settlements, leading to gains nationally for all meat workers

1978-80

Big Three plant closings across Canada, including shutdown of Burns and Canada Packers in Edmonton



"She's our best employee and I think we should pay her almost as much as a man"

Cartoon courtesy "Canadian Packinghouse Worker", 1953

including equal pay and access to union positions. Her own low pay of 53-and-a-half cents an hour in 1945 made her sympathetic to the situation of the other women, who viewed her as their champion and protector. She also fought for maternity leave policies and for the right of women to keep their jobs when they married. She went on to hold several union positions and was a provincial delegate

to the 1947 international convention in Cleveland.

Back in Edmonton, though, she became frustrated by union politics, which she regarded as dismissive of women. She turned instead to local politics. She was elected to Edmonton's city council for three terms before switching to provincial politics in 1959 as a Social Credit candidate. Wilson went on to win three provincial election campaigns, drawing considerable support from north Edmonton workers, and she served in the Social Credit cabinet before retiring in 1966.

Cynthia Loch-Drake, an emerging labour historian and close observer of the Edmonton meatpacking industry, argues that factors such as confrontational bargaining tactics and the maintenance of higher wages for so-called male jobs helped to produce a working environment that effectively shut women out of the good packing-plant positions. Local union leaders drawn

Profile: May Fingler

May Fingler began her meatpacking career in 1943 at the Swift Canadian plant in St. Boniface, Man., and went on to hold union positions in Manitoba and in Calgary. In a 2005 interview she recalled the working conditions at St. Boniface: "We worked in the wet and the cold, because of the fact that it had to be cold to keep the meat fresh. Naturally it was wet, because we were handling raw product.

It was also quite heavy work. The girls themselves loaded the kubasa, the rings of sausage, and boxes onto the trolleys at the back. There would be about thirty girls working in that department. . . I can't think of anything that might have swayed me into talking about the union, but apparently I was active in it, because the girls in the department used to call me 'Union Baby.'"

1979

UPWA merges with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) because of declining membership



1980

Peter Pocklington buys Swift's Canadian plant on 66th Street in Edmonton



Gainers strikers stop scab workers from entering Edmonton plant, 1986

from recent East European immigrant populations, many with a paternalistic outlook, created an environment hostile to women, both as workers and as union officials, she argues. Such attitudes affected other workers, including immigrants from Asia and Africa, whose progress up the ranks in the meatpacking plants was slow, if it happened at all.

The predominantly masculine union leadership was soon to be tested. Hard times returned to the meatpacking industry in the 1980s. A series of confrontations and defeats eventually produced a new leadership attuned to a present-day work force much more culturally diverse and with more fe-

male members. To its credit, a union movement born to challenge inequalities would eventually rediscover its early ideals. It set out to represent workers, male and female, whose job skills had been undermined by automation, and workers drawn from distant places such as the Philippines and Sudan.

Assault on Unions

On June 1, 1986, workers at the Gainers meatpacking plant in northeast Edmonton, members of UFCW Local 280P, went on strike. The following day, plant owner Peter Pocklington, acting on his well-advertised threats, challenged the very existence of the union by inviting replacement workers

1984

Pattern bargaining collapses as Alberta plant owners demand concessions

1984

Burns demands concessions, shuts down Calgary plant when workers go on strike. Job loss totals 600

1984

Gainers workers avert strike by agreeing to concessions demanded by owner Peter Pocklington

Peter Hohlbein discusses Peter Pocklington

When Peter Pocklington bought the Swift's plant in 1980, things got worse: "They had a chain that would speed the lines up. They'd crank her up. Pork cuts, we were doing about 2,300 hogs a day in 9-1/2 hours. Then after Pocklington took

over, they got up to between 5,000 and 6,000 hogs a day. It was a fight all the time. They wanted their production out and you, I mean if you can't do it, you can't do it. The body can only take so much damage on it at one time."

to take the strikers' jobs. In the months that followed, the battle galvanized the labour movement and transfixed the city. It was a fight to the finish, meaning that whoever was left standing at the end could claim a victory, however small and fleeting.

The backdrop was ominous. For more than a decade, corporate meatpacking giants in the United States had been dismantling the bargaining system and contract gains won by workers in the previous half-century. Under the onslaught, the proud but weakened United Packinghouse Workers of America had merged with the larger United Food and Commercial Workers to strengthen its position.

To crush labour, companies began moving to rural areas, building huge single-species plants that processed thousands of animals a day from nearby feedlots and shipped out production on specially-equipped semi-trailers. Roads, not railways, were the new arteries. The production line was speeded up and divided into smaller segments, and the companies

then argued – successfully in anti-union states – that the old, skilled meatpacking jobs no longer existed. Wages quickly tumbled downwards.

These American giants naturally began eyeing Alberta, where slaughter animals and feed grains were plentiful and where labour laws were among the weakest in Canada. But the first blows to the Alberta workers came not from south of the border, but from within.

In 1984, Burns announced it would no longer follow settlements based on pattern bargaining. When its Calgary employees went on strike, the company closed the plant. Lakeside Packers at Brooks followed suit and turned to replacement workers in a bid to break the union. Within two years it would succeed. At Gainers in Edmonton, workers reluctantly accepted concessions in 1984 to avert Pocklington's menacing vow that he would hire replacement workers.

When he demanded concessions in 1984, Pocklington promised that the workers would share the rewards when

1984

Lakeside Packers demands concessions but workers decide to strike. Lakeside uses replacement workers to break the strike. UFCW strikers out for 44 months before strike is finally defeated

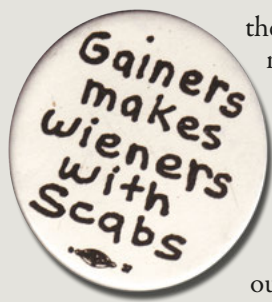


1986

Workers at Fletcher's Fine Foods in Red Deer go on strike but settle within three weeks



Massive show of support for Gainers strikers on day 2 of the strike Edmonton, 1986



the plant became more profitable. Two years later, profitability was plain to see. But instead of sharing the proceeds, Pocklington took out newspaper ads seeking replacement workers while demanding more concessions from the union. The Gainers workers had little choice but to strike.

“Gainers was obviously making money,” said union representative John Ventura, who worked at the plant under the ownership of both Swift’s and Pocklington. “But when it came time to share in 1986, he (Pocklington) 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.

“We knew it was going to be a different kind of strike. We had tried to prepare our members that it wasn’t going to be a four- or six-week strike like in the past. This was going to go into months.”

It went for more than six months, and from the beginning the strikers knew they were fighting for their livelihoods. They tried physically to block the buses

filled with replacement workers, until riot police intervened and the courts began to limit picketing. The strike became popularly known as the War on 66th Street—and on the worst days, that was an accurate description.

“The workers were met with scabs again, ready to take their jobs,” said Alberta Federation of Labour president Dave Werlin, a prominent presence on the picket line and key organizer of a campaign by the federation to garner outside support for the strikers. “But they were ready for it this time – they were psychologically ready, they were angry, and they stood their ground. Once the strike commenced, there was an almost spontaneous militancy.”

Down the road in Red Deer, meat-packing workers faced similar tactics at Fletcher’s Fine Foods which, like Gainers, turned to replacement workers in a bid to defeat the union. Faced with a strong reaction from the workers, who were members of UFCW Local 1118, and also facing a strike at its British Columbia plant, the company agreed to bargain with the union and reached a settlement weeks later. As a result, the union was entrenched at Red Deer, where Quebec-based Olymel eventually replaced Fletcher’s Fine Foods as owner. In the years to come, Local 1118 would use its strong position and experience to help workers to organize at a plant opened by Cargill Foods at



1986

Gainers workers reject demands for more concessions and begin strike that lasts six and a-half months. More than 1,000 workers take part in strike

1989

U.S.-based Cargill Foods opens state-of-the-art beef packing plant at High River

The Story of Local 1118

Gainers employees spent a wearying half-year on the picket line in 1986. A strike at Fletcher's Fine Foods in Red Deer, which began the same day, lasted three weeks until the company settled. What was the difference?

Albert Johnson, president of Local 1118 of the United Food and Commercial Workers, says the Red Deer workers got a boost when employees at the Fletcher's plant in Vancouver voted to strike.

"That was one of the main factors," Johnson said. "When the workers at our sister plant in Vancouver put themselves in a strike situation, and gave notices, the company was facing a shutdown at both its plants."

Also, Fletcher's was owned by Alberta's hog producers, whose interests were directly affected by a long strike. "They couldn't influence Pocklington (the Gainers owner), but they could influence the Fletcher's board of directors," and some began to urge a settlement.

The Fletcher's settlement solidified Local 1118 but didn't end its troubles. The union confronted the company again in 1988 when Fletcher's used a contract expiry to try to break the union once again. Members of Local 1118 fought an eight-month lockout before the company relented. By

then, the local had earned its spurs as among the most determined in Alberta.

As large multinational corporations moved into the meatpacking business, threatening to sweep aside unions and a half-century of worker protections, Local 1118 decided to respond in kind. Under Johnson's leadership, it set out to organize workers at High River, south of Calgary, where food giant Cargill Foods Limited opened a plant in 1990, intending to run it as a non-union shop.

With experience gained in its ongoing battles with Fletcher's, Local 1118 successfully organized the Cargill workers, many of whom had worked at smaller Calgary plants that were essentially put out of business by Cargill's entry into the Alberta market. The meatpacking workers, organized in the past, readily accepted Local 1118's representation.

Buoyed by its success at Cargill, and aware that workers needed strength in numbers to counter the huge multinational companies, Local 1118 set out to organize other plants. By 2009, it represented close to 5,000 workers at plants from Fort McMurray in northern Alberta to Medicine Hat in the south. "There is strength in numbers and a coordinated approach," Johnson said. "The workers are substantially better off with us."

High River, and to represent workers at plants across Alberta.

As the long summer on the Gainers picket line turned to fall and then to winter, the strike exposed Alberta's la-

bour laws in all their calculated weakness. It showed a compromised and paralyzed provincial government, unable to act even in the face of the embarrassing posturing of the stubborn Pocklington, a former leadership

1993

Burns buys Gainers plant from Alberta government

1994

U.S.-based IBP takes over Lakeside Packers, expands it into largest beef packing plant in Canada

1996

Maple Leaf buys Gainers plant from Burns

candidate for the federal Conservative party. It revealed a police force seemingly over-eager to escort strikebreakers past the picket line, and a court system zealous in its setting of picket restrictions. More than that, it revealed a band of strikers who would not be defeated.

A boycott of Gainers products, combined with a labour board ruling that the company had bargained in bad faith, finally brought a settlement just before Christmas in 1986. Perhaps the Conservative government of Premier Don Getty also applied some pressure to Pocklington—and inducements—because the Alberta packing plant had become a symbol across Canada of corporate greed and irresponsibility. Whatever brought the settlement, it was a victory for the union simply because it had survived a concerted attempt to break it. The striking workers were hired back, but at wages considerably below the industry norm.

By then, meatpackers could see more trouble ahead. Pocklington left Edmonton owing the taxpayers millions of dollars; the Gainers plant was sold twice in rapid succession; and by 1999 it was shut down – putting an end to Edmonton’s meatpacking days.

Large, urban plants like Gainers that had been the visible symbols of meat-slaughtering for a century were going

the way of the Prairie elevator. Meatpacking wasn’t on the way out in Alberta. In fact it was a bigger business than ever, but it had changed.

The American food giant, Tyson, purchased the small Lakeside plant at Brooks, and proceeded to build the largest beef slaughter plant in Canada. The old Lakeside union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 401, had finally folded its tent in the late 1980s, and Tyson intended to ensure the union didn’t come back. It hired people badly in need of any kind of job, including recent immigrants and refugees from Africa and job-seekers from depressed regions such as Newfoundland. Working conditions were tough and dangerous, leading to a high turnover rate. It seemed unlikely any union would be back.

In 2004, about 70 workers in Brooks, mostly from the growing Sudanese



1999

Maple Leaf shuts plant in response to strike

2001

Tyson Foods of Arkansas takes over IBP and its Brooks plant

2004

UFCW certifies Lakeside Packers plant at Brooks

Profile: Manny Lacson

Manny Lacson came to Canada from the Philippines in 1995 and went to work at Lakeside Packers in Brooks in 2002. He speaks Pampango, Tagalog and English: "I have my first wife and three kids in the Philippines. I send them money and they are in schools now. They're okay.

"My job is, they said, one of the difficult and heaviest jobs in the plant, in slaughter. They call it first transfer. I lift the legs (of an animal heading for slaughter), or some times they are

too low and you have to lift and put the hook in. If you make a mistake or you did not make the hook, the line will stop. The whole line will stop, and everyone will stop working because of you. I work there for three years now, and I got injured two times. The shackle, the roller, fell on my shoulder, and until now my arm is still sore. I broke my finger. They (the company) don't consider you like if you are broken or something, they don't care."

community, staged a wildcat strike to protest working conditions. They were all fired, and some appealed to the union for help, after similar appeals to government and its agencies proved fruitless.

Peter Jany emerged as a leader of the fired workers. He had come to Canada from Sudan in 1993 with his wife and their young family. "When I came here, I didn't come for war," he said. "But I won't be afraid to fight for my rights."

UFCW Local 401, which had maintained contact with Brooks workers ever since its defeat in the 1980s, decided to undertake another organizing drive. With heavy participation from the recent African immigrants, and using recruitment literature in languages as diverse as Tagalog and Dinka, Local 401 narrowly won a certification vote in the summer of 2004, and then

began the long struggle for a contract.

The company did everything it could to defeat the union, surprising even long-time UFCW organizer and Local 401 president Doug O'Halloran with its tactics. Rather than negotiate, the company stepped up efforts to destroy the union. In this, it was helped hugely by the Alberta government, which appointed a disputes board on the eve of a strike at Lakeside, enabling the company to extend its anti-union campaign.

O'Halloran, looking back to the darkest days in the fight for a contract at Lakeside, remembered the resolve of the negotiating committee, surely one of the most diverse in the province's labour history.

"At this stage we're fighting the company, we're fighting the labour board, and we're fighting the people in the

2005

UFCW Local 401 wins first contract after 24-day strike at Brooks





Lakeside strikers and supporters block buses carrying replacement workers during second day of strike, (Photo Don Crissal)

plant that don't want the union," he said. "The (negotiating) committee is wonderful. We have 22 people on the committee. I would say probably half are female, and at least half are of ethnic origin. So it's a very multicultural committee and it's one of the best committees I had ever seen. The individuals were just unbelievable. They're being harassed on a daily basis in the plant. They're being goaded by people who want to get rid of the union, they're being goaded by supervisors. If they retaliate whatsoever, they could be let go."

The committee members and the workers supporting the union refused to buckle. The disputes board eventually reported, and the company rejected its proposals. The strike went ahead. Tyson's response surprised no one. The company shipped in strikebreakers, went to court to limit pickets, and played cat-and-mouse games to smuggle non-union workers past the strikers.

O'Halloran was even chased in his vehicle by company representatives apparently bent on serving a court order. He wound up in a rural ditch blocked in by his pursuers—an event perhaps unique in Alberta labour history, and one that stiffened the resolve of the strikers and drew outside support to their cause. It might be acceptable to fire workers who complained, to hire strikebreakers and to prey on the worst fears of immigrant and refugee workers seeking some protection through a union, but what appeared to be a chase scene from a movie set in the Ozarks

proved to be beyond the pale. When the infamous chase was made public, Tyson had a noticeable black eye in rural Alberta as well as elsewhere.

Twenty-six days after the strike began, the company agreed to negotiate. A first contract was signed. A band of determined workers, including many who were recent arrivals to Canada and spoke little English, had succeeded in organizing and then obtaining a contract from mighty Tyson Foods. Within three years, Tyson sold Lakeside to XL Foods, a Canadian company, preparing the way for the U.S. giant's departure from Alberta.

The Lakeside strike was more than just another victory on the picket line. The UFCW, successor to the once-powerful United Packinghouse Workers of America, had to gain the trust and support of workers who came from every corner of the world, who spoke more than 100 languages, and who had transformed Brooks into the most multicultural community in Canada.

The union had to reach back to the best and earliest ideals of the UPWA, including its conviction that workers of every race, men and women, had a right to be treated with dignity in the workplace – no matter how big the employer.

The contract won with much bravery and determination at Brooks in 2005 honoured both a storied past and an uncertain future, but a future in which workers would have some say in their own fate.

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Project 2012 is a joint project of the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Alberta Labour History Institute. The project will produce materials which celebrate the AFL's 100th anniversary in 2012, and will record the history of working Albertans.

www.project2012.ca

