

Yvette Lynch

2009

YL: I was born in Barbados. I was raised in Montreal and at the age of 22 I left Montreal and came to Calgary looking for a better life. Then I started working at the hospital. That was my first job, was at the General, and I started in dietary. I worked in dietary for five years.

Q: What did you do in dietary?

YL: We started off first with hot carts. All the food went into the hot carts, into containers. Then a couple of years after that we went to the tray line, everything was frozen, precooked, frozen. Then after that we got layoff time, so that's when we bumped down to the laundry. I stayed in the laundry for over 11 years.

Q: When you went from dietary to laundry, was there a cut in pay?

YL: No, there was no cut in pay, it stayed the same. We were still at the same, so it was good. After we'd been in the laundry seven years then we had a cutback. There was rumours going around that the hospital might be closing down, the laundry they're gonna contract out. So they asked us to take a cutback to prevent it from getting taken out, so all of us decided to take the cutback. I can't remember exactly how much percent it was, but it was quite a bit. I can remember we were making something like over \$10, close to \$11, and then when they made the cutback it was \$9 something. So it was a big cutback. Then after that we had another meeting a couple of years down the road, we had another meeting that they were going to close the hospital down, they're going to do the contract out, they decided they're going to contract the hospital. So we decided; we were all upset. I remember I was pretty upset too, I was very upset.

Q: Can you tell us about the meeting where they told you?

YL: I believe it was the president that came, because there was quite a few of our union people that was there plus the bosses that run the plant were there. They were telling us that they're

going to contract, they decided they're going to contract the place out. A lot of us was very upset; so we started asking a lot of questions. One of my questions was, if they knew that they were going to contract out, why did they ask us to take a cutback in our pay, which didn't make much sense? It was like what I considered a slap in the face after having to work so long and so hard just to make ends meet, that they decide that we're not going to have a job anymore. Then on top of it, we wasn't going to get paid any severance package or anything like that. In my mind I figure, well we have to get something out of it after taking the big cutback.

Q: What happened after the employer left?

YL: Actually after the meeting I left before the meeting because I was upset, I was very upset; I was crying too. I don't remember exactly what I said but some of the words was, it wasn't fair what you're trying to do to us. You wants us to take a cutback so we can save our jobs; then a couple of years down the road now you come and tell us that wasn't enough, that you're going to take our jobs from us now. So I got upset and I left. I remember I went upstairs on the roof where my car was parked and I smoked a couple of cigarettes there, quite a few. I believe it was time to go home; so then after that I went home, just worrying and thinking what next, what am I going to do next? After working in the hospital for so many years you gotta start all over to look for a new job and all that. I was a single parent at that time too, and having no money saved. It's okay to have \$100 or \$200 in the bank but you needed more than that if you're going to end up losing your job, because it's going to take a while before unemployment kicked in. Then I had my brothers and sisters and they would've helped me out too, but not the way that I would need the help; I needed more. I believe after that day we went back to work and then we decided to call a meeting to see if we were going to strike or not; so we called a meeting. That night in the evening time we had a meeting and we decided we were going to strike.

Q: I bet there was some discussion.

YL: Oh ya.

Q: What do you remember about the discussion?

YL: I remember there was a lot of ideas thrown around. Half of the workers wanted to strike and half didn't, because a lot of us was financially didn't have that kind of money. There was a lot of ladies, a lot of single parents in the laundry, and a lot of us didn't have that money to say we're going to go on strike. So a couple of ideas was thrown around, but the only one that I can really remember was work to rule. One of our members mentioned that. I remember I got upset, very upset, because it didn't make no sense work to rule because in my opinion I said that they're still going to get what they want. Some of us is going to go out on the picket line and some of us still going to be working, and that didn't make no sense to me at that time. So I said we should strike. I said, I have a lot to lose because I'm a single parent and I have no one to support me. Some of you ladies, most of you ladies are older and you have husbands. I didn't have no husband, I didn't have no boyfriend, I just had me and my daughter. I said, if I can take the chance to go and do it, I think you all can too. So we had a vote and we went on strike.

Q: What was the mood following that decision?

YL: After we decided we were going to strike? People were pumped; we were ready. Everybody was ready. I'd say it was about 75 percent of us that was ready to go on strike. We were hyped, we were willing to take the chance, to let them know that they just can't do this. They just can't ask us to take cutbacks and then decide to take away our jobs from us just like that. I don't know what kind of plan they had, but we were ready. A lot of us was ready to do it, and we did it. . . . letting public know what we were going to do and why we were striking. A lot of the public was behind us. A lot of them agreed, because they were honking their horns. We put up signs saying, honk your horns if you agree with us, and things like that. A lot of the public was behind us; so it was good. In the end then I got a lot of help. A lot of people donated food to me and money. I don't know who it was, but they did and I appreciated it.

Q: What are your memories of the picket line?

YL: Day one everybody was still pumped and we were all talking about what thing is going to happen, if we're going to get what we want. But everybody was still happy that we'd made that

decision to go on strike. A lot of the nurses and housekeepers and dietary came out every day to support us. So we did have a lot of help from the public and from our own coworkers from within the hospital. About maybe the fifth or sixth day some of the workers started to go back in. We had a couple of meetings that we were told and we didn't get anywhere with the head people; so a couple of the girls were getting kind of scared. I guess in their family some of their husbands told them they should go back; so they made that choice to go back in. I would say it went maybe from 75 percent to maybe about 65 because we still had a lot of people left on the line. Then we got a lot of help from Edmonton. A couple of people came down on buses. I don't remember exactly who. I remember they were all part of the union and there were workers from different places. But they really boost our morale to let us continue, and they supported us. So it was good to know that we had other people behind us still, because it was starting to get to a point that people were really getting scared to see if things were going to follow through.

Q: Do you remember getting on the bus and going to other locations?

YL: Ya, we went down to Holy Cross. I can remember that. It was Holy Cross we went to and there was a lot of people out there, a lot of people out there. I think there was about two or three busloads that went down to Holy Cross.

Q: Tell us about what happened there.

YL: I remember dancing in the street. I remember the union people, our supporters, the presidents that was in the union, they were making a couple of announcements and telling us that the board was running scared and things like that. They were boosting up our morale, they were really boosting us up. We were playing music. I remember we were playing music in the street; somebody brought a boom box.

Q: You had a lot of public support, didn't you?

YL: Yes we did, we really did. The amount of people that was out there in front of Holy Cross, I know it wasn't all our workers, it was some people from the public. It was lots of people from the public too. I think from day one we had public support.

Q: Can you think of why the public would be supporting you?

YL: The only thing I can think of is from the news from what they were saying about the hospital and things like that, it wasn't really fair what they were going to do to us, like contracting us. First they were saying that they were going to contract us, they was going to take the linen to Edmonton. We didn't think that was right, because the company that they were going to hire to do the linen had something to do with mixing our clothes with the oil and things like that. So we didn't think it was very hygiene to mix that kind of linen, because when you're doing the laundry everything goes in as one. No matter how much chemicals you put into it, it stay. Ain't going to come out looking clean and germs-wise and all that stuff. So that's why I think the public was behind us, because maybe they knew something that we didn't know about K-Bro, the way they do their linen and all that.

Q: What was it like to work in the laundry?

YL: In the laundry it's heavy-duty machines, big washers and dryers that can do hundreds of bags of laundry, tons. It wasn't easy; it was hot. Some days it was so hot in the summer that we had to open up a lot of the doors just to get some fresh air to come in there. It was hard. We had huge machines that would press the clothes like, how do you say that, rollers that would bring the clothes through the machine and then you gotta catch them on the other side and you have to fold them. We had to fold them a certain way; so everything had to be nice and neat, nice and neat.

Q: Was there a special section for laundering things that would be contagious?

YL: Ya, we had the clean side and then we had what we called the dirty side. Whenever there was anything contagious or isolation, it was in a yellow bag so we knew automatically that you

had to wear a gown, a certain uniform, something to protect your clothes, like an apron to protect your clothes and gloves. Sometimes you had to wear a mask because you didn't know what was in the yellow bags.

Q: Do you know some of the things that were found in the yellow bags?

YL: It was a lot of blood, like surgery bags. When they did surgery in the operating room we saw a lot of blood, a lot. Sometimes we'd get instruments. I never really run into body parts or anything like that but some people did, and that was reported right away. But there wasn't too much of that.

Q: Was it pretty hard, strenuous work?

YL: Ya I would say so. If you're working on the dirty side it was always the bags were always heavy. So you had to be able to lift up and throw. You had to pick up the bags and throw them out to get the linen out; one person would do that. They had to separate – it was like a belt line and it just comes down. You had to be pretty strong to handle those bags.

Q: What was it like on the picket line?

YL: I can't remember too much. Sometimes I was trying not to, they always kept us informed of what was going on every day, if they were having meetings or when they would come out. But it was always good. There wasn't too many negative things that was coming out that would make us want to go back in. It wasn't scary or anything like that. There wasn't too many negative things coming out from the meeting. When they were bringing it back to us, they would bring back the information.

Q: Do you remember the newsletters?

YL: I can't remember much about the newsletters. I know they were keeping us informed what was going on. I remember we had some reporters; reporters came and interviewed some of the

girls. I didn't want to get interviewed; I think I made enough trouble. I can't remember much about the newsletters.

Q: What are some of your other memories?

YL: I can remember when we were getting down to the end, like I said, then some more girls went back in. It was getting tough there because we weren't really getting the news that we wanted to hear. So a couple of the girls went back in and a couple of the guys. But they were still doing their part when they went back inside, because the linen was never on time. So at least they were still doing their part by slowing things down while we were still outside.

Q: Were you ever afraid you were going to lose the strike?

YL: No, I didn't think that, no. A lot of us that stayed out was, I think we were the strong ones that stayed out, stayed to the end. I'm not saying that the girls that went back in were weak or anything like that. I think it had a lot to do with maybe their husbands that convinced them they have to go back. But I had no husband, I just had me, and I knew what I wanted and if it wasn't coming it wasn't going to come. So I made my decision from day one to take a chance, and that's what I did. But some people didn't, but in the end it worked out.

Q: What do you remember about the settlement?

YL: I remember they told us that we're going to get a severance package. We're still going to lose our jobs, they're still going to contract it out, but at least we were going to get something. I think that was the most important part, because if you know that you're going to have something coming in, you can still get some courage up to go and look for a job. Then on top of that, they give us the opportunity to go back to school; so we also had that. So they give us the opportunity to go back to school, they give us the opportunity to do the bumping system, and a severance package.

Q: What school were you able to go to?

YL: The school part that I can remember, they said we could do upgrading and we had an opportunity to go into any position you choose. If you wanted to do servicing or nursing or caregiver, even if you weren't going to stay with the health region. So a lot of the older ladies took the healthcare part with the elderly-- I can't remember that word.

Q: In long-term care?

YL: Ya, long term care, nursing aide and things like that. A lot of them took that; they went back to school and took that. Some people decided they were going to go to the different hospitals, Peter Lougheed and Holy Cross. Most of them went to Peter Lougheed.

Q: And they got jobs?

YL: They got jobs, ya. They got the same pay as far as I can remember. They got the same pay too; actually they got a little bit more. A lot went into dietary, some went into portering. I decided to take my money and run. I decided to take my money and go somewhere else.

Q: Did you go back to the laundry for awhile?

YL: Ya we went back to the laundry until what year was it they closed down, '97. All of us went back to the laundry; we stayed there. They brought in people to explain to us what we can do and options we have to do to help us out. That's when the school part came in and the severance package and what you should do and what you shouldn't do. Anybody that stayed with K-Bro had to have an interview. K-Bro gave everybody a chance to see if they want to work for them.

Q: Did they pick and choose, or hire everyone?

YL: I think they pick and choose and do what they wanted to do. There was only about maybe five or ten people that they picked. But I heard so many different rumours that some people



backstabbed people just to get to stay. Some people did what they had to do to get into the job there.

Q: After the hospital closed. . .

YL: K-Bro took over; K-Bro came into the laundry. From what we heard, originally they were supposed to go ship the stuff out to Edmonton, but that didn't happen. So K-Bro came and took over the laundry; so they started doing the laundry in Calgary instead of Edmonton.

Q: Are they still doing that?

YL: No, K-Bro still has the contract but K-Bro is not that location anymore. . .

Q: Was the public upset about taking it out of Calgary?

YL: Yes, that was the biggest concern that we had, that they were taking our jobs away from us to take it to Edmonton. That's what we didn't like.

Q: The community supported you, and you actually won something for them.

YL: Ya we did; we kept the jobs right here. It give other Calgaryians the opportunity to work for K-Bro.

Q: If you had to do it all over again, would you?

YL: Ya, oh ya, I would. Ya, I would do it all over again.

Q: Would you do anything different?

YL: Would I do anything different? Nope, no I wouldn't. I believe that they should've been honest with us in the first place, but what company is? They have to scheme and do what they have to do to get their work done. So that's what it's all about.

Q: What was your initial reaction to the final settlement?

YL: It was fair, I think it was good. The only thing it's too bad that we had to take a cutback in the first place. But it paid out for everybody got a good settlement because it went for the years of service. A lot of us, I would say the majority of us, was there for over ten years; so it worked out good for a lot of people. Some people got to retire, some people took their package and went their way, some people still got a package but went into different hospitals. So in the long run everything worked out. Some people stayed and worked for K-Bro.

Q: After the strike was over, there were some hard feelings against those who went back during the strike.

YL: After the strike a few of us was upset with some of the workers that went back to work; so the tension was pretty high there inside. A lot of us didn't speak to each other for awhile. Then while we were still angry, especially me, still angry with some of my workers, I came up with the idea of having a pin. I decided, well it just came to me just like that. So I got these three colours – black, red and yellow. My original thoughts was the black was we wasn't dead yet. It was to do with death. They didn't bring us down; we kept going. The red was for courage for all those girls that stayed out there. The yellow, the yellow have two meanings. My true meaning was I call them cowards, that's what I called it. But in the end I really thought about it and we changed it, and we changed it to, what was it?

Q: Solidarity and understanding?

YL: Ya, that's why I put it my simple way. My first thoughts was anger because I couldn't understand why they went back. But in the end when we started talking to each other after getting over all the anger and making this, people started explaining why they went back. That's

when we changed certain parts instead of calling them cowards, because they weren't really cowards. It's just that they had a different lifestyle. So that was the pin.

Q: What kind of leadership support did you get from your local once you decided to go on strike?

YL: There was 100 percent, 100 percent. Everybody was behind us. Even if we were wrong, no one told us we were wrong. Everyone kept saying, try, do what you have to do and don't give up. So everybody was behind us. The union was behind us 100 percent.

Q: What are your recollections about Ralph Klein? What part did he play in the whole scenario?

YL: Was that the part where we said we made him blink? I guess he didn't take us serious, because like I said it was only a handful of us. But I guess after a couple of days that it went on for so long, he blinked. He made a comment about that.

Q: How did that make you and your coworkers feel?

YL: It made us feel good, it made us felt strong, like we did something that we were supposed to do, that they can't walk over the little people. We were little people, we were just laundry workers. A lot of us didn't have big education or anything like that, but we weren't stupid people either. If we'd have stayed there and continued working we would've never gotten what we got. We would've never got our severance package, because they never talked about giving us anything. They weren't going to give us anything; they were just going to close the doors and take the hospital away. Whatever they were going to do with it, they were originally going to blow it up, because they had all the plans to take it to Edmonton. So they had no intentions of doing anything for us. They weren't going to send us back to school; there wasn't access to make a better life for ourself or offer us anything. So I think what we did was right. Whatever Ralph Klein had his hands in, well it didn't work out. If I had to do it again, I would do it. I would do it over and over again. If I had to tell anyone, no matter what, you have the courage, do it. Just stand up for your right. It doesn't matter how much education you have. You can be a laundry

worker, you can be a street cleaner, you can wash dishes, housekeeping. If you know that someone is treating you wrong, you can make it right.

[ END ]