

Colette Singh

April 30, 2009

CS: I'm Colette Singh. I'm the president of CUPE Local 8 in Calgary, which looks after around 1,300 healthcare workers, all from the long-term-care sector. I've been in Local 8 for the past 22 years. I started off there as a job steward at the care center and built myself up and now I've been president of Local 8 for the past nine years. Before that I was a treasurer of the local, and today I'm still president of Local 8. Before that I came from England originally. I was born in England. My father was a Canadian soldier and he married my mom and stayed there. My grandfather was a coalminer from Wales. After leaving the mines he moved to England and he worked for the town borough of Teignmouth, which is a small place on the south coast of England. He was active there getting uniforms for the garbage collectors who worked for the town borough, so he was involved in the union. At the age of 13 my parents moved from England back to Canada. I went to high school in Montreal for a while and then I moved out to Calgary when I got married. I worked for Burns packinghouse here and was a member of UFCW. I was there when they finally went on strike, well they locked us out, and that was the end of Burns.

Q: What did you do at Burns?

CS: When I first started at Burns, I worked in the meat-cutting, de-boning department. I worked in that department for the first year I was there. It's very hard. They were an equal opportunity employer, it was equal pay for equal work, so we worked just as much as the guys. There was no special treatment in there because you were a woman. You did the same work; we all did the same work in the departments. Then I moved to the cryovac section where they cryovac the meat into packaging. At the last when I worked for them I worked in the pre-pack department, which is where they pack bacon and hams and they actually package the meat. I worked there for four years in that job. Then the company wanted too many concessions and cutbacks, and we ended up going on strike. Then Burns eventually locked us out; then Burns closed the plant down. We believe the

intention was they asked for so many cutbacks that they knew we wouldn't agree to, that they were actually forcing the strike to actually close the plant down, and blame the workers and the union. The Burns packing plant was very outdated. The equipment was very old; the whole plant was old and falling apart. That's why we feel that they really pushed us to go on strike, to lock us out, because their real intention was to close the plant down, and blame the union and the workers in the plant.

Q?

CS: I believe there was. That was part of their issue. I remember reading that part of it was that they wanted quite a big pay rollback and they no longer wanted to provide the smocks and coveralls that we wore in the plant. If your stuff got stolen you were responsible to pay for it. There was going to be no more help with that.

Q: Was there an issue with pensions?

CS: With the people under five years, they paid us out; they paid out the monies. I think there was some issue with the older longer-term employees with pension, but I was basically told anybody under five years would be paid out. So they sent us whatever we had there.

Q: What year was this?

CS: I believe the plant closed in '84, somewhere around June, almost summer.

Q: After Burns shut down, what did you do?

CS: I stayed home for a year and took unemployment, because they never harassed us about the unemployment, because of the way Burns closed. Then for about eight months I worked for the Sheraton Hotel on Barlow Trail. In those days it was very hard to find a job when Burns closed. You took what you could. I worked at the Sheraton for

approximately eight months. Then my girlfriend got me a job at what used to be Chinook Nursing Home. I've been there ever since. I liked going there. My friend had worked at Burns as well, and we liked it because it was unionized. I didn't like working in non-union places, because you have no protection.

Q: Talk about the work you did at Chinook.

CS: I ended up getting a casual job in the beginning because you only get hired as a casual. That was your stepping stone into getting a full time job. I worked in the laundry and housekeeping when I first started there. After a year I got a fulltime position working evenings in the laundry there. In the second year they allowed me to take the in-service training for PCAs, personal care attendants, and I've been a PCA ever since. It's actually a nursing assistant. We totally take care of the residents there. We're responsible for feeding the residents, dressing the residents, giving them baths, transferring them in and out of bed, putting them in the wheelchair. All their daily functions we assist them with.

Q: And that job was unionized?

CS: It was unionized. After I'd worked there for about a year, there was a lady who'd worked at this facility for over 40 years. She was on the executive board at Local 8. Something happened: they asked me to work, and I asked them for the overtime and they said no, we don't pay overtime because you agreed to do the shift. I got quite upset about it. She noticed that I was quite vocal and she asked me if I would consider becoming a job steward. After that I was a job steward for the last 21 years with Local 8. As the years went on, they encouraged me further up to where I am today. She was a good mentor. She really pushed me. She was pushing me and I didn't realize what she was doing at the time. But she knew that I had some kind of quality or something that she liked, and I helped her.

Q: What were some of the events of Local 8?

CS: Local 8, we were there during the laundry workers' strike. We were asked to help out and they asked the nursing homes if they would walk out in support of their efforts. The homes that I worked for, and some of Carewest that were at that time in Local 8, we walked out. We just didn't go into the worksite and we walked up and down outside the buildings. I know two of our homes walked out full force. Chinook was a little different; they would come out and picket on their breaks. It was pretty much myself and Audina Richards that stood out there all day for two days. That's how we supported it, and I think it made a difference, it helped them.

Q: So was that towards the end?

CS: Towards the end, yes.

Q: Why did you feel like supporting the laundry workers?

CS: I felt really bad for them because it was almost to me like what happened to us at Burns. That flashed back to my mind. They were forcing them because they wanted to do something different. They wanted to contract the laundry out. It was almost like the same thing, like you were being forced. I felt really bad for them because I know how I felt. So I just felt that they needed the support. Down the road it could happen to us as well.

Q: Can you give us some history of Local 8?

CS: Local 8 has been around for a long time. One of the charters in the office goes back to 1919. I believe at that time they were the hospital, the General Hospital mostly. Sometime later on some of the nursing homes went into Local 8. I know for a fact Mount Royal was in Local 8 and Glenmore Park, which is now Carewest, and George Boyack and the three ND Cook homes, now they're known as Intercare, those homes were all in Local 8. We were part of Local 8 but it was mostly the General Hospital as the predominant membership in the local. Near the end of 1995 or '96 we lost some members and then around early 2000 the hospital part of local 8 ended up going into another CUPE

local. Local 8 then was just long-term-care workers. We were left with about 400 members back in the early 2000s. Now the membership has swelled. We have merged one local of CUPE that was the same industry into Local 8; 2340 merged to local 8. Local 8 also has organized other sites from scratch, non-union people.

Q: Can you tell us about this award?

CS: The award was given to the local because most of the members were women and it was because of the fight they put up to save their jobs. I believe it was given to the local, I'm not totally sure, but I believe it was given to them in '96 by CUPE. But they have other awards too and I'm sorry I forgot to bring it. The other award is like a stone. I have to confess I haven't read the bottom who gave it to them. It's in the office.

Q: Do you want to read it?

CS: It says, bread and roses, jobs and justice, in acknowledgement of the courage and leadership of the women of CUPE local 8, the Calgary laundry workers and the solidarity of the members of CUPE locals 936 and 1240, who walked out in support of their sisters, and of all other union members in Calgary and throughout Alberta who stood together. Unions are good for women. Presented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees May 22, 1996 on the occasion of the Women's March Against Poverty, Calgary, Alberta. And here it is.

Q: Were there any people who influenced you?

CS: The main one who, I think that going on strike at UFCW really influenced me. They played a big part. They're very strong, they were good. I was young back then and that made an impression on me, that they would go to that length. I think my grandfather too. He used to lecture me about workers' rights and the whole nine yards, and I listened to it growing up quite a bit. I listened to my mom telling me the stories about her dad, who worked in the coalmines. She would bring it up quite a lot.

Q: Did she tell you stories of the miners?

CS: Pretty much. She told me that they used to go down the mines, and she brought up the story about canary birds. I didn't understand why they would have birds. I remember asking her, why did they have birds in a mine? She said, well if the canaries died then they knew that the air quality wasn't safe for the workers. She explained it to me and now I know that's what the canary is. My grandfather and her brother worked there. She said they would come home very filthy. It was very hard work for them and it was very dangerous. I remember her telling me that.

Q: Did she talk about the union?

CS: Yes, because he was so union-minded, I think we heard about it quite a lot and how the unions were trying to help the coalminers. I believe my grandfather actually left and they moved to another town because the mines were starting to close down. They moved to south Devon, which is in England. They moved from Wales. That's when he got involved and he got his job with the borough there, which is what we would call a city. That's when he got upset about the garbage people there who collected garbage; the city wasn't providing them coveralls. Being vocal and the way he was, he got himself right in there. I believe he was involved in a union. I think they were the national union of something over there; I don't remember the actual name of them. But he was quite active. Then he ran for the town council as a councilor. He wanted to be a councilor because he was choked with their whole system. Most of his life he was a very vocal person. Maybe it rubs off on me, I don't know. He was a fighter. We used to hear those stories from my mom quite a lot.

Q: In the UFCW days, were there influential people?

CS: Not so much, but the only thing I noticed in the days of UFCW, they were all together. Everybody was on the same, like we went to the strike vote and the majority,

they must've got a more than 80% strike vote. They were really showing solidarity in the plant; they were good. So I figured it's a very strong union if they can get the members to that extent.

Q: Were there any other events?

CS: Not events, just that we keep on working hard and plugging, trying to get new members and informing people they're better with the union than without. Other than that, Local 8 is running pretty good right now.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

CS: The one life lesson I've learned is that, I know a lot of people slam unions and they don't like unions. I think it's because they don't understand unions. But I think if you're working you need backing from someone when you're at work. I would strongly urge people to work for unionized, and encourage them if they're not unionized to organize them. There's more strength in numbers. That's what I've learned over the years, that you're not by yourself. If you just work you have no support, really. So I would rather work in a unionized place, and I encourage younger people to really consider that.

... My plaque, you want my plaque? Can you see it now?

[END]