

Laundry Workers Discussion: Tom Fuller, Winston Gereluk, Jim Selby, Dave Werlin

Winston Gereluk: When the laundry workers' strike broke out I was the PR director for the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. When the strike broke out on Wednesday I don't think any of us, well a few of us may have heard of it, but it really hit the fan on Thursday and that weekend the media all wanted to know what was going on. Some of our people were already down in Calgary. I was up in Edmonton and got to put together a lot of stories on this issue. So that's why I've got a few comments to make, I guess.

Jim Selby: My name's Jim Selby. I was the research and communications director at the Alberta Federation of Labour during the laundry workers' strike. During the strike we held an emergency meeting of the Alberta Federation of Labour executive council in Calgary for several reasons, number one so we could get all of the leaders who run council down to the picket lines to show support, and secondly so that we could talk about how best to aid and support the strikers.

Tom Fuller: My name's Tom Fuller. At the time of the strike I was a researcher with the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees in their Edmonton office. During the strike I worked with executive director Bill Petrie at trying to broaden the strike by organizing support actions in Edmonton.

WG: I think that a few notes on the context of the strike are in order. These strikes don't just happen, workers don't just walk off – usually there's an abundance of reasons why they walk off. So I guess we have to say that this strike which occurred in the middle of the 1990s goes right back to the 1980s and the cutbacks that had started when the downturn came to the Alberta economy in the early part of the 1980s. The rest of Canada by this time was already in a bit of a depression, they called it stagflation I guess, that went back into the '70s. We were kind of shielded by that because of all of the development going on, primarily in the oil sands. So I guess we'd have to say that it hit Alberta when the Alsands consortium announced that it wasn't going to go ahead with its development; I believe that was in 1981, it might've been in 1982. After that the government of Don Getty started the program of cutbacks, deregulation and privatization,

which hit the healthcare industry, education and social services. So the protests were starting but these were relatively mild cutbacks. I guess I'd have to say that we really didn't feel the impact until Ralph Klein's government was elected in 1993 and after that he started his program of regionalization, and the massive cutbacks that he announced in 1994 takes us right up to that point. The trade union movement in the face of the massive cutbacks like 20 percent cutbacks immediately to the budgets of healthcare, education and social services, the trade union movement I don't think was particularly good at the fightback up to that point. So it took us right up until November 1995 when the newly formed Calgary Regional Health Authority announced that it was going to be shutting down two laundries and shipping the laundry from the Calgary hospitals up to Edmonton. I'll have more to add on that particular sequence of events. Maybe some of the others have something to say about the context leading up to this event.

JS: I think one of the things that we need to remember is that Klein had an ideology that was a bit of a departure from Getty's. It's all part of the same package but Klein was enamoured with the notion of cutting really deeply and really quickly, and then refusing to engage in any discussion about it. In other words, he prided himself on not blinking, and that's the way he put it, so that he would not blink. I think that the labour movement with its social allies in '93 and '94 and early '95 had put together coalitions on a healthcare coalition, social services coalition, and we also attempted to put together an education coalition trying to gather up all the different interested public parties and the general public and get them activated in some kind of campaign against the cuts. But although we did have some successes, we had some large marches and demonstrations, Klein was impervious to that kind of crowds. He in fact scoffed at demonstrations with thousands of people, calling them rent-a-crowds.

TF: I think part of the background that's important is to pick up on something that was said a minute ago, that government was quite ideologically driven in a very odd way. Subsequently, the Klein government tried to recast itself as a very sort of pragmatic government where leadership is fine, where the parade is going, get in front of it. But in fact in the early and mid '90s they were quite ideologically driven and they were driven by really simplistic kinds of principles, one of which was that the private sector was by definition automatically more efficient than the public sector and therefore you could save money by privatizing and contracting out services

without even bothering to look at the business case. The details weren't important. The private sector had this magic free market pixie dust that would sprinkle on operations and make them magically more efficient. So the background, part of this detailed background to the laundry situation, was that back in I think about '93, quite early on, the Capital Health Authority had basically created competition within the organization. They went to K-Bro Linen, which before that was a relatively small scale laundry service for industrial companies, and essentially handed them half of the hospital laundry franchise for the City of Edmonton. The theory was that by doing so they would create competition with the remaining public sector laundries, which would make the whole thing much more efficient. They then about a year later gave the other half of hospital laundry services in Edmonton to K-Bro Linen, and did so with only a fairly cursory bidding process. In that bidding process elements inside Capital Health wanted to mount a bid on behalf of the internal existing laundry services; they were told they could not do so. The final result was that K-Bro ended up with the monopoly for hospital laundry services in the City of Edmonton and region, and they were "sold" some very modern computerized industrial laundry equipment that was state of the art, was almost brand new, and they got it for a fraction of its original cost. As a result, when Calgary Health Region announced that they were going to shut down the laundries at the General and Foothills Hospitals and that they were going to be shipping the laundry up to Edmonton, two things happened. One was I think a lot of people, having seen what happened in Edmonton, realized that this was not a good faith process. The fix, whether it was personal connections or ideology, the fix was in. Secondly, on the face of it the idea that for a service like laundry you could actually make savings by bundling it up, trucking it for 200 miles, washing and drying it and then trucking it back, was on the face of it so absurd that it heightened the sense of outrage both on the part of the workers in Calgary laundries and the public.

WG: I want to refer to something that Tom just said. It's very interesting when you examine the thinking that went into the regionalization that really kicked into full force in 1994, and that is the idea that they are going to introduce some competition. The role of the health authorities, unlike the role off the old boards, was going to be to almost broker the deals. They were going to look around in the community to see who could best offer the services and provide the materials, and they were going to do that through a process of tendering, bidding, and that sort of thing. We

were all afraid of that but we really didn't see what it meant – it was starting to cut a little bit, as Tom just mentioned – until the fix was in for the laundries in Calgary. You had the two laundries in Calgary – one operated by the Calgary regional hospital laundry service right by the Bow Valley Centre but the prime user of course was General Hospital, and the other one was right in the Foothills Hospital. Now I just want to say something about that, because I was involved with a guy whose name is Bruce Strummel in the negotiations that occurred the year before. The year before that, 1994, the fix was already in, as Tom said. The healthcare workers were wondering what to do. Unions were wondering what the best strategy was. So when the Calgary Health Authority, our negotiators, came to Local 55 in the Foothills Hospital and said, look, have we got a deal for you; if you take a cut in your pay – and I forget what the cut was; it wasn't huge but it certainly wasn't a raise; it might've been in the order of 5 percent. What was it Tom?

TF: It ranged by positions but I was told, and I believe Bruce gave me this, in some cases up to 18 to 20 percent; it was huge.

WG: Okay it was huge. I can remember when the time came for the vote. I went with Bruce; I think he brought me along as a bodyguard, but he could've chosen better. When he told the workers there that they shouldn't accept the deal, saying that you can't trust these bastards (I think those were exactly the words he used), they were quite angry with us. In fact, when the meeting broke up and Bruce and I walked back down the hallway to our cars, a bunch chased us down the hallway arguing viciously with us, vociferously, saying look, you wanna jeopardize our jobs, you don't want us to take this deal. So I'm saying this just to illustrate that the workers really thought that if they took that contract that their jobs would be secure. So you can imagine their outrage when a year later the Calgary Health Authority announces that it's going to cut their jobs and contract the work out to a group in Edmonton. I just want to say one word about the fightback, because Tom and Jim also mentioned it. The fightback had started but I have to say that during the '80s even though all of the unions were involved and certainly the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees and CUPE were involved, that the big fightback was likely led by the nurses. The '80s is where the nurses, starting with a strike in 1980 (there were a couple of strikes before that), and going right through that decade the nurses went on strike several times defying government and board back to work orders, incurring huge fines, one of which led to the

formation of the Friends of the Alberta Nurses, which was started from the Federation of Labour and basically helped them fund a huge fine that they had received. So there was a fightback and there were organizations in place that were committed to the fightback. Still I don't think we were really prepared for the strong ideological position taken by Ralph Klein.

JS: It was hard to predict that a government that was essentially in a very healthy economic situation despite what they gave to the media about how badly Alberta finances were doing, it was unexpected to see the depth of the cuts. The same thing happened with the CUPE laundry workers, by the way. The previous year they had also taken fairly serious concessions and you're right, in exactly the same way the concessions were linked to job security. They said, if you take these concessions you'll get to keep your job. When they announced that they were contracting out laundry, it was the CUPE workers who were out the first day. They held a meeting that night and they walked off the job the next morning.

WG: Wednesday, November 15th.

JS: Exactly, and were followed the next day by AUPE I believe. This was done without any guidance from the leadership of CUPE. I think this was the workforce themselves being so angry that they decided that they were going to take action and simply ignore all of the various contractual obligations to stay at work, based upon a fairly clear understanding that if the employer had lied to them before there's nothing the employer could say now that would ease their conviction that their jobs were gone. The second thing I think we should talk briefly about is exactly what the makeup of the laundry workers were. We're talking about a largely female workforce and a large proportion of them immigrant women. For them to take on an illegal job action is incredibly impressive because of their insecure position in society to start with. So the first real true fightback against Klein's agenda of public service disruption and cutbacks came from the most vulnerable members of the public sector workforce.

TF: One last little bit of context I guess. I mentioned earlier the sort of ideological drivers in the Klein government, and it really was quite funny because they took some pretty simplistic ideas in the first place and simplified them even more. There's a great quote somewhere, I think in the

first Parkland *Trojan Horse* book, the first one from Steve West in which he sounds absolutely fatuous saying something like, I'll make this bold prediction that you can take any public sector operation of any kind and privatize it and save 10 to 15 or 20 percent, and you don't even have to look at the details because of the way they do their business, efficiency stuff. Anyway, what they in fact were doing a lot of the time, I guess people at the deputy minister level which drove a lot of this and the people that had some brains, was they started to follow in a fairly simplistic way some private sector models of outsourcing. The idea was that the organization should focus on what the organization is about, so hospitals should be about healthcare not about laundry, food services, or housekeeping. It wasn't just limited to healthcare. All across the province in 1995 what we were seeing was colleges, hospitals come forward with proposals to contract out housekeeping services, maintenance services, food services, and laundry services of course. I was involved in some of those things working for AUPE and while we would try to mount fightback campaigns with the members of the community, most of them went through really like they were on rails and the best you could hope for was to get some good severance and maybe some alternative job placements for your members. That had happened over and over until the laundry strike, and that's I think what's really important about the laundry worker strike.

WG: The way that they moved with the regional health authorities, they moved differently with education, but nonetheless just as effectively. They went through a process where they put them under their own boards, under their own set of legislation, and so therefore they were suddenly in charge of their own budgets. It was no longer a decision of the government, so to speak, it was this board which had to decide how to allocate scarce resources so they would have to contract out and privatize and things like that. I just want to say a couple of words about the legislation, because Jim mentioned that the strike was illegal and some people may not know exactly why. So just to run through it very quickly, 1977 we had Bill 41, the Public Service Employee Relations Act, which made it illegal for anyone covered by that act, which meant most people who worked for the government and boards and agencies, to ever go on strike as well as a whole lot of things we don't have to go into right now. Trudeau had already announced his wage and price controls in 1976; they went into effect in '77. There were a whole bunch of wage and price control measures that followed when the AIB expired. The nurses' strikes in the early part of the 1980s I believe led directly to the Labour Statutes Amendment Act in 1983 which gave us Bill

44. The significant thing for this discussion about Bill 44 was that it extended that ban on strikes to a whole lot of other people, including healthcare workers. The long hot summer of 1986 gave rise to a labour statutes law review process which gave us Bill 20 and 21 which gave us the current Alberta Labour Relations Act. Since then it's been amended several times but if anything it extended that ban and imposed severe penalties as well as such provisions for instance as that the cabinet could decide to decertify the union if they went on strike. I think that that last point is kind of important for the way that the labour leaders responded to this wildcat strike, because suddenly the union had a much greater legal obligation to act as the policeman of its own members, and several of the leaders were kind of worried about that. I just want to say one last thing Tom has referred to as the debt and deficit debate. We were in a climate where up until 1995 I guess you'd have to say that the public pretty well had bought the government's mantra that the debt and deficit had grown to the proportions where they could use the shock and awe process. We were supposed to be so shocked by the fact that the debt was running away with us, that we were supposed to accept almost anything they gave us, and the public was on their side. I think that what's also significant about the strike in 1995 is it was really the first major blow against that public trust in what the government was telling them.

JS: I think that the reaction of working people in general to the Klein agenda was a sense of betrayal and a deep-seated anger. I think that the laundry worker strike galvanized people's opinions and offered them a way to express their anger and discontent with what was going on. When I was on the picket lines in Calgary I was astonished at the outpouring of public support for the laundry workers. We'd be out on the picket lines – and this is Calgary, which is a fairly conservative city – and literally two out of three cars passing by were waving and honking and showing support. It was very heavy; it was unbelievable, the atmosphere on the picket line. I think that what you'd seen was almost a fatalistic acceptance of the Klein agenda. People were losing their jobs left, right, and centre in the public sector. Those jobs were not reappearing in the private sector, contrary to popular belief. People who worked in the private sector were taking cuts in healthcare services that just weren't what they used to be. So people were angry and discontent, and this gave them a chance to show it. I think that the ease with which the strike spread, or could have spread might be closer to the truth, shows exactly how important it was in terms of being a flash point. At the executive council meeting at the Alberta Federation of

Labour we held an emergency meeting on Thursday and Friday, which would've been I believe November 13th and 14th. [doorbell]

Dave Werlin: I was CUPE regional director at the time of the laundry workers' strike. I had in fact at one time been a rep for that local, Local 8 in Calgary. So I knew quite a few people although I can't say I knew the laundry workers individually at that time. But it was clear that Klein was out to cut everything that he could in the public sector. It's also pretty obvious that they had already lined up somebody to take over that laundry. That was part of the deal; that was their way of cutting back was to contract out. That of course is how that particular strike occurred, in the context of cutbacks that had hit hospital workers throughout the province and public sector workers everywhere. I think the major cuts came to the hospital workers and many other locals no doubt at a time when their contract was open; so they were in collective bargaining. In fact I think they had just come through collective bargaining and had got a new contract and hadn't made any gains at all really; then the next thing they started contracting out. I think that's what really caused the laundry workers to erupt. They'd just been through bargaining, they'd got a contract where they made concessions, and now all of a sudden they get rewarded for their concessions by having their jobs contracted out.

WG: In the middle of November the Calgary Regional Health Authority announces that it's going to do this contracting out, and it really I think caught a lot of us by surprise, though as Tom said a bit earlier, they had already done the contracting out in Edmonton to the same firm. One will never know the relationship of the owners of that firm to the government, but I can bet you it was pretty close. So in the middle of November it announces this and on November 15th the CUPE workers in the General walk out and set up picket lines. A day later the members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees at Foothills walk out, those members who were involved in the laundries, because those two laundries were going to be shut down. Friday, which is the following day, November 17th, cease and desist order comes out of the board. On the weekend they keep the strike up. Finally on Sunday the Calgary Regional Health Authority agrees to sit down with the workers and talk about a possible deal, and there were about four minimal concessions that they were allowed to make. I just said this by way of now getting to the point where the strike's taking place.

JS: I think that what I wanted to discuss was what happened with the rest of the labour movement during the strike. As I said, I think that the strike hit a hotspot of labour discontent. The Alberta Federation of Labour held an emergency executive council meeting in the second week of the strike on Thursday and Friday in Calgary. The specific resolution in front of the executive council was how best to spread the strike. In fact, we passed a motion calling for the Fed to build a general strike in support of the laundry workers. At that meeting it was interesting because you were already getting some wildcat job actions from non-laundry workers in small pockets here and there, people refusing to cross the picket lines. For instance, Health Sciences, despite the fact that Health Sciences voted not to participate in the strike, their members did anyway. But what surprised me is that the Alberta Federation of Labour itself, which is comprised of both public and private sector unions, was absolutely 100 percent in favour of spreading the job action beyond the laundry workers, in other words not leaving the laundry workers out to dry being the only people fighting the good fight. And it was from surprising quarters. The International Association of Machinists on Friday announced that they had a local in Edmonton that would walk off the job on Monday morning in support of the laundry workers. I can't stress how important that is when you have a private sector union and a private sector workforce in a different city from the strike prepared to walk off the job in support of the immigrant women doing the laundry at the Calgary hospital. It flies in the face of a whole bunch of accepted notions of the conservative nature of the Alberta workforce. Furthermore, there were also very strong indications from the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union and from the Steelworkers that they would follow suit. The Machinists were a little bit ahead of the game but the sentiment was strongly endorsed by everyone else. CUPE 474, I have to add this one, they're a schoolboard local in the city of Edmonton, actually booked off eight people to be paid time off starting on Monday to help organize a general strike. So to say that it caught the imagination of workers and the labour movement would be I think an understatement.

DW: I think there's a certain parallel here with the Gainers strike. You mentioned, Jim that this notion of the conservative nature of working people in Alberta, there's a sense of that in how they vote. There's a certain amount of political apathy but among workers in Alberta like everywhere else there is an innate understanding of their role as workers, and they see the

difference between themselves and the bosses. They tend to understand when somebody is being really unfairly picked on, more so than in a lot of really big strikes where they're high wage earners and so on. You're talking about both in the Gainers situation and in the laundry workers, people whose jobs are drudgery and pay is bad, conditions are terrible. In both cases they had been given promises. Pocklington made promises to the Gainers workers in '84 and '86; he didn't come through with his promises. They felt they had been cheated. It aroused a special resentment, and the same thing with the laundry workers. I think that people understood that and I think we saw the beginning of what could've amounted to something perhaps quite as substantial in terms of rallying labour as happened with the Gainers strike. I don't necessarily mean it would be exactly the same; these things are hard to predict. But you had some really decent size. A little hospital in Lethbridge walked out, and they did it very quickly. Nobody had to go down there and talk to them; they just heard about it and saw what was going on. My job as regional director was to contact the various CUPE locals, and there was really excellent response. They weren't prepared to immediately walk out necessarily, but every one of them that I talked to expressed a concern and talked about how we have to support them. So there was a latent resentment there that was spreading, and I think that strike could have taken on different proportions given a chance.

TF: I guess it was the Thursday morning the CUPE people walked out, or they took their vote Wednesday night and walked out Thursday morning.

WG: The timeline I have says that they actually set up picket lines on Wednesday. What time Wednesday, I'm not sure, because it was Thursday when the. . .

TF: Thursday morning the AUPE went out. I was in the office in Edmonton and there was of course quite a lot of excitement in the air. Two of the headquarter staff organizers, Ron Hodgins and Bruce Gremmel, were immediately dispatched to go down to Calgary to help organize the picket line and Carol Anne Dean, who was the president, of course headed down immediately. I went into the office of Bill Petrie, who was the executive director at the time, and said, so what do I do, and hoping that I would get to go down to the picket line of course, because that's where it's fun. Bill said, we have to organize here. He said, the only way this strike works is if it's

broadened, and that means we have to start organizing here in Edmonton. For the next week until the strike ended, I may as well just run through it I guess. We immediately began holding meetings with the two large AUPE healthcare bargaining units in Edmonton at the Glenrose Hospital and the University of Alberta Hospital. We'd done some preparation in the background. Winston and I, among others, had been working for about seven or eight months producing research and writing and doing presentations to AUPE conventions challenging the idea that privatization necessarily or even probably saved any money. I'm not of the opinion that changed anything very much, but at the time it was an idea that was almost unheard of; people accepted the idea that automatically when you privatize you save money. So we'd done stuff for various AUPE bargaining conventions, bargaining conferences where we said, no wait a minute, take a look. We produced documentation from management academic journals and evidence from various studies saying, no look at this. What was important there was it didn't have much impact on the public at all at that point but I think it had some impact on AUPE's members. They had been lacking a certain amount of confidence; so it was almost a feeling like they can do this to us and it's too bad but the government is in trouble fiscally. Once we started to give them stuff that said, no this is not how it works, I think that helped. Anyway, over the course of the week following, AUPE members Local 55 going onto the picket line, we actually held a series of meetings. One was in Snell Hall at the University of Alberta Hospital and the other one was in the auditorium, I forget the name of the auditorium, at the Glenrose Hospital. We held long discussions and at the end of those meetings the members voted to take whatever action was necessary, including strike action, to support the workers in Calgary. We set in fact a deadline of the following Friday, and of course word has got out to the employer. I remember vividly, because it was on the following Friday that the strike ended, sitting in the boardroom of Capital Health at the University Hospital. You were there were you not, or were you in Calgary?

WG: I was in Edmonton.

TF: You and I and Bill were in the room and we had at that point walking around outside the U of A Hospital about 150 people picketing. It was an information picket at that point because they were all people who went on the dayshift which started at 7:30 or 8 o'clock. I remember Bill Petrie getting calls on his cellphone from people outside saying, are we on strike or not? Because

if we are on strike we have to go to work in 15 minutes. Then we started getting calls from Calgary saying, hold off, hold off, hold off, and then by 10:30 the call came through that no it was over.

WG: So just to pick up on that, and I would like to hear from Dave. You were in Calgary too?

DW: Yes.

WG: So Dave and you were in Calgary, Tom and I were left in Edmonton. We saw the story from outside, well from Edmonton. But my knowledge is that when the Calgary Regional Health Authority finally sat down to negotiate with these workers and the two groups were together at this point, that they actually made four or five minimal concessions that very first Sunday, Sunday the 19th I believe it is, in other words, three or four days after the strike started. Then we go to Monday and that's when the union leaders now gather in Calgary and we go right through a process, and that whole thing was opaque to me. I was writing inflammatory press releases from Edmonton in support of the stuff Tom and others were talking about. But then we heard that the strike was over on Friday. I think the two of you are much closer, especially you Dave, to what was actually happening. What happened in that week? The offer that they finally accepted on Friday wasn't substantially different than the offer that they were made on Sunday.

JS: Which they had rejected. They rejected the first offer and yet that was, you're right, essentially what was accepted.

DW: I think you chose the word opaque. A lot of it was the same with me. What happened was that the political leadership did what the political leadership should do, that's the Alberta division of CUPE – they met and they decided to support the strikers. But they did not come anywhere close in my view to talking about a CUPE general strike. I don't think they seized the opportunity or saw that there was an opportunity. Being on staff we sometimes know less of what was going on politically until afterwards than you would be if you weren't on staff. To a large extent I was shut out of it when it became critical. Part of that might have been because I was on the verge of telling them to stick their job up their ass anyway and I had not very good relations

with some of the political leadership. But having said that, there was a job that needed to be done and I was unable to do what I would liked to have done. A lot of this is a matter of timing. When would the public really have risen to this occasion? It wouldn't have been long. We were getting responses from the unions, particularly the public sector unions but some others as well. There was starting to be quite a response from the public; in fact, by the time that whole thing was settled the public was really onside. But by that time the leaders had arrived and had I think decided that they could not sustain a major strike. I think frankly it's a lack of confidence in the workers, placing your confidence in a leadership role rather than understanding that the workers are the bellwethers, the ones you should observe and see. From what I saw, that picket line was not going to budge. They were just constantly given more and more spirit because they kept hearing about others that were coming to their aid. Then of course it was taken indoors; that's what happened.

JS: I'd say that it's important to note that when Dave talks about the political leadership, specifically the national president of CUPE came to Calgary and got involved in the negotiations, which would be Darcy, as well as the Alberta division president Terry Mutton, as well as Carol Anne Dean, the president of AUPE. I think that Dave is right and that is that the leadership were so busy behind closed doors trying to negotiate a deal that they didn't see what was happening on the streets, they didn't see what was happening across the province, and fundamentally I would say dropped the ball. Without putting too fine a point on it, I remember we were sitting in executive council meeting debating this motion and people were talking about how and what they could do to spread this strike. People were very excited about it, even very conservative trade unionists at the Alberta Federation of Labour. Our president at the time, Audrey Cormack, was known to be conservative; she was 100 percent behind building the strike. So that tells you that it had grabbed the imagination of the labour movement. But then we're in the middle of this discussion and CUPE came in and basically told us that there was deal and it was all done. It was as if somebody had pulled a very large plug on a very small bathtub.

TF: I have no idea what kind of information people in the room in Calgary were getting. I have no idea who was talking to Judy Darcy and Terry Mutton from CUPE. I don't know what conversations Bill had or you had with Carol Anne. In their defence I think it's important to go

back to something Winston raised earlier, which is some of the extremely punitive provisions of the labour laws in the province at the time. What scared I know when I talked to them, what scared AUPE leadership, not necessarily in this context but in a number of illegal actions that happened around that time in Michener Centre in Red Deer, wasn't the fines that were threatened, it wasn't even the suspension of dues that was possible under the terms of the legislation. It wasn't the contempt of court proceedings against for example union leadership, because at that point any leadership would've been more than happy I think to spend a little bit of time in jail on that kind of issue. It was the threat of decertification, the threat that they could walk in and say, there's no longer a union here period. Now I think those of us around this table would say, they could try it but the workers wouldn't let them. But for people who'd come through the bruising period of the 1980s and early 1990s and whose training and experience was in limited North American business unionist approach, the threat of decertification was a deterrent. After that all bets are off, there's nothing there. Unless the government somehow falls apart, which is hard to imagine, or the union simply loses. So that was what was preying I'm sure on their minds. But it is very hard not to feel that a huge opportunity was missed, even if it had gone on another 24 hours. If the two hospitals in Edmonton had then gone out and stayed out for 24 hours or longer, then you'd have started to see some serious movement across the province and a sense that the government lost control. That was what I think really scared them. It wasn't just that the public was supporting both in polls and in letters to the editor and honking their horns by the picket line, it wasn't just that the public was supporting the strikers. It was the sense that the government for the first time had lost any semblance of control. This was a government that thrived on bowling over the opposition and always being in control, and I think that scared them. If the hospitals in Edmonton and a couple of other places had gone out and started to spread – in fact it would've been better if it spread slowly but steadily rather than all at once – I think the government was really scared. It's hard to say what that would've meant in terms of resolution, but. . .

JS: The best corroborating proof of that is the fact that Ralph Klein got personally involved in the negotiations and in fact counted on his previous relationship with the president of CUPE Alberta, Terry Mutton, who had been a civic union president at the time that Ralph Klein was the mayor of Calgary. So they had these all-night negotiation sessions with the premier involved.

First that indicates how seriously the government was taking it, because Klein absolutely refused to get his hands dirty with any of this stuff. But the fact that he actually was forced to step in and sit down and negotiate is I think a really strong indication of exactly how seriously the government felt threatened.

WG: Ya, I think that we're going to get into the significance of the strike, what the strike actually accomplished, in a minute. But Dave was there and even though you weren't involved in many of the actual negotiations I wonder if you can give us a little more background on what happened that week. You were down there, you were talking to people. Was there a sense that the workers had gained everything that that they were going to gain, and there should be a deal anyway, from a business union perspective. What happened during that week?

DW: It's pretty hard to say. When people are on a picket line and a lot of stuff is happening on a level that they ordinarily don't get involved in, they really don't know what's going on. They're surmising this and they're surmising that, and they're doing a lot of rah rah stuff because they see themselves as winners; they're putting up a good fight. I just want to make sure that it's clear. I don't think anybody came to this bargaining table with any intentions of selling out the workers or getting less than they could get. I think it was misread. I question why a national president would come all the way out from Ottawa. What you're doing is you're putting your five-star general into the battlefield. Who do they turn to next? You've got Klein in the battlefield. So what's happening is that there's no fallback. There's nobody can step in and say, look, we're going to add some more muscle to this, because they've already got all their muscle at the bargaining table. I think that's an error, and there's two parts to that. First of all, you fired your best shot, your biggest shot, your biggest cannon has gone off, but at the same time nobody's out there taking the pulse of the workers to see where it's at. There becomes a separation, and that's what happened there that's different than Gainers where in fact quite frankly in Gainers there were people who quite mischievously were trying to put an end to that strike from down east but they couldn't get a hold of it because it had blown up into something that they couldn't just take away, although ultimately six and a half months later they practically did. But there's a difference; it's a matter of timing.

JS: In the negotiations process the negotiators always get vested in the TAs that come out. They sit there for long periods of time and hammer out what they believe is the best thing they can get, and they take it out and bring it to the membership. What the union needs is to have somebody back from that that looks at it and says, no this isn't good enough or this is just what we've turned down. But that was the role of the national president, not to be seen at the table. In fact, I question Carol Dean sitting at the table. You put your professional negotiator into the table, your political people should sit back and let the agreement come to them and then they can, with all the best advice they've got and keeping a good look at what's happening with the membership, then say yes or no or should we push it or should we not.

TF: A couple things. First I agree with that, Jim, although I think once the premier comes to the table, if you're a provincial union leader you'd better show up. If the government has taken that step it sort of calls for that sort of response; otherwise the argument is you're not bargaining in good faith. If the premier's there you'd better have the president of CUPE Alberta at least and AUPE I think; at least that's the argument. But to go back to what we were talking about earlier, all of us were talking about it, is the questions about the kind of information that was getting to the people at the table. My only evidence to back up the fact that they weren't getting a real good reading of what was happening outside of that room was talking to two of the reps who were on the picket line for AUPE there. When they came back to Edmonton I expressed bitter disappointment that we hadn't been able to take it to that next level, and got sort of the, well no you don't understand, people can't hold out indefinitely, and once a picket line starts to crumble we saw signs that it was getting ready to, when it starts to crumble it's an ugly thing to see and do almost anything to avoid losing in that sense. What that told me was that those reps on the line were not aware of what was happening in Edmonton and what was about to happen and what was happening other places. If they had, because we're talking about two hours, even if the picket line was getting weak in Calgary, and I don't think necessarily it was, even if it was if two major hospitals in Edmonton go out and then Lethbridge goes out and then someone in Red Deer or Grand Prairie, each time, because one of the things that happened that week is I think that some of the people on the picket line had expected to be able to shut the hospitals down. People who haven't been on strike a lot had this sort of naïve idea that, people who haven't been all that active in their locals have this idea that once they take the step of going on strike, well we're all

unionists now so these other people, well they're still crossing the picket line, understandably. I wouldn't be surprised if that had affected the morale of some of the picketers, not all of them by any means. But if they were waiting for manifestations of support from other people at the Foothills and General hospitals, they got some. If they had then had other hospitals actually go out, I think that their morale would've shot right back up. That information I think was not getting to them.

DW: I heard that same thing that, well you've got the big guns that come out on one side, you have to bring the big guns on the other side. I understand that, but I don't necessarily agree with that, certainly not in every circumstance. If Judy Darcy spent some time going around to hospitals and if Carol Anne Dean had spent some time going around to hospitals and talking to the workers on the picket line and telling them, no it's not going to crumble, we're going to make it work, then they would be able to go back to that bargaining table with that response that they would've got from those members. So the question about what did they understand sitting in there in this room overnight, all night. I sat out in the car waiting for a chance to do something; I just sat there and burnt gas while they were in there all night. Nobody at this time has any communication with the workers. It's now a debating circle.

JS: All-night sessions in fact set up their own dynamic, which is quite different from normal negotiations. Now it's a question of stamina and you keep people up and say basically you've been up for 17 or 18 or 19 hours. Are you thinking clearly? Are you getting enough information? It's the kind of negotiations that I've never liked. There's a few people who practise it but they're usually people who are good at staying awake.

DW: The problem is that the workers don't have any sense of any movement, because the leadership has disappeared; they all went into some room somewhere.

WG: We can go back to the English peasants' strike in 1381 to find out what happens when the leadership is taken off to another room – usually the masses who are on strike get slaughtered. I just want to say since we're into the realpolitik of the way unions actually operate as opposed to an idealized notion, another very important point about the way our laws operate and about the

way the unions work within the law is that what happened when the leadership in the negotiations came under that sort of cover is that the two unions were separated. Previous to that there was some notion of solidarity but now you've got CUPE people over here and AUPE people over here, and that went right to the ratification vote where they ratified in separate rooms. Right now you're almost practising a divide and conquer on behalf of the employer, and that's unfortunately the way that our unions operate under the law.

DW: Let me just tell you, I was at the meeting for the settlement that was put to the CUPE membership. It wasn't their picket captain, it wasn't the president of the union, it was Judy Darcy. Now there's the power of the union standing up there telling them this is the best we can get, we can't get you anything better than this, and that support has crumbled and you've made a wonderful show, you should be very proud of yourselves. But this is it, this is the end of the line. Now if that national president, which these people never see because she's come all the way in from Ottawa, that represents a force that is different than telling your shop steward to stick it up your ass.

WG: So that's the paradox of trade unionism. At a certain level they come out almost as another level of management, as far as membership is concerned. We're involved in this process, we'll try our best to make you understand why we think that it's over, and if you can't understand well then you get to vote. But as far as I'm concerned, unless we got something else to say about the strike itself maybe we can talk a bit about the significance. As far as I understand, this was the first time that Ralph Klein, to use your term, actually blinked. The media did us the honour of telling us that Ralph Klein blinked. As far as I know from what followed, that was a very significant act.

DW: I think the politics of what went on were extremely important. The fate of those people in there was pretty much on the line – one way or another, they were going to contract that out. The best they could've gained, even if they kept the laundry (they did keep it for some time), but what seems significant to me is the missed opportunity. Actually if Klein blinked that was an opportunity to keep the pressure on. I think when we got to Bill 11 and everything else, that

laundry worker strike had made an impact and it should never be underestimated, and think about how much bigger it could've been.

JS: I would just like to add to that, and that is that after the laundry workers' strike the Klein government was a different animal than before the laundry workers' strike. Before that, as Tom said, they were ideologically driven, they refused to discuss. There was no discussion of any of their policies, they were simply enacted. After that they became much more of a kind of populist government. Yes, they still had their ideological conditioning, but they looked before they leapt. They compromised, they backed off of things. If it looked like people were ready to make a fight out of things, they backed off. They did not come in and take people on directly that way again I don't think, and I think that was a victory for the labour movement.

TF: I saw two things, one of which was that Winston and I had been trying to talk to people about the economics of privatization and outside of the union, even inside the union at times, people would just laugh at us. You talk to media and it was impossible to even have a discussion. You'd say, well contracting out or privatization doesn't necessarily save money, and they'd just laugh or walk away. During the strike I was getting phone calls from reporters in Edmonton and when they said things like, well but doesn't the government have to try to save money, I'd say, well privatization doesn't necessarily save money. All of a sudden instead of laughing they were saying, oh really? Can you send me anything on that? We were faxing out stuff to reporters. After that the nature of the discussion changed. All of a sudden it was possible until ten years later journalists in Alberta what does...say in the discussion of the first of the P3s. Well of course we know that privatization doesn't necessarily save money – all of a sudden it had become conventional wisdom. It started with the laundry workers' strike. The second thing I'd say is that if it wasn't for that strike you don't have the general support staff strike at the University Hospital and Glenrose in Edmonton in 1998 and you don't have the support staff and LPN strike in 2001.

WG: That's right. I want to add, well I want to reinforce what you just said. We talked about how they challenged the political power, the hegemony that the Klein government enjoyed in the deficit debate up until that point. They challenged the hidden power of the accountants, is what

they did. Previous to that they could simply say, well the accountants have given us their best version of what would happen under privatization. Nobody dared to challenge the accountants, because after all they just work with numbers. These members said, baloney, we don't believe that – the accountants spin their fiction just like everybody else does. So maybe we'd better stop right here and he's got to switch tapes.

WG: I just want to say that we've begun the discussion of the significance of the strike, and the significance was that for the first time Ralph Klein blinked, we challenged the hidden power of the accountants. We had Tom Fuller working at AUPE and here we had a fellow who has his Masters in Business Administration, and it's an honest Masters as opposed to some MBAs. He is churning out this stuff that shows that the deficit argument that the government won should be revisited. He was showing very clearly how the debt and the deficit were not unmanageable, as the government liked to suggest, but that they could proceed just the same as anyone who takes on responsible debt and lives with it and pays it off over a number of years, and that they didn't have to effect these massive cutbacks that had actually resulted in, overdetermined, the strike that was taking place in 1995. It took a strike by a bunch of workers who maybe never ever read your stuff, Tom; in fact, I'm almost sure they didn't, and never really seriously considered that argument but just said to themselves, there's something wrong with us, we don't buy this, and there's several reasons. So that strike resulted in a whole turnaround in the ethic of this province. Suddenly you had unions acting way more alive. It's as if the laundry workers told the other unions what they should be doing to fight back. Now that's my take on it from my perspective.

DW: I think the other thing we have to understand about this whole Klein attack on the public sector is that it isn't about economics, it's about the public sector itself. The public sector is a problem for people who prefer to have the taxpayers' money turned into something that brings a lot of profit. Having taxpayers' money go to services for the taxpayers is a contradiction that capitalism has to deal with. They are doing everything they can to privatize. You have to ask, is it ideological, is it economics? I guess behind it all I guess it is economics – it's where the profits are. There's a hell of a lot of profits being made in places like the United States out of things that the public sector is doing in Canada. When George Bush talked about a regime change he wasn't just talking about Iran and Iraq and places like that, he was talking about Canada. Canada has a

regime that needs to be changed so that the public sector no longer has such authority. Why do you suppose they want to elect the senators? So that every four years they can beat the crap out of them and pick who they're going to support with their money, and do the same stuff that they're doing in the United States. They politicized this event. I think we have to see the bigger picture of the attack on the public sector and not just think about it as cutting weeds. And of course a big part of it also is to undermine unions because in Alberta particularly, in fact in Canada to a large extent these days, the public sector unions are the ones that are showing a lot of growth and are developing a militancy that takes generations to build, and it's coming about.

TF: I think situating the laundry workers' strike is a bit difficult in a couple of ways. One, you don't want to understate its importance and you don't want to overstate its importance – obviously you don't want to do either one. But it's a bit tricky in this case because it was a watershed in terms of the Klein government and I think in ensuing governments in terms of how they pursue their agenda and even the agenda itself. That is not to say that the Klein government stopped privatizing after the laundry workers' strike – they continued. For two or three years thereafter, for example, in hospitals in Edmonton and in Calgary and across the province as far as I know, there was one review after another review about housekeeping in hospitals, and in fact they were always issued RFPs, requests for proposals, to privately contract out housekeeping in hospitals. For most of the hospitals in the province it never did happen; it did in some regions. But certainly the health authorities and the government did not pursue contractual privatization in the same confident and vigorous fashion they had in the past, and the pieces they were able to contract out and privatize were smaller pieces. For example, hospitals in Edmonton dietary they took a series of chunks out of, but they were always small little bites. There was no more of this grand, as of this date you're all gone and we're gonna have Aramark Catering or somebody in here. I remember walking around the Glenrose Hospital and the Alex. One of the things AUPE tried to do was to put in bids, internal bids if they were going to contract out, and said, okay our members will make a bid to perform the services they're doing right now. Walking around with a bunch of contractors in the Royal Alec hospital, walking behind two guys from Marriott, the big hotel chain, and hearing them say, and this is almost an exact quote but it was 14 years ago so it may not be exactly accurate – you know really it's just like a big hotel, just like cleaning a big hotel. The funny thing was that stuff came back and I've used that stuff since then talking about

P3 hospitals and infection control. As you know, the government of Scotland has ruled out any more contracting out of housekeeping services in hospitals because of infection control. So what happened is the government lost its ideological energy and vigour but it did not turn into a different government.

WG: Oh absolutely. The regionalization trend, just that whole tendency on the part of the government to come up with regions that it could say then to the board of directors, okay you've got your budget, live within it; if it means you have to contract out and privatize, that's what you have to do. If it means you have to shut down hospital beds, that's what you do. As we know, it's a tragic story. They went from 17 regions to nine regions. They passed Bill 27 which was a direct attack on the trade union movement as far as I'm concerned, nothing more or less. It told established trade unions whose members had voted by majority vote to belong to that union and to continue belonging to that union that they no longer could and forced them into runoff votes with each other so that they were in pitched battles with each other. Then went from there from where we are today, where suddenly they decided, you know something, we don't need these regional health boards anymore. I guess that what they did was they expected these regional health boards to do more than they could actually do by way of promoting that agenda you were talking about and finally decided that they weren't doing it. So they went to Australia and found a chief executive officer that they put in charge of one combined Alberta Health Services, and they're moving ahead and certainly didn't stop. We all know what happened when they tried to pass Bill 11. I hope you can talk about it a little bit, Tom, because I think that was significant proof that they weren't stopping the P3s for sure. I just want to add though that the privatization that they clearly intended was carried on in other sectors, the transport sector for instance, where they said there's going to be no debate about this, we're going to contract out highway services. And they did to this day, to some of their best friends I may add. We can go through the provincial parks; there was hardly a public sector that wasn't touched. Healthcare, because people care about their healthcare, excited a lot more debate than any other area. The area that's not exciting a lot of debate infrequently is education, where they just literally gutted the education system compared to what it used to be. We certainly shouldn't overstate the effect but the effect was that it laid the base of a process where unions started fighting back a lot more and government started to try to defend its actions a lot more.

DW: One of the things that's changed too after that series of strikes, I think it's more because Klein finally did blink and he ended up not being the premier. They've gone to a different tactic, and that is now it's privatization by stealth. None of the frontal attacks that Klein did; he just asked for a head-on fight and he got it. They're doing stuff more by stealth now and they're doing a lot of stuff in the outlying areas. They're making announcements that ordinarily are worth a news conference at the Legislature that are now being announced by MLAs out in the country so that there's no reaction to it until after everything is in place. The agenda hasn't changed but the tactics have.

TF: In terms of the outcomes, the other thing I think Winston and Dave both touched on and is hard to overstate is that it certainly changed the mood inside the union movement from one of desperate last ditched resigned we'll go down swinging to a confidence and an optimism, and that has a big impact. But the fact is that unions remain creatures of that are shaped by and formed by and constrained by the collective bargaining process and the collective agreement. They aren't very good at political fights. After this was over even though what they had won was a political victory they continued to be not very good at political fights.

WG: After I left the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees in 2000 I went to Athabasca University to become, at least I was supposed to be, a professor in charge of human resource management and industrial relations. It was clear from that perspective, just hearing the talk that went around the school of business table, that we were in the business of training management specialists. In that process it became clear to me that union reps are almost forced to become management specialists in order to participate in the collective bargaining process. When you think about how complex and technical collective bargaining can get, how complex and technical the grievance arbitration process can get, and all of that, or even just to go and certify a union, it's not something that's intuitive. In fact, it's highly constrained. You break the rules, suddenly you're not part of that club again. It really put pressure on the union negotiator at the table, for instance, to remain true to his membership. It takes a real commitment because the whole ethic of the union negotiating table is that you're talking to the people across the table now and you gotta keep face with them.

DW: And you get to that final-offer stage and by law you're forced to present it to the membership. They may turn it down but there'll be another final offer that you have to take to the membership. Eventually the membership see at best incremental change and they lose heart. Just like you said Tom, in the collective agreement we're actually playing in their ballpark, we're playing by their rules. So we can continue to bargain collectively and there may be tiny gains, there'll be some losses. But it doesn't mobilize the membership into any political action, it doesn't strengthen unions. The only thing that we talk about strengthening unions is they get bigger. We ya you get more members, the unions grown stronger – that's a relative term. Are they growing stronger? Do they understand and is the trade union movement learning anything about the class consciousness that's required if you're actually going to change the system instead of playing within the system?

TF: The conundrum we face – and normally I don't go big picture until after the fourth or fifth year, but I'll do it right now – is unless you're an anticatalyst, you don't probably believe that unions are the vehicles that will change society. Unions aren't, especially in the North American format but even in Europe, unions are ameliorative organizations – the bargain, the strike deals, they make things a little bit better. If they're going to engage in political fights or if they're going to have ? from political fights, what they require is a strong and active left outside the union movement, either a parliamentary one or an extra-parliamentary one or preferably both. They don't have that in Alberta and that's one of the reasons why unions were not able to capitalize to a greater extent on that strike. And of course the cynic in me says that that's a self-inflicted wound because nowhere was the Cold War fought out more bitterly and for longer than inside the union movement. Long after the rest of the world stopped caring much about this stuff, unions were still a home to really bitter anti-Communists and anti-Leftists and anti-Socialists groups. So then when unions find themselves in a fight for survival they look around for their allies and wonder why the public doesn't support them more often than it does. Well there's no political Left out there to help organize and channel and create that public support. What was astounding about the laundry workers' strike was, and it's a cliché we use now, but it really was, the laundry workers were catalysts, they did initiate a chemical reaction spontaneously out there in the public that brought together a whole bunch of unease and distrust and unhappiness with

the Klein government. All of a sudden oil patch engineers making \$140,000 in 1995 year were going, I don't like the fact that when I took my kid into the hospital two months ago with a broken ankle from playing soccer he sat there for seven hours; there's something wrong here. Calgary is a conservative town, as Jim pointed out. People who in other respects and in terms of how they voted said, no the Klein government is right and in fact we should be more like the Americans in various ways, suddenly when the issues were clarified folks said, no, public healthcare is crucially important to us, we care about it, and it's important that it be public. That carried through not just on the union side but it carried through the fights in defence of public healthcare over the next decade as well.

WG: Right, and there've been many. I just have to tell you that when you read the history of the Canadian labour movement, and we're doing a book right now on that, you'll find that in the formative years in fact the Communist Party played a kind of leadership role. It was never that strong in Canada but it was strong enough that you always had some people who had the benefit of discussions and readings and that that would give them a class analysis, an analysis of what's happening in the system. They would go to their unions, quite often they were baited, but nonetheless the word would usually get through. That's severely lacking today. The CCF always had left-wing members but it never sort of congealed into a group that could focus attention on the issues in the same way as the Communist Party. So the near-death of the Communist Party I think was a severe blow to the labour movement.

DW: And the Communist party never was huge in Canada, it was even outlawed in Canada and had to change its name, unlike the United States where they still have Communists running for president. But what was important was that the Communists when they did speak out and they did have discussions and they did talk about class struggle, and when they were in the leadership of the trade union movement, it was infectious. You had all kinds of people who weren't Communist, you had people who were anti-Communist who still listened and understood the analysis. That is a critical loss because you're absolutely right, there has to be a Left outside the trade union movement in order ever to have a Left in the trade union movement.

WG: I just have to say one last thing from my perspective, and that is that isn't it something how the fight over healthcare still goes on. Even as we sit here and speak, the Stelmach Conservative government of Alberta has plans to close down part of the Alberta Hospital Edmonton. It had plans to close beds in Edmonton and Calgary in spite of the fact that they're vastly over-subscribed and that we have one of the lowest ratios of hospital beds to population of anywhere in Canada and even in the OECD. So the fight is certainly not over. The healthcare workers understood; these low-paid workers understood viscerally that something was wrong. I just attended a town hall meeting last night which was attended by hundreds of people, in which people just understood that it was not right. Don't give us this "the economy is in trouble" baloney that you gave us in the early '90s as an excuse for unconscionable cutbacks of service – that's what I'm hearing. Did you have something to add?

DW: No, I think I exhausted my entire knowledge of everything.

[END]