

Cyrline Lynch-Parker

CLP: First of all I should say that I was always involved with the union for more than 20 years, but the particular thing that I got involved in with this group is... I should say my local is 4822 Calgary, healthcare workers. We work in housekeeping. We are a contract within the Calgary Health Region; so they were privatized. Some of the employees were a little annoyed with the way they were being treated. Their rights were being violated. They approached some of us that worked for a different union, which was still a local CUPE--at that time it was 182. We decided we would have meetings, and we organized that group of people. At the time that we organized, which was five years ago, we got 66% of the employees signed up. The day of the election when the labour board came in, we got 98% of the staff voted in favor of having a union. At that time Denine was the national rep for us that was very instrumental. Susan Keeley also was one of the people. Ron Pillens. Ron from PLC, Rockyview at the time. Jimmy Otter was the president of Local 182 that got us organized together.

Q: How were these people instrumental?

CLP: Because they were already healthcare workers and union activist, they were the ones with the education, the knowledge, the information that we needed to organize our group. In our group most of the workers are of different ethnicities: they're Filipino, East Indian, Chinese. They were afraid to organize, because the culture is so different. The ones like us that knew that the union would be there to back us 100%, we knew that we didn't have to worry, that we had these people and the law behind us. So we were okay. We snuck around in places like Tim Hortons, we went to different people's homes to talk to the staff, and got everyone involved.

Q: What's your family background?

CLP: I was born in Barbados and immigrated to Canada in the '60s. I think I was 14. My grandparents and all my family worked in the hospital. In those days they were unionized. This was in Montreal. When I first started my first experience with a union was in Montreal when I worked in the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. We had a union and that union was from the States. But we as Canadians wanted to have a union that was based in Canada. I can't remember what the union was – I think it was CSN or CQN something. This was in the early '70s. Then I moved to Calgary 30 years ago and started in the General Hospital. We were Local 8 laundry workers. When I was away on holiday we had a big strike due to the government wanting to sell out the company to K-Bro, to contract out to a different company. So we had a walkout, big strike. It was wonderful; lots of good things came from that. Because of that strike we got severance packages for staff, which wasn't in place before. The laundry did close eventually and from there I went to work at the Colonel Belcher Veteran Care Centre. This is the main reason why I became more involved in the union. At that time I started out on a 12-hour workweek only. But the management thought, well there's not enough work for 12, and for some reason they were going to cut me to 8. I was at home and the other girl that I partnered with called me and told me they were cutting my shift. I said, like hell they're going to; it doesn't work that way. I have a letter that says I have a 12-hour shift; they're going to pay me my 12-hour shift. So they go, no we're going to cut your one day. So I decide while I was at home; I phoned the union. They put me in contact with a wonderful woman named Mary Chuckery. I'll never forget her to this day. Mary came, saw me, filed a grievance. I don't even think we went that far. She spoke to management, called human resources. Believe it or not I was working six months and I got a position, because it was not a relief. They wanted to know who I was relieving. There's no one. So I got the 12-hour shift permanently. That's how I got my first point, which is a .2. After that I worked my way up another maybe two or three years; so I went to a .7. How I got full-time is really interesting. The department was closing because they built a new hospital for the veterans. So they were going to transfer me to Rockyview Hospital. But they came to me with an offer: would you like to stay and run the cafeteria for six months? It ended up two years. But before the two years, one of the guys that was working with me – they paid me as a working supervisor – one of the guys that was working with me, a .2, was sick for

three days. They said, well because you're only a .2 we will pay you for the .2 and not for the third day. So I was upset and I phoned the union and we filed a grievance. I said, what will they do to me after working 19 years going through all those loops? They'll do it to me too. So I said, I want a grievance filed, I want that position, I'm entitled to it full-time. So we filed a grievance and I got full-time. That place was closed and then I moved on to a different department, which is now called the wound center, where I'm now in the High Risk Foot and Wound Clinic. That's where I am today. It's 20 years.

Q: What's the management like?

CLP: I don't have a lot of problems with management. I know my job. I do my job. I don't phone in sick. If I have issues I go to management and usually they're solved within the first level. I think I filed maybe five grievances in all the time; so that's not bad. They're usually pretty cooperative. Once you know your rights, they don't mess with you. Usually it's the supervisors that want to have a little control issue with staff, but as long as they don't violate the staff rates, they give the respect that's due to the staff and treat them properly. I don't have a problem at all.

Q: What's it like to be a healthcare worker?

CLP: My favourite part when I first started healthcare, or third or fourth job maybe, I would say was with the veterans at the veterans hospital. When I first got there I met one of the veterans. He was paralyzed on one side and he was yelling at one of the nurses, not in a very nice way. I got off the elevator and I could hear this swearing and carrying on. I walked up to him, kneeled down in front of his chair and said, does your mother know that you say words like that? He goes ... telling me she's being mean to him, the nurse. So I said, well you know sweetie, you catch more flies with honey than you do with lemon; maybe if you're nice to her she'll do whatever you want. And I fell in love with that centre.

Q: What's it generally like to work in the hospital?

CLP: I think it's a nice place. If you love doing things for other people, if you like taking care of the elderly or sick people, you have to like that kind of work. If you don't like it, it's not for you. You have to put people before yourself or treat the people the way you'd want to be treated. If you're sick, you have to be compassionate. You can't just say, oh well somebody else will take care of that. Even if it's not your job and someone needs your help, you should always be there for them. If it was you or your mother or father or sister or brother, you would want that same care for yourself and your family. So you should always be kind, treat them with respect and dignity, and always remember they're sick. When you're sick you're not thinking straight; you might say things that aren't really nice to people. But you still have to treat them right, no matter what.

Q: What are some of the challenges?

CLP: Work overload. Short shifts. We're very short shift a lot of times; so you're doing two people's job instead of one. Sometimes the workers are not there; so you're cleaning two units instead of one. If ten people phone in sick – because it happens on the weekend, it's weird – but somehow Friday night nobody shows up for work for Saturday. So you are prepared that you know you're going to do a little bit more that day. One of the challenges for my people in housekeeping is if they would not refused to do the job, but sometimes they're overworked or overtired, and they would get stress from management or the supervisors – if you don't like this you can always take the door, that kind of attitude.

Q: What changes have you seen?

CLP: I don't really think things are getting any better. There are still long waits and long lineups and people are waiting forever. Myself for example, I was at Foothills this Monday morning from 9 o'clock to have a CT scan done, and I didn't get my CT scan done until 7 o'clock that night. They told me in half an hour they will read my CT scan. I left the hospital at 10 o'clock and still didn't get my scan read. So as I'm in healthcare, I

have little things I can do. I pulled it up myself. I pulled my own scan. I needed to know, because I didn't want to miss this convention. This is very important and I said, I'm not missing the convention. So I have to find the report. Oops, I'm in trouble now.

... My comment about phoning in for my lab report is that, in all seriousness, I would do anything to be with my CUPE family. CUPE has done a tremendous job for my workforce, and not just my workforce but others that I speak to outside. There is lots of positions that come up. For example, I was offered positions where I would be exempt. You know what I said? Absolutely not. If I'm not union, I'm nobody. Union is the top. We get protection; we have our rates. Labour standards don't cover everything. The union is what makes us. We're the people, we're the members, we're the fighters. We need to keep fighting to get all the rights that we need and all the protection under the law. You gotta do what you gotta do. As for the healthcare workers, in my site we have Filipinos, Chinese, East Indian. For myself, I can handle myself, I know what to say, I know my collective agreement. Not just mine, but I know the nurses and I know a couple of others outside of my own. For those that don't understand because English is their second language, they're the ones that I'm there for to help them, because management will violate their rights. My cell phone goes off at least 30 times a day from some worker calling about some issue that they were violated or they don't know their rights. Sometimes I can't understand what they're saying but I know they're in trouble, and I'm there. My first boss is very good; she will let me leave the worksite because I do two positions. She will let me leave the worksite to go to the other two sites – Rockyview or Peter Lougheed, to take care of the other workers. Even though she's management, I would say she's one of the ones that cooperates outside. I'm not working when I go to the other group; it's not even her group, and she lets me go. Sometimes there's nobody else to call. If the office is busy or my rep is out of town, then gotta go take care of more people. Other issues that the staff have, sometimes you have to do things that you really don't want to do, but we always think patient first. It's patient safety; there's hundreds of things. Most of all what we do in our job is because we like to work in the public. That's what they want us there for. That's what we're here for and that's all there is to it. So we do what we have to do to get the job done. But we want to do it in a safe way and in a right way, and to make sure that we always have union and a representative here when things

are not running smooth. We're all overworked, we're overtired, we get work stress, home stress. But we still have to do what we can to help each other.

[can't hear questions]

I think it's common across the whole healthcare system. If you look around, most of the people that work in nursing homes and lodges, they are of different ethnic backgrounds. There's not just Canadian-born as a first language, there's people from all over the world. English is hard for them. But as I always said, sometimes management gets upset because they can't do the job right. I say, well that means that you're not a very good teacher. If you have a child and the child doesn't know how to put his toys away, then you bend down with that kid and show him how to do it. If the person cannot read perfectly – they know it but not all the words correctly – then you demonstrate by showing the person how to do this. That's how we learn. We don't learn just by saying, oh I want you to do this and here you go. You have to teach that person, show that person, just like a child. You teach him how to hold his spoon and put it to his mouth. What is the difference if you're cleaning a bathroom? You have to take the soap, the toilet brush, you squirt the toilet and you clean it. Wouldn't you teach your kid the same way? Not to say that we're children, but because we have a learning disability, it's just like a child. That's what it is. So we gotta do what we have to do to show people the right way. I think we wouldn't have a lot of problems if management did their part in teaching the staff to do the job the right way. They're the ones. I believe it's on them to teach us. We have a right in our collective agreement to give us the tools that we need to do the job. If we're there to do the job, then they should provide the tools. There's no if, buts or maybes about that, as far as I'm concerned.

What I would like to see done is if management would, for our department, we have management meetings every month. But in other sites, if they can do that, where they can bring their issues before it goes out, and then you don't have to file grievances. That's what I'd like to see in all workforce, that we can discuss stuff and have problems solved before they get out of hand or before we have to file grievances. If we can control that,

it's money for us and it's money for management. We could save our members a lot of headaches also. They would feel that their issues are being answered and they're not waiting a couple of weeks or months. If we have an issue, put it on the table today, get it over and done with, move on to the next one so we can do a better job for the patients or whatever business we're in.

In the beginning, the threats were there and they still are. If you don't like it, the management tells the employees, well you know if you don't like it there's the door, you can take it. In the beginning when we first organized – they're in a different province, in Ontario – they spent thousands of dollars to fly into Calgary to tell us, oh the union is going to take your money away from you; the union is going to do this and that. I was standing there and when he started to talk I said, excuse me. I'm working for this company for three years and you never came and saw me to say, hello my name is Mary. Why are you here today? Get away from me. I don't want to talk to you. And you know what sir – and you're the first person I said sir to – when your boss, the person you put in charge, is telling the people to take the door and get out the door, or disrespecting them, I'm sure I'd phone your office. I haven't got a call back from you. Why are you here today? You're going to give me money so I don't take the union? I don't think so. We want the union. You know why? Because then people like you and all the people that you're working with will do their job and not treat our employees like they're crap. We're not crap. We're humans just like you. And we're better, because we're doing the work that you should be doing. There you go.

I'm the type of person that likes to keep track of things. Under the bed in my room is an album of everything that I have done from the beginning in the union. I have all my own personal grievances that I've filed, which I'm proud to say is five, and I won all five. Notes and papers and information that people give to me, like mementos. I've moved from department to department so there's things that I have and I keep those things. Newspaper clippings from when we first started our union, my collective agreements. We're on number three so I have copies of all those. From my first convention to whenever, I have all the materials from them – buttons, pins, everything. I have a bin so I

keep them. I got three new filing cabinets last year to store these things in. Bev Norman got me three and I'm supposed to return them to her. I think I will keep them, because I need to file stuff. I like to keep things like that. What I would like to leave behind is for all employees that are union members to learn your collective agreement. Know your collective agreement; act like it's your Bible. That's what I call my collective agreement. I say, where's your Bible? That's your Bible. We are paying to print this; don't let that paper go to waste. You should know your collective agreement; you should know your rights. Most of all, don't squeal on each other. Remember you're all union members. We are here to fight together. We're here to treat each other with love, dignity, and respect, the same that we want from anyone else. That's what I would like to leave behind.

That's kind of hard, because there's so many of them. I'm going to start with Jimmy Arthur. Jimmy was one of the persons that helped us organize in the beginning. Even though he's not with us anymore, I could still phone him and I would get answers any time. A couple of months ago I had an issue with someone that's no in my union. I didn't have an issue; they had an issue. I have her/ his number and he took care of that person. Next would be Mary Chuckery. Mary was the first person that filed a grievance with me. Yeah Mary. She's retired now. Susan Keeley and Denine, I can never pronounce Denine's last name. Denine was administrator, because I'm the president of the union but it took a while for me to have an executive board, which I still don't have a full one right now. It's just three of us. So Denine was in charge to oversee all the stuff and kept all my books going for me. Thank God for her; she took care of all that. Now we're doing it on our own. Susan was one of the ones that when we first organized, and Susan can probably tell you more. I can't remember all the names. Donny was one of the people. There was a whole bunch of people that was there for us to get us going, when everybody was scared and no one knew where to go, or that they were afraid they were going to get fired. They got the advice to just lay low for a few days, don't make waves, the right things to do before we finally got organized. But it was hard work. We just did our third collective agreement. I know this is going off topic a little. We just did our third collective agreement. We had a little problem with the staff ratifying. One of the staff said to me, we're up \$15 now but when we started we were at \$7.10; if you can believe in these times

we were making that. Some of the workers today said to me, well the health region makes \$16, why are we making blah blah blah? I said, you weren't here when we were making \$7.09. Now you're making the same, \$14 now. So don't talk to me about not signing this agreement. I'm on the bargaining committee; I think it's a good deal. This is what I got you. I think it's a wonderful plan, I think we have to take it. Remember that we are in a depression right now. We are a contract within the health region. How do you know that we wouldn't be one of the ones to lose our jobs? There's 400 employees that I have to think about, not just you alone. There's 400. So I did what was in the best interest for the 400 employees, not for one. We're all equal here. If you think you can do a better job, I suggest you come to the meetings, get elected, and then you will have a say. That's what it's all about. We all have that right.

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