

Laura Lee

Q: Tell me more about some of the issues the women's committee was taking on.

LL: Part of it was sexual harassment issues, how to educate women and men in the postal stations about any issues that affect them, how they could deal with it and how they could talk to their shop steward if they have issues. One of the issues that I mentioned was probation and undue pressure on women coming into the post office to get along with their supervisor. On some cases there was a lot of bullying happening. Some of it was subtle and some of it not subtle at all. Some supervisors would pick one young probationer to pick on that they thought they could get away with, and we were trying to stop that. Because of the way the probation system was set up, the supervisors had undue power over these people. Some of the mostly male supervisors weren't emotionally set up to handle that kind of power over other people, and it would go to their head.

Q: Karen described it as a militaristic atmosphere.

LL: Right. It had come from a militaristic, I think they probably hired ex soldiers after WWII and also police officers were favored as management of the post office. Because of how the postal system was run, patronage was how people got jobs as managers. You knew somebody and then you could become a manager of a postal station, then the workers were supposed to follow all your instructions. There were a lot of instructions, and you're constantly trying to keep up with new things and new ways of doing things. Some people can do that and some people can do it less well. The post office is set up as a pretty intense assembly line. The letter carriers and drivers – and I was in that part of the union – you're just part of getting everything out to the public. As external workers, we had contact work in public, which really gave us a little bit different understanding that you become quite close to customers. You stop in the same businesses every day, you get to know them. When the time for strike comes, you wanna make sure that you do

the best you can to get the mail out. But you want them to understand if you're not able to, if you have to go on strike. You try and use as many creative tools of work slowdowns or having a study session, go in the coffee room for an hour before you take out your mail, or something like that. When there's a strike you want to have maximum media presence but you don't wanna screw up the mail too much, because you know that these businesses and individuals need their mail. It is a vital service, but you still need to be able to use the work stoppage as a tool to get a fair contract. The whole setup is really geared to letting bullies get their way. There was one guy, one bad supervisor. Certain letter carrier people would bring their lunch to work and they might have something before they go out at about 9 o'clock, then they'd come in and have the rest of their lunch. This one supervisor was into eating people's cake off their desk. He would just help himself to what he wanted out of people's desks while they were out delivering the mail. This one fellow called him on it and said, stop doing that. He didn't stop doing it so the guy said, okay I gotta do something to make this stop. So he had some muffins and he put melted Exlax icing on the top of the muffins and left it out for the supervisor. He ate it, and he never did that again. And there was other things where there were people who, one man I knew who was very bitter because his wife had worked in the post office, I think she was an inside worker, and she had been harassed into a mental breakdown. He had not one good word to say about any management. He was very bitter, because it basically ruined her health, just because she had to be off a bit and they weren't allowing it, and forced her to work when she really shouldn't have been. Her health was never the same after that. As a shop steward learning to dialog with people and trying to mitigate some of these draconian measures by talking to people, and also you have to get your own work done as well as you're talking to members who are in trouble or talking to managers and trying to find creative ways to get things moving along and keep harmony as much as possible. Sometimes you can and sometimes you can't, but the real important thing is to have brothers and sisters that you can count on, that you can go to when you're having trouble. Sometimes you get a shop steward that just gets in the hot seat for too long and they need to move out of the position. It becomes sometimes personal or too much about them or us, and you just need to step back and let somebody else take your place for a while. It doesn't help your coworkers and members if it becomes too personal.

So it's important to have enough people that are willing to step forward and take the time. I really believe that workplaces get the union they deserve. They'll get a militant union if they're not respectful and not reasonable about all kinds of things. People would really rather go have a beer with their friends than have a union meeting; I certainly would. But if there's issues that really need to be talked about, then it's important to do that. I, for example, lived in a housing co-op so I didn't have a mortgage like some of my sisters and brothers. They could not afford to lose their job. So some people had a little more latitude than some other people. I could say some things sometimes that other people might not have been able to say. Depending how many kids you have or how many people you're supporting with your postal salary, how much freedom you're gonna have in your union activities. Some people had to be more careful than others. One thing that came up in the two years that I worked in the union office was we were pretty sure that our office was bugged. There was a break-in and then every time someone was on strike we were pretty sure there was either somebody nearby – this was before all the new technology of microphones and stuff – but they would be outside near the office, maybe within a block or so, parked over across the street or something keeping an eye on. If they thought that after the executive meeting we were gonna go somewhere, we would try to trick them into seeing if they were gonna take the bait. We'd say things like, oh we're gonna do this tomorrow morning, speak into the microphone. So that was kinda funny, well not funny, but different I guess.

Q: How did the introduction of new automation in the post office affect your work?

LL: It was more to do with sorting mail, but route measurement was a very important part of determining how big your route was going to be, how much you could deliver in a given time, how many steps. It's measured up to everybody's mailbox, whether the mailbox is hanging on the side of their house, if it's out at the gate and you can take it to lot line delivery. In some cities, the mailbox has to be at the gate, and they're not gonna walk up to your house and put it on the side of your house. Then of course there's the group box thing where neighborhoods all get group boxes and they don't get home delivery. That really affects how many carriers you have. That's one of the coldest jobs,

delivering outdoors in cold weather in a strong wind into a group box, cuz you're just standing there. If it's a really big group box you might be there for half an hour freezing. If you're walking you can stay warm, but standing and delivering into those things is one of the coldest jobs. So not only are you carrying mail around and it's up to 40 pounds, but it's cold and you gotta figure how to deal with the cold and how many layers of different clothes – socks and shirts and whatever – you have to wear. And now not to fog up your glasses so you can actually read the addresses that you're taking to people's houses. Also it gets dark and you may not be done your route until after dark. Because of understaffing, we've got quite a bit of what's called callback or force back. You deliver your own route and then you have to go back and three people will do another person if they're away or their position may not be covered. So you could easily be there until 6 or 7 o'clock at night to do another few hours after your own job. Then you might be doing that every day for several months over the winter. So it's pretty tough physically on people.

Q: So there was a real pressure for work intensification all the time.

LL: Definitely. And every year or two they re-measure the routes again and add some more work or make the routes a bit bigger. They were always changing the routes around to figure out how to get more work out of less people. Our local was pretty good at getting people working on route measurement issues so that the union would always have a very trained person working with the route measurement people to say, no. You have to walk up and measure the steps and count the steps. If they're going up 10 steps or one step, that makes a difference on how long it's gonna take. Everything is very finely measured. I would say it's a Taylorist approach to the work, really piecemeal, and the union making sure that everything was measured that you do. You're just part of the machine in a way. You have to be accurate because it's really easy to make mistakes and get a letter stuck in the wrong place or to misread a number. The public is really aware. If they get a letter that's not theirs, some people get really mad about it so you get a lot of feedback if you make very many mistakes at all. You can be 97% correct but that's not really good enough, and people get fired because of those things I'm sure at times. Or

walking on lawns and somebody complained that you walked across the lawn instead of going back out to the sidewalk, and that sort of thing. The other part is you have to deal with dogs. When I first got there, the first route I had was in old Riverbend. You get to know all the dogs really quick and people often say, oh my dog won't bite you, and they're letting their dog out in the yard. But it's their property and the dog feels very territorial. I even had a cat that was attacking me once. It would hide under a spruce tree and wait until I came by, then grab my pant leg until I embarrassed it or pulled some trick on it and it stopped doing it. But it was pretty bad for a while. I had one place I was delivering mail where you walk up to the house and then across in front of the picture window and then onto the doorstep where the mailbox was. They had a dog that was like a shorthaired hunting dog of some kind, and it would bark and bark. It was also slamming itself against the picture window as I'm going by. I'm thinking, that dog is going to break the window sometime. We kept telling the owners to put the dog in a different part of the house, and they probably eventually did. But you could see the picture window bowing as the dog is slamming into it. So every day you'd hope that the dog was not going to be at the window. My first experience with dogs, you kinda get paranoid over the first month or two. They'd hear the chain. You have a chain that is your key to get into the boxes where you pick up the mail, and they would hear that chain down the street and start barking. Some of them do come after you and you have to fight them off. I got in the habit of carrying rocks in my pocket. You have to throw them once in a while and you try not to hit the dog, but you just wanna scare it away. A couple times I used my chain to kind of fight off a dog. I did get bit once when this little dog nipped my ankle, but I actually didn't tell the post office because I knew that they would sue the pants off those people. I knew people that their old dog bit somebody and they had to pay \$50,000. The carrier doesn't get any of it, the post office gets it or the lawyers get it or whoever, but the corporation gets it. . . . Dogs are very territorial. Some people would carry dog biscuits in their pockets and feed the dog a biscuit every time they go. Actually there was one Rhodesian Ridgeback that was in a business that I was delivering parcels to. That dog loved getting out. Her name was Cora, a huge thing. I'd come into their business, where you just open the door and walk in with the mail, and she's right after me. She's barking and biting – she wants to bite you, she wants to eat you alive. So I would give her a

cookie and she kinda slobbers on you, but she's still going after me. I would rather let her run out into the rest of the building than have her bite me, so they're running after their dog quite a bit and I think they learned to keep her in the back. But they just think, oh no problem, but she's a really big dog.

Q: When you were with the antiapartheid movement, were you a part of that cricket game?

LL: I've got a list of all the people that were there. There was a group. Canada had a boycott and there was an international boycott against South African teams. But there was a team that was owned by a South African, Openheimer or one of the big capitalists of South Africa and they were touring North America, coming to Edmonton. We knew they were coming, so we organized a sit-down strike on the cricket pitch down in Victoria Park. It's a nice day and we knew it was going to take all day and we would probably get arrested. We wanted to make sure we had a non-violent event. Some people had some reflective tinfoil or something and it was a sunny day so they were doing a little bit standing on the side, but we couldn't really do much until they went off for lunch. Then we went and sat down on the cricket pitch and there were 65 of us or 61, I'm not sure. There were people in the group who were on student visas from other countries and they could not participate in this, because they couldn't get arrested. The ones who felt that they could get arrested did. We were all picked up by the police, pulled apart. You're kind of hanging onto your cohorts and they swing you around if you're still hanging on, so that you finally let go. We were taken in the paddy wagons down to the old jail right by Shoppers Drug Mart downtown in the old police station, Market Drugs actually. Because there were so many of us, we were process from probably about suppertime until about... We had a lawyer, what was his name, Bob Berkhard, I'm not sure, who came down. It was on the weekend so they had a hard time finding both a judge and a lawyer. I was one of the four or five women that went in as samples of this is who's in jail, and the lawyer speaking to get us out of jail. So then we had to stay away for the rest of the weekend on our own reconnaissance, we were released on our own reconnaissance. But it took all night. We were in jail basically in the drunk tank downtown. We noticed that in

the women's side of the jail there were six women and five of them were native women. That was interesting to us. They fed us wieners and something else – they hadn't expected all these people, I guess. We had some boiled wieners or something for supper. Then it took them all night to process us in and take our mug shots and whatever else, then put you in there and then get us out. Actually the very last people that were released out of 60 some people were the non white people. Then we worked for the next couple years both paying our lawyers and doing other fundraising events and sending money to antiapartheid groups in South Africa. We also got in the Durban Times that demonstration and arrest situation, and actually on the front page. I think it was the Saturday and Sunday papers in most across Canada had the demonstration photos in. We had some very good parties, lots of reggae music and got to know a lot of people. Compared to other cities, I would say with both the feminists and the union people and the antiapartheid, Edmonton was relative cohesive in terms of the progressive people, partly because maybe because 20 or 30 years ago there was much more rightwing ideology. I think it made us a little more cohesive in that different groups talked to each other and really helped seed ideas between nonprofit groups, church groups, student groups and unions. I think we had a pretty good mix, which you don't always see in other bigger places or some other places. People make up ideas – these people are like this, we don't wanna talk to them. I think Edmonton is really rich in that social way.

Q: Much more crossover history.

A: Also a sense of if we don't do it maybe nobody else will. As a feminist, I'm on the board of the sexual assault center and have been for a few years. I'm glad to be able to do that, but in the past we've felt like we had to do everything and be on every board. But now I feel like I can choose one and work that way. There are many people, men and women, working in different areas that are really doing good work. A lot of it came out of the social movements of the '70s and '80s, I would say.

Q: Talk a bit about the co-op movement.

A: It's really part of this cohesion of having people from many different places. CMHC and Canadian Labor Congress was very influential in getting the funding for national programs. The CLC and some church groups, I'm not sure which ones, but I think it might've been the United Church of Canada as well as the CLC, getting funding for national programs. In Edmonton, Keegano (Northern Alberta Housing Association) in Mill Woods was the first funded housing co-op that I'm aware of that came under the national program. Barrie Chivers was one of the people helping start that, and you would probably know Joanne Monroe. So Keegano started in about '73 or '74. I moved into a co-op house where people there were already involved in starting Sundance Co-op, which was mainly people from... Actually, back before that Edmonton had Scona Foods Co-op, and it was a lot of people from student co-op houses in Garneau. They weren't all students but there was a strong movement of people who'd been involved and were involved in social movements. A lot of those people said, we want a housing co-op to live in, we don't wanna just live in separate houses around the city. So a lot of those people got involved in building Sundance Co-op, which took about six years. It was a bigger struggle to get land around downtown; most of the other ones ended up with land that was on the outskirts of the city, cheaper land. We got one in Riverdale because we could theoretically walk to work and be closer to downtown in a mature neighborhood instead of contributing to urban sprawl. I moved into Sundance and lived there for 27 years. I have to say that it's very good getting... you could see people moving in that had very little experience with groups, in some cases. For example, one woman was a welfare mom and didn't feel like she had much to offer, many skills. But in the process of living in the co-op she really gained a lot of understanding of how to get things done in a cooperative and democratic manner, working with the community and really moving forward as a group rather than as individuals. Then in the early '90s I became the office manager or the staff person for the Northern Alberta Co-op Housing Association, which had been started in about '85. We'd been active in co-ops from the mid '70s and then the provincial organization with Southern Alberta and Northern Alberta started regional organizations, and we both worked together in the different parts of the province and set up some services that co-ops would use and still use now. I worked with them for about 10 years.

Q: That was after Mulroneu started cutting the funding.

A: That's right, and nationally then they believed that we don't need to do that, that's extra. Co-ops are really good at involving people. Housing is such a key thing to people, and if anybody needs services it's a really good way to bring people in so that they can become aware of any services they need, whether it's education and health or that sort of thing. Co-ops are really good in areas that are underdeveloped or rough parts of town. For example, in the Boyle Street area, Artspace Co-op has played a role in helping that area become developed and really a safer, more family friendly place to live – a very good tool of community development that's underused, I would say. It's really too bad that the federal government hasn't funded it or continued funding much more than they have. I think it's an underused tool.

Q: Once Mulroneu cut the funding, it was hard to maintain that component.

A: Yes. Now we're still getting some subsidies in the co-ops here, but there's been a move to transfer those to municipalities. Municipalities are getting some social housing, but I don't see that it's got the member involvement aspect that really gives people an incentive to really use their sweat equity to both keep the physical buildings up and the grounds but also to reach out to their neighbors as well as do the social development within keeping people active and aware of what's happening, and making decisions about important things happening. It kind of takes the management away from people living there and isolates them as more like renters – they're renters, basically. ... The capitalists can do it, so let's just let them. It's really shortsighted in that they're not aware of how much people will put their heart and soul into making a better community. It really helps people do that and facilitates doing that. We all learn by doing things ourselves and that's a great way to develop a community. In the long run, it's the cheapest way to get a community developed. I wonder if some of that model could be applied to Native reserves, and maybe it is, I don't know. I really don't know much about that, but the whole thing of just dumping in money and saying, hey run yourselves, I don't know how

well that works or what supports need to be there that aren't. But creative thinking is obviously...

Q: The women's committees in the various unions are a potent force in moving agendas along. You mentioned Karen Kratz.

A: She's the one who spoke up at a local meeting when we were talking about contract negotiations, saying we needed to add in sexual orientation – you may not discriminate against a person on the basis of that – add that into that clause. Our past president, Bill MacDonald, spoke up and said, yes we need to support this and it's important. Some of our members certainly didn't understand it and maybe they still don't, but most of them probably do now. This was in about 1981 or so, so pretty early on in terms of understandings of how sexual orientation can work.

Q: What kind of discrimination are we talking about?

A: Probably work floor policy. I don't think the union has much, maybe it does, but I don't know if it has very much influence in hiring. But especially in terms of treating people with respect and not harassing people. You can do the job just like anybody else, so you shouldn't be targeted. I think that came out of Edmonton going into the national contract. We were still in letter carrier's union then, so that understanding was just starting to percolate into unions through members. Karen Kratz was a member of our women's committee.

Q: Did this eventually extend into spousal benefits?

A: I think that was later, but it might not have been much later, probably later '80s, I couldn't say for sure. It came a long a few years after that, yeah. It's a part of not discriminating against a person with their benefits and insurance and things like that, if they're treated equally. What does that really mean in spelling it out in future years of

how it would really play out in the workplace in terms of benefit structures and that sort of thing.

Q: How did the militancy of CUPW impact LCUC?

A: I remember the day when Jean Claude was put in jail during the CUPW strike. They had been told, you must go back to work, and he said no. . . . You mentioned Jean Claude Perot. I sort of felt like we were sort of told, well CUPW is more militant than you are, they go on strike more than you do. But I felt a sense of safety that Jean Claude Perot was there and he was saying the things that needed to be said. There was certainly an effort to play us off against each other because if CUPW was on strike some of our members would say, well we don't wanna lose pay because they're on strike. I recall one strike they were on that our national officers, because I think it could've been a walkout and because we didn't walk out, they managed to figure out how to get unemployment benefits for our people for a short time. Some of these strikes were long and very bitter. All the strikes were bitter, but it would depend on the people. A long strike is very tough on everybody, and continuing to support our brothers and sisters in the other union would be very mixed in terms of some of the carriers and drivers in our union, working to encourage people to support them and the importance of us sticking together as much as possible. There were times in our union where our executives didn't agree very much with CUPW and LCUC, but some of us like Karen Kennedy and several others and Lynn Boo and I and Greg McMaster and most of our executive felt that it was important to work with them and to talk to them if we had differences, and to talk them out and understand that the employer is really the body that we're working together to work against, and to get good working conditions. So really the benefits they gained we would often also gain, and the benefits we could gain they could gain as well. The more we explained that to our members... There was real animosity between some members. Sometimes you can explain things and they listen and understand that you gotta work together, but other times not. Some people you're just never gonna get through to.

Q: The women's committee was a bridge.

A: We actually had a small group of, and I forget if we had a name for it, but we would meet and included some of the women lawyers and the women union executives. It was Karen Kennedy, Jessie Bull, and the women lawyers that were working with our unions. We had some get-togethers and lunches where we would sit down and talk about issues, just kind of social time and the importance of working together. I think we understood that fairly well in that it helped to create a bridge between the locals. Calgary, for example, was very different. We knew that at some union functions there was some pressure by some in the very old sexist union style thing. When guys go to a convention some of them are looking for prostitutes, so the local union was expected to tell them where to get prostitutes. Hey, we're out of town, this is what we get to do. No, we were talking about that and this is not what you're gonna do. . . .

There was a time when Carol Reed and Karen Kennedy were both on the executive, and I think Tom Olynik was part of that too. When CUPW was in Avord Arms they had their office in an apartment in Avord Arms and we were still up in the north McCauley area, meeting with the regularly and having coffee and trying to do some projects together. I'm sure we pulled some projects for our locals together before the merger happened, we worked together on some things. We just saw it as a totally win-win situation from the start, so just trying to get over some of the old believing things about people over there but never talking to them kind of thing. Also CUPW in the postal stations in Edmonton there'd usually only be about, because most of the inside workers are sorting mail in the big plant downtown or somewhere like that, and there'd only be two or three or four CUPW – this was before the amalgamation – the inside workers out at each station. So they were really in the minority out in the station and probably didn't have very big visibility or voice. As letter carriers we may not have understood some of the pressures that they were in, being in an indoor situation with a supervisor there all the time. One thing about being a letter carrier, you're off by yourself for part of the day a couple times a day, so that was a benefit.

Q: What was the story of someone coming in and tearing down photos?

A: I have no idea. I just know that some people, some men thought that they could have pinups by their desks. I know that I would talk to them first and then I would just tear them down and rip them off and throw them in the garbage. That included in the manager's office. There was one in there that I'm sure I took down and said, okay we're not having that in here. It was their property and I was maybe being disrespectful of their property, but it's just not acceptable. Yeah, that's true – pinups was one of the campaigns that took several years to make it not acceptable to have negative sexual stereotypes displayed. It was kind of seen as a right – I'm a man so I have a right to do this. That's just not on. You just stop asking questions after a while and just take direct action. I'm sure that happened many places.

Q: That direct coworker stuff is the hardest to do.

A: Right, 'cause you're gonna be working with them the next day and the next months, and you gotta look ahead. How far do you wanna stick your neck out? I would say that a surprising amount of interpersonal education happened. We also did things like we'd sort our mail and then send it out and then go and have coffee or breakfast at the local Smitty's or whatever. We had a lot of good discussions between women and women and women and men, just kind of really healthy social what's acceptable and political discussions. When you know them as 360 degree people you don't see them as a stereotype. If men are really isolated from women and they're not in the same workplace, it's really easy to have false ideas about those people, any group of people. Having false ideas about what's acceptable between women and men and on a daily basis negotiating the equality and respect that everybody deserves. I always found just standing sorting mail, if there was one guy that I really couldn't stand I would always end up right on the desk beside him. I figured there's gotta be a way to deal with this. So I decided I've gotta make my life a little easier and how am I gonna do that? Well you find one thing you like about them and just kind of focus on that and kind of ignore a lot for a while. After a while people come around and you can get along surprisingly well with people. You probably both change a little bit in the process and just learn to respect each other a bit. Often I decide I've gotta be the one to take the first step because he's not going to, just to

try to figure out how to get along a bit more. It just makes life hard if you don't. But it always seemed like there was one person that I just rubbed the wrong way, so it was kind of intense at times.

Q: It takes a lot of courage to do that.

A: Yeah, to engage with people. I'd say in 30 years Edmonton has changed a lot and just our society in general. You're not supposed to talk to people at bus stops, you're not supposed to talk to people on the bus. People look at you if you try to engage them in conversation, and I think that's really unhealthy. It just builds the silo mentality of separateness. I think it's really important to engage with the people that you come in contact with every day, in some way or another. We tend to kind of just blank people out or just interact on a very shallow level, partly because we're so inundated with emails or information or phone calls or TV that we don't want to engage with the people around us. I think interfaces like housing co-ops means you get to know more people in a much more meaningful, deep way. Back to the housing co-op things, you get to know people if they're in your co-op in a meaningful way, and some of those people you'd really rather not know. So it's very enriching in a positive way but then there's some people that you know much more intensely than you would if you just kind of rented an apartment in an anonymous apartment building. So it has its pluses and minuses, but mostly pluses I would say.

Q: There's been a huge shift in the tone of union culture as more women have become part of the union executives.

A: Quite a bit, I would say. In a union, a few people being the boss and everybody else being a little bit of a top down approach is seen as less acceptable. I think we've not entirely leveled things out but I think it's a little more respectful of everybody and listening to everybody. You can't listen to everybody all the time but a culture of expecting to be a bit more respectful and making room for people and figuring out how to make room for somebody's different ideas and opening the door to possibilities.

Q: I notice that meetings tend to work in much more of a consensus way.

A: Yeah, part of it is taking the time to understand the different points of view. It's certainly not always divided by gender or anything like that, but more consensus. I think also the co-op housing culture I'm sure has helped contribute to some social expectations of respect and more consensus. There comes a time when you can't use consensus, but using it much more of the time. Really the social debates are never really over; they just kind of cycle through different generations. You find one debate comes up and then five or ten years later it comes back with a little bit different face or looking at a different angle of it. I mentioned the woman Bina that I thought you should interview. She was president for a while. She was the local CUPW women's committee. But as an East Indian woman, she was fired three times by racist supervisors. I was there the second or third time right after. I remember meeting her in the lunchroom. She was looking shocked, like I've just lost my job. So I worked with her to make sure she filed a grievance, make sure she talked to the union, instead of just going home and throwing up her hands and saying, that's it. Totally on racist reasons. She was told different things – you have to finish this job but you can't work overtime. I think she was a relief worker so it's not her route, she doesn't know it, she's trying to do the best she can. Just abuse of power, plain and simple, for somebody who's trying to do their job. So that's a really good example of people not using their brains, if you ask me. She's a very outspoken and effective union member and a union leader now. My last day in the post office was in '89 and I'd decided to leave for a few months and plan ahead. My very last day was December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1989, which was the Montreal massacre day. I just remember, this is going to be my last day. We got into work and then we heard about this on the radio and everybody was just going around in shock. That impacted everybody across Canada, what terrible things can happen when people get crazy ideas and feel entitled about certain things and take their bitterness out on the people around them. I always remember that day. I was working downtown then, and the men in my station were more shocked than the women. Everybody was really shocked, but the men were especially shaken that

anybody could do such a thing. It was a man who did it, and I think they felt worse than the women.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?

A: I can't really think of anything much.

Q: I'm interested in the interlocking women's committee.

A: There used to be the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee, which had a fulltime office funding. The government closing down the office changed the women's movement in Edmonton. There doesn't seem to be one voice, but there's different voices in different places and different organizations for women. I think the women working together and having a place to go... When I first came to the union and there was a woman on the National Uniform Committee but it was picked by management, so it would be a management sweetheart who gets on that committee and maybe didn't make much noise, I don't know, I wasn't there. But they didn't understand and the unions let them do it. They didn't understand that it needed to be someone coming up from our ranks who understood women's issues, not just what size does this shirt need to be or whatever. It was the locals that got that there should be a national women's committee as well, and the pressure to do that. Also the fact that Edmonton women who were involved in working progressively together to make a more just society often knew each other and we talked outside the union as well as inside the union.

Q: How does Edmonton Working Women fit into this?

A: I don't know when they started. I was never directly a member of them. Probably in the '80s as well. They may have come out of that Women and the Law conference, which I expect was set up as what committee, but it might be worth talking to some members of those. I wasn't directly involved.

Q: How did the feminist theory you absorbed in university feed into all this kind of work?

A: You read a lot of books and you talk to a lot of people but how does it come out in an everyday context? Well partly growing up in a large family with older brothers and sisters and negotiating in a household of who does what work, and seeing that there's some inequities there. And working and continuing to work on my brothers and our brothers. We had that discussion in our family and I expected it to be something I would talk about – how do you live together, basically. But that's a normal thing to talk about. And reading books and coming in contact with people who have different creative ideas about how we can make a better society, and that we can make a better society if we work at it and not just be reactive to what comes along. I guess part of it comes from a sense that we have to do it, nobody else is gonna come from somewhere else and fix things for us. And that we can trust our sisters and brothers and figure it out. Where social change happens, it's like language – it happens every day. Language changes word by word, it doesn't change all at once. Look at the example and it's in everyday interactions really. We live in a free enough society that some people are able to speak out and help make those changes, other people aren't yet in a situation where it's safe for them to speak out. The importance of noticing – even some societies you don't even notice, well that's exploitation, and it's not really seen as exploitation but in fact that's what it is. Learning to recognize it and then put our heads together about what we can do, then work towards some goal. I think if you're in a place where you have to have a certain amount of freedom, both economic and social. If you have ten kids to support and not enough money to do it, you're not gonna spend much time working in social movements. But if you have some time and you can take a few risks, and also you have to see that it's worthwhile to take a few risks and try to make them small enough to deal with. There's lots of people that have lost their jobs trying to do things, but try to negotiate that it's doable in a given situation. Sometimes things are not doable at the current time and you might have to wait until you can actually make some inroads and bring something onto the agenda. That's about it.

Q: It's interesting how you said being in the co-op gave you the freedom to say, okay fire me if you want to.

A: Economic freedom. If you're paying two thirds of your income for rent, you're probably not going to be able to speak out very much. I think the way rents are going now and people's incomes aren't going up on average as much as things like rent and cost of living generally, it doesn't bode well for social justice issues being pushed forward. People are scrambling trying to work two jobs or whatever. But I think that's about it.

Q: We were just starting to talk about trucks.

A: One of my favorite jobs, I was a letter carrier for the first part of my career and then became a driver, mostly driving the small one-ton mail trucks around. Then we saw there was an opening for the big five ton mail trucks that take the mail to the stations or out to the airport or whatever. There was only a couple women that did that. I thought, well I think I could do that, I've driven grain trucks in the past so I could probably learn how to do that. There was a real mystique like this is a guy job, really a guy job. Some of the guys that did it felt pretty special or something. You get some training and it's driving a vehicle. There's a couple things like if you have to change a tire you're gonna call somebody anyway because there's somebody that will come out and do that. So you don't actually have to lift an 80 pound tire or whatever it is, and you're using those hand jacks for pumping up. The mail is held in these big metal frame things and you pump it up and wheel it into your truck. I actually really enjoyed driving the five ton trucks. Most of them are automatic shift, so that's actually pretty easy. It's learning to back in tricky situations when you're backing uphill and have to go around a corner to get out of the station, to back into the dock. I really enjoyed driving the big trucks.

Q: How did you get that job?

A: You just have to apply. You have to take another defensive driving course. You take a defensive driving course when you start as a driver and you do a couple other things.

You have to learn to back the big trucks and they take you out in some big parking lot and you back around a bit and stuff. Basically learning to back up with mirrors in tight spots, and stopping distance and that kind of thing, and using airbrakes. You get a ticket to use airbrakes so you have your air ticket right in there with your driver's license. It was neat work, a great job, I quite enjoyed it. What the post office does is for most of the letter carriers you're taking out mail to a station first thing in the morning and then you're back and then you drive a smaller truck the rest of the day delivering business mail or taking out letter carrier bags or whatever. But you do your shift on the big truck first thing. It was very doable and I'd recommend it to anybody.

Q: I assume there's a pay premium.

A: Not much. I don't think there was really.

Q: That's often the reason why they're male jobs.

A: Well I think the tractor trailer drivers got more training and there was a pay premium, but I'm not sure. I can't tell you about that. They're not manual transmissions so it's really not that complicated. It's just to learn the ropes and do it. It was fun, actually. You're sitting up above everything and because it's a stub nosed thing you're kind of over the street. I liked that part of my job quite a bit. I guess the reason I left the post office is I kept getting repetitive strain injuries.

Q: From sorting?

A: You're carrying parcels for the rest of the day, you're taking parcels and stuff around. I think the post office is a good job, at least the external part of it is a good job for people that are between 20 and late 30s, then your body sort of changes and you're not quite as tough as you used to be. More power to them if people can stay there and do that until the end of their career, but I wasn't one of them.

Q: It should be geared for [normal people].

A: Yeah, not just something an Olympic athlete can do. That's kind of something they're pushing towards, trying to get it so that it's just a young person's job. But there are other parts of the job that can be done by different people.

Q: The job shouldn't destroy your body.

A: Yeah, exactly. My last job was downtown at the main post office. I saw City Hall across the street and thought, maybe I could work there eventually. Then I was pleasantly surprised when I got hired by Michael Fehr nine hears ago. It was very like my secretary treasurer job at the union doing admin work with a political context.

[ END ]