

Tanis Pichette, USWA

Feb. 3, 2009, AFL School, Jasper Park Lodge)

Q: What do you do for a living?

TP: Most people would think it's kind of weird. They look at me and I'm a woman. But more women are coming into the coalmining trade, and I operate heavy equipment at the Highvale Mine just south of Wabamun.

Q: Describe what you do.

TP: We basically dig up the earth to get down to the different layers of coal. I work at a coal mine that is thermal coal, which goes into the power plants. There's a bunch of power plants around Wabamun. The plant that I work at is Sundance Keephills generating plant. The coal goes into the plant and generates the heat and everything. It goes out into the lines and boom, you've got your electricity.

Q: What specifically do you do?

TP: Personally what I do every day is trying to do my job as safe as I can. It's very stressful when it comes down to the safety aspect, because I work on very big equipment. For instance, the truck that I run is a lock truck and it's a 400 ton truck, and I'm hauling 4 tons of dirt, because we're trying to get that dirt off to get down to the coal layers. We actually come--I don't know if people are familiar with drag lines--, but we go ahead of the drag lines clearing off all the mud and excess so that they get down to the gray level which is part of the line, and then it gets down to the coal level.

Q: What union local do you belong to?

TP: I'm United Steelworkers 1595. Our union hall is out of Wabamun and our site is Whitewood and Highvale Mine. You're looking at about 680 some members right now. Out of that membership there's 25 or 30 women. I'm looking at that, going, we can change that maybe down the road. If you look back into history, it's usually a man's dominant job. I came onto the jobsite in 1994 and I was the first woman employee ever on my crew. There's a lot that I had to go through, but you persevere. For the most part, the male gender was fine, but you do have those few. But on that aspect, I love my job. I never thought of playing in the dirt. Well you're not really playing; you're working in the dirt.

Q: What is your position in the local, and how are you accepted as a woman in that position?

TP: I'm a safety rep on my crew because safety is very important to me. When I came on, the safety aspect wasn't looked at as much as I look at safety, especially around heavy equipment. I wanted people to be more aware of the safety aspect of running equipment and being aware of your surroundings. The whole aspect of safety is so important on the worksite. I was involved in another union before I became United Steelworkers.

Q: How did you first become involved in a union?

TP: This goes back to almost--we started in 1993 or '94. It was all in organizing. I was a rehab practitioner, which was working with adults and children with disabilities. This was with the Good Samaritan Society in Edmonton. They were very non-union and it was quite the struggle throughout the years from 1993 to when we first got our first contract that we persevered. That's a big story right there. The Good Samaritan Society was so against union workers and what they stood for. I was like, well how could you not? We're standing up for people's rights. That was a really big going, wow, I'm working for a company that has that mental concept. Through that persevering to organize, the company was saying that myself, I was signing people on their territory, and the threats of jail and everything else. We all got brought down to the Labour Relations Board

downtown Edmonton and basically we were jailed in the Labour Relations Board, in that building. We weren't allowed to go anywhere, we weren't allowed to see our members, and the threats of being thrown in jail for two days because of organizing. It was quite something. That company, when we started, we actually did organize. We persevered, we organized, we got unionized. It was an awesome day for all of us. We were very proud of everybody. Not just ourselves, we were proud of our whole membership. Then the bargaining process started, getting our first contract. It ended up going into court and everything else because of the cover page of our contract, because they didn't want to have all the group homes, all the activities under one. They didn't want that strength of bargaining that we were going for. We persevered to some degree. We had two units that were out of our bargaining unit, but through perseverance and through the previous history of unions and letting them know what all unions have fought for for years and years, because we did bring that forward and brought them the past history of unions and what they stand for to our membership, it helped us in that process.

Q: Then you a member of Alberta Union of Provincial Employees?

TP: Yes.

Q: How was the local organized, and what positions did you hold?

TP: When we became members of AUPE, we were also affiliated with the Alberta Federation of Labour. My position that I held with AUPE, I was vice-chair of my chapter. I was also the treasurer of my chapter, and I was also a safety person on that. With the AFL, that was my first school that I ever participated in. That was back in 1998 or '97 was my first AFL school, and it was here at the Jasper Park Lodge. It opened up my eyes to how many other unions there are across Alberta, and we're all affiliated with the Alberta Federation of Labour and how they help us all join as a group and fight as one, and not be singled out as one union. We're all working together as one unit instead of all these units, and that's what we were striving for when I was organizing for AUPE.

Q: You were a member of AUPE and now you're a member of the Steelworkers. From the nursing home to the coalmine, do you face many of the same issues?

TP: They're on such different spectrums, but when it comes together it's all the same. You're fighting the same things day after day – you're fighting for your rights.

Q: Talk about the transformation in taking a bunch of non-unionists and organizing them into a union. How hard was it to convince them?

TP: We held a lot of meetings, and the reps of AUPE helped us also by giving us information about unions. We held the meetings for the members and we would also meet them for coffee and things like that. We would sit and explain to them basically what unions are doing for people across the world, how much better you can make your workplace and how much safer you can make your workplace, and fight for your rights, because we do have rights and that's why we fight for our rights. That's what we're here for. And for them to realize that we're here to help, we're not here to damage anything, we're here to help. Unions are here to help, and that was the main thing. You could see when you were talking to that person their eyes going wide open going, wow, this makes sense. Finally we have help. You could see it in the person's eyes. They're all scared like, what is this, what's going on? Myself, I knew what it was about, but I did my research and talked to people. Communication is wonderful. That's when I really noticed that they were okay; this is the right way to go.

Q: AUPE has dropped out of the AFL. If you were to go to AUPE today as a member, what would you tell them about being outside of the house of labour?

TP: I'm going to go back. When I found out AUPE--this all happened when I left my previous job and now I'm a coalminer--, I was shocked to hear they were not affiliated anymore with the Alberta Federation of Labour. Like I said before, we're working as one. Let's work as one together. When we have all these groups that are outside the boundaries, because there's always boundaries that are set up with everybody, it makes us

stronger in so many other aspects. The strength of bargaining, the strength of solidarity, everything--I would express that to them and say, why is this? Why not join us? Why not become one? Why not bring all your education and all your experience that you have and let's bring it all together for all Albertans so everybody can benefit?

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