

Nancy Furlong

January 15, 2010

Interviewer: Marie L, Pasula
& Winston Gereluk

NF: My name is Nancy Furlong and I'm the secretary treasurer of the Alberta Federation of Labour. I come from CUPE Local 1158 and I work as a union rep with the non-academic staff at the U of A.

Q: What is your background?

NF: I had a large family; I have six siblings. Both my parents are alive and most of my siblings have children and we're quite a large group. We came out of Ontario. My father moved our family here in '61 here to Alberta when he got tired of working six months of the year in Ontario and going on pogeys the rest of the time. So he decided there are better advantages out in Alberta. So we moved to Alberta. I was at that time six years old. So we moved to Red Deer originally and my father worked in the trades; he was a carpenter. In Red Deer he worked there until the work ran out in Red Deer and then he moved to Edmonton and we stayed east of Edmonton for the rest of my childhood, and in my adult life I've always lived around Edmonton. We weren't a political family. My father was a member of the carpenter's union until he started his own business, and he was thrilled that he would be having a pension, and that was important to him. He raised the seven of us on one carpenter's salary, so it was never easy in our family. We had financial challenges all through my growing up.

So when I hit adulthood it was not a choice of going to university but I had to get a job and work on my own. Luckily that was just in the early '70s when there was a lot of work in Alberta and things were booming. I could've worked anywhere I wanted to work. So when I graduated high school I went to work eventually, like three or four years after high school. I ended up working at the province, working for the provincial government. It was there that I first became aware of unions. Until that time my memory of my childhood was we just didn't talk about them. We weren't political, we just were a nuclear family and we relied on each other and it was a real work ethic but not a political one.

When I went to work at the Government of Alberta it was in 1976 and the province had just passed a law creating the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. At that time they were organizing the workers who worked for the province, and I was one of those workers. I attended one of the founding meetings of the support staff; at that time I was a secretary. I attended one of the founding meetings of the chapter of Local 1, which was the administrative support group within AUPE, and became a steward because no one else was volunteering. The rest is history. I worked for two years with the province, active in my union, and then the union was looking for a support staff member. They came to me and asked if I would be interested in working for the union; so I said that would be good. It was a real opportunity to work in something that I'd come to really appreciate. So I became a staff member of AUPE and from that moment my career path was begun. I did some university work to learn labour relations. I did projects that I was offered at the union.

When a job came up at AUPE as a rep I applied and was successful. This was the early '80s and they were growing. The government was just increasing the number of employees they had and the union had just become certified for all of the members of the province. So AUPE was just really expanding. So I was able to get a position as a union rep and I stayed there until 1998. I went from being a secretary to my last position there was executive director with Carol Ann Dean as president at the time.

Q: Were there some people who influenced you to become active?

NF: That's a really interesting question, because throughout my career various leaders of the trade union movement have been important. Some of them influenced me in a good way and some not so good. We have challenges in the trade union movement and we all need to be reminded at various times of why we're active and why we want to belong and what we're doing it for. When I became active, AUPE, as I said, was just growing. It was a wonder to me that you could work together for each other rather than simply for your family and for your own betterment. I remember being asked if I wanted to take training and to go to steward training and learn how to represent people. It was just such an eye opener that someone could do that and actually help coworkers. So that was an influence for me, the fellow who convinced me that I should begin steward training. I've been fortunate because I've been able to follow that in a fulltime capacity for my whole career. Every day that I go to work I'm able to do things that are good things for people. You meet career politicians within the labour movement, some of whom I just have lots of respect for. You meet career union reps, who I have lots of respect for. They come and they go and it's just all developments. There's no one person that would really stand out for me. It's all just a growth opportunity.

Q: How were the working conditions in the jobs you've had?

NF: All of my career I've spent representing public sector workers. I was fortunate enough to be an AUPE negotiator for people who had regular employment with the province for the most part. I negotiated for, I was lucky enough to be able to have as an assignment once negotiating for grain handlers. They were completely different from the regular government employee that I would normally represent – I represented office workers and instructors and teachers and social workers. So those people have a set of conditions of work that are for the most part predictable, so you could negotiate based on improving their pay for those circumstances. But really the environment was something that was predictable and pretty reasonable for most of the office workers.

When I negotiated for the grain handlers, the entire scene was so very different because they had all of the health and safety issues that you find in a grain terminal. They had their own pension plan. So I needed to negotiate with them, with Cargill that was buying them, and they wanted out of the pension plan. So I got to learn about a private sector pension plan and negotiate with. And the health and safety issues around those plants were so very different that it stands out as an opportunity that really made me appreciate the breadth of problems that workers have and how we might not encounter them ourselves, but it broadens our own self if we understand other people's conditions. So that stands out. I was able to have my own strike. I had my own strike, staff strike at a union. Going on a picket line that was my own picket line stands out as a major

change in my life. Anyone who's been on a picket line that is their own picket line will understand that. I handled picket lines, I worked on strikes as a staff member supporting people who were walking a picket line because they were trying to get a collective agreement, but as a staff member of a union – and remember I was 18 when I started working with the union, so all of my career is within organized labor. So it was a very big surprise that I was ever going to have my own strike. I work for a union; why would a union staff go on strike? Very odd. But you know it's a formative thing to actually take strike action against your employer and to walk the picket line and to see people who you respect or have respected as your employer react to you taking that kind of stand, and to not let it influence your behaviour and to not let them convince you you should back off, but to stay solid with your coworkers and continue to walk that picket line until you resolve your dispute is life changing, even for a union rep. Union reps are people as well and they learn from those experiences. I'll never forget that. It changed how I thought about the work I was doing. It's an incredibly important experience.

Q: How did you come to be in your current position?

NF: My current position with the Alberta Federation of Labour: I was with the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees until 1998, then I moved over to the non-academic staff at the U of A. I'm a union rep there, that's my base position, and I was lucky enough to be organized with CUPE 1158 so I'm a card-carrying member of CUPE. Through that affiliation, through that union, I would attend our meetings and attended with 1158, so still working fulltime for a union so very active in labour. I decided in 1997, I'm sorry 2007, that I needed to take a more active role in the broader labour movement, that I had something to offer and was able to do that, and people who are able should give back and deliver for labour. I knew at the time that the Federation was needing someone to hold the position of secretary-treasurer, and I put my name forward and was successful in getting elected. So I've been there since 2007 and I'm in my second term.

Q: Were there any other major developments or significant changes that you've been involved with or witnessed?

NF: It's been a long career so I remember going from, I remember the days of dealing with the creation of AUPE to the issues of making certain categories of employees essential services and having the province deem all of their employees essential, and the fightbacks that we had to do on that, and the political change in this province never changing from being a conservative right-wing province but just changing in terms of the immediate issues that workers are facing, from essential services legislation to taking on the healthcare unions and making them essential and taking away their rights to take job action to the reorganization of health and how that had such a huge impact on organized labour in this province. If you sat and thought about how the things that labour in this province have been through, it's a long hard row and it's really quite amazing that we remain and we remain strong.

Q: Do you think there's some way we should go in the future?

NF: That's a pretty broad question. I have this heartfelt belief that we have not done what we need to do to take ourselves back to that really strong base of support, which is in the communities. For some reason we tend to deal with, I guess we deal with the crises and we deal

with the big picture stuff, and we all fall into that trap. But really the strength is in the community; the strength is in the people who go to work every day and have issues and have problems with everyday life. That's where the trade union movement needs to really focus and we need to get back to addressing those kinds of problems on an effective basis. That will change the world far more than the larger campaigns and the larger things that we have tried to accomplish. I tend to be more hard on us than maybe other people because it really does matter to me that our energies have meaning and that they have impact. I've watched us fight each other and I've watched us spend our time trying to jockey one better than the other and sort of make one stronger than the other through harsh interaction amongst ourselves. If we could really just focus on that basic need at the workplace, that basic need of a person for support from others around them, then maybe we'd have some hope to change the province.

Q: Any thoughts on how that could be accomplished?

NF: It's a challenge because it really does take a long vision. It takes a longer look at it than just our individual fleeting careers. Leaders within unions need to look beyond their own election and their own career as a leader to where they're leading their organization, more importantly where they're leading the workers that are members of their organization. That's a perennial problem, I'm sure. I don't have any of the solutions, I just have the thought about what might be a way to look at it, a different way to look at it. So I guess it takes all of us talking about it and thinking about it to make it so.

Q: Anything else you'd like to talk about?

NF: No.

Q: Anything of personal significance for just you?

NF: For just me? I feel so fortunate to have had the career that I've had. I have been able to do many things that many people don't get to do. I care about the work I've done; I care a lot about it. I get paid for it and I get paid really well for it. It's an honour to be able to work the way I have worked. So I find it's all good, it's all good.

Q: [can't hear question]

NF: I worked for AUPE until 1997, December of 1997. Prior to that date in '95 and '96 I was the executive director for Carol Ann Dean, who was president of AUPE. I was away for part of that so Bill Petrie was the executive director as well for part of the time. When I was working with Carol Ann, the first glimmer of the government's plan to reorganize health was taking place. We had several decisions where bargaining units that AUPE had and bargaining units that CUPE had within health worked side by side within region or within an area of the province. The province had then created 17 different health regions. So there might be one health region where CUPE and AUPE both held certificates for general support services.

In those cases we had decided we'd have a coalition of healthcare unions. We'd work with the other healthcare unions to try to avoid having members lost from one union to another union. So

I know that at least in a couple of cases AUPE and CUPE sat at the same table with the employer and negotiated toward collective agreements that would recognize both unions in those circumstances without having to go and make decisions to take someone else's members. When I left AUPE we were working on that basis. Carol Ann left the union, she was defeated and Dan MacLennan was elected, and at that time I left AUPE and moved over to the Non-Academic Staff Association. So then my perspective on what was going on was a bit different, because I wasn't in it. I was outside of it but I was a CUPE member. So I was aware of it from that perspective and decisions were taken on both parts that it wasn't any longer going to be that kind of cooperative approach.

People all make their own decisions about how they want to approach stuff, but the result was that during the next from '97 to 2004 or '05 there were fights between the unions. AUPE was alleged and I think they were found guilty actually of raiding CUPE locals and their national union, the National Union of Public and General Employees, had them suspended over doing that; they were suspended from the national union. There were huge consequences to labour to that that haven't got to do with where those particular members are paying their dues and who's doing the work for them. The consequences are that this huge union in Alberta is excluded, they're excluded from the labour scene because they have not been playing by the rules. Of course CUPE, my now union, lost a lot of members over that because to begin with there were raids but then in the end the government decided that there would only be one union for each certificate in each of the regions, and they reduced the number of regions from 17 down to I think it was nine and now it's one. So the consequence there was runoff votes and the runoff votes resulted in sort of an amalgamation of bargaining units so that the one with the most members would take that particular group. Now I think CUPE ended in the south, Medicine Hat-Lethbridge area, and AUPE had the rest of the province. Now when it's one big certification it's likely to be the case that CUPE will end up losing the Medicine Hat-Lethbridge group too, and they want to stay in CUPE but they won't have a choice because of the province. In that case there's nothing AUPE can do about that, the way the province is going to run things. But for that period between '98 and 2005 what was going on was dividing the labour movement, and it was not a good thing. I wasn't in the know in terms of exactly how it was coming down. I'm sure AUPE has reasons for what they did, but I am aware that they were suspended from the labour movement because they were taking members that were members of CUPE, and that's not allowed under the rules of the CLC. So that was the case, and it was a very bad thing and has set the labour movement in Alberta back a long way. You cannot take a union that size out of the mix without huge consequences. The fact is that the Federation almost went down because when you talk about a 55,000 member organization being removed from the Federation at one time, that's like over half of their income at that time. So just purely financially as the secretary-treasurer that matters to me and purely financially it was just a big blow with no warning. So just financially it has that impact on the rest of the labour movement in terms of being able to accomplish things together. The Federation has succeeded and grown since then and we have continued and we're going to be continuing whether AUPE is able to return ever or not, but the fact is that those members that work in those communities that I talked about earlier that are CUPE members or AUPE members or members of any other union are all impacted by those calls. Those calls might advantage one union over another for a short period of time but in the end it just weakens all of us. So it's really a very bad thing. People shouldn't be doing it, they

should be thinking further ahead, because it's a short-term advantage that isn't good for their people.

Q: ?

NF: I became executive director for Carol Ann Dean when she was elected in 1993, and something else happened in 1993 that was important in Alberta – Ralph Klein was elected as premier. He followed Getty, and anyone from Alberta that remembers the Getty years remembers the spending and the lack of attention to the finances of the province were all defined as being wasteful, as being a major spendthrift problem. So Ralph Klein came in able to stand on the horse of I'm going to save our family farm and I'm gonna do that by cutting the costs dramatically. Anyone who knew what was going on knew that that wasn't going to be the real problem. The real problem was the revenues, because we were going through a reduction in the value of the oil system, but also because they had not paid attention to some investments. So it was really a revenue issue, it wasn't a spending issue. But Ralph Klein was able to call it a spending issue and become very popular, probably the most popular premier in this province. He did it on the backs of the government employees; he did it on the backs of the services that Albertans were to expect from their province. He changed it all and made it clear that Albertans just had to tighten their belt and they didn't really deserve to have public services. Public services were now a luxury that they couldn't afford. So he decimated the public service. Carol Ann Dean was just elected and I was there as her executive director. So we had to deal with that in AUPE.

We had had our own Getty running the show at AUPE and had had our own problems. So we hadn't had a dues increase at AUPE for many years. We had grown and we'd spent a lot of money on a lot of different things that you could say were good or you could say were bad, but we were having our own problems in terms of finances. On top of that then came this Ralph Klein, we're gonna cut back the major source of revenue for AUPE, that being the public service, the people who worked directly for the province. So he changed that. They were at about 45,000 members at the time that Klein got in and by the time he was finished I think they were down to 20,000 members of the provincial government proper – half. He did that over about four years. So it was just blood on the streets in terms of AUPE's ability to function. So it was a dreadful time, a dreadful time, and AUPE had to adjust for that. They were at the same time dealing with all these healthcare issues and the reforms and the impacts on relationships with other unions. It was just a really dreadful time, far harder from inside that union than it may have looked from outside that union. We had to put together programs that would help us to fight back publicly against the Klein regime and to try and convince Albertans that we certainly could afford the services that they had already paid for through their taxes, and that we certainly didn't need to do these draconian things that were going on that Klein was instituting. Many people remember the 5 percent rollbacks that Klein was able to have happen. We recognize these things now because we hear the same things coming out of our current premier's mouth. Stelmach wants to do these same things but people aren't buying them the same way; they aren't buying them. Although we've been accustomed to hearing it from the Klein years, people don't see it quite the same this time around as they did before. I'm not sure why that is but I'm very happy about that. It was a dreadful time and at the end of it all the province was poorer for it.

Q: You're the president of another very important organization.

NF: In September of this last year, 2009, I ran for the position of president of the New Democrats in Alberta. We have in Alberta a small contingent of people who are elected as New Democrats – we have two in our legislature. We have a problem with being able to claim that labour is represented by the New Democrats, I think, because labour in this province doesn't actively support the New Democrats. The New Democrats have sort of broadened their direction away from labour I think. So I took that position because it's my belief that people in the labour movement, workers in this province, will never have a government that they should have unless they are politically active. Every decision that impacts labour, you at your workplace, every political decision, has an impact on you at your workplace.

All of the things that happen to you at your workplace that are harmful to you have their roots in government – in government policy, government direction, government rules. So I say then that it follows that workers need to be active politically. I know that in the public sector that's often difficult because there's a belief that since the public sector is often a union that doesn't give people the choice of belonging, they are automatically members, then they can't be partisan, they can't say well you have to support the New Democrats, and your union is going to give money to the New Democrats so they can get elected. There are challenges there but I say to you that workers deserve to have government that will do things that won't harm them. At the worst they shouldn't harm them and at the best they should help them. Really, what is the government about except supporting its citizens? So that's my view so I think we need to have active trade unionists working with the New Democrats to try in this province to get a voice for labour that is effective and strong and logical and sensible and respected by trade unionists. So that work needs to be done and we have in our history in the last 10 years, maybe longer, had this real division between the New Democrats and labour, and labour hasn't really taken a strong active voice there. Without it I don't see another choice besides the New Democrats. They were created by labour. The CLC had a really big part in making the New Democrats the party they are and I think that we have a responsibility as trade unionists to have a voice there and to develop in Alberta the kind of New Democrat voice that exists in places like B.C., that exists in places like Manitoba, and now in Nova Scotia. We can have that kind of voice; it's been done in other provinces. I'm tired of us having to deal with the government we have. I'm really tired of them just changing their stripe, changing the colour of their stripe, and continuing to treat us the way they treat us, as if we don't have a right to expect them to care for us as their citizens. So now we have Danielle Smith who is a Conservative just the same as Stelmach is. They're not different; they're both in the same party. They just want the way Ralph Klein got out of Getty Danielle Smith's going to get out of dealing with Stelmach, and we're going to end up as citizens of this province dealing with just as big a problem as we've had in the past. So I say we have to have another voice. It's hard work because we have lots of things we should do, but the workers of this province absolutely have to become political or we're never going to have a province making decisions that are good for us. It's just logic.

Q: The Federation of Labour has grown and changed since you came into your office. How was this growth accomplished?

NF: I mentioned earlier that in about 2005 we had a problem at the Federation because the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees left. At that time they were the largest affiliate and they were probably close to half of the membership of the Federation. So they would be the largest public sector union and CUPE locals all belonged to the Federation, and then we had our private sectors. So, when we lost AUPE, the president at that time and the secretary-treasurer worked to have the United Nurses come into the Federation and the Health Sciences Association. So it changed the makeup of the Federation but brought back some membership and some clout in terms of membership. Since I got elected, I've been spending my time working on making sure that our affiliates support the Federation actively. It's one thing to be a member, it's another thing to remember to always send your dues in, and it's a third thing to remember to send your participants and to send your people and to actively consider things that the Federation is doing in the province as part of your job too. So I've been working on that. But we have about 140,000 members now and that is not an insignificant number. We're, I think, the third largest federation in the country, and that would surprise people because we aren't that well known for being a large union contingent in this province. So we've done very well.

Q: What's the purpose of the annual schools?

NF: The CLC and the Alberta Federation of Labour have for many years now cooperated in having an annual school. It's taken different visions and they've been organized differently, but for a number of years now we've had a two-week school here in the mountains of Alberta, in Jasper, where we take affiliate members, we give them opportunities to learn in depth information about a subject of their choice, and we give them a week of union education. That sounds like something that many affiliates will do on their own – they take their own members and they'll give them education about their union and about issues of interest to them. That is as it should be; unions need to do that and they need to educate their members. The difference with what we do at the Federation at these CLC/AFL schools is that we bring together different affiliates and we bring together members of different unions, and we give them opportunities to connect and network with each other in ways that they don't have in any other place. You don't have that opportunity in any other way. So you are not only learning with people from other unions within your class but you're partaking in social activities with other members of other unions in all of the social activities in the organization.

What that builds is it builds a common network. It builds your feeling of solidarity with others within the trade union movement. That movement is what will make the difference in this province, because you'll take back with you some understanding of those other unions to your community and you won't always look for a CUPE member to talk to, or a Public Service Alliance member to talk to, or a CEP member to talk to. You'll look for anyone who is a trade unionist and you'll recognize them as such and you will have a common experience to rely on when you go back. So it's building the movement and that's what the purpose of the school is. I think it's fair to say that there's evidence that it works, because it's always been something that people return to. We almost always have about 40 percent new people and we have about 60 percent of people who've been here before and say, I need more of that, I need more of that to sustain me. The numbers keep growing. We have 140 here this week; that's the highest it's been in I think 15 years, and it's big again next week. People need the experience. You work every day in your union to make things better for the people around you, and you need the opportunity

to connect with others who are doing the same thing and who have different experiences and who can show you different ways of dealing with those same things. So it's very popular and a very effective way to let people connect.

Q: Has your family been supportive of your union involvement?

NF: It's funny you should ask that question. My parents have always taken the view that they'll support what we want to do as long as it's legal. So I have parents that are completely supportive of fulfilling what you want to do and doing effective and good work with what you want to do. We weren't raised around unions and I was the first one to become a staff member of a union, but immediately after that my sister became a staff member of a union as well. So there's two of us that are fulltime activists. I have a third sister who's an active member of CUPW and I have a niece who's a strong supporter and steward of UFCW. It seems to just spread within the organization of my family. The only person I've ever had any pushback from is my brother, who happens to be a business owner. So he likes to give us a hard time about that but he does it in a fun way and it's not really that he's serious about it. The fact of the matter is unions aren't a lot different from a supportive family. A supportive family will not pull any punches and will tell you when you're doing things that you shouldn't be doing, but they will support you in the things you want to do and your success, and they'll be happy for you if you're successful. Unions are like too, so it's not really all that different.

[END]