

Marle Roberts

April 10, 2015, Calgary Interviewer: Karen Werlin

Q: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

MR: I was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and I'll even say the year, 1961. I grew up in Medicine Hat, Alberta. I did post-secondary education in Calgary, moved back to Medicine Hat, and had my family there. I still reside in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Q: What's your family background?

MR: My family background is my father worked in unionized environments when we were children growing up. My mother did not. My mother was a stay-at-home mother until we were probably about 16 years of age. What a bad time to leave teenagers alone in the house. My father always talked. They were originally from British Columbia. My mother was six months pregnant when they moved from Kitimat, British Columbia, to Medicine Hat, Alberta. I always say, how did you do it, going from the climate they did to very, very hot. So my dad always supported unions, coming from a province that was really union supporters. He talked about unions. I have to thank my father for his positive influence on me regarding unions, because when I became employed in a unionized environment, I immediately became involved in the union.

Q: What kind of education did you receive in Medicine Hat?

MR: I went into post-secondary in Calgary, and if you can believe it or not, I got a Bachelor of Science in Microbiology.

Q: It sounds like your father was one of your role models and mentors.

MR: Yes he was, and my father always encouraged us that we could do whatever we wanted to do. That was one of the things he always said to us, that we could do whatever we wanted to do, no boundaries, don't stop. And in regards to unions, they make a difference. They make a difference not only for the jobs, they make a difference for society as a whole.

Q: What union was he with?

MR: My father was with PSAC, Public Servants Alliance of Canada. I'm not sure in Kitimat, B.C. which union he was with when he was with the aluminum plant there, Alcan. I'm not sure which union he was involved with there.

Q: Were there any other role models or mentors that you feel are important to recognize?

MR: My grandmother as well and my mother, very strong women. My grandmother worked in a unionized environment. So we talked about unions in the house. My mother never did and that's always why she used to say, that's why I don't have benefits, that's why I don't get--it's a good thing that your father does. So they both were very strong women in the family as well.

Q: Your grandmother worked in a unionized environment?

MR: Yes she did, yes she did. She worked in CP Rail in Medicine Hat. She cleaned the offices. She was involved in cleaning and she worked there.

Q: What union would that have been?

MR: That would've been the Teamsters that she worked, yes. And my grandfather also worked for the City of Medicine Hat, and he was CUPE. And my great uncle worked for the City of Medicine Hat and he was CUPE.

Q: What was your first job?

MR: The first job I had was non-union. I worked for the City of Medicine Hat. I don't know how that happened but I worked for the City of Medicine Hat and I worked a non-union position. It was in the concessions and it was in an outdoor facility in the summer where there was a lake. When I graduated from university I then went on and a position came up as a wastewater treatment plant laboratory technician. I was successful and I became in a unionized environment. Once I became president of the union in the City of Medicine Hat Inside Outside Workers, I actually tried to organize the concession workers. There was an appeal at the Labour Board because I tried to organize, I and the rest of the members of 46, in the winter months when there weren't a lot of employees. In the summer there were higher numbers. So we went to the board. The City appealed, of course, because they said we picked the least amount of time that workers were working. They sent us back with the City to try to come to a compromise, which has not happened to date.

Q: What was your job at the waste treatment plant?

MR: I was a laboratory technician there. I always say that I kept the water good discharging into the North Saskatchewan River for all the people downstream and the residents in Saskatchewan.

Q: So you already were aware of the union, and didn't really need to be prompted to become active.

MR: No, I became active in the union right away. I asked about the union and became active in the union right away. I think I probably was employed a month and I went to the union meeting. It was intimidating at first; it really was. Once I became in more of a leadership role in the union, I will always remember my first union meeting and the intimidation of it, because there's a lot of acronyms that are used and there's a parliamentary procedure. So I always remember that when I'm in the chair, to actually

make sure I don't use acronyms. I'm bad for that, but I try not to use acronyms. I've been told I'm a firm but a gentle chair.

Q: What were the working conditions at the water treatment plant?

MR: The working conditions there were good. It was a unionized environment for a long time. I became involved in two things in the union. The first step I took in becoming involved was I became one of the appointed union members on the health and safety committee. I did that for about two months and then somehow I was appointed chair, because the chair stepped down and I became chair. We did have a number of health and safety issues that we had to take on when I was chair of the health and safety at the wastewater treatment plant, a couple of them very significant. One was there was a contractor in; they were expanding the wastewater treatment plant and they brought in chlorine tonners. They brought these chlorine tonners in. We had self-contained breathing apparatus at the plant but not in the area where the chlorine tonners were. So quick research, did a bunch of research and we actually had the plant shut down. There was 12 health and safety violations. Occupational Health and Safety came in and they shut down the contractor until those infractions were fixed. It was not only the health and safety of the workers there, it was the health and safety of the wastewater treatment plant. It's right across from an area in Medicine Hat where citizens live, and if the wind is blowing the right way it could've been horrendous health and safety issues for both the workers and ... So that was something that I did.

Q: What year was that?

MR: That year would've been 1993 or 1994. We had another issue too when they were expanding the plant. The other issue that we had was actually asbestos in the flooring. Where I worked there I was in the lab, and I overheard in a meeting room that that flooring was asbestos-backed. The plant was originally built in the '80s, that area, and all the flooring was asbestos-built. So then they were coming in and they were expanding on the lab. They were moving the walls and expanding the lab and making a different

lunchroom in a different area. They had their workers in there on their knees. They did give them knee pads, with trowels scraping off the floor. They knew it was asbestos-backed. So that was another health and safety issue.

Q: Were you able to stop them from doing that?

MR: Yes, it was stopped immediately. I phoned the Occupational Health and Safety from the City. It was Bob Brown at the time. He came down; it was stopped immediately and they had to bring in special vacuums and vacuum all the area that had been done. They had to put in the proper barriers for removing the rest of the floor. So the contractor at that time started finally coming to me after a couple of incidents. They were quite not happy with me at the beginning but I guess they just decided, you know what, instead of having our job shut down, let's just go talk to the health and safety committee. So they would come in and speak with me.

Q: What was the makeup of the workforce at there? Was it primarily men?

MR: Yes, there was primarily men there. There was ten of us, nine men and myself.

Q: Did you face any challenges or barriers as a woman in that workplace?

MR: There was a barrier when I first came in. I think – I don't think, I know – I was challenged more in regards to working in that type of environment. I had one of the male workers come up to me and say two things: I really, really have a problem, and I need to tell you this, with a woman working here. I said, well can you tell me why? He said, well I have two issues. One is that it's so easy for a female to claim sexual harassment by saying they were touched inappropriately; that concerns me. And he said, the second concern that I have is the physical strength. We work in an environment where if there's a fire, we work with chlorine tonners, we drive heavy equipment, and I don't think a woman has the physical strength to be able to do that work. So we had discussion on it. There were some points where me and him did still have some confrontations. It came to

a point at one point I said, I'm telling you that your behaviour is inappropriate, and if your behavior continues, I will take it further. But I want me and you to work this out before we go further with this. Me and him did work it out, and I have a story I'd like to share with that. He talked about physical strength and not being able to depend on a female if there was an emergency situation. He would be the one that worked, he worked maintenance and he worked operations, and he would be the one that would actually change out the chlorine tonners, him and an operator.

Q: What are chlorine tonners?

MR: They're huge tons of chlorine, they're big tank containers, and they hold a ton of chlorine. So it got to a point after a couple of years and we worked through some things, and I had the brave discussion I always call it, honest, brave discussion with him. It came time for backup and he would come over into the laboratory and get me to be the backup. We did have one incident. The backup, the two operators would go in with masks, chlorine masks, but they had to get out if there was an incident. I was backup with a self-contained breathing apparatus on, and I stayed in the anteroom. There was a leak and the operator was being trained and he panicked and ran out. Of course the other gentlemen had to go out with him because he would've been overcome by chlorine. I went in, had self-contained breathing apparatus on, went in, turned off the tank, turned off the valves, and then radioed to the fire department that it's under control; we don't have any issues. I walked out to where they were standing and he came up to me and he hugged me and he goes, I'm so glad that you were the backup; you handled that situation and made it a non-situation. He also said at his retirement, if I've learned one thing with working with Marle over all these years, he said, the one thing I've learned is don't ever call her a biatch. Actually it wasn't the biatch word, but... So yes.

Q: What positions have you held within the union?

MR: I originally started health and safety and ended up being the chair. I then was on the group benefit team for the City of Medicine Hat. What I did there, all the unions and

associations as well as a non-union member would negotiate benefits for the City of Medicine Hat. I represented CUPE on that. I also was involved on CUPE national and I was on their political action. I was on the national executive board representing CUPE on their political action committee. I then became the vice-president as this was going on. Simultaneously I became vice-president of CUPE Local 46, which is inside-outside workers for the City of Medicine Hat. We have four other sub-locals: Town of Redcliff, a housing society, a healthcare facility, and the public library. I then for a year was the vice-president and I became president in 1999 and became a fulltime officer for the union in 2003, and that was with the City of Medicine Hat Local 46. Then I decided that the stars aligned and that it was right. I had some time when I did back away. I also sat on CUPE Alberta division as an alternate area vice-president and filled in as the area vice-president for the South Medicine Hat area when the area vice-president became ill. I also then took some downtime. My husband had some health issues and I took some downtime and backed away a bit from the union. Still continued to be president for CUPE Local 46 but gave up some other committees. Then the stars aligned and things changed and the stars aligned and I'm not sure, I actually know why I did it. I love the work I do and I ran for president of CUPE in Alberta.

Q: What year was that?

MR: That year was 2011. It was in Grand Prairie, and I was successful.

Q: And you've just recently been re-elected.

MR: Re-elected, yes. I'll be going onto my third term, six years. I also am regional vice-president on the national executive board for the Alberta region, and I was from 2011 to 2013. In 2013 I was elected as general vice-president on the national executive board for CUPE. The makeup of the national executive board is the national president, national recording secretary-treasurer, five general vice-presidents that represent the areas across, and then regional vice-presidents that represent each province. So I represent British Columbia-Alberta as general vice president on the national executive board.

Q: What work do you do as that representative or as the representative on CUPE Alberta as president?

MR: There's so much work for all of us on the labour movement as union activists. I was joking around last night saying, you know, the tribunal grandmothers, I went to the movie last night and I was joking. You know, I like doing crafts but I haven't had time to do them. So I think I can find time between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. to do a craft to help. But all the work, the lobbying that we do. The government has been relentless in its attack on labour. I don't even know if it's gotten any, we're looking at it saying it's gotten worse, but it goes in ebbs and flows. It's up and down. You look at history and you look at when they've attacked us before. So it's fighting off the attacks with the government. It's lobbying, it's rallies, it's speaking on behalf of the locals. I'm working with likeminded groups to make sure that we fight for what we have, and gain. This is not my saying, this is from another union activist, but he always used to say, it's bar-gaining not bar-losing. So I really like that and it always sticks with me. It's making sure that we have a quality of life, not only for unionized members but for society as a whole.

Q: Can you give us an overview of your work on water campaigns?

MR: Yes, I definitely can do that. I was involved with, I was laboratory technician, I was involved in the Alberta Wastewater Association. I was quite involved in that association as well because I was a Level 3 operator. I had to make a decision when I started to do fulltime officer for the union, because I could only do six years where I could continue on with my license to operate with credits through learning, through online courses. So I had to make a decision. It was a tough decision but I chose to follow the union activism because I found really making a difference there. Not that testing wastewater before it's discharged to the receiving stream and making sure that it's within government standards isn't an important job either, cuz it's very important. So I had to make that decision. Water, wastewater, and I'm from the wastewater industry, has always been something near and dear to my heart and it still is that. So when there was an opportunity I also sit

on the Public Interest Alberta, which gave me an opportunity to be involved in water. It is called "Our Water is Not For Sale." This province was trying to introduce more water markets, I will say, because there already are water markets in Southern Alberta. We went around coalition, working together. There was Public Interest Alberta, Council of Canadians, CUPE, and we presented a paper in regards to water markets, I'd say more so the cons of water market and what the province has been doing. It was very interesting to me and it was so interesting because I knew a lot of what had happened over time with the government in my position as a laboratory technician. One of the examples I used was they were changing the testing, the amount of testing, and what they were testing. I as a laboratory technician at that time fought the government changing that. They would come and test samples; we would do composites split. So it was just an easy flow for me to work on this project. We still are talking about our water is not for sale, and now we're going into the avenue of privatization of water wastewater facilities, which the government is pushing. That's something we will definitely need to work on down the road here and activate union members, activate citizens, and let them know that our water is not a commodity. It is a human right and it needs to stay a human right.

Q: So you feel we should be pursuing this as an international campaign?

MR: Yes absolutely, yes, as an international campaign. I was watching the news the other day, speaking of that. I was watching the news in California and they were talking about farmers that have water selling to ones that don't, and paying for water. We cannot get into a situation where water is a commodity. The companies already are very good at doing that. If you look at the amount of bottled water that people drink, and if they figured out how much they pay for that bottle of water compared to how much they pay for gasoline, they would be appalled. Just do the math. So ya.

Q: Aside from the water campaigns, can you tell us about any other specific events from a women's perspective that you've been involved in?

MR: Childcare. Childcare is another huge issue that I and the union have been involved in. I've worked with the CUPE member who is on the childcare national workforce. So I've been involved in that. I had an interesting situation happen to me just after I'd been elected as president of CUPE Alberta. I had a vehicle, and this is an interesting thing I'm gonna talk about too. I have two stories to tell here. So the first one is I had a vehicle and it had CUPE on it. It had CUPE and it had decals and it had all of that on it. The president prior to me was a male and a bit more of an intimidating male. He was more intimidating. He not once, he never once driving that CUPE vehicle did he get hassled about unions. I ended up having to take the decals off that vehicle because I was accosted three times in regards to unions and f-ing unions and that sort of thing. One was outside a drinking establishment; I was staying at that hotel. I just kept walking and just didn't even you know. The second time it was actually in Fort Macleod where again somebody came up to me. I got out of the vehicle and they came up to me and started yelling and hollering at me about unions. The third time was Calgary. I was in the parking lot and I was getting ready to go, and it had snowed. An individual came out and said, oh you're with CUPE. I said, yes. He goes, well I wanna talk to you. He started on me and it was Wolf, I believe his last name is, and he was from Eduland. He was pissed off because of CUPE's comments and CUPE's politicking and lobbying on big-box daycares. He actually went, you know it was to the point where I probably should've called the police. He didn't push me, he didn't, but he was right in my face. A number of times I had to back away from him. I then joked around about I became an Eduland follower, not a good follower but a bad follower.

Q: So you were threatened because you were a woman who was also a union member.

MR: Yes. I only had that vehicle with those decals on. I was elected in April, not April 1st, April 2nd. Those altercations between April and September--I had three altercations. The individual before me, same vehicle, was a male, not once was he accosted or spoken to.

Q: Have you ever received any awards or honours that you'd like to tell us about?

MR: Awards or honours?

Q: Something to do with the union?

MR: I have not. Thinking about it, I have not.

Q: Are you involved in activities outside of the workplace or outside of the union, any other organizations?

MR: No, I'm not. I joke around and say I have time. There's so many organizations that I'd love to be involved in that do good work. I look at that as part of my, I'm not going to say retirement, I'm going to say my next phase in life, becoming involved in those organizations. I guess you could say NDP. I'm definitely involved in the NDP. But they're all very closely linked with the union. Public Interest Alberta, I'm involved with Public Interest Alberta, another organization. Alberta Federation of Labour. So I guess, ya, I am involved in other organizations. They're just so closely linked that when you think about it, now that I'm thinking about it, ya. But when I first thought about it, because we're such likeminded groups and we support each other so well, I didn't think of them as other organizations.

Q: So you get active and campaign – are you door knocking right now?

MR: Yes I get active and campaign, and I've door knocked on numerous occasions. Yes, done all the campaign training and encourage people to take. We did have division convention and it was spoke here at AFL, just give one day. That's all we need is just one day. If everybody gives one day that will make a big difference.

Q: Can you comment on the level of union activity right now in Medicine Hat?

MR: I think people need a little push, but there are dedicated activists in Medicine Hat that are doing the work of many. I think we see that everywhere, but I wish more people would come forward. We do have a district labour council there, which is good; I know some areas don't. They definitely do good work.

Q: Are you involved in that labour council?

MR: No, I get to meetings when I can. I don't hold any positions on the Labour Council. I have been involved. Again, we work together. The Labour Day barbecue, myself and John Lahey did the Labour Day barbecue and did the press releases, and I helped with that. So, any opportunity, when I am in Medicine Hat, I do help where I can.

Q: Have you found that your family responsibilities have made your union activism challenging?

MR: Yes, yes, and my son can agree to that. As he got older, I became more involved in the union. I guess I thought the four of us didn't turn out so bad when my mother went to work when we were teenagers. So I did the same thing with my son. But there were a few times. One, I forgot to pick him up after his soccer game. It was indoor soccer and he had shorts on and he didn't think to use the payphone to phone collect, cuz I'd never taught him that, which I should've. The poor child had to run home 13 blocks in the wintertime. Thank goodness it was only -12. I got home and I was thinking, well that's odd, Kyle must've went to his friend's house. My son's name is Kyle. Must've went to his friend's house cuz he should be home by now, the soccer game's over. Then I started doing some work and then I thought, I was supposed to pick him up. The soccer game is over; it's been over 45 minutes ago. Just as I went to panic mode I heard the door open and he walked in and his legs were a big red. He had a few things he said to me. They weren't anything really disrespectful but ya, and we joke about it now. But at the time I don't think he thought it was very funny, and I didn't either; a bit of guilt in there. There were times when I could not go to sporting activities. My husband was so supportive during that time as well. I know even before I started travelling more and my son was asthmatic;

he was viral asthmatic. So my husband was very supportive in taking time off work as well if needed, taking him to appointments, helping out. I would've never been able to do it without the support of my husband and my son being a bit independent at a young age.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

MR: No, I really enjoy this. So ya, I'm good.

[END]