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March 10, 2015

UNIFOR Office, Ft. McMurray

NW: I work at Wapasu West camp as a housekeeper and I'm involved in local 401 as a job steward. I was also on the negotiating committee of our last contract, which was very interesting.

Q: Tell us about your background.

NW: Actually I was born in Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon. I was raised by a middle class family. Both parents worked. My father was with the CPR, so of course it was a union thing, so I knew a little bit about unions as I grew up, but not that much - not that much. When I was late teens I moved up to a place called McKenzie, B.C., which is basically a total union town. It was a mill town, both pulp mill and sawmill. So I learned more about unions of course, because everything there was pretty much union. Then after 20 some years I left and moved down to Kelowna, went back to school, became a certified nursing assistant. Most of the places that I worked, there were union as well, not great unions, because they really weren't, but they were union. You got a little bit more involved because you could see where things needed improvement; you could see the working conditions, and some of them were not that great, even through unions. Then when healthcare in B.C. went bad I had to take a good look at where I wanted to go and where I needed to go. I was either going to work myself to death or starve to death, one of the two. So the option was the oilfields.

Q: In what way did the health system go bad?

NW: There were massive cutbacks. The government did massive cutbacks. How long have I been at the oilfields now - about eight years ago. It was massive cutbacks in the hospitals, in healthcare units for the elderly, things like that. Some of them actually laid everybody off, and brought in foreign workers. What I meant by 'feast or famine', was I was going to either work myself to death looking after the elderly as the nurse next door or something like that. So it's constant driving from place to place to place to place, and there's no guarantee of hours. So you would work, you could work for two or three companies to make ends meet that way, or basically starve. As you know, Kelowna is a very expensive place to live, and jobs are few and far between there. So you wouldn't think so because it's a retirement place, but it truly is. When they brought in the foreign workers in some of those places it really became mayhem. So I had to take a look at where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do.

Q: Has the situation improved at all with the healthcare system?

NW: I actually haven't kept track that much except for the last little while. I've been looking and just seeing what was there. There are a lot of jobs, but they seem to be the same thing – part time casual, this type of thing. So I don't think it's really improved that much over the last few years, no.

Q: Tell me about your career switch to the oilfields.

NW: Well it was really hard because all of a sudden you're away from home. You're in the middle of nowhere. I had no idea what I was actually getting myself into. The first camp I was at was a very poor-paying camp. It was very poorly paying. But it would pay my bills. I remember the first week I was there I think I cried every night wondering how I got myself into this and where am I, what am I doing here? But I got used to it. You have to get a mindset because it's an extremely solitary life. You're away from your family, you're away from your friends, you're away from your home. You're away from everything that you know as being yours. Nothing is yours there, nothing. You do have coworkers but it's a little bit different. You have friendships but they're not like your friends at home, they truly aren't. They become family in a way, because you're around them more than you are your own family. You're with them 21, 20 days out of a month, and that's more than you're at home.

Q: Where is it located, and how did you get into it?

NW: How did I get into this? I started applying online, that's all I did. I started applying online. I was basically desperate to work. I had to get out and get a job. So it was a lot of applications online, and I finally got a phone call. When I got that phone call I was extremely relieved because unemployment is nothing to live on, it's nothing to live on. I was elated in one way and heartbroken in another. Elated, I have a job - I can make my ends meet, I can pay my mortgage, but heartbroken because I now have to leave my family and everything to make a living. Where did I go? I went to a place called Jocelyn Lodge, which is in the middle of nowhere.

Q: Where is it?

NW: That's what I mean; it's in the middle of nowhere. I don't think anyone knows where it is. It truly is in the middle of nowhere; most of these camps are. It's outside Fort McMurray towards the Ft. McKay area. It wasn't a big camp and it wasn't a great paying camp either.

Q: What are the oil companies doing there in Jocelyn Lodge?

NW: That I wasn't sure, because it was my first lodge. So I pretty much kept very much to myself. I didn't really speak to the clients. When I was there and doing housekeeping and various other things, clients weren't really there. By the time they were back I was pretty much in my room. So being the newbie, so to speak, I pretty much kept to myself for a while.

Q: What was the job classification that you applied for? What was the work like?

NW: The job that I originally applied for was as a janitor. Of course it had to do with floors and waxing, stripping, as I had 20 years experience in that many years back - before my healthcare, before all this, I had experience in that. It evolved from that into a housekeeping role, which is cleaning rooms and such like that.

Q: What's it like housekeeping in a camp? What's a camp like?

NW: What's a camp like, other than isolated? There are many different types of camps; there are many different types of rooms in camps. We now have at the camp I'm at now, we have three different types of rooms. I'll start with the bottom, which is - they don't even make them anymore. What it is, it's 48 rooms down a hallway, and all you see are 48 doors. It reminds me of a prison; seriously it does. It's like walking down this hallway and all you see are these doors. There is one giant washroom with I believe it's six showers, toilet stalls and sinks. They don't make those anymore; I don't even know why we have one there, but we do. That is one type of room. The second type of room is called a Jack and Jill or a 'trades' room, where you have a room, a bathroom, a room, and you both share that washroom. You have your own sink in your room but you do share a toilet and a shower.

The other type - oh we actually have four, I'm sorry, not three - are superior, which is a single room with your own personal washroom, which is nice. The fellows like those. The fourth is called an executive. The executive is quite a big room. Most of these rooms have single beds. The executive has a double bed, a recliner, big screen TV, huge shower. It's very similar to a hotel room, a little on the smaller side, but the same type idea. Huge desk. They all have a desk, some of them are smaller, a closet and a dresser. Every room has that. But the execs are the nice ones. These are the ones the guys want. They want that recliner at night, which is kind of nice. What we do in those rooms is we will go in, depends on what day it is. At one time the cleaning used to be done five days a week for each room. That has since changed and we do the cleaning three days a week. In the trades rooms where they share the washroom, the washroom must be done ever day. It must be cleaned; it must be disinfected. Every room is supposed to be disinfected daily. You go in, you make the bed or change the linens, all depending on what day it is. You empty the garbage, you dust everything down with a cloth and you're supposed to use disinfectant, clean their sink, clean their mirror, empty the garbage, wash the floor, that type of thing. In the exec's it's the same thing, except you have a carpet to vacuum instead of a floor to wash. That's pretty much the basic of the cleaning. It's like you would do at home, only a little bit more in-depth.

Q: Is the work distasteful at all?

NW: I'm sorry?

Q: Is the work distasteful? Would I find the work unnerving if I were getting into it for the first time?

NW: Parts of it can be; parts of it can be. On the whole it's no worse than cleaning your house. There are times, some things you see in rooms can be distasteful at times.

Q: What about being a woman working in a camp? Do you come into much contact with the men?

NW: I do more at this camp more than I have at the other camp. Why I'm not exactly sure, but I think it's because there are more people. The first camp I was at was a very small one. Wapasu; the camp I'm at now, is basically three units. There's Wapasu Main, Wapasu East and Wapasu West. Wapasu East and Main are joined together and Wapasu West is actually separate from that. It kind of forms a horseshoe, only we're disconnected, where the other two are connected. So we have approximately 1,100 people in just Wapasu West. Wapasu East and Main I think all combined. I believe we have over 5,000, so it's almost the size of a small town. It's pretty impossible not to run into clients. I do find on this one, because I have my own floor that I clean and this type of thing, you get to know the clients. Sometimes you're leaving a floor when they're coming back or you see them in the morning and they're on nightshift and coming in. So you get to talk a little bit and you get to know them a little better. On the whole most of them are very good, very respectful. There have been times where they haven't been, which is not good for them because our company has a zero tolerance policy for anything that's disrespectful towards the women there.

Q: Have you seen that policy at work?

NW: Yes we have, yes we have.

Q: Describe a situation.

NW: Well I can actually, no I can't use that one.

Q: Just in the abstract, if you want.

NW: There are times where clients get a little upset about something. They could've even had a bad day- who knows? But if they come in and they start yelling at you or getting after you, this type of thing, you don't become combative with them. You just don't. You just basically agree with them, try and calm them down, and you report. You have to report it. There are times that gentlemen have tried getting some of the girls into their rooms. That's reported immediately and they are dismissed.

Q: You've actually seen people being dismissed?

NW: Yes, or heard of. Not necessarily seen it, but talked to management after and found out what has happened with this client. And, we are told that client is no longer on the premises; they have been dismissed. The bad thing for them is once you are told to leave our camp, that you cannot be here, you cannot come back. They will lose their job. That's

the unfortunately part. If you can't stay at the camp, you have no job. But the thing is you cannot disrespect us as women. We are there to serve a purpose and the purpose is our job.

Q: What's the life of a person who leaves their life in Kelowna to work in an Alberta camp? What are the shifts?

NW: We just renegotiated our contract. We used to have 21/7, where we were 21 days at work and 7 at home. That has now changed from 20 days working to 10 at home, which is wonderful. Very hard to leave home; it's a very hard life. I'm not going to sugarcoat that. It's very hard to leave your family, your friends, everything behind for 20 days, go out into the middle of nowhere, do your job, know that there's things going on at home that you can't do anything about or you're not able to do anything about. Everybody has their, everybody has their life but ours is pretty much torn apart because of working out there. It's hard. A lot of people say, well it's the money. Everybody needs to make a living, and if that's how we choose to make our living so be it. We do it by choice, granted. But to leave everything behind – your grandkids, your children, your husbands – it doesn't give you much of a life really. I find a lot of people; some people really fare very well, if they're married. Some do very well with it, when their wives - I know a few that the wives work out at camp and their husbands are at home and it works very well. Some - it absolutely destroys their marriage. Some if you're single, trying to find a significant other or whatever is extremely difficult, because they want you at home, they want somebody who's working close or doing that type of thing. So in retrospect it's a solitary life, it's a hard life.

Q: Are you a single person?

NW: Yes I am, yes I am.

Q: But you do have children?

NW: Yes I do, yes I do. I have one daughter and two grandsons.

Q: How does the company get you in and out?

NW: Well I have to fly home, of course. The company supplies busing from camp to Fort Mac to the airport to Red Arrow, and actually the E-bus now is actually coming into camp. So my way to get home is I'm up at 2 a.m. in the morning, I catch the 3 a.m. shuttle into Fort McMurray airport. By that time it's about 5:30. You wait a few hours, you catch your flight home. So you actually have two travel days but you have eight days at home, which is better than the seven, which only worked out to be five when it came right down to it. So it's not too bad. I get home early enough that I'm home at 11:30 in the morning now, so I've pretty much got that whole day.

Q: So there's a flight direct to Kelowna?

NW: Yes there is. Well yes there is and no there isn't. The one I take - no. If I could make it there - 10:30 at night the night before it's direct, which is nice. But the unfortunate part is our bus doesn't leave until 7, get into Fort Mac 9. If the plane leaves at 10:30, if anything happens to that bus where it's delayed or something, then I would miss my flight. So I don't chance that. In the summer I would but in the winter I don't want to chance that. But it would be nice to be able to catch that 10:30 flight at night and be in your bed in the morning, wake up and then you'd have the whole day. But yes.

Q: What are the rewards of working in a camp?

NW: The reward is the money is there – in some camps, not all camps. The first camp I worked at was a very poor paying camp, extremely poor paying camp. But it paid the bills and that's all it paid. The one I'm at now is a union camp and yes we are very well compensated, I will give them that. We do have benefits, we have medical/dental benefits that are phenomenal. We get a travel allowance.

Q: Your way is paid home?

NW: Well, we get a travel allowance. So if it covers it, that's great. But it's decent, it's not too bad. Very seldom, about the only time I really have to put much out of my pocket is in the summer, because prices to up in the summer with the airlines, always does. There are certain peak times, but on the whole it's fairly decent the travel allowance they give you. The wages are decent and the benefits are very good. Included with our wage is also an RSP. We get a certain amount put into an RSP for every hour we work. So when you can go someplace and make over \$100,000 a year, why would you not? Why would you not want to get ahead that way? Anyone that's got a young family, if they're strong enough to get through this why would you not and get your mortgage paid and have a good life for your family?

Q: Is it the kind of thing you do for your entire working life?

NW: For myself, I will be doing it until I retire hopefully, because I'm not that far from it. Some people, I know some people that have done it. I actually know a fellow that lives across the street from me that's been going up to the diamond mines for many years - in the Yukon. He's done it for 23 years. I would say if you're a young family, have a game plan. Have a plan and stick to your plan. Some of them come out here young and they have a hard time but they want to go back to school, they want to go to university. This is the place to do that. Put that money aside. How many times can you get an RSP, for every hour you work so much into an RSP, that at the end of the year you've got \$12,000 plus into an RSP. How great is that for somebody who wants to go back to university?

Q: How and when did you first come into contact with the union that you belong to now?

NW: The first contact I had with the union was at the first camp I worked at. The union was doing - oh I forgot the name of it now. They were actually organizing. The union was organizing, and they walked through the camp I was at. I didn't know they were there. I

actually saw one of them. I thought they were a client, and of course said hello, nodded, and kept on walking. I found out later that the union had walked through and I'm okay fine, didn't know anything about it. The next morning I was brought into the manager's office and I was terminated. There were two of us actually that were terminated. The reason we were given - both of us were given this - is that the camp is moving in a different direction and you're not included. I kind of went, "What? What do you mean?" I got the same thing again: the camp is moving in a different direction and you're not included. That is a quote. So we did find out through somebody else, a manager who works there that we know, that we were let go because we were thought to have let the union in the door and we were being used as basically a power point. This is what we're going to do, if this is what you're going to do we'll fire you. So on that note, the girl that was terminated with me did have some dealings with the union.

Q: Which union was it?

NW: It was local 401, UFCW. So, when we had our so-called limo, as it was told to us. Your limo will be here in one hour, the cab took us into Red Arrow and she got a hold of the union at that point. It was Archie and I can't remember his last name, I just remember Archie.

Q: Duckworth.

NW: Yes, Archie Duckworth. Everybody, oh that was funny, but I'll get to that later on. Anyway, the union was excellent. They put us up in a hotel, they gave us money to live on at that time. We had talked to them about a few things, because I had a mortgage. I was terrified I was going to have to sell my house. When you get terminated there is no unemployment, there's nothing. So the union covered my mortgage, they gave me money to go home on. But before we went home we were in Fort McMurray for about a week. During that week we did help them go to different camps and organize. The one camp we went to was the one I was terminated from, and that camp yes did get organized. So it was kind of a little payback, but it was sweet. It left a good taste in my mouth, to be honest with you.

Q: What about the protection under the Labour Code, which says that the employer is not allowed to discriminate against you when it comes to such activities? Was that ever invoked?

NW: No, actually it wasn't. The union did, though, file for unjust termination, and we did win that. In the meantime, they did write a letter also to Employment Insurance and we were able to get our unemployment benefits because it was a labour dispute up for review, that type thing. Did we win? Yes we did win that case. As a matter of fact, when it came time for the voting at that particular camp to vote the union in or out, we were allowed to vote.

Q: The Labour Board ordered that?

NW: Yes. The company could dispute it, and of course they did. But because we were working there at the time, we were allowed to vote. Revenge can be sweet sometimes, you know.

Q: The union really stepped in in a very aggressive way.

NW: Yes they did, I will give them that. They were excellent. They did not have to cover a mortgage, they did not have to make sure we were looked after, and they really did. They really stepped up to the plate. I was absolutely astonished.

Q: Are you aware of what difference that has made to working conditions there. Or have you kept up with it?

NW: Yes, actually we did. Everything became better. Their wage didn't go up as much as ours. I will say at Wapasu we were one of the best paid. Of course it takes time, and that has taken time from the time they started to get to where we are now. So this camp being at the beginning, they got a fairly decent increase, I will give them that. It's the oil fields, there's money here. There's money, so share it. Some companies are hoarding this; I don't know why. But pay your employees fairly. Some of the camps that we went out to, because the union was going after them, did up their wage just automatically to keep, we don't want them here. So some companies did give their employees better wages, better working conditions, benefits, things like that that they normally would not have gotten. The camp I was with at the beginning, yes their wages went up, their benefits went up. The working conditions changed. They had a voice, whereas at one time you could not voice your opinion because if you did you would be down the road. There were no ifs, ands or buts, and there was nothing to prevent that from happening. So yes, they did. Unfortunately, as it happened, that whole catering service is closed down. Not because of the union, it's because the camp they were at decided to take over all the cleaning and everything else with their own company.

Q: With a different company?

NW: No, with their own. They were actually - I don't know if I can mention their name... Clean Harbours. Clean Harbours had a cleaning outfit within their business, so they took over all the cleaning.

Q: So there's no more union there?

NW: I believe there's not again now. So I'm not too sure how that worked, because this is fairly new, so I'm not sure. I just know that the catering company there is no longer there and no longer with Clean Harbour at all. But I haven't been able to catch up with the union to find out whether the union has continued on. If it hasn't, well we'll go at them again.

Q: In your organizing work, did you actually go into the card signing?

NW: Yes, we did with some of them.

Q: How do you go about that?

NW: It's not an easy thing to do for most. For us going into your camp is extremely hard. Some of us have actually been threatened to be removed by the police and various other things, which can be very interesting. But for the employee that's there, it's very heart-in-throat because they're so afraid that if they're caught signing this, if management knows they've signed - they're terrified they're going to be terminated, absolutely terrified. So we have to explain to them, and we do this all on the sly, we really do. We have met people in the woods, because they're so afraid to be seen, and explain to them, once they sign this card, management can't touch them. They will try – there's no ifs, ands or buts; they will try. But then it goes to unfair labour practices and the whole bit. A lot of people have gotten their job back from it. When that happened to me I could've gotten my job back but at that time I was working at Wapasu so no I was going to stay where I was happy, thank you. So all this is explained to them right from the very beginning how the process goes.

The vote has to be to a certain percentage. Then it's looked at by the Labour Board. The Labour Board has to condone that yes okay we now have a certain percentage here, we can now go to a vote. But in the meantime, everything is frozen. The company or whomever is frozen. They cannot terminate, they cannot; they're locked in so to speak. It is to the employees' benefit. The unfortunate part of this though at times is we have a lot of employees that are English second language, a lot. Some of them still don't understand. Even at our camp, we've been union for many, many years. The majority there is English second language. We still have a hard time letting them know, no no, you cannot be disciplined for this. They're still afraid, because in their world, their country, if they had spoken up, if they had done anything, they would be terminated.

Q: Or worse!

NW: Or worse, yes. So that's instilled in them. So at times it's very hard to get through and let them know that - no you're protected, you're protected. That fear is so engrained that I think it's going to take a long time. I know at Wapasu it's taken a long time to get some of them, so they know they have a voice.

Q: What sort of people are they hiring that have English as a second language?

NW: We actually have a lot of people from Africa. We have a lot of people from the Philippines. I'm trying to think. That's the majority.

Q: Are they coming here as permanent immigrants or temporary foreign workers?

NW: Some of them are and some of them are temporary. Some of them are permanent residents.

Q: What do you say to the temporary foreign workers?

NW: We don't know who they are. That is not information that we – yes, we only know that if they're allowed to do, like when we go to get somebody signed up, if they're working in Canada you're allowed to do this. So whether it be a temporary foreign worker or permanent resident, it doesn't matter.

Q: How do you explain the benefits of being in a union?

NW: Protection.

Q: Is that what you say to them?

NW: That's one of the points that seems to hit home. We just talk about job protection, what the union can do to protect them in their job – from discrimination, from harassment; whether it be employee or management, because you can get it from either side. It's your rights. You have rights as an employee. As well as employers have rights, you have rights, and we explain these rights to you. It's protection, and that's the biggest thing. It doesn't matter whether it's the money or not, that's still a form of protection. You're protecting your family, you're looking after your family. So it comes down to pretty much that, that you are, as an employee, protected.

Q: You don't mention money first?

NW: No, no - although, a lot of them want to hear that right away. I want you to know what will benefit you as an employee, not just the money. You can have all the money in the world but if you're mistreated, if you're going to be mistreated, that money doesn't mean anything.

Q: What's it like working in a camp?

NW: Life in the camp. Well the food where we are - it's terrible. A lot of camps, if you're a small camp, the food can be very good because a lot of it is homemade. I've been at the small camps and everything was made, from soup to bread to you name it – oh it was wonderful. With the camp we're at being so big, you can't have everything homemade. So everything comes out of a bag, a can. Oh yes - or frozen. There's very little there that's homemade, very little that's homemade. It's not the best food, it's totally not. But we get through it, we get through it. We have ways.

There's such a thing that they call a bag-up room. The bag-up room is the one place where you can actually get things that are fresh: fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, there's quite a variety. They have sandwiches which I don't touch, because they're all pre-made, so that to me is 'no'. But the fresh fruits, vegetables, salads, stuff like that. Some of the salads no, they come out of a pail. You get to know which is and which isn't. You'll stay with the lettuce that's fresh. You'll stay with the apples, the oranges, the grapefruits, the kiwi – things that are fresh. So we get to know which is the good stuff to eat and which is

kind of not. We do have things that go on at camp. The company has been very good, our company, with supplying us with a bus on Friday and Saturday nights. We call it the Fun Bus. It will take you into town at a certain time, 7 o'clock. They drop you off so you can go shopping at WalMart, go to a movie, go to dinner, that type of thing, go to the casino if you wish. At 11 o'clock at night the bus picks you up. If you miss that bus it's a \$250 cab ride, so you gotta remember that. They don't have to do that; that is something they just supply for the employees, which is great.

This is strictly for us, the employees. Not the clients at the camps; this is strictly for the employees. It's an extra they do, because they certainly don't have to. Those buses are expensive; they're not cheap. From what I understand, I think they run \$1,500 for one run. So when it comes right down to it, they do do a few things for the employees, which is great.

Q: What about during the week?

NW: During the week we have buses that run daily. The only time we do not have a bus is on Sunday; that is the only time. There are buses that go out at 7 in the morning. So if you have an appointment, if you have a day off, because some people that do not live in this country, which there are some of us that don't, on their days off they stay at camp. They pay so much for their room. On their days off they can go take a bus into town, do some shopping or whatever. Then there are buses that come at night. Of course there are turnaround buses, the ones that come in on your turnaround days, which are days off. There are buses that go to the airport every day. So there are daily buses and there's a couple runs a day.

Q: What else to the camp operators do to make life tolerable for workers?

NW: Well, there's various things. They have games rooms. So we have games rooms with your pool table. I think it's air hockey, table tennis. They do have what we call, they changed the name, but we always called it the exec lounge, because it's a big screen TV, huge. It's just like a screen. So there are times we've gotten together and had movies. One of the managers actually that was there was really good over Christmas time, when we were all working. She got us all together and said that we're going to have movie night. She had popcorn and pop and all kinds of stuff, and we all came in the ones that wanted to, and we chose what movie we wanted to watch. We had a great time. It was like being at a theatre. So it was nice that they had that. They also have gyms. We have a ladies' cardio, which is strictly for women. There are some women of course don't want to be around some of the guys when they work out, and I get that because I work out quite a bit. We have a main cardio room and then we have an absolutely huge gym. So there's all kinds of equipment and such that clients use. You've got the games rooms, you've got the gyms, you've got the executive lounge with the TV. So there are various things to do. In the summertime a lot of people just walk, they go outside and walk.

Q: Is it a dry camp?

NW: Oh yes. We have far too many people there for it not to be. We do actually have drug dogs that come through our camp quite regularly and check for drug and alcohol.

Q: So - no alcohol is even allowed in the rooms?

NW: No, absolutely not. No, totally dry. When we come back from our turnaround everything we have is screened. It has to go through screening: our suitcase, our jacket, our purse – everything.

Q: It's very much like a prison.

NW: Yes, as a matter of fact, ours is almost sectioned off. At one time there was quite a blurb on it; I can't remember where it was that I watched on the Net one time. It basically referred to it as a prison, and it was called 'Wapatraz'. The humor is there, but there are some that really don't like it.

Q: Is this in the case of all camps?

NW: It's becoming the norm now. We just closed down a camp called Athabasca. Athabasca was not a dry camp, but it wasn't as big either, and that's a big thing too. We've cut back on - everything's been cut back. Even security at Wapasu has been cut back drastically. If you had drinkers there and you've got an outbreak, it would turn into chaos, absolute chaos.

Q: Why was your camp established and why has it been operating so long?

NW: It was established, I believe - I'm not 100 percent sure, but I believe it was started with Wapasu Main in 2007, in that area,, I do believe. It was started because the Kearl site is very close to there. Kearl is a massive, massive project.

Q: Oil sands project?

NW: Yes. They claim, and so far, I came into the Kearl site one time. They actually have a doctor there, which is great. Anyways, I did see this and it is massive. They say by the time it's done, which will be many years from now it will be bigger than the city of Calgary.

Q: How is Kearly spelled?

NW: K-E-A-R-L.

Q: The reason they have a camp is because it's so far from town?

NW: Yes, oh definitely. There's no way. It's an hour and a half to two hours, then winter conditions and such like that. Yes, it's quite a ways, quite a ways.

Q: Are there a lot of other camps?

NW: There are many camps, many camps that are out there. Noralta is one of them, Husky Sunrise is another. Noralta has a few camps out there – Grey Wolf and I'm not sure all the names of them. When we go to camp the road we go down, you can see camps. You can see, you'll see the sign that says Grey Wolf, Husky Sunrise, this camp, that camp; there's various camps. Even with Wapasu we have another camp that's just kind of almost next door called Pebble Beach. We don't know why. It sounds very attractive and one would tend to think you're in the sunshine, but you're not. Actually Pebble Beach is isolated as we are, and it's much smaller; it's a much smaller camp.

Q: What success has the union had organizing these camps?

NW: We get bits and blurbs. It takes a long time to organize. This is not an overnight thing. It can sometimes take years through disputes and lawyers and this and that and the other thing. But even if we don't organize, our objective is for the employee. Even if you're not organized, if we can scare that employer - and I do mean scare them - because some of them, the wages and working conditions are absolutely horrible. People need these jobs, and that's the only reason they put up with it. They need to pay their mortgage, they need to be able to live. So if we can scare them enough to give you that raise voluntarily, give you some benefits, improve working conditions, we've served our purpose. It's not always about becoming that union, it's about improving your working conditions. If we can do that and still not get in as union, then we've still accomplished our goal for you.

Q: What do you mean by horrible?

NW: At one camp I worked at: your working conditions, you could get a multitude of rooms. If you do not get those rooms done and they are not done up to standard and they are not done the way management thought they'd be done, you could be gone in a heartbeat. There's nothing to save you from an employer terminating you at any point at time. But where I work now, I know if my workload is too harsh I can call down to the office and say, I'm going to need help at a certain time. You're given a certain time, which is usually 3 o'clock. If I don't get that help, if we are too busy and I don't get my rooms done, I don't get punished. It's a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. That's not saying that you're not going to do your best; we do our best. But we're not threatened. We're not threatened that if we do bring back five rooms or two rooms that the next day we're going to be taking our suitcases out the door. There are some places that you live under that threat all the time. Some people are terrified, just terrified that this will be their last day. If we can give that employee just that confidence to know that's not going to happen, that you are a person, you do have rights. You're an entity and you do matter.

Q: Who is your employer?

NW: Civeo.

Q: Who is Civeo?

NW: Civeo? Well Civeo just evolved from PTI. Actually it branched off; it used to be PTI.

Q: How big is it?

NW: That I'm not sure. It's a very big company, I do know that. It's U.S.-based, I do know that. It's a U.S. company and it's U.S.-based. PTI is also a U.S. company but we used to have our base in Canada, so that made it a little different. Civeo is different than what we're used to with PTI. Things are changing. That's the way it goes when different companies take over. Although it's not a different company, it just branched off, but still their way of doing things is going to be different than the PTI way and we know that. Some things are good, some things we'll fight, and we know that too.

Q: Are the majority of people doing that kind of job in the camps women?

NW: Not really, no. We have quite a mix at the camp we're at. We have a lot of fellows too that are there. I would say it's, gosh I would say it's almost 50-50 where we're at, very close to it. There are probably a few more women but we've got a lot of guys out there, a lot of guys. They've got families to support, and some of them live in Canada, some of them don't.

Q: Is the high percentage of women reflected in the kind of union it is? Is UFCW 401 a good union for women? Do they operate in such a way that they take into account the fact that many of their members are women?

NW: I believe they do. I don't think you can actually see it, but just by some of the wording and the way that the union will back you up, and they will. They will back you up to a tee. I do believe that we're becoming more accepted, much more accepted in the workforce of the oil sands than was previous. At one time you saw very few females here, and over time you've got us working out in camps, you've got us working in the oil fields. I've seen some of them drive those huge, huge machines, which at one time you never heard of. You never saw that. So I think we're becoming more respected as an entity in the oil sands than what we were at one time. Of course the union is going to back that, because we're part of that workforce. In some ways we're a lot of the backbone. We're pretty strong the women that are out there – pretty strong emotionally, physically and in every way possible, otherwise we'd never survive it.

Q: You helped to bargain a contract.

NW: Yes I did.

Q: What's it like to bargain a contract? Describe the process. Is it like bargaining for a blanket in Mexico?

NW: There are times I wondered myself. When it comes down to it, I was quite surprised. I'd never been involved in bargaining before. You go in as a group; you're all chosen.

Q: Who chooses you?

NW: It's a combination; the union and some of the employees. If an employee has a problem with somebody who's on the bargaining for any specific reason, they will let it get voiced and be heard. But the union asked me if I would go, and I was quite honoured that they would even do that. But it was a lot different than what I thought. I thought we'd go in there, guns a-blazing. We're just going to duke this out, and we're going to get what we want.

Well that's not how this works at all. We do have a negotiator. As a group I believe there were 19 of us - 19 or 20 of us. Some were housekeepers, some were drivers, some were chefs, or not chefs sorry, chefs are not union. First cooks, janitors – it was quite diverse. So that was good. We got a lot of different areas in the camp that were being worked and on the bargaining committee. But we would get together and we would discuss certain things, a lot of things. Okay we're looking at wages, we're looking at benefits, we're looking at conditions, we're looking at air quality, we're looking at, it's more than just money, far more than just money. We'd go over this all with our negotiator. It is the negotiator that negotiates this. We make a lot of notes. 19 of us are constantly writing, constantly writing. The reason for that is if there's ever a dispute over who said what, because you must document, okay this person and this person. It's amazing. They will go back through those notes of 19 people to see what that person had said. If there's a dispute, here we've got 19 people saying, yes it was said and this is what was negotiated and such. But yes, it's strong and sometimes very heated.

Q: How are the priorities set, and what were the priorities this last time around?

NW: The priorities mainly went to environment. More healthcare, yes! We put the monetary things were actually the last, one of the reasons being we're pretty well-paid. We needed things at that camp. We wanted air quality control. We're out in the middle of nowhere, and we found that a lot of people are getting allergies, a lot of people had trouble breathing at certain times. We're going, why is this? What is going on in this camp that people are getting these allergies all of a sudden or the dust is flying and it's coming in thick, not just through the windows, through the registers and through other things? Is there a mold issue? Various things like that. It became a real health and safety thing. I think that was valuable because if you're not healthy you can't work. So health is extremely important, and we won that. We actually got a person - and I cannot remember her name for the life of me - but she's a very highly respected person in the field of testing, air quality testing. As a matter of fact, she's the only one in North America that can actually go to court and testify, the only one that is certified to do that. So that, as a matter of fact, when I was leaving they were just packing up. They had just finished an air quality test there, so we will be checking it. It doesn't just have to do with the dust and the molds, busing.

We have many, many buses out there that run, and there was issues with the fumes going into the intake of the kitchen, various things like that - people getting headaches. So we need to deal with this; it has to be dealt with for the safety and health of the employees. There were other issues that had to do with travel allowance. Of course money is always an issue, but the company was pretty good. We fought, we won, and we pretty much got most of what we were looking for. As a matter of fact, in one area the company was extremely accommodating. We've always wanted to get what we call trainers. We need people that know how to do the job, how to do the job properly, and train people that are coming in and learning. The company was very much onboard with that. As a matter of fact, what they offered us was more than what we were asking for trainers, so we knew it was an important thing for them as well as it was for us. But the bargaining, yes it was, and sometimes it was heated, most definitely.

Q: What were the company's priorities? What were the first things they said?

NW: No. We had a booklet that was about that thick. They had a booklet that was that thick.

Q: And what did they want from you?

NW: Really they didn't want to do much of anything at the beginning, which I think is strategy - it's always strategy. So their thing was, well you know, we can't really do that at this point, we're not really structured to do that. But I always figure sometimes in a way it's a game play, because they know they're going to have to come up with something.

Q: When bargaining begins, you state your items?

NW: Yes, but they didn't state anything. It was basically us that struck out.

Q: They didn't turn to you saying, "This time around, we're going to need these concessions from you?"

NW: No, they actually didn't, they actually didn't. They pretty much let us take the ball. There were certain things that of course they knew was coming, like the wage. But when it came right down to it, we're the one that did the presenting of what we were looking at, and they basically had the concessions. But that's what surprised me. I thought they were going to come back with, "Okay we want this from you, we want that from you." They really didn't. But the reason for that is we have it in our contract, so of course once you've got something even in an old contract you cannot take it back. They knew they couldn't do that, because we have no quota. We're one of the few camps that is not given a bed quota - here, you have this many rooms to do. No, we don't get that. We do get rooms to do, but it's not a bound quota.

Q: We hear a lot about dirty oil and destruction of the environment. What do you think about that?

NW: I'm a little torn at times. I see the tailing ponds and things like this, but what I also see is, once they remove that tar from the sands, which is the bitumen and all that, that is then mixed with viable 'dirty', and they actually start harvesting trees and such like that. So for me it's a mixed bag. I see them doing the environment good by replanting and reforestation and using that land that was a wasteland, because you cannot grow anything on it, it's full of tar or oil, well it's kind of like tar. It's like - okay, now all of a sudden you've got things growing because they're redoing the environment so to speak. They're mixing it with viable dirty. Now this is clean sand, so you can mix it with things, you can grow things, which they are doing. I do see the tailings ponds too; I understand that there are a lot of toxins. Is there going to be leakage? Well we all know that there is, we all know. Can we blame everything on the oil environment? No I don't think so. No I don't think so. Like I said, it's a real mixed bag. It's good and bad all mixed into one. There are bad things about it and there are good things about it.

Q: What do you think about the pipeline debate?

NW: I'm torn on that too. In some ways I want to say, no you're not going to put a pipeline through, because of the leakage or this or that - what it can do to the environment. On the other hand, I'm going, "You know if this is run right there's no reason for it to spill." There are a lot of things. Would it create jobs? Of course it would create jobs. Would it create viable industry for down the road? Yes of course it will. So, I'm torn by that too. I don't want to see it ruin the environment, because I know it can. On the other hand, if it's run right and it's managed right and if the maintenance on it is done right, you don't have that. But it's having everything done right, and I think that's where a lot of things hit a downfall, is it's not done right. You build this line and then all of a sudden it's left. No. Well who's going to check it? It should have an inner shield and an outer shield so if there is a leak that doesn't go right into the ground, that goes into the outer shield. Should it have alarms? Yes, of course it should have alarms. You need things to protect the environment and to protect yourself as well. The environment is yourself; if we destroy this land, we destroy us.

Q: You come from a province where parties come in and out all the time. What do you think about Alberta politics? If you were an Albertan, would you be concerned about the kind of politics we have here? But you're not an Albertan.

NW: I'm not an Albertan, no. And I don't keep up on it all the time, but from what I see every once in a while I just go, "Oh no, oh no!" Would I live here? Oh no. But no, sorry, you need to do something about your government. A change is as good as a rest, so they say. So take a good look and see if you need the rest, because if you do it's time to change it.

Q: Still this old government gets the highest percentage of the votes in this corner of the province.

NW: Yes, and I don't understand that. I don't, I'm sorry. I just shake my head and go, "Oh no!"

Q: Don, do you have any questions? . . .

You said you work 20 days in. Within those 20 days, do you get days off? What are your hours of work? How is it structured?

NW: When we're there, we work 20 days straight. You do not get a day off. Your days off are your 10 days after. When you think about it, it's actually quite wonderful. Where can you work in this great land of ours that you're going to get 10 days off a month, which is 120 days a year, plus your vacation days? In retrospect, I get approximately five months off a year, and get well paid to do it. There are very few jobs that's going to allow you to do that.

Q: How are the hours of work structured?

NW: The hours can vary. We work 10 hours a day on the whole. There are times we do work overtime, which is 12 hours; we're paid 11 and a half, because we get an unpaid lunch hour or lunch half-hour. That's good, because it's all overtime for us. Anything over eight hours is overtime. So it can vary. It all depends how busy the camp is, how many checkouts you have that day, that type of thing. There are only so many of us, so if we've got 200 checkouts, and that means that person is checking out. It's like a hotel and that room has to be cleaned from top to bottom and disinfected and ready for the next person. That next person could be waiting downstairs for that room, we don't know. Sometimes they check in fairly early and sometimes they filter in throughout the day. So you're busy, you're busy, and by the time you're done you're tired.

Q: Could you describe your day? What are your living quarters like?

NW: My living quarters are trades rooms. I have my own room: desk, dresser, sink. I share the washroom and shower. For my day in the morning, the first thing we do as a housekeeper is you go down the housekeeping office. You're given a board with your workload on it, and a key. You have a master key – don't lose that key! That's a big thing – don't lose that key. Anyone can get into anything with that key, so you watch it. The next thing you do, you go to your floor; you take out your cart. You do have a maid's cart, and that should be ready to go. Not all the time, but should be ready to go. You've got your linens, you've got your towels, you've got your chemicals. Now you've got your workload.

The first thing you do is you look for your checkouts. Checkouts are a priority, and the only reason for that is you've got people checking in and out all the time. If you've got somebody who's been on a flight from Nova Scotia and they get there at 7 o'clock, they're tired. They want to get in that room, they want to get some rest. So checkouts are a priority. You want to get your clients in. After you do your checkouts then you start cleaning rooms. Of course I start at one end and work my way down. It could be just going in. It has changed from the last little while. We used to do rooms every day, now

we do them every three days, which is a big change. The only thing that gets done daily will be the washroom in the trades rooms only. So you've got your trades rooms. You'll go in and it'll either be a service day, which is a cleaning, which means you make the bed, you clean the sink, you change the towels, garbage, sweep and wash your floor. You look and make sure the room looks clean; it's got to look decent. Some of the rooms are pretty good; some of the guys are pretty good. Some of them are slob. If that's the case, do the best you can because sometimes it's not easy. We're also protected in that area as well. If I walk into a room and that fellow's got cords all over the floor, I'm not to do that room because it then becomes a hazard for me. If it's a tripping hazard, and that's something the company is very good about. If there's a reason why you cannot enter that room for tripping hazards or you can't make that bed because they've left a suitcase on. We're not allowed to touch personal property at any time. You just mark it on your board under comments and they will get a letter stating your room was not done because it's a tripping hazard, please remove your cords, or your bed was not made because your personal property was on, please remove.

So they're very good about protecting you about things like that, which is excellent. So we go through our whole board, we go through the rooms. If it's a linen change you change the linens. If it's a checkout, you do the checkout. If it's a clean you do the service days and make sure that it's clean for the fellas. A lot of them are very appreciative. There are times we've got, I've had a few requests from clients, especially nightshift, because nightshift, you try to be as quiet as you can, but unfortunately, it's so quiet in those rooms and the walls are paper thin, that it's really hard not to make a noise. But we're usually pretty good. So if a client says, "Listen, I'm a light sleeper, do you mind?" I'll go, "No problem; I'll clean your washroom before you get it." It's done, I don't have to bother. You've got to be reasonable with the client as well. They're usually pretty good about it. Why would you?

Q: What time do you start in the morning?

NW: We start at 6:30 and we finish at 5, unless it's an overtime day, then it's 6:30. So it's not too bad, not too bad.

Q: You mentioned the quality of the food. Is it a cafeteria style? Are there a number of eating areas?

NW: Each camp area, like Wapasu East, will have their own kitchen, and usually there are two dining rooms. One will open early, because you've got your nightshift getting up and going in, and by the time they're just finishing people are coming back. So when you've got that many people, you've got two dining rooms. You've always got a kitchen in each area, so they have their own kitchen. You go through, there's an island, so that will have all your salads all your condiments, everything like that, deserts and such. Then you go through the hot line, so that's where your food is actually given out. Then off you go to your table. So it's like an assembly line so to speak, you build as you go.

Q: You were talking about the organizing campaigns, getting people to sign the cards. How does it work from there? Is there a ratification vote?

NW: Sorry, that's my phone... There are barriers, but there has to be a certain percentage before it goes through to ratification. The Board pretty much knows. You can pretty much tell by talking to a worker. Most of them are gung ho and they want a union, they really want to be protected. They're tired of being mistreated, they're tired of being afraid, they're tired of, they're just tired, just plain tired. So you pretty much know, you can pretty much know when you go to a camp by the way the person, their body language, what they're saying, various things like that, that they're yes. They know that you have to have a certain percentage before it goes to a vote, then after the vote it goes for ratification. It's quite a process but it's an interesting process. Nine times out of ten, that union will get in; it's not very often that a union doesn't. As a matter of fact most times it's quite surprising when it doesn't – it's kind of like, oh really, well you never would've thought. But nine times out of ten it does.

Q: That wasn't the case in Brooks, because the company actively campaigned.

NW: There are some, yes. But up in the oilfields, I think they're just tired. The workers are tired of, like the oilfields is such a ... when people think of the oilfields, they think of money. When they talk about Fort McMurray they don't say Fort McMurray, they say Fort McMONEY. So there's billions of dollars here, and you're giving a worker \$13 an hour? That's shameful, it's shameful. When you're turning around and making \$300 per room for something and you give this person \$13, go live on that. It's not easy. Some of these people have families, and they have mortgages, and this is their life, this is their livelihood. They just can't get work elsewhere, or the work they can get is \$10 an hour, which is even worse. There's a lot of that, a lot of minimum jobs. You cannot live on that. I would give anything to see any MP in this country live on a minimum wage, and I would give anything to be an MP, put in my stint in the government and then get a retirement. Seriously? When I retire I'm lucky if I'm going to be able to support my home. You do one stint and you can retire the rest of your life and get a very good income. Yes, that's justice. I mean seriously, that's the Canadian way? I don't think so. I don't think so. That almost says that there's a division.

Q: There is a division, and that division has been growing.

NW: Vastly, to the point where, gee, you want to retire early? Just do a stint as an MP. You can always retire after, and get a good income. But seriously, that's a shame. Sorry, I'm going to rant. Who of us in this country as a regular person can do that and say, "Well I've done my stint, now. I can just sit back and I can live comfortably. I don't have to work." That's not the average Canadian. The average Canadian is impoverished. When they think that, people think that I'm full of it, I'm not. There are too many minimum jobs out there, minimum wage, far too many. There are people that we don't even realize are out on the street that are homeless, and I'm sitting there going, you don't get this? Take a look, look in your own back yard. We're bringing in people from other countries and we allow them to work. Yet our Canadians, so-called Canadians, are living on the street.

Q: But we're not bringing those people in to be nice to them. we're bringing them in to exploit them.

NW: Yes. And one of the most exploited that I've seen that we did organize was our security guards.

Q: Talk about that a bit. Was it a different union?

NW: No, this would be local 401 as well. We just finished doing that - actually not that long ago. And I do believe they're still in negotiations. Most of them were foreign workers, most of them. Very few of them are not. So they come to this country, they're looking for a better life. They were being totally exploited. These were the ones that I said had the gang washrooms; this is where they're being housed. To me that's just so 'third world'. They don't make those units anymore; nobody uses them. They're obsolete ... yet the security officers. These are not through Civeo. This is a security company, so I want to make that clear. Civeo has nothing to do with the hiring of them, just the company that they work for. They're totally exploited. You were lucky to be getting \$19 an hour, no overtime, no travel allowance. You're thrown on a bus. You're this, you're that. No, their working conditions were horrible. They could be bused all night long and expect to come to camp, get in your room and go to work right away. It's like, no. They were the same way, afraid to say anything. They couldn't go to their employer and complain, because they would've been fired. A lot of them have been terminated because of that.

So now they're getting a voice and they're finding out they have a voice. It's going to take time, and I believe they're still in negotiations. But when they went for, when the vote came in it was 94 or 96 percent yes; I can't remember, it was one of the two. But we knew just by talking to them. These fellows! Honest to goodness, they've got families and they're making \$19 an hour. You're working them 12 hours or 10 hours or whatever it is, and you're not even giving them overtime. I kind of thought that was against the labour law myself. But when you've got a family you sign for anything if you want to support them, and this is what happens out there. People have these families and they need to support them, and they're willing to do that to support them. So in that way, yes they're being exploited. Companies play on this.

Q: And most of them are foreign?

NW: Yes.

Q: Good for you.

NW: And are we proud of it? Yes.
[checks phone call]

Q: Did you say some fly in and out from other countries?

NW: Yes.

Q: Where are people coming from?

NW: We have a number of people from Africa, Somalia, Kenya - places like that, whose families live there. They come out, they work here to support their family back home. We've had a number of them. We actually had a young lady that had been out at camp just over three years I believe. And she finally, her husband told her to come home now, that was long enough. Actually it was her husband to be, so she actually went home to get married and she will not be back. But we do have them coming here and working out in the oilfields and supporting their families back home. So a lot of them, we think we have it bad at 10 days off. They're at camp 24/7 until they go home, and sometimes they go home once a year and that's all. One fellow that I know of, his wife lives in a very small village. So like he said, I just hope to goodness that all my flights line up, because when I get to a certain point, and it was a certain point in Africa, if I miss that plane I'm there for a week because that plane only leaves once a week. So if he misses that plane he has to find another way to get to his village, otherwise he's stuck there for a week. So when they do go home, it's usually for two or three weeks or longer. But it's home maybe once a year. And they have families. You have to have a strong relationship, very strong. I actually believe their relationship is stronger than most of ours.

[END]