

Alvin Finkel

Interviewer Winston Gereluk, camera Don Bouzek

AF: I'm an academic historian, but I didn't start out that way; I didn't start out in a bourgeois family. I come from a working-class immigrant household. My father came to Canada from the Polish-controlled Ukraine in 1937. Since he's Jewish, that meant he was just two years away from being murdered. My mother came to Canada in 1930 from Soviet Ukraine. Her family was one that had people already in Canada. It's remarkable that both of my parents came to Canada in the 1930s, because only 4,000 Jews managed to get to Canada during that decade. They were lucky, because they had family who were already here.

Interestingly, although both of my parents came to Canada in the 1930s, I actually had a great grandfather who came to Canada in 1892. He was somebody who had left Poland and gone first to Britain and then to Germany before coming to Canada. He had ten children he left behind in Poland, and then had a second family of seven kids in Winnipeg. We inherited nothing from that family. My great grandfather was somebody who was considered a healer in the Jewish community, and is buried in sacred ground in Winnipeg.

My father had never been to school, either in the Ukraine or in Canada. He was 15 and a half when he came to Canada. He went straight to work in what's called the *shmatas*, which is the clothing industry, then later was a soldier during the war. After the war, he did various things. He wanted to be an electrician but it turns out you really couldn't become an electrician if you were a Jew, because the Masons kind of controlled entry into the trade. So he ended up being a labourer at the CPR from 1956 until his retirement in 1983. My dad worked three jobs most of the time when we were growing up. We were a family of six kids. My mom went back to work when my youngest sister was two years old. She worked in Eaton's warehouse during the day, and my dad worked night shift at the CPR. The first year when this was going on, I had to skip school for the last half hour to come home and look after my youngest sister who wasn't in school yet.

We were a proletarian family growing up in the North End of Winnipeg, an area with a radical tradition. My father had been a supporter of the Communist Party in his 20s.

The period when I was growing up, he wasn't really politically involved. But he was a small-c communist, as he always said. He believed that all industries should be nationalized and workers should run things, not capitalists.

I grew up with that kind of background. My father actually wanted me to be a doctor, because he felt that if he'd ever gone to school and had opportunities, that's what he would want to be. When it became clear that I really didn't have those kinds of skills, although I was very good at school, he kind of accepted that I could do something else. I actually had wanted to be a journalist, and did work summers for the *Winnipeg Tribune* while I was at university. The year I was editor of our student newspaper at the University of Manitoba, we did an exposure of a pulp mill project funded by the Conservative government in Manitoba, which essentially involved taking \$150 million of Manitoba taxpayers' money and giving it to the Italian mafia. For my sins, I was blacklisted as a journalist. I was almost blown up by the mafia, who put a bomb in our office.

Then I wasn't entirely sure what to do with myself. Cy Gonick, who was NDP MLA, the most radical of the NDP MLAs in Manitoba and editor of *Canadian Dimension Magazine*, asked me if I would like to be the assistant editor of the magazine. He was both a full professor at the University and a political activist and a member of the legislature and father of four kids; so he needed some help. So I did that for a year and a half, and during that period I gained a lot of confidence. A lot of people writing for *Canadian Dimension* were established scholars, and I realized that I actually wrote better than any of them. I decided to go back to university, and I did first a Masters Degree and then a PhD in History.

First I taught as a sessional in a number of universities. I was too radical in those days to be hired as a full professor in a conventional university, but I was lucky enough to get a position at Athabasca University, which was brand new, as a professor of History. Over time, I actually became part of a sub-establishment of radical Canadian historians. My textbook on history, *History of the Canadian Peoples*, which is co-authored with two other people, has sold probably 150,000 copies. So that's who I am.

Q: Did you experience any discrimination in your background? How and why did you become radical? Were there things that contributed to you developing this left-wing outlook?

AF: I was well aware, even as a kid, that my dad had trouble finding work because he was Jewish. He wasn't a businessman type. So he couldn't do what a lot of Jews were doing, which was small-scale business. He was poor. So he wasn't able to go into a profession. He tried to find work as an electrician, and that failed. Then he drove cab for a number of years before he got the job at the CPR. At the CPR, he felt discrimination from his fellow workers. He was one of very few Jews working at the CPR. I remember my dad telling me when I was about 11 or 12 that all the people who ran the union that he was part of, the Brotherhood of Carmen, which he supported, he said all the people in charge are white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and they're too close to the boss. He said most of his fellow workers are Ukrainian, and they're divided between the nationalists that he won't talk to and the Communists, who feel a real sense of discrimination and talk about the capitalist system but are very careful about how they conduct themselves on the job, because they don't trust the union bosses and they certainly don't trust the people who run the CPR. My dad would so often talk about how he wished that the government would take over the CPR, because the working conditions were terrible. When he was a labourer there, he would come home every day just sweating bullets, saying it's so hot in the factory. He was working on repair of trains, and he said in the repair shops they didn't have a fan. It was so hot and filthy, and the bosses were just always whacking you to work harder. He felt that the Ukrainian workers were so scared of the foreman that they worked really hard. He was very happy in the early '70s when a number of Portuguese workers came into the shop. My dad was so proud of these. He said, they're all anarchists. If a foreman tells us to speed up, they lift up their tools and say, do you want me to kill you? He said everything changed. So those kinds of conversations with my dad did radicalize me.

In terms of discrimination, well this is the time of year when I often remember a story from grade one, where I was this very smart little kid. Our class had been chosen to

be on CBC just before Christmas, with all the Christmas trees and everything around us, doing what we supposedly did on a daily basis, except it was all a little phony. I was to be on the show leading a little group who were sitting reading from a Dick and Jane book. I was definitely leading, because I was the only kid in that class who was a fluent reader. If any other kid made a mistake, I was to whisper the right words. The day before we were supposed to be on CBC, my teacher suddenly says, you read too fast and too loud; you can't be on the show. I was like, I can read more slowly and I don't have to read so loud. No no, you can't be on the show. I went home and told my mother. I was distraught. She said, Alvin, I told you. And it's true, she had told me this. They're not going to let you be on this show; they're not going to have a kid with your length of nose on a Christmas show. There were a number of incidents of that kind. Ironically, I faced more anti-Semitism I think from teachers than I did from kids. One of my first political actions occurred when I was in 6th grade. Our teacher was a fellow who later became a deacon in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He had required the whole class to memorize the Sermon on the Mount. I loved the sentiments of the Sermon on the Mount, but I'm a Jewish kid. Why am I being made to memorize something from the New Testament? Those were the days of the strap. If you hadn't recited by Friday the Sermon on the Mount, then you were going to get the strap. We got to Friday, and the only kids who hadn't recited the Sermon on the Mount were the five Jewish kids in our class. Mr. Woroby goes and makes this announcement that everybody has to recite the Sermon on the Mount or they get the strap. I was actually in some ways prepared to recite it - I knew it off by heart and liked the sentiments of it. But I could see my fellow Jewish kids didn't want to and were terrified about getting the strap. We were all goody-goody kids. So I got up and said, Mr. Woroby, as you know, the five of us who haven't recited the Sermon on the Mount are all Jewish kids. And this was a lie - I said, I discussed this with my father and he said if you strap us he's going to the school board to get you fired. This teacher just said, oh I didn't realize that the five of you were Jewish. Everybody knew who was Jewish and who wasn't - we all stayed away for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. You know who the Jewish kids are. So anyway, that act of resistance was kind of important. Another thing that actually made me critical at least of what we were learning in school was

that when I was in 7th grade I didn't have any interest in history and I certainly didn't have any interest in *geschichte*-history-at the Jewish school I went to. I went to public school during the day and then I had to go for an hour and a half to Jewish school after. Well one day we were learning about Alexander of Macedon and how he had brought Hellenic civilization to primitive peoples. I didn't really understand. I remember thinking at the time that they were people in caves or something. That evening at school there was something about Alexander of Macedon, and it was the Hanukkah story. Alexander of Macedon is this early Hitler, because he's trying to force the Jews to give up their culture. I was shocked. I said the next day to my Social Studies teacher in English school, you were teaching us something anti-Semitic yesterday. She said, what do you mean? I said, well this Alexander of Macedon imposing his Greek civilization on people with inferior cultures, well that's the Jews. No, she said, I'm sure that's not who was meant. I said, well who? She said, I'm not a specialist, I really can't tell you. I said, well what's a primitive culture versus this Hellenic culture? After that, I don't think I ever learned anything in school without thinking: what are the biases in this? Of course at a certain point I started seeing the biases as more than just anti-Semitic.

But I think even at that point I had started to be anti-imperialist. So growing up radical, I remember in 1965 when Lyndon Johnson came on TV to announce that the United States was about to increase their involvement in the Vietnam War. It was while we were watching the Ed Sullivan Show. My dad was just screaming at him, you fucking bastards, just invading people all over the world; this kind of stuff has to stop. Stuff like that; so I grew up with fairly radical views.

Then at university, well initially actually I was in the pre-med program; so there was no outlet for that. Then I actually went and did Honours English before I switched to History as a grad student. I was interested, for example, in Bertolt Brecht. I was quite taken aback when I handed in a paper on Bertolt Brecht and it was graded with only a C plus. The comment was, why are you emphasizing his political views? You're not saying anything about what impels this man as an artist. So I started talking to the professor and I realized at a certain point that he didn't realize that Bertolt Brecht was a Communist. I thought, what am I doing here? They're so uninformed and dealing

with literature in this pretentious way. So History suited me better. I was interested in class conflicts in history, because I was a Marxist as I entered that program. As a graduate student, I found I had to be very careful because most of my professors were not left-leaning. I was doing left-wing stuff and I had read far more than anybody else did, and I had to answer all the kinds of arguments that right-wingers would make. I think I ended up reading far more than most people did and understanding the different kinds of perspectives.

Q: As president of ALHI, you decided we were going to focus on the Great Labour Revolt of 1919. Why do you feel it's important that we devote our resources to this project?

AF: Coming from Winnipeg and from the North End, I was aware, almost from just people on the street, about the Winnipeg General Strike. I remember the grandmother of one of my friends talking about how she had been one of the Eaton's workers and they all walked out, and she talked about the banners they carried and how after the strike none of them were rehired. Fifty years later she was still very proud of having been part of that, and it had a real impact on her life. So I grew up knowing about the Winnipeg General Strike. I actually made an attempt as a summer reporter of the Winnipeg Tribune in 1969 to get something in the paper about the 50th anniversary, and they were adamant that it was not something that Winnipeg was proud of. Even though I tried to write something that was politically neutral about it, they didn't want anything. So I carried that interest in the Winnipeg General Strike with me. In the 1980s teaching in Alberta and writing a book on the Social Credit Party in Alberta, I did a fair bit of work on the labour movement. I wanted to understand why it was that Alberta, which had had a fairly radical labour past, then falls into this darkness of the Social Credit period where the labour movement seems to become marginalized. Some of the research I did was on 1919. I approached it at that point thinking, well it couldn't have been as important in Alberta as it was in Winnipeg; that was *our* general strike. But gradually I realized that in fact it wasn't our strike in Winnipeg, that this was part of an international movement. In Canada, it affected all

parts of the country. There were a number of people who were doing research during that period on the Amherst General Strike, on the general strike that had occurred in Toronto and the one in Vancouver, sympathy strikes with the Winnipeg strike. But really nothing much had been written about the Alberta strikes. So I did start doing some research on it even in that period. I didn't find anything all that illuminating initially, maybe because I was reading the wrong stuff. I read the *Edmonton Free Press*, which was a newspaper that later became *Alberta Labour News* and was the official organ of the Alberta Federation of Labour for many years and then became the *People's Weekly*. That was run by people who were involved in the strike but who were really deep down anti-strike, more conservative people. I read the Alberta newspapers of the period, which barely commented on the strike. It's only later I realized that in fact they were suppressing what had gone on. I did find some things in the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council papers and at Glenbow in Calgary Trades and Labour Council papers. But it was sketchy. I included a bit about that in some of my writing in articles for *Labour/Le Travail* in the late '80s. But I think it was the revival of labour radicalism, particularly with the 1986 strikes, that made me feel it was really important to try and revive the earlier periods of radicalism in the province, rather than simply mourn their passing during the Social Credit period, as I had done in my book, *The Social Credit Phenomenon*. I do deal with the labour movement, but mostly with its caving in to Social Credit, because that in fact happened. But the point is that before Social Credit and after, we did have radical periods of the labour movement. I thought it was extremely important as we approached 2019 that we revived what had gone on in 1919 for two reasons - one, to show what had actually happened in Alberta, and two, to put Alberta back in the world. Too often in Alberta we have this idea of like we're living in southern Alabama or someplace where radicalism is killed off in two seconds, and we're not going to get anywhere. It's actually not true. We have a much more mixed kind of history in Alberta and I thought it was important to revive that.

Q: What kind of evidence arose early in Alberta to show that we were that kind of province?

AF: Well one of the things is that during the First World War there were more threats of general strikes and actual general strikes in Alberta than occurred in Winnipeg. This was the centre of radicals in this country. This is the province where the OBU was formed in 1919. The conference that created the One Big Union occurred in Calgary, which people just think of as an oil town. But in those days, Calgary was one of the most class-conscious places in this country. The Ogden Railway shops, in particular, were a real centre of radicalism. It was also Calgary where the CCF was formed in 1932.

People think about the Regina Manifesto as when they think the CCF was formed in Regina in 1933, and I think they think that because it was in Saskatchewan that Tommy Douglas formed a CCF government. In fact, it was formed in 1932 in Calgary, and virtually all of the members of parliament who were part of the Ginger Group who then formed the CCF were Alberta MPs. They weren't all members of United Farmers of Alberta - a number of them were not from the farm movement, they were from the labour movement. I found out from my research why that happened. It was that in a number of seats that were mixed farm and labour, the United Farmers of Alberta had approached the Labour Party that had formed to say, well you know, we can't run candidates against each other, because we're just going to elect a Liberal that way; we have to work together. The response from the labour movement was, well that's fine, we can support a farmer candidate as long as it's somebody who is pro-Labour. In a relatively large number of seats, the UFA more or less gave Labour a veto over who the candidates would be federally. Interestingly, that didn't happen provincially. The provincial seats were small enough that they were clearly either Labour or UFA. The government that was elected in Alberta as United Farmers of Alberta in 1921 were quite conservative. But federally, we had people like William Irvine, Michael Luchkovich, people who were clearly on the left and worked very closely with J.S. Woodsworth and the Independent Labour Party people from Winnipeg and Vancouver Island. Here was this important role that Alberta had played in the radicalism of Canada.

So I thought it was really important to revive that, and certainly all of ALHI regarded that. I think that became the motivation for looking at what had led to Alberta's participation in 1919. As I say, the wartime period played a big role, and even before that you look at where the big strikes were in Canada before the First World War: The largest number of them are in the mine fields of Alberta and British Columbia. The Crowsnest Pass was the most radical area. There was nothing about that border between B.C. and Alberta that made B.C. more radical than Alberta. In fact, the Alberta miners were as radical and they elected a Socialist MLA in a byelection in 1908. A guy named Charlie O'Brien. When King Edward died and the legislature was asked to move a motion of sympathy to the family of Edward, he got up and said he would support this if the motion also gave sympathy to the families of miners who had died as a result of completely unnecessary mining accidents. Of course the legislature was in an uproar - you want to put miners on the same level as King Edward? So that kind of stuff was already going on before the war in the mining communities. During the war, the mining communities were again at war with the miners. The miners actually, because they were so crucial to the war effort, forced the federal government for a period to take over the mines and make concessions to the miners that the mining companies weren't willing to make. Then with the war over, it went right back to where it had been.

Meanwhile, in the cities the trade union movement grew during the war. Why did it grow? Well frankly, because workers had always wanted to be in trade unions, but before the war there was huge unemployment. Joining a union was like hanging yourself and your family, if you were outside of certain trades where there were not a huge number of people. Electricians and mechanics could unionize because there weren't that many people around to take their jobs. But if you were a carpenter or just a general "unskilled" worker, well they were a dime a dozen and there were all sorts of people who would be hungry to take your job, because they had to feed themselves and their families. So they weren't going to unionize, because there were no legal protections for unions. In fact, collective bargaining contracts in Canada, until 1944, had really no legal meaning. Even when workers were unionized and they

struck and had a collective bargaining contract, the employer could throw that out at any time. The courts didn't protect those kinds of contracts.

During the war, the unemployment generally disappears, not at the very beginning of the war. In the early part of the war, you've got lots of unemployed people. In fact, the Ukrainian workers who Winston talks about in his interview were put in camps, partly because they were radicals but also because they were unemployed at that point. By 1916 the large number of troops overseas and the munitions industries meant that there was actually a shortage of labour, and of course they started bringing women into jobs that they'd never done before. Suddenly working people find that they can get jobs. But the problem is that the jobs they get are paying very poorly. There's major inflation going on during the war, because the guys who own industry are taking huge wartime profits. The cost of living is absolutely impossible. Workers join unions and they demand higher wages. Usually the employers say no, but under wartime conditions people can strike and within days they will get their way. By 1917 what workers are talking about, well maybe instead of just striking individual employers and getting some minor increase, we need to work together - when there's a strike somewhere, we need to have all the workers go out. This idea had come from the Industrial Workers of the World, an organization that was around from 1905, but before the First World War was repressed so thoroughly that it wasn't able to organize very many workers, particularly in Alberta. However, it did have an élan to it. People were aware of the attempts by the IWW to organize free speech, because when you distributed radical pamphlets, for example, the police would take them away from you; the IWW would resist that. Their members would be hauled off to jail for that. Also, when the war started and unemployment was still very high, the IWW was telling workers to go into restaurants and get a meal and not pay for it, then afterwards to go into the churches and lie down. You need a place to stay overnight, especially in the winter. So people had respect for them; there were many people who might even hold a card for the IWW. But it couldn't create a long-term organization. So what happened, ironically, by 1917 the organized group that was mostly picking up the One Big Union idea was the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party, before the war, had mainly

focused on elections and education. Their notion was that if you taught people Marxism that then they would be this great force.

That's why the Social Democratic Party is split off from them, because they thought, ya great, teach people Marxism, but that doesn't put food on the table tomorrow. People need to strike; they need to threaten the employers. The Socialist Party said, you foreigners don't understand how Canada works. The response was, ya we bloody well understand how it works. You guys have the better jobs; you are the ones who are mechanics and you have your unions. We're not waiting for pie in the sky. We're going to strike when we need to and we'll do all the things we need to to get things in the short term while also keeping the long term in mind that the goal is Socialism. The Socialist Party were the ones who first during the war took over this IWW idea. The IWW people themselves were mostly in jail, if they hadn't been murdered by the state. So the Socialist Party began promulgating this idea, and it spread through the working class, the notion that together we're much stronger. Of course it was much easier to be together, because if a group of workers were going out, well you could go out with them and last a week or two. There were no scabs to be found. One of the first events of this kind was one that was in many ways a surprise - the firefighters in Edmonton in January of 1918. The firefighters, before the war, didn't even think of themselves as workers; they saw themselves as kind of above the working masses. But they, like every working class group, had certain traditions. One was when the fire chief for Edmonton (and this was true in Calgary, too) retired, the senior firefighter became the new fire chief. That was the tradition. Well the City of Edmonton thought, that doesn't make any sense. We're going to hire somebody with experience as a fire chief, actually somebody from outside the city altogether. So the firefighters said, we're not going to let you get away with that; we'll go on strike. They said, well we'll see how long you last. The firefighters approached the Trades and Labour Council and the Trades and Labour Council agreed that they would poll their members about whether they would be willing to go on sympathy strike with the firefighters. It turned out virtually all of them were willing and ready to go. On the very day that strike was to start, the City cried uncle and said, of course we're happy to have a senior firefighter as the new fire chief. Then you had something similar happen on the

street railway where those workers were going to go out, with everybody about to support them. Again, the City gave in.

In Calgary the workers who were about to go out were rail workers. They were covered by the federal government. So the City government as such couldn't really intervene. But the same kind of thing happened. These freight handlers said, we're going to go out; they went out on their own. The federal government at this point was trying to be tougher, because they had given in to a number of strikers as well. They said, well we're going to draw a line in the sand on this. We don't think that these guys are going to last very long, these freight handlers. They're all complaining that they need more money because we pay them too little to even pay their rent; so if that's true, in a couple days they'll have to go back. So they did go out for a bit and they were at a point very quickly where they thought, well we can't really afford to do this. So they approached the Trades and Labour Council in Calgary which, like the Trades and Labour Council in Edmonton, called a vote of unionized workers. The unionized workers said, well we could be in the same position next week as these freight handlers, and yes we're going to go out. The federal government kind of dared them, and they did go out. There was an actual general strike of unionized workers in Calgary. At that point, the City of Calgary and the employers in Calgary were saying to the federal government, look, we're going to go broke if you don't give in to these freight handlers. So they did, and they made concessions to the freight handlers, and everybody went back to work. But the memory of all this stuff was very strong as the war ended and these things were happening in the late period of the war.

As Winston mentioned in his interview, the federal government, while it had given in on these various strikes, was trying to stem radicalism with legislation to ban all kinds of groups. They banned the IWW, even though most of their members were already in jail. They banned the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party - 14 groups were banned. All material published in foreign languages was banned for the duration of the war and even afterwards. There were raids on the homes of workers to take away radical literature. There was this great attempt to intimidate workers. But the fundamental reality was that with the end of the war unemployment very quickly came. The same government that had planned so well for the war had no

plans for the postwar period. Here you had soldiers coming back; there was no housing for them. You had people who'd been working during the war in munitions plants or in clothing factories making clothing for the soldiers - no money for that, nothing from the federal government. So instead of the plants that had been used during the war for wartime purposes being turned into peacetime production places, they were left with nothing. People were against that, this failure to recognize their contributions during the war either as soldiers or as workers. On the other hand, there was this continuing inflation from the wartime; so even if you did have work you were destitute. There was an incredible instability that people felt. They really felt dishonored as working people, as citizens. That was true whether or not they had supported the war effort.

Almost everybody in the working class in Alberta during the war opposed conscription. They felt it should be voluntary, some people because that's what they thought was fair, and others because they thought of the war as imperialist. Whether they saw the war as imperialist or not, many of them went to fight because that was a job. In 1914 people were at the recruitment office saying, now we eat. When the war started in 1914, Canada was in a recession. Comes the end of the war, they're back to recession; they're back to these terrible lives. People who have jobs are in workplaces where there's no occupational health and safety, there's no protections for families if you get maimed or killed on the job. Workers' compensation had been introduced in 1918 but first of all it was very hard to get and secondly it wouldn't feed a mouse in its original form. People felt a real sense of desperation.

Two things were going on at once. On the one hand, people were making representations to the federal government about the changes they wanted. There was the Mathers Commission on Industrial Unrest in 1919, and it came to both Calgary and Edmonton in early May. Workers' representatives talked about the terrible position that working-class families were in. Kids couldn't go to school because they had no footwear for the winter and because their families were earning so little that parents felt they had to send the kids off to work. Working women were often in situations where they were sexually harassed or assaulted, and felt they had to put up with it. What was the alternative? It was starvation. On the one hand they were appealing to

the authorities for understanding, but on the other they were organizing. The response that kept coming from the authorities was, oh this is all foreign agitators. Whether you were born in Canada or born abroad, what you were hearing from government was, we're not going to do anything; we're not going to improve anything. Even if you were an Anglo-Saxon worker who maybe didn't like Ukrainians and Italians and other people coming into the country and getting jobs, what you were often still hearing was, we're not going to do anything for you. We're not going to kick those people out, but we're also not going to create jobs in any way. As a government, we take no responsibility.

In terms of the employers, well they don't have to negotiate with you. It's a free country, and what that means is that your labour is free to them; they're free to exploit you. So it was those kinds of attitudes that were building to a general strike. The importance of Winnipeg I guess is that they struck first as a whole city. Because they were first and because they were a more industrialized city, they were able to organize pretty well the whole working class to go out, without the authorities fully thought through how they were going to divide and conquer. The Winnipeg General Strike was very well supported everywhere in the country. People thought, if the strikers in Winnipeg can win their demands, then all of us will win.

What were the demands of the Winnipeg General Strike? On the surface, they're not all that radical in our thinking today, but really then and even now they are. What precipitated the Winnipeg General Strike was that both the metal trades workers and the construction workers demanded the right to unify when they negotiated with the bosses. They were tired of the electricians negotiate separately from the carpenters, the carpenters from the labourers, the labourers from the mechanics, and on and on. Everybody got screwed. They wanted to negotiate together. The understanding of that was, you know what, if you don't make us an offer across the board that we all like, we're all going to strike. Of course the employers said, no we will not negotiate with you collectively, even though the employers were negotiating collectively, which was this incredible hypocrisy. The four or five big employers in the metal trades and four or five big employers in construction were negotiating with each of these little trades, using divide and conquer. So they demanded the right to negotiate with these

employers, and the employers were not willing to budge and the government was not willing to force them to negotiate.

So they said, well we have no choice but to all go out collectively. But to make this stick, we need the support of all the other workers in the city. Winnipeg had had an almost civic workers strike in 1918 where the position of the civic workers was improved through the threat of a general strike, supported by the private sector workers. It was probably no big surprise that the public sector workers felt they owed it to the workers on construction and the metal trades to join them. But the bigger surprise, when the strike actually started on May 15th of 1919, was that pretty much everybody who was working for a living went out, including the telephone operators, who were the very first ones to book off. The women working in places like Eaton's and a lot of servants left the homes where they were working to be out on the streets and to rally. There was this fear on the part of the ruling class that they were facing a class revolt. And they were; they were facing a class revolt. Did it have revolutionary implications? Well it's very hard to know, but to some degree yes. If the Winnipeg General Strike had been successful, the capitalist system in Canada would've been weakened; there's no doubt about it. They had some models from other countries of how to deal with these kinds of workers at that very time. Just before the Winnipeg General Strike occurred, there was a mass working class revolt in Germany where you had the people who had opposed the First World War altogether telling workers who by then believed it, that it was bullshit, this idea that we were defending German culture against British imperialism. It was German imperialism against British imperialism, and neither side has the interests of workers in mind at all. So they were taking over their factories in Germany and demanding the right to these things without the involvement of capitalists. In fact, they were running them without the capitalists; they didn't need the capitalists. They knew how to run their factories better than the capitalists did. Well the group that would later become the Nazis, militia people and people coming out of the army, put this revolt down with blood. So the Canadian state was prepared to do that, too. The Citizens Committee of 1000 that was formed, which was probably about 80 people, but gave itself that name because

it was the richest people of the city, were adamant that the machine companies and construction companies should make no concessions.

Then the strikers called on workers in other cities to join with them. They were willing to do so, because the defeated Winnipeg General Strike would be a defeat for everybody. People here had very similar demands. In fact, the miners were already on strike in Alberta - 41 out of 42 mines were on strike at the time the Winnipeg General Strike started. In some ways when you talk about worker radicalism in Canada in 1919, the miners of Alberta, about 6,000 of them, were already out there before the Winnipeg strikers started, and were very adamant in their support of the Winnipeg strikers. They said, we won't go back until the Winnipeg strikers get their demands met, even though their own demands were not being met.

What were their demands? Their demands were to be treated like people, essentially. They were being treated like they were animals on the job. The figures, in fact, for deaths in mining "accidents", or one should say incidents - these were preventable deaths - were ten times higher than worldwide. That's how bad it was. It's not like miners were well treated anywhere, but in Alberta and British Columbia you had the worst possible conditions. The miners were essentially demanding to be treated like people. They wanted real wages instead of being paid by the piece and then having phony weights used to underpay them. They wanted an end to being fined every time the management claimed they had done something wrong. That kind of thing. The incident that brought on the miners' strike in Alberta, particularly in the south, was actually a solidarity incident. In the Crowsnest Pass on the B.C. side, short hours were such that a miner's wage couldn't pay anything. They were demanding a minimum number of hours on the B.C. side. The Alberta workers could see that the same thing was coming to them. The war was over and the coalmining companies were likely to do the same thing that they were experimenting with on the B.C. side; so they joined the strike as well. In the two big cities, Calgary and Edmonton, the trade union movement joined the strike pretty much when they were asked. On May 26th, 11 days into the Winnipeg General Strike, you get general strikes starting in Edmonton and Calgary, each with about 2,000 workers on strike. It might not sound like a lot, but these were cities of about 65,000 to 70,000 people. So a very large portion of the blue

collar workforce came out. The difference between the strikes in Edmonton and Calgary and the Winnipeg one was that the trade union movement didn't make the effort to get non-union workers involved. I think they thought those people weren't so pivotal, although in Winnipeg these workers, like the telephone operators, did stay out the whole six weeks. The stories about how they were starving were going across the country, because that's what the media focused on. You would not find out from a single bourgeois newspaper in this country why workers were on strike, but you would find out that many of these workers were now facing starvation because they're not working. You wouldn't even hear too much about how in fact in Winnipeg the strike organizers worked things out so in fact people were fed; people weren't right to the point of starvation.

So there was a lot of fear in other cities if you were non-union about joining. The other thing too is that unemployment had risen so much that for many non-union workers and even for many union workers, the idea of being dismissed and somebody else taking your job was like a death sentence. But the first week or so, these strikes were solid in both Edmonton and Calgary. All the workers on the railways went out, the civic workers went out, construction workers went out. But then what happened was fairly quickly the civic authorities in both Edmonton and Calgary announced that if you didn't come back to work on the Monday, your job was gone and they would hire scabs to take over. Well that was not an idle threat, given the level of unemployment. So the civic workers did, over a couple of days, come back. That kind of broke the back of these strikes as "general strikes".

Both strikes lasted a month. The railway workers stayed out the whole month, construction workers stayed out, and many workers in the manufacturing sectors stayed out. But without that involvement of the government workers, it didn't have the same feel as the Winnipeg strike. In the first week in Edmonton and Calgary, just like throughout the whole Winnipeg General Strike, deliveries of bread, milk and other essentials were organized by the strike committee. The city was in a sense being run by the strike committee, which of course infuriated the bourgeoisie, because it basically says, you're not needed; this class of people who make most of the money and live the best really aren't contributing. That's the kind of thing that

they wanted to stop right away, and they were more successful with that in Alberta than in Winnipeg. In Winnipeg, for the whole six weeks, pretty much everybody stayed out, and the city was in fact being run through the strike committee. The strike committee itself in Winnipeg didn't see this as taking over from the bourgeoisie; they saw it as providing essential services. We're all on strike, but we all need to eat, and we need utilities and this kind of stuff. So collectively we will work to provide these things. But the bourgeoisie, not entirely wrongly, said, they're basically saying we're useless. They were elected to run the city; we elected our people. Actually on the council in Winnipeg, almost half of it was working people. But the way things were done, it was set up in such a way that, well you had to own a certain amount of property in those days to get the vote. So the working class as a whole couldn't, even theoretically, end up running Winnipeg at that point through the electoral system. But on the street, they could run it.

It wasn't only in Edmonton and Calgary that people voted to go on general strike. In both Lethbridge and Medicine Hat workers voted overwhelmingly for a general strike. The local Trades and Labour Councils were afraid of the likely retaliation by the employers. So they stalled, and in the end there wasn't a general strike outside the two main cities and of course all the mining areas.

Q: Were the strikes worthwhile?

AF: The general strikes were broken, but concessions in the end were made - not necessarily immediate, but over the longer term. In the first place, there was an impact on the electoral map of the general strikes. In the Winnipeg provincial election that was held in 1920, 11 Labour MLAs were elected, including two people who were in jail. In Edmonton the municipal council that was elected in late 1919 had a majority of Labour members. Calgary had a minority, but a significant minority, of Labour members. The strikes had divided people on a class basis and helped create the dynamic that led to United Farmers of Alberta forming a government in 1921 in a coalition with the Labour Party. One of the members of the first UFA cabinet was Alex Ross, a stonemason from Calgary, who had been one of the organizers of the general

strike in Calgary in 1917. So there were concessions that workers received as a result of the strike, and the next generation in particular got a boost from the strike. The general strikes, although they were defeated militarily, scared the capitalists and the Liberals and Conservatives, because they suggested that there were a large group of people in the country who didn't really accept the social system. During World War II, as it became clear that there was a real desire on the part of people for Socialism, people said, why did we have to undergo the Great Depression? The war is showing that governments can organize the economy when they want to. Why didn't they do that during the Great Depression? We will not allow this to happen to us again when the war is over. We'll revolt again, like we did after the First World War. The response of governments was well, this country has become far more urban than it was then, and we could use those country boys to put down the urban revolts. Now that's not really so true. So they made concessions in terms of making collective bargaining legal. Collective bargaining contracts became legal, as long as the unions were willing to play by rules that preserved employer control of the workplace.

Two sets of concessions were made after World War II. One was that trade unions, which had existed in the margins of legality before the war, became completely legal. Workers in certain sectors were able to organize freely and their collective bargaining contracts were recognized as legal documents, provided that the unions disciplined the workers and the employers were left to control the workplace. So that was the first concession. The second concession was that the social wage was improved substantially. You had a whole variety of government programs that meant that if a worker couldn't work because of illness or because of unemployment being high, that there was some provision for them. So these concessions were made, and over time would increase until it got to about 1980 and capitalists actually got tired of these concessions. There was a kind of irony in all of this. The truth is that, on the one hand, these various concessions did achieve some of what the capitalists and pro-capitalist political parties wanted, which is that the working class became less class conscious and more conscious of itself as consumers. But on the other hand, workers, although they were not necessarily revolutionary in any way, were militant on the job. When unemployment is low and the foreman is screaming, speed up, speed up, the

workers say, well we don't have to. They just work at the pace they think is right because they figure, well in the worst-case scenario, if somebody tries to fire me, there are other jobs.

At a certain point, the employers were saying, you know, this isn't really working. Labour is getting too much relative to capital, and we want to go back to the good old days before World War II. In part, they start establishing runaway shops in Third World countries where there are no unions and where they have friendly right-wing dictators to make sure that the workers do exactly what the employers tell them. Then they use that fact, which creates greater unemployment in the western countries, to demand that governments here get rid of historical compromises, and insist that workers have to work for smaller wages and under worse working conditions, and work faster and all of that. That is what we've been living with since the late 1970s. It's often referred to as neoliberalism, which means a kind of return to 19th Century liberalism, in which governments are unimportant in the economy. But it's neo because in fact the government is important - it's important in terms of policing the overall thing and making sure that the employer side is winning, and also in terms of creating the notion that, as Margaret Thatcher put it, there is no alternative, that this is the only way it can be, that workers have to work harder and sacrifice so that the employers, who are supposedly the smart people, can innovate and make everything better.

However, in reality, we know now that what's happened over the last 40 years has been a redistribution of wealth to the wealthy, and working people are making no more and sometimes making less than they were making 40 years ago. Even though the size of the overall economy has grown, it's the employers who are getting all the benefit. That's where we are now. In many ways we're back almost where working people were in 1919. Not totally, but it's moving in that direction rather than moving in the direction that it was moving from about 1945 to 1975.

The result of that is that more and more, unless workers can unite and say no when governments and other employers tell them that you have to earn less and expect less from governments, that the law of the jungle is back. If workers don't believe that -

and most don't - then they have to assert themselves collectively rather than just moan privately.

Q: Is there any reason to believe that trade union leaders and other leaders are willing to take them in the direction that's needed?

AF: There's some reason to believe it and some reason to not believe it. Obviously, in that period from 1945 onwards of the historic compromise, the trade union leadership was put in a funny role. On the one hand, they were supposed to represent the interests of workers. But on the other hand, they were to ensure that workers' demands did not impinge on the rights of capital. That's a balancing act that's not easy for trade unions to perform. In many cases, workers started at a certain point to see their unions as very much locked in with the system and not really representing them.

Trade union leaders were often in a funny position too. On the one hand, they saw themselves as more radical than the people they represented, because the trade union leadership tended to support the NDP and their members often were voting for Tories and Liberals and were not very politicized. But on the other hand, the members had all kinds of complaints about things that were going on on the job that the trade union leaders often seemed deaf to, because their jobs were to represent workers, not to be workers. So there's that contradiction. It's hard for the trade unions, having operated under this legalistic system that relies so much on labour lawyers, to accept that maybe the whole system has kind of collapsed, that the guarantees they thought they had after the Second World War don't mean anything anymore, and that really what we need is to go back to the kind of militancy that existed before this legalistic system. That's a hard one for trade union leaders to accept.

On the other hand, we are hearing from trade union leaders in this province that their efforts to talk to management, particularly in terms of the Kenney government, are going nowhere. They're not even allowed a meeting with ministers. The collective bargaining contracts that they already have are being treated like they're junk. At some point they have to ask the question or are asking the question, what kind of

militancy do we need to show so that these people know that the working class and their trade unions mean business, as opposed to being wedded to a period that may now be gone.

Q: What is Kenney's response to this?

AF: Kenney's response is interesting. He's trying to just keep changing the subject. Whenever the workers say, you're taking away our jobs, you're cutting our pay, you're providing fewer services to the people of Alberta, he says, well look what's happening to the workers in oil and gas. Their jobs are disappearing, and don't blame me for that. You have to blame Mr. Trudeau; you have to blame those easterners. There's discrimination against us and this is now a poor province. Well the figures don't show this to be a poor province at all, and the cuts that he's making would have Alberta paying substantially less of its GDP towards government services than any other province. In fact, that's already the case that we put less to government services than other provinces. Even the NDP government was not willing to impose a sales tax, which people in Alberta seem to think it's their God-given right not to pay that tax that other Canadians pay. But the NDP did raise the corporate taxes a bit. Kenney wants to have the lowest corporate tax in North America, lower than places like Alabama and Kentucky, which have these really low corporate taxes. It doesn't draw any companies into the states. People say, wait, I don't want to go to some hick state and invest there. They don't have an educated labour force; they don't have a healthy labour force. So Kenney is kind of turning us into a kind of Alabama, even though we actually remain this very wealthy place. The question of the oil and gas workers, that's important. We need to be transitioning to a post-fossil fuel society. That's not something I'm saying as a person who's left-wing and thinking, isn't it wonderful that we get rid of fossil fuel. No, it's a tragedy. It turns out that fossil fuels are destructive of the planet. We can't ignore that. I don't want to take away somebody's job in oil and gas. In reality, although I'm not a supporter of Mr. Trudeau, I don't think he's taking their jobs away either. The world is changing and these jobs are disappearing. We have a government that is creating a kind of McCarthyite

investigation of who's saying what about our oil and gas industry. There's a kind of fascism that's developing in this province. How many people buy into it? Well I think a lot of working people do, but I think there's an increasing number of working people both inside and outside government employment who see through it and realize that what this premier is putting on the table is not something for working people, it's something for his Big Oil friends. His Big Oil friends, ironically, don't want to invest in oil and gas in Alberta either. They want the government to steal our pensions and put their money into the last few years of oil and gas. They themselves are taking their money and either putting it into oil and gas investments that are cheaper, because the oil sands is expensive to extract oil from, or putting it outside of that sector completely.

They see some of the writing on the wall, but they're kind of having their cake and eating it. On the one hand they are spreading a bit of a message of saying, well we do recognize that there's a climate crisis, and blah blah blah. But on the other hand, they're giving all this money to Kenney and the UCP so they can have their corporate taxes cut and they can have investments taken from public workers' pensions put in to replace the money that the market won't put there. It's a very funny situation because on the one hand Jason Kenney presents himself as Mr. Markets, Mr. Free Enterprise. But in fact, his agenda isn't free enterprise and it isn't socialism. It's just corruption by Big Oil.

Q: The Great Labour Revolt carries lessons for what's happening today.

AF: It does. It shows that working people can unite across trades, across industries, and basically tell governments and employers, we've had enough and we're not going to take this anymore.

[END]