

## ALHI

Archie Duckworth

Q: How did you wind up in 401, and how did you wind up in Brooks?

AD: My history is probably extensive. I've been involved in the labour movement for over 30 years. I used to be a brewery worker and belonged to the Brewery Cereal Soft Drink Workers. In 1985 we merged with CFCW where I was involved in education and worked out of the national office in Toronto. Then I decided in 1999 to move to Alberta and become an international rep servicing Alberta and all the locals within Alberta. I worked there until the year 2000. One of my major projects was in 1992 I started working and trying to organize what is known as Lakeside Packers, who was owned by IBP, Iowa Beef Packers, who had purchased Lakeside. I also was involved in organizing programs with Cargill, who was the new beef packers in Alberta coming from United States, which actually devastated the beef packing industry as far as the labour movement was concerned with our unionized plants. I worked in Alberta and servicing locals and as I said before, in 1992 started a major program of trying to organize the plant at Lakeside. At that time as well I worked in negotiations, etc, in servicing the local unions. In the year 2000 I moved back to Ontario where I worked for a local until President O'Halloran asked me to come out in 2004 to help lead the organizing campaign for Lakeside, which previously was owned by IBP and now is owned by Tyson. That's how I started in the labour movement and until now working here in beautiful Brooks, Alberta.

Q: Tell me about Tyson.

AD: Just to give you a bit of background about it: of course in the early '80s there were quite a few packinghouses such as Maple Leaf, Gainers, Burns, etc., where they were all unionized plants. They had good paying jobs with benefits where the worker could supply the needs of the family. In '92 when the economy was on a downturn, high unemployment, Cargill came into perspective and opened a major beef plant in High River. You've got to appreciate that Cargill is a major multinational corporation that basically has more profits than most countries in the world. When they opened the plant, that devastated all our unionized plants. They started hiring people at \$7 as opposed to the people making \$15 or \$16 an hour. No one could compete with this multinational corporation. This was in High River. So consequently all our unionized plants and the smaller businesses folded. Now we're dealing with an international company. As it turned out, box beef came into play, and that's where most packinghouses had swinging beef at the time, and now they were into cutting and packaging beef for the consumers and the businesses. Basically the packinghouse industry, the meat industry in Canada, changed and most of our unionized plants closed because they couldn't compete. We had to start all over again in regards to negotiating contracts and organizing the plant. We did successfully organize the Cargill plant. Then along came Lakeside Packers, which was mainly a kill operation, employing about 150 people, that was not unionized. Then Iowa Beef, a competition with Cargill, came in and purchased the plant at Lakeside and built

new facilities for the new oncoming slot of box beef. So that's what happened to that and circumstances that I believe the good Canadian companies were no longer around. We virtually lost control of the beef industry in Canada and now it's run by the Americans across the border.

Q: Were you involved in national bargaining at that time?

AD: We were involved at that time. Back in the '70s there was establishment of all the packinghouses across Canada were into what they call national bargaining. That's where a contract was set, whether it be in Ontario or Quebec, with the parameters of benefits and wages, and would flow right across the country. An individual working in a small town in Saskatchewan would have the same benefits as an individual company in Toronto. A standard was set and it flowed right across the country. It was good for union members because the major companies would settle and then the other smaller companies would follow suit. That standard would flow. But unfortunately in the province of Alberta, with the political climate, they took on the fight of destroying national bargaining, which they did. That in turn devastated the unions in regards to settling consistent collective agreements. A lot of strikes ensued in that time. In 1986 at Lakeside Packers they took a strike. Unfortunately the strike went on for many years. At that time we lost the strike and since 1986 it was a non-unionized plant. Gainers, Fletchers, all those packinghouses were into heavy strikes, well documented in history about the Gainers strike. That was the

reason -- the governments helped the employers take on and destroy the national bargaining.

Q: What set up the conditions for you to finally win in Brooks?

AD: It took many years. We started in 1992 to start coming in and look at Lakeside Packers. It was starting to grow. They had a one-shift operation with probably about 600 people in it. We felt at the time it was imperative that we try to organize Lakeside Packers, because as you can appreciate, we had Cargill under contract now. Our goal was trying to bring up the wages into what they were in the past in 1986. So it was imperative that we bring up the wages so we had a level playing field where then wages weren't going to be a major issue. Lakeside being a non-unionized place and Cargill being, it was driving wages down what we could try to negotiate in Cargill. So we came to town in 1992, '93. At that time we weren't well accepted. The remnants of the 1986 strike was still there. The community wasn't in favor of a union. So we started that campaign and many years of trying to organize. One can appreciate as the company grew, because now they put on a second shift and we're up to about 1800 people, starting out with no names or addresses. What we had to do, through the persistence of the local union, because this was one of the biggest organizing campaigns in Canadian history, we virtually had to go door to door and knock on every door in the town of Brooks and surrounding areas such as Tilley and Rosemary and Scandia, and just virtually ask people if they worked at Lakeside so we could sit down and talk to them. There were other issues as well. This

company was still run by the previous owners, which still had the remnants of the strike and were very anti-union. We took on the fight and it became a very technical fight. Inside the plant there was bribery; there was all types of issues in regards to people slamming the doors in our face and say that the union was run by communists. The old stories of what would happen. So virtually for the first 3 or 4 years we never got our allotted 40%. But through the persistence of President O'Halloran for one, we remained here. In 1995 the local purchased a house here, saying we're here to stay and we're not giving up. We opened an office here, and it remains today. It gradually came about that in 1998 we just narrowly got enough for a vote within the plant. We lost that vote drastically. We only received about a 29% vote.

Q: The first one you signed up 40%?

AD: Over 40%, which was around at that time about 1400 cards. ... During that we had some Labour Board issues where the company was found guilty of participating in the illegal activities of trying to persuade people, coerce and intimidate people. I remember quite vividly that the Labour Board had issued us a right to go within the plant and speak to all the members. There were 3 of us who were allowed into the plant. President O'Halloran went in at that time, myself, and another individual. What we did is that they paraded all the people into the cafeteria. This employer, as I said, was trying to keep us out for various reasons. They paraded everyone into the cafeteria. We had police officers there to make sure there wasn't any fighting. The Labour Board was there. They crowded

in about 600 people. To this day we're not too sure, but I believe they only allowed the anti-union people into this meeting; we had no way of knowing who was there. We were trying to put our pitch across about how important the union was. My obligation was to talk about WCB, the injured workers. The employer had these people so incited that we couldn't speak. They threw money at us, they called us all kinds of names, threw eggs at us. We had to go and have 6 meetings, and quite obviously we didn't do very well at those meetings. I remember the Labour Board saying they'd never seen anything like it. They couldn't believe how people acted. We attribute that to the people not knowing about the unions. The employer had incited this. You can appreciate that for 8 hours a day all the supervisors would talk about how bad the union was. Therefore, when we went into there, they were all primed ready to kick us out, and did.

Q: Being a company town, the influence in the workplace was also in their social life.

AD: Absolutely. The owners of the plant, the Altwassers, were well known within the community, well respected within the community. As well, you can appreciate this is an oil town, and the oilfields are non-union. You had a lot of people coming from other areas of Canada at that time that really needed jobs and were incited to say if the union came in they were closing the plant. When we came to town, we couldn't show our colours, i.e. the UFCW, because we were afraid that fights would break out; they would chase us out of town. I remember quite well that we very seldom went out to a bar at night because the

people would just gather behind the predominant family, the Altwassers, to look after their needs. Plus they remembered the 1986 strike.

Q: It wasn't that many years before they walked out on a picket line. How did that come about?

AD: We had 2 other votes prior to us getting certified, and we lost both of them. The first one was around 29% and the next one was somewhere around 18%. What happened during that time was, as you can see the makeup, the demographics in the plant were changing. Predominantly they were Newfoundland people, people from other war-torn countries such as Croatia and Russia. As you can tell within a plant, what happens in the world politics, you can also see new immigrants coming from those war-torn countries. They constantly and persistently tried to organize the plant. When it came up to 2004, the major population within that plant was Sudanese or African origin. In May of 2004 the Sudanese community had been negotiating with the company to create better working conditions. The company had apparently promised them this. When that failed, approximately 100 people walked off the floor and insisted that they wanted to talk to the management to solve some of the issues. Some of the issues were pay, injuries, and being treated with respect and dignity. No one was secure of their job. The employer at that time decided to turn around and fire the 100 people. Then the Sudanese community came and asked us to come back in and try to organize the plant. So that's when I came back on the scene and we started our campaign. It was a campaign that was vicious within the

plant. They fired people. We had many labour charges at the Board. That took us 3 months to organize. Again we still had to go from door to door. But this time it was a little different because we had a high population of the Sudanese. They helped us and were instrumental in helping us organize. We received again 41% of the vote. So we were allowed at that time to turn around and have another government-supervised vote, which we did. We won it by 51.6%. What do we do now? We had a certificate; we still had an anti-union employer. At that time it was taken over by Tyson, who had bought IBP. Tyson was an absentee landlord; it was still run by the old management, the old ways of doing business. We had to build within the plant. People were still scared at that time. You have to realize that at that time if you spoke union this employer would fire you. You've got to appreciate the laws in Alberta aren't that great. It was hard to prove at that time that they fired you for union activities. They worried about the company picking on them. So we were negotiating from a weaker position than in normal circumstances. We had language barriers where there's 26 or 27 different languages and dialects. We have different thoughts and theories about trade unionism within different countries and cultures. We built a negotiating committee and we tried to make it as diverse as possible, with the best representation possible within the plant. Keep in mind this employer did not want to meet with us, did not want to have anything to do with us. They did not want organization in there to find out what is going on within that plant and how they treated people. We started to negotiate with the employer. This negotiation wasn't a negotiation in the normal sense. This employer did not want a collective agreement. You can appreciate the 51% is saying that if we can hang on and prove that the union wasn't doing anything, then of

course eventually if they didn't get a collective agreement they would decert and everything would go back to the old ways again. Through the persistence of the local, we started our negotiation, which by law they had to do. They virtually offered us nothing. It went on for a good period of time. We negotiated into late 2004 into 2005. President O'Halloran decided in that summer of 2005 that we were going to call a strike. Keep in mind that 51%. But we were going to call a strike. It was prime time because summertime is prime time for the beef industry. We called the strike and this employer, having the great politics, and keeping in mind they had made, because of mad cow disease, they had made hundreds of millions of dollars. So we called a strike in July. The company went to the Labour Board to call for reconsideration. The government in their wisdom decided that they would bring in a mediator to settle the strike, and we were ordered back to work.

Q: Who was the mediator?

AD: I can't remember his name right now, but it was a well known arbitrator. He made his report. You can appreciate how devastating it was to us in regards to we had, we believed, probably about 60% of the people out, which was, in our estimation, very good. But only for that one day until we were ordered back. A lot of people don't understand why we had to go back. That hurt us tremendously. Through the mediator's report, we accepted the mediator's report. It was a bad collective agreement; it was a bare-bones collective agreement, which was okay for us because we knew we weren't going to get

anything better out of the employer. The employer rejected it. They rejected it for the simple reason again that they did not want the union in that workplace, and for obvious reasons. They had to adjust to they couldn't fire people at will, they couldn't fire people on WCB, they had to start paying people what they were working, etc. In their arrogance of rejecting the mediator's report, on October 12<sup>th</sup> president O'Halloran decided to call the strike, and we did. You've got to appreciate that all the way through these negotiations everything they offered us was less than they were paying. They started negotiating certain wording. So come October 12<sup>th</sup>, which at this time we're allowed to go out on strike, there was no more government intervention, there was nothing, and we went out on strike. We had approximately 55% out on strike; the rest crossed the picket line. It was unique in the respect that the people out there were very strong. We believe today that this employer hired as many people as they could in regards to it didn't matter if you could work or you're 90, to show the strength of people going in, trying to pass that picket line. There was more people here. Hotels were full, with police; the hotels were full with reporters. One says that strikes serve the economy. Well Brooks was booming because every hotel in Brooks was full.

Q: During the strike, was the company still receiving the government money that was being issued over mad cow disease?

AD: I believe they were. They have a big feedlot here with 20,000 head, and that's basically where the money was going to, is into the feedlot. So the first day of the strike

was unique because we didn't know. They had the riot squads here; they had approximately 100 police officers here. We're all worried at that time that there's going to be a vicious strike. The first day there was cars lined up because in their wisdom they had told all the people to go over to the feedlot, which is just across the street. There was lineups of cars there, and I'm sure they told them one per car to make it look good, and to go into the feedlot. We put up picket lines on the feedlot and we put picket lines up at the main gate. This employer spent millions of dollars. They went out and bought 11 or 12 buses so they could bus the people across the picket line. We felt that we had to hold them up a little bit. So we picketed the feedlot, which we're entitled to do. By the time everybody got into the feedlot it was quitting time. That didn't work. That went on, and the employer just screamed about, 'what are the police doing'? The unique situation with the RCMP was they were not doing anything. The next day they did the same thing. Now they tried to bus some people across over to the main plant. We sat down in front of the roadway. The buses couldn't get through. This went on and on, and there was no production coming out of that. Of course the employer was angry, and the police again weren't doing anything. The police were there to ensure the safety of the people, which I think is unique in this province. Usually what would happen is the police would get involved in it and clear the lines; they weren't doing that. The police went and said: we are not doing anything until we have the absolute court order from the courts. Well you can appreciate at that time that that took a little bit of time. Eventually that came down and we had to let the people through. Then the employer in their wisdom decided that they were going to let the people drive in to the plant. We were allowed to hold up cars

for a minute, 2 minutes. You can appreciate if you've got 900 cars going into that plant, the last car came in almost quitting time again. So that wasn't working. You can appreciate the plant is on the highway, but they literally own thousands and thousands of acres of land around that plant. So they decided to start going around into the back of the plant and come in the back way. Well then we started setting up picket lines and again held them up. But this employer was determined. Again, the police did not do anything, because we were within the laws and the boundaries of what the edict was from the Labour Relations Board. This is how arrogant this employer was – they literally spent around \$300,000 building roads in the back of their property, and roads that they could build right in so people could drive into the plant. They built probably 10 or 15 roads, tons and tons of gravel, so it would lessen the time for people to get into the plant. They said they were killing 1000 head a day; they were doing this. Later we found out they weren't killing any. It was all smoke and mirrors, which was the perception that this employer would like. Then the inspectors refused to go into the plant because of their safety. So that held it up for another 4 days. It was quite unique in regards to it was a pretty safe strike. Everybody was following their issues. But this employer came along and they used those buses like SUVs. One day we had them trapped in the plant; they couldn't get out. They drove across fields trying to get out. At one time a fight ensued and that's when the riot squads came in. All the management got off the bus and started fighting with our people. All we wanted to do was stop them from coming through. That was one day, and then of course we had the issue with President O'Halloran.

Q: Tell us a bit about that.

AD: It was quite an event. This is past management, now there's new management within the plant. They were trying to serve us notice with respect to allowing more people into the plant. We had to lift the picket lines. I was doing an interview with CBC at the time; I was live on CBC. One of the company management came up and served me while I was doing the interview on TV. President O'Halloran took off. He didn't want to be served. He took the rest of the day off. He was driving around, coming back to the back roads. These management had walkie talkies; you'd think they were the secret service or something. They were out looking for President O'Halloran all over. Eventually he was sighted and all these people, including the owner of the plant, including top management, were after him to serve him notice, and a car chase ensued. Doug didn't know who these people were. They literally drove him off the road into a bad accident, and Doug was seriously hurt, just so they could serve him a piece of paper. This is the type of people we were dealing with. Someone went up and he was lying on the ground and said, you consider being served, and walked away. That's how arrogant they were during the strike. . . . Finally we got a collective agreement. Not a good collective agreement. As I said before, Tyson was basically an absentee landlord. Of course. Why not? When they're making millions of dollars, why upset the applecart? Although they didn't understand about the firings that were going on in the plant, and the injuries and all the other fine stuff. So since November of '05 and when we had the collective agreement, most

management hierarchy have gone, and Tyson has taken over the plant and there has been some drastic changes in it, with better relationships.

Q: What types of problems are the employees having now?

AD: When we first started out--and as I said the collective agreement wasn't the best collective agreement--the old management negotiated a collective agreement for a decertification. That decertification is under the Labour Relations; every two years you're allowed to decide whether or not you want the union. They weren't willing to give one inch in a collective agreement that would help the workers. They didn't care about the workers; they cared about getting rid of us. So that collective agreement was a collective agreement to decertify the union. What I mean by that is that, for instance, we were forced into, because don't forget we weren't negotiating in a position of strength. We had to pay for our benefits: they changed the vacation structure, the overtime. What they wanted to do eventually, as we were going through the two-year period, they would turn around and use that against us and say, the union didn't do anything for you; they're no good; let's kick them out. But what happened was, because of the change in management, because, see, the only way that they could decertify this plant would be management involvement, or the people would have to go out and do exactly what the union did and spent millions of dollars trying to organize the plant. So, as management changed, the philosophies changed. But management still had to live with that collective agreement, which we are virtually changing now in regards to renegotiating some new issues within

that collective agreement. So management has changed, philosophies have changed, and quite frankly, they're starting to do the business and treating workers the way they should be. What I mean by that is some of the issues were of course WCB, when prior to us coming there you were fired if you were injured. If you complained about management, you were fired. The turnover rate was probably 400 a month. That's of course when unemployment was high so they could pick and choose. People weren't getting paid for their hours of work. People weren't getting the benefits they were entitled to. So they rotated people. They were some of the issues that were there. Are they changed now? Absolutely. Of course with the union there, they can't just fire people when they're injured anymore. People are getting their benefits. They're getting paid for all hours worked. I'll give you an example. During negotiations, the company put a cost on if they had to pay every worker for what they worked during the 4 year contract it would cost them \$10 million. They put a price tag on that, saying that's how much we're not paying our workers and that's what we're saving. ... They had what they called gang time. Gang time is when the cattle come in and they're knocked or killed would be the time you'd be paid from till the time you stopped killing. You can appreciate that line is a long line. It takes probably an hour to go through. If you had breakdowns in between and problems, and some of those problems and breakdowns may last 15, 20, 30 minutes, you wouldn't get paid for that time. You can appreciate if you've got 1500 people working in a plant situation and you're saving even 10 minutes from each person per day, how that adds up. Now that doesn't happen.

Q: You must be dealing with a lot of different things that don't normally come through the door of a union office.

AD: It's unique. The standard union office of course deals with work-related issues such as WCB, sick pay, representation within the plant. Yes, it's been a unique office in regards to we knew there are other issues. Language barriers, for instance, understanding landlord-tenant acts. People come to us--the insurance company isn't paying them for accidents. We go to court for people in regards to speeding tickets if we think they're excessive. We get people counselling in regards to marriage counselling or any other type of counselling. We're dealing with ethnic cultures that are different in how they treat people and what they do in their own country. So we're dealing with a lot of issues through mediation. We deal with a lot of landlords. For instance, if people aren't getting their short-term disability now, we deal with them. If we have problem with, for instance, long-term disability in regards to medical practitioners. In fact we co-sponsored a meeting of all the physicians in Brooks to sit down and talk how we could expedite the process for WCB and sick benefits. The benefits weren't being done properly because of paperwork. We had a joint program with all the stakeholders, including WCB, trying to expedite all this. We sit in meetings with different ethnic cultures and try to help them out. We deal with their religion aspects, for instance, in the Muslim faith, dealing with the imam. Virtually anyone who comes in here we try to deal with the problem. Are we perfect at it? No way, but at least we try to help the community.

Q: It's a community union.

AD: Yes, it is a community union. We try to believe that we're a safety net for all, and we work in conjunction with other agencies as well.

Q: Do you think what the union is doing here is having an effect on the political sensibilities of the people in this community?

AD: I think it has. It's a long time coming. You can appreciate from 1992 on you didn't have the influx of new Canadians coming in, and the different cultures. The Brooks community has come a long way in understanding with what's happening within the community. I believe there's more social acceptance. There's more acceptance in regards to this is here to stay. I believe that with the change of council within Brooks, this is even going to get better. They all understand that the new Canadians, the new people coming to this town, buy houses. They buy houses more now than they did before the union was there. There's that sense of security. They buy cars; they participate in the community. I think it is getting better. The oil town and the oil boom in this town has created just as many problems as new Canadians coming into this town. I think the culture is different. There's more acceptance. There's more people getting involved in the community and sitting on various committees.

Q: With the children from different cultures in the schools, that's going to make a difference too.

AD: I think it's going to make a tremendous difference. I think it's an opportunity. I know that right now we have a French school here, and a lot of people from the Congo speak French, are involved in it. There's more social acceptance. With the children, you see them playing together. About a month ago you see people; you have different colours walking down holding hands together. I think as time and history goes on, Brooks will be a far better place than most cities, because they're starting to grow with that multiculturalism. We promote it and we like to say, look, people are here the same as anyone; colour and religion doesn't mean anything. They're here; they're involved in the community. Quite frankly, I think new Canadians are harder working and want to progress quicker than us old guys that have been here and taken a lot for granted. It's going to put a new spirit within the community. We just have to embrace it and work with it.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add?

AD: It's been a great experience for me. I have grown so much to understand. We say that they're bringing in foreign workers to take our jobs. That's not what's happening here. It's the same as when Canada was born. Foreign workers and new immigrants built this country. I think it's a new generation, a new rejuvenation. Instead of having people from

Britain and Italy, now we're having people from Africa and Russia and the Ukraine and China. I think it's something that we need; I think the union should embrace it providing we do it properly. I've grown so much for an understanding of culture. I think we have to do more in regards to educating ourselves. We as Canadians think that we're liked throughout the world, but we still have to spend more time in understanding what is happening to our country and involving our new Canadians in this. There are employers out there that still live in the '30s. I don't think we do enough to educate our Canadian people on our rights. I've grown so much to understand, and I think this was an opportunity for me to learn so much that things can be done if people work together. This isn't going to stop. We have to get the word out there to embrace our new Canadians and embrace a better understanding of our rights in Canada.

Q: The experiences that you're having are happening elsewhere, and it's important to talk about these things.

AD: I agree. I think Brooks, because they have a unique small city surrounding where you're going to have more and more new Canadians come in, I believe probably in the neighborhood of 700 coming – English and housing and all the things that come with increased population – could be a role model for the rest of the communities that are being affected right now. This is part of our history in regards to how it led up through Lakeside Packers, through any of the other issues such as the oil, and the town accepting all these responsibilities, could be a tremendous education in history of our Alberta.

[ END ]