

Albert Johnson

AJ: My name's Alberta Johnson. I'm the local president of United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 1118 in Red Deer, and I've been president of this local since 1989. I grew up on a small farm, mixed farm between Delburn and Pine Lake in central Alberta.

Growing up, the only thing I knew about unions was that the damn post office workers would go on strike and the milk cheque would be held up in the mail and we'd never get it. But my parents were both community-minded, very community-minded and very active in all sorts of community stuff, which growing into the labour movement really the community aspect is there. Whether it's called a labour union or whether it's called the Foresters or whatever, that community mindedness is there. I got my first involvement with the union working at Fletchers Fine Foods in Red Deer. For the first couple of years there I collected my paycheque just like everybody else did, went to work, did my job, and that's it. In 1983, leading into it, the company approached the workers about outside of the union what I now know would be an unfair bargaining approach, but about lowering the start rate to fund an expansion of the plant. There was an ongoing battle between the union and the company in regards to it, and many days of hearings. At one point in time they kicked the union out, quit deducting dues, and all the rest of it. When all the dust settled, the union was found that we were there illegally, and the Labour Board upheld it and sent us to the bargaining table. Meanwhile, there was 300 people there that didn't believe that there were union meetings, union workers, and didn't know anything about belonging to the union. Needless to say, we got our butts kicked in that round of negotiations. The employer got all the concessions and more that they were asking for, and barely escaped with the union intact. That was the 1984 collective agreement that was resolved in May of 1985. At that point in time all the union personnel within the plant resigned and they had elections. Part of my upbringing is if you're not happy with what's going on and you want changes, then you better be able to stand up and try and make a difference. So I ran for the position that would now be known as the unit chair for that local. I hadn't been to a union school, hadn't been to anything. It's just

the employer was lying. What was going on I believed was wrong. There were several of us that started out fresh and green at that time and went through the battles for the rest of '85. We were taught by Wayne Coby and Kip Connelly and some of the long-term union leadership within the province where we're going. That led to the strike that we had with Fletchers Fine Foods in June of 1986.

Q: What kind of company was Fletchers?

AJ: Fletchers Fine Foods was in 1983, which was the start of this whole upheaval in the pork business in Alberta, was purchased by the Alberta Pork Producers Marketing Board. Their original inception they were to market hogs and they believed that by owning a facility that they would better serve the interests of the pork producers. During that purchase process from the people that owned it, Gary McMillan, who ended up to be the operator or CEO and CFO of Fletchers Fine Foods, was involved in some very shady dealings in the acquisition of that, of which he profited and other people profited by the purchase, of which the Hog Marketing Board was not aware of at the time. I don't believe they were aware of it at the time. Basically every pork producer in Alberta paid a levy of every \$2 they sold in the province, to purchase the meatpacking company, Fletchers Fine Foods. With that had, government, the Marketing Board people sat on the board of directors, Fletchers people sat on the board of directors, and government and some hog producers sat on there. But as the whole government anti-union biases that was there went through the whole process of the company from top to bottom and directed by the government appointees and their rightwing hog farmers as well.

Q: So it's not surprising to see them taking that stance.

AJ: It wasn't surprising at all. One of the things that the membership at Fletchers learned, we'd always been, the owner was always a good owner previously. It was more like a company association. One of our stewards in 1985 went to file a grievance, and there

wasn't even a grievance pad available for him to file a grievance with. The main production plant was in Vancouver. The contracts were negotiated in Vancouver. We got the same as, plus little things. It was more like a family-oriented little operation and there wasn't a lot of problems. It used to be, at that point in time, a really fun place to work. All sorts of things that wouldn't happen nowadays went on in there, and it made it enjoyable for everybody. Not so now.

Q: It was on the site of the current Olymel?

AJ: Yes.

Q: What was happening in '86?

AJ: During '83, '84, '85, between Pocklington and Gainers, Swifts and Fletchers ongoing hog wars back and forth, the whole industry was in a turmoil. Part of the turmoil was in '84 the Gainers members were severely taken advantage of. Fletchers wanted the same me-too deal, only a little bit better for them – we're the hog farmers and we need more of a break than anybody else does, that whole concept. When we lost virtually all the wording and rates of pay and everything in 1985, the membership was angry. The people that ended up accepting it were angry. There was a whole movement within the plant from a bunch of people that never really knew what a union was, they just knew what was going on and the union was the avenue that was there to solve the problems and to use for our benefits. It wasn't until people got into the process and understanding and seeing what it was that they saw how strong a tool it could be. Leading up to that, the company Fletchers was hired and started a second shift six months prior to the end of the collective agreement. They knew what was happening, that the anger was out there and that people made no bones about it, that they needed to give us back the stuff we had. Simple shift change language that they took away: they moved the whole pork cat, which was more than 50% of the plant over the weekend. Friday we got off at 2:30; Monday we

were starting at 2:30. There was no consideration for babysitting, there was no consideration of how that upset. It was just something that they could do because they had this so-called new process that they thought was working. Part of it believed that they thought that they could cause some of their workforce to leave. The mid '80s was part of a recessionary time and they were punishing people, in our view. So they hired the extra couple hundred workers, trained them on nights for three months or slightly over three months, and as we were in negotiations announced that they laid them all off. We go through negotiations; we're looking for all the stuff we gave up plus we're looking at parity with the Canada Packers plants. We were the industry leaders and the chosen ones that had led the industry before, because they still had national bargaining. It was traditional the national players would negotiate and the independents or smaller chains would follow very closely. During the course of leading up to that, there was no doubt that there was going to be a labour dispute. Nobody could've stopped a labour dispute, because the members were that angry. But, during the course of that, they started to recall as we were giving them strike notice, they were recalling or attempting to recall the 200 or so workers that they had laid off. To give people credit, not one of them crossed the line and went back to work. They had been as angry as everybody else. They'd worked for this employer; they'd been mistreated by this employer the same as everybody else was, and weren't prepared to do that.

Q: What had to be done before the workers went on the picket line?

AJ: You know what? We were so green we went up to the Gainers picket line and sat in on a meeting where we listened to the Gainers group talk about all the preparations that they had done. We looked at ourselves and said, holy cow, or something similar, we haven't done any of this. We were an angry bunch of workers. We had picket signs. We didn't have radios; we didn't have communication; we didn't have a tent or trailer or whatever, some kind of picket office. It was just we were going to be out on the picket line picketing, and that was it. All the other stuff was things that people with more

experience in what was going on were telling us or saying they had. So it was there. The company, as silly as they were, knowing there was going to be a labour dispute, we had some Polish workers that had come over fairly recently as refugees working in there. It was mainly them but there was a few others that wore the rubber boots from inside the plant, because you had to buy the first pair. So those were their boots, leaving on the last day before the dispute. Made them all leave those boots that they'd paid for and walk across the gravel parking lot to get to wherever they parked, with security lined up on both sides to make sure that the prisoners exited quietly. People who had used their own equipment, own steels, those were forcibly taken from them because if a person didn't have the receipt for the steel, even though anybody that worked in the plant would look at it and say, this steel is different than every other steel that's there that's a company provided steel. Obviously it wasn't one the company had provided. It was the whole bully gang-related intimidation. Park the scab bus outside two days before, and all sorts of mental games that was going on. That just hardened the resolve of the members that this is going to be a war. This isn't going to be two sides, them doing their stuff and us walking around on the picket line outside. This was going to be an absolute war. And that's what happened.

Q: What was the company's attitude?

AJ: They totally, the company totally misunderstood what was going on. The management believed that they were just going to roll over top of us. In '83 they'd rolled over top of us. They didn't recognize that for a year after the time the substandard collective agreement was until that point in time that people fed off of all the mistreatment that they had. One of the things that I was proud of that membership for was that they always did a good job all the time. Through all the labor disputes that we had, people took pride in the fact that I did a good job. I hate those bunch of bastards but I did a good job. They're not going to get me for job performance; they're not going to do anything; and I know that I did a fair day's work when I went in there and they owe me a

fair day's pay. They misread that. They misread the fact that people were prepared to stand up and fight. This is Alberta. Pocklington got away with it in '84. In '85 they'd lined up over 1,000 scabs while we're voting on the contract, to help encourage us to vote in favour of the contract in '85. Doing the same thing in '86, people said, I don't care. I'm not working here. They sold the pork producers. This was their company; they needed to send people. They thought they would have absolutely no problem staffing the plant from scabs they could hire, pork producers coming in themselves and working or sending their kids in. After the plant got going, when they were scabbing it, the farmers were coming out and saying, you guys need more money than what you're asking for cuz we're not working for those cxxxxxxxxxs in there either. You bleep that out, I hope. But we're not working for them either. They treat you like shit. They don't understand when I say I'm gonna be a few minutes late and phone in and say I'm gonna be a few minutes late because I had problems getting going this morning, my truck wouldn't go, whatever it was. They don't care. They yell at me and tell me to get there, and when I get here they yell at me again. The farmers, and that's part of the whole community thing I talked about growing up with, that reasonable people are reasonable. The farmers didn't see what Fletchers management was doing as being reasonable at all. They couldn't keep the scabs; they couldn't get them going. Through the course of negotiations when the violence flared up, we had several of our picketers that were injured in the course of picket line activities by the scab bus and by logs that were used to try and stop the scabs from getting in. It got very ugly. The members were angry; the company didn't recognize that. They were just angry, frustrated, and looking forward to being treated like humans and respected as humans, not some commodity that you just use and throw out.

Q: What did the company do to keep the plant going?

AJ: When an employer as slimy as what Fletchers was chooses to keep the plant going, they hire replacement workers. They enlist the help of the RCMP or police services to try and infiltrate the picket line to try and find out what's going on. They will go to the

government agencies and tell them that there's jobs. Your welfare recipients, if they're capable of working, then we offer them a job. So they were taking advantage of any vulnerable people that were out here to try and force them across the line. With the scab bus with all the boarded and painted up windows and the propaganda that they would put out and the misinformation that they would put out to the people that were coming to work for them, to the public, to anybody, to try and distort the truth about how these workers were just greedy people wanting more, and playing the whole poor corporate citizen were a bunch of poor farmers, and trying to elicit support from anywhere and anything they could get.

Q: What about the legal recourse?

AJ: We were in front of the Board several times. The second time in front of the Board the company got the injunction that they were requesting to get. We chose to civilly disobey the injunction and had a sit-in in front of the plant gate to stop the scabs from coming in and to try and make our point that we're just regular people trying to do a job. Here's the big employer doing over. The police involvement at that point in time was unreal, with people with broken fingers and injuries to shoulders and elbows from being strong-armed off the picket line. The jail cell drunk tank in the police station, or the remand center at that time, they had 53 of our members in one drunk tank. There wasn't room. So people had to alternate between sitting and standing. They had men and women in there because there was no place else to put them. In the two-man cells in the station they had up to 10 or 12 of us. Most of them had 10 people. In the jail cell there was no avenue to, you couldn't lay down, couldn't stand. It was pure, anything that the RCMP could do to try and help break the workers' will to stand up for their rights, for what should be their rights.

Q: You went to jail – what did they charge you with?

AJ: They didn't; we were civilly violating the injunction. That was before we asked for the improvement in labour laws that we got from the Alberta government, where it was still a civil disobedience charge. So all of us, 109 of us, were civilly arrested for the violation of the injunction. There was others that were accused of and defended of criminal activities and stuff like that. Proudly, not one of our members spent any time in jail and only one of them ended up with charges that stuck. Mr. Mercer, our lawyer, did an extremely good job, in my opinion, of defending our workers' rights. We had to show up in court several times and answer several different allegations of improper conduct. But like I said, Mr. Mercer looked after all of it very well.

Q: Was the company itself inciting any violence?

AJ: Oh they did everything from advertising the scab bus out front, by having security guards that would try and intimidate and bump members around as they were picketing, stand inside the fence and mock the people on the picket line. They would do everything and anything that they could. As most employers do, they believed that they could get the injunction and then they have the upper hand. Our members learned from that. In '98 when they brought in their goon squad, our members stood there and didn't do anything outside of mock them back. It was their security team that got bounced off the picket line, because our guys didn't react to that.

Q: How did the strike progress?

AJ: The first three days were kind of a blur because everybody was living off of adrenalin and coffee and whatever. But for the union executive and some of our activists, we were on the Gainers picket line the day before our dispute started. We then came down, had our meeting the night before, talked to the membership, and then showed up at the picket line at 6 o'clock the morning of June 1st. They first brought in the empty scab buses and when we didn't react the same way they did in Edmonton, then I believe the

first two or three buses were empty of anybody. When we didn't react, then they started bringing in the scabs. There wasn't very many the first day. Our approach to this was that we're not going to. Gainers is in the headlines now; that's where the battle is today. We'll have our time. The third day in is when we chose to stop the scabs from going across, and with that, barricade the road and stop the buses from going in. A number of our members and brothers and sisters from different plants were there as well. Several of our members and brothers and sisters were hurt in that. Some of them permanently carried the scars of that incident, but stopped the bus. There was some violence on the picket line for some of the people that tried to ram through the mass of people there through the ditch, and that even escalated the violence even further. The bus didn't cross the picket line at that point in time. After the police came and whatever, they pulled the bus into the plant parking lot, unloaded it, and that was the only bus with some 20 people on it that got in that day. The police closed off the plant, stopped any traffic in and out, and basically barricaded off the road that was there. The employer went after their injunction. The injunction was issued that we could only have five people on the picket line at any given time. The injunction was so far-reaching that on one side of the plant we would've been picketing in the middle of the Red Deer River for about a mile stretch. We had people that couldn't go to their houses because their houses were inside the injunction. In order to get the half mile this way and half mile that way from it was the closest that any other, and the police would escort any vehicles that had got their approval to go down there through the pickets that were there. It proceeded that way. It was disheartening but the members stuck with it. The good thing out of it that made a lot of people think from inside is those people were also locked inside the plant for that 24, 36 hour period as well. We had patrols going around the outside of the plant that persuaded a few people that if they really wanted to be in the plant that bad, then they should go back there or face the consequences. They all went back. It was a very emotional, very exciting time. People were actually able to fight with their employer over the conditions that were there. We went through the process. Our sister plant, Fletchers Vancouver plant, which was also in bargaining at the same time, they, myself and Wayne Covey and Kip Connelly went out

to their bargaining table. The company was trying to drag out their negotiations, but with their progressive labour laws, they were able to take their strike vote before they hit an impasse. The company got an opportunity to bargain for both groups at that bargaining table. Sedna walked away. Dave Charelle, the business agent for that local at that time, did a very convincing, and he told them point blank, if you're not going to do it, here's your 72 hours notice. Excuse me, I believe he'd given their 72 hours notice that they had to give to make them aware. But they didn't have to go on strike based on their legislation. After the 72 hours they could issue that they could leave the plant at any time. The ultimatum to them when they refused to even talk about Red Deer was that they had the choice. Either they said they weren't going to scab Vancouver, then they'd shut the plant down and clean it up. If they wouldn't give an answer to that question, then the members would be out of there within half an hour and everything would rot where it was sitting. The company took a very short recess, came back and said that they were prepared to negotiate with us. Then they started playing around with, well this is the package for Vancouver and here's 2 cents over here for Red Deer. Mr. Charelle got upset. He threw his clipboard across the room and told them to get the hell out because that's not negotiations and none of his members would put up with that type of thing. They were outside of the room for a very short period of time, even shorter than last time. They came back and was offering to negotiate on a level playing field with us, and it proceeded through that process. We ultimately after two days came up with a memorandum that would put our members back to work and that the Fletchers Vancouver people could accept. So we went through that whole process, ratified by both memberships, and we were back to work in just over three weeks. Then we find out the company was continuing to play games. The plant had a base rate in different brackets for each job. For anybody that was there less than wasn't at full rate, they were not paying the bracketed rate. Some of the people who had been around in '85 but at a lower rate were put on a higher progression but still had to put in some time before they got to the top rate. It wasn't ideal but it was the best we thought we could do. Those people were getting over a \$5 an hour increase in the course of two years. So that was acceptable to the membership

and acceptable to them. But then they took away their bracket pay. For some of them that were doing some of the high-skilled jobs and had been doing it for a couple years and would've been past that were not being paid a progression rate and lost their skilled job rate extra tacked on top. Went to arbitration in Vancouver because part of it was that if there's any disagreements over it that Vince Reddy, the arbitrator in B.C., would arbitrate it. Went there, arbitrated it, successfully won the arbitration. As slimy as they are, they admitted that, their lawyer admitted under oath that yes they had had the discussion of what they thought we were giving up, but didn't clarify it. They just took the approach that the union fucked up; we're going to do it. Mr. Reddy disagreed that we fucked up, but he was not pleased with the fact that a lawyer and the company human resource manager would take the position that they could just sleaze their way through and attempt to get something by default without actually negotiating it.

Q: So you guys won?

AJ: We won hands down.

Q: It's the idea that because it's Red Deer, they'll put up with anything.

AJ: You get that idea about Red Deer a lot. You get that idea about Alberta a lot. Union is still a bad word in Red Deer and in Alberta. When you sit down and talk to people and take out the word union, an association is okay. The employers know what's good for them because they have the Chamber of Commerce and all the meatpackers have their associations. They all understand that if they're going to go to government and if they're going to get what they want, they need to be united on what they do. Albertans, for whatever reason, look at that and say, union is bad, and away it goes.

Q: The government didn't have to step in in the case of Fletchers like it did in the case of Gainers.

AJ: No, it didn't have to. I believe that the fact that the two major pork processors in Alberta were down, that there was a lot of pressure from the pork producers on the government and their board of directors to correct that problem. Every hog was then being shipped, virtually every hog was then being shipped out of province and the farmers were paying the additional freight costs as well as they were getting less because they had to go places where they weren't going. There was basically a flood of fat hogs on the market. So directly involved no, a lot of pressure yes. But the sister plant in Vancouver applied the ultimate pressure.

Q: At what point did the plant become Olymel?

AJ: We had a 8-1/2 month lockout at Fletchers in Red Deer in 1988 that was the company's way to try and get back what we had gained in 1986. We were locked out for eight months in 1988. So we went back in March of '89. There was a change in local management and some changes on the board of directors. Fletchers, the hog producers, and the government were getting tired of Gary MacMillan and what was going on. In 1990 they announced the plant closure because Gary MacMillan believed that was the thing to do to pressure the government. They'd just proclaimed Family Day and he wasn't prepared to pay it to us. Went through and everybody was laid off for about a week. During that course of time the board of directors at Fletchers did a coup and took him out. He was fired. There was an interim CEO that came in and the plant closure was only for slightly over a week. But we did give up Family Day as part of trying to get back to work. We now have Family Day but it was that one-time thing there. In 1998 after the 1997 Michael McCain Maple Leaf thing on the pork industry that decimated it once again, we were on strike at this plant for 12 or 13 weeks trying to maintain the work conditions that we had and limit the blows that Michael McCain had got away with. We maintained our language. So we have by far some of the best language in the pork industry in the country. But we gave up the wages and ended up back where Maple Leaf

was. Between Gary MacMillan's mishandling of the company in '88 when we were locked out, Stockwell Day, who was the MLA for Red Deer North, a few days before we locked out, they cancelled our negotiations with us so that the Alberta government could announce that they were giving Fletchers \$20 million to expand and create jobs in the pork industry. With that, and supposed guarantees that there was going to be jobs in the pork industry, they went and bought eight plants – a bankrupt pork company in California, mainly in California, but some in Washington and Idaho. They put the \$20 million there and proceeded three days later to lock us out for 8-1/2 months. That was in 1988. In 1998 they were going back after all the concessions. The members stood up again; we protected the collective language. But the company had been run into the ground ever since that. They worked out with the farmers and screwed them over again on shares and whatnot. It was sold to a couple different companies, one of them being Onex, the financial investment, and then Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was looking at buying them and whatever. Finally in 2003 Olymel purchased the Red Deer plant. Olymel is a Quebec-based cooperative company that has a fairly good labour relations record and is a fairly progressive employer compared to any other employer I've worked for.

Q: What was the government's role in the strike?

AJ: The experience that I've had with this Alberta government, no matter who the premier is or anything else, is that the most important thing that they have is the rightwing agenda to support business at all cost. All they can do, whether it's financially, whether it's through their appointments to the Labour Board, to jerking the chair out of the Labour Board and inserting somebody that they believe is going to give decisions that are more in line with their philosophy, not in line with fairness or a balanced approach to labour, they will do. They will continue and continuously attack labour through whatever means they can, whether it's through their party policies, whether it's through attacking labour unions that have chosen to voice anti-government by making them do dual votes

to be unionized, all the rest of that stuff. It's all geared to try and inhibit and attack labour unions. Outside of churches, they're the only ones that have the wherewithal and the ability to fight the government on an ongoing basis. Everybody else gets burnt out. Does that answer your question?

Q: What's the policy around replacement workers?

AJ: This government believes that employers should have the absolute right, no matter what, to be able to run their business through a labour dispute, which includes hiring replacement workers. Replacement workers only fuel the fire and lengthen labour disputes, because neither party has to worry about finding a common ground. Number one, the employees have jobs to go to, and number two, the employer, if they've got the financial resources, can sit out there forever and operate and the workers have to worry about whether their jobs are gone. It's ironic that you have a Labour Relations Act that says people have the right to form trade unions, but there's no onus on the employer to bargain a collective agreement. There's no onus and no penalties if the employer chooses not to bargain fairly or interferes with an organizing drive or whatever. They get less than a slap on the wrist; as a matter of fact, I'd say that they get a pat on the back for doing a good job to keep the worksite from being unionized. Those damn commies, you can't have them interfering with your ability to make a profit. Meanwhile most of these corporations line up for government funds, whether it's grants or whatever, that comes off the backs of mainly workers, lined up at the public trough.

Q: What was it about the summer of '86?

AJ: I believe that recessionary period gave the government, and the employers with the government's urging, ability to attack unions, attack rates of pay, and participate in a race to the bottom, if you can cut your costs. There'd been for a few years before that a little bit of a hot spot within the Alberta economy that drove employers to pay a more fair

going rate for labour. When the shoe changed then, with encourage of the government, there was open game on labour. Go after 'em. It set the stage for all sorts of disputes because it was encouraged and promoted.

Q: How did those strikes reinforce each other?

AJ: Within the pork industry, and that's all I can talk about, because I was very new on the labour scene and it wasn't a traditional trade union background that I had that led me down this road. It was a matter of fairness and principles and honesty during that. Did your membership feed off of what was going on in Gainers and did they gain strength from somebody else taking on their employer? Absolutely. Do I believe that our members and the Gainers workers felt that they could win as well because we did and we'd taken them on? We'd got rid of most of the garbage that we were forced to take into our collective agreement the year before, which the Gainers members were forced to take in in '84. We didn't resolve our '84 collective agreement until May of '85 but the industry in Alberta, wages, standards, and collective agreements, were taken down because of what happened in '84, '85. The battle was to try and get it back.

Q: What impact do strikes have on the union?

AJ: Do I have to answer that? I guess my concern about answering it is our experience, because we were successful, was positive. I know that the Gainers experience wasn't positive. Even though that was a monumental battle which just keeping the union there and making any sort of progress that they did was a price that a vast majority of those members would never pay again. So I don't have a one shoe fits all answer.

Q: What about the one you were a part of?

AJ: The violence on the picket line is the product of poor labour laws and an employer's poor management there. The threat and imbalance in the labour laws, so the threat of a worker losing their job and then losing their house because they choose to try and better their lifestyle, better themselves, better their family, better the community, because we all know that unionized workers, a high rate of unionization, makes the whole community prosper. That brings people together. What we had at Fletchers with the violence, as much as people know, none of the people there are violent people. But it was a rage that was built up because there was no other avenue to do it. Did it bring our membership together? Yes it did, because we successfully won the battle. But it would be ideal to go without. But sometimes as people you have to do what you have to do. At that point in time people, including myself, were so angry, so frustrated at the employer, that it was the only avenue to let it out. Then bringing in the scab workers and have them mocking the people on the picket line and holding cash out the windows as they go through and being urged on by the members psychologically gets to people and there's going to be a blowback. Anti-scab legislation would take all that away and it would just purely be economic.

Q: How did the temporary foreign worker phenomenon appear?

AJ: The end of 2003, early 2004, Olymel, the Quebec pork processing and slaughter company, poultry company, their human resource manager sent myself an email saying I was going to be contacted by somebody from Human Resources Development Canada about the use of temporary foreign workers. At that point in time I'd never heard of the program, had no understanding. I started doing some research, got the phone call from the person from HRDC. I'll give that person credit because when we said no, we weren't interested in having temporary foreign workers for a number of reasons, one of them that we don't believe in having a throwaway workforce. A throwaway workforce after 12 months is no different than the incredibly high turnover that we have in our meatpacking plants now. You're not solving anything; you're just forcing somebody to work there for

12 months and not solving any of the problems. So during the course of that, didn't hear any more about it until probably May of 2004. Got another email from the HR vice-president out of Montreal saying we need to talk about this. So we sat down and what we did is we negotiated a letter of understanding that was attached and part of our collective agreement, enforceable by the collective agreement, in order to deal with temporary foreign workers if they're coming, what the employer's responsibilities were, what their obligations were as far as we're concerned, and our participation in it, and an ongoing requirement that before any temporary foreign workers came into that facility that they needed to have our agreement in order to do that. Without a real understanding of what was going on, that probably became one of the most important parts of anything that we negotiated. Today there is no requirement by the federal government to have the union onside or anything to do. All our employers – Olymel, Cargill, Maple Leaf – that have access to temporary foreign workers, we all have virtually the same agreement in regards to we have to be involved. We have to agree and we have to negotiate any terms that may be there if they're different from the terms of the agreement. We went through with the first groups that came from El Salvador. Then there was more from El Salvador, the Dominican, and now today the vast majority are coming from the Philippines, although there hasn't been any new temporary foreign workers come into the plant in about two years. Part of our program was that they had to have, paid for by the company but provided by us, was English language training. We had three weeks before they entered the plant in order to go through, give them an orientation on Canada, the City of Red Deer, what to expect, workplace language. Like most worksites, you end up with workplace lingo or whatever that goes through. But to somebody that picks up garbage and cigarette butts to somebody that works beef line it's the hip, but to a pork it's part of the front shoulder. So they needed to know what it was; they needed to know how to communicate; they needed to know how to understand what safety was. All those requirements were things that needed to be brought to them because this is a new country. We required the employer to provide, to contract and provide housing that fell within guidelines that we negotiated. After the first month the employees would be responsible

for the payment and the deductions would come from their cheques. But they were guaranteed housing which had to be reasonable and had to be appropriate and that type of stuff. Contrary to what has happened out there in far too many places, where you end up with 12 people in one house, each paying, our approach that the house, if it's in the paper for \$1200 to rent. If it's a four bedroom you take that \$1200 and divide it by the number of people that are living there, and that's what each person has. In other places the employers or whoever was saying, okay you can pay 33% of your income from housing. So that's \$343; so we're going to take \$343 off everybody. There's 10 of you living there. So the house is now worth three times what the going monthly rate for a house of that type would be wherever it's located. We got into representing these temporary foreign workers before they came with things. We had some criticism from some of the temporary foreign workers when they found out they were locked into a lease when they got here, because they may have been able to find something cheaper. There was one minister from one specific church that was really raising issue, because he could rent his two rooms in his house to these two young ladies for \$100 a month and they were having to pay \$250, and how could we participate in that, and all the rest of it. Well the global good of all of them was that they had to have a house, and it was appropriate housing and all the rest of the stuff. There was some pushback from some community groups that thought they were being taken advantage of. But then some of those community groups have now come back and said, well geez, good thing you were there, because we hear of all these horror stories. But initially there was definitely some resistance within the community to the program that we had in place. We've bettered the program, because you learn from last time's mistakes and whatnot. But they went through; they got three weeks here. The first three groups were under the government program that required six hours of English every week. Three hours was donated by the employee and three hours by the employer. Those three hours were paid. As soon as this program started going, some of the employers were looking at it and saying, holy cow, I gotta pay for something. The government was very quick in getting rid of those what they considered perks, that somebody considered fair to start with. But now that it was starting to affect some of their

larger employers, then we gotta get rid of those. So we went through, negotiated the rules. There were some 200 people that went through that. Got the involvement of the provincial nominee program, which had quite a bit less restrictions that are in place now when it comes to that. Of the 643 or whatever foreign workers that come through into our plant population at Olymel, more than 75% of them have got status or in the program they get status. Every one that Olymel hires or Cargill hires or Maple Leaf hires, every TFW must be put forward as a candidate for the now ANIP program. The employer is responsible to hire people that have those skill levels now that they're known to fit that, so that those people aren't coming over here and finding out that there is no opportunity here for me in Canada and I am going to be getting sent back after 12 months or 24 months or whatever the timeframe is.

Q: What sort of contract were most of them coming in on?

AJ: The original ones came in under 12 month contracts that were extended to 24. They're all coming in under 24 month contracts now. But, like I say, Olymel is not and hasn't hired TFWs. Part of our letter of understanding agreement with the employer was that if the unemployment rate rose 2% or if we deemed that it wasn't the appropriate time to be bringing in TFWs, that we had control over some of that. For the TFWs coming in, for the ones that choose to stay in Canada, I'm going to venture, and I haven't looked at those numbers, but they're probably at least 90% successful. Where we run into problems are not with the ANIP program as much as it is with the federal immigration. We had one gentleman who ended up in the hospital with diabetes within a week of being here. The employer, we wouldn't let the employer send him back, threatened him with discrimination and arbitration, the whole bit. Go through the whole process. The employer, when he got back to work and he worked for as long as his permit would allow, as well as us and community groups, petitioned to have him stay here on humanitarian grounds. He was probably one of the best workers that they had hired, no matter whether it's from outside of the country or inside the country. His ability to stay

was only inhibited because of his medical conditions. Unsuccessful in the petitioning. So that's where we run into more problems than anything else, although there's a few more now with changed regulations in regards to the education. But most of our people, through either hard work or the training that's been provided by us and the employer or similar community groups, are getting them through most of the educational thing. We're running into the problem--the biggest problem is at the national level with Immigration Canada.

Q: Some of the standards they have to meet are pretty high.

AJ: Some of the standards that they meet when they come comes to issues like reading, writing English, understanding English.

Q: Describe that.

AJ: Originally the foreign workers coming in had to show that their English improved, and they had to attend classes. From there it became that they increased so they had to meet at least a minimum level of English knowledge understanding, which was 2220 to start with. As it evolved it's now what's called a 4442, which is your reading, writing, understanding, and speech. The highest level that there is is a 7. Somebody who's a university professor in English may get a 7. Somebody that has a Canadian Albertan that's finished high school would be lucky if they met the 4442 criteria. When they were moving the benchmarks on English around and they were indicating that they were going to go to the 4442, Carvel and High River were along with us, and Olymel out of Red Deer believed that that was too high. As a group, we went and benchmarked the general percentage, and I think we ended up with about a 10 to 12% of our members working in each of those facilities, benchmarked them to see where they were at. We didn't meet the 4442 from the general population that was in the plant. It was we'll take two people off this line and we'll take three off of there and five off of nights. It was just the general

population. Meatpacking has traditionally been immigration versus refugee, new Canadian industry of which Cargill is very good at dealing with that worldwide. They integrate very well but they also understand that not everybody is going to have English. If you're a refugee coming from a refugee camp someplace, your English is not going to meet 4442. Inside the plants, not just because they can't speak English, because of noise or whatever, there's sign language. Everybody knows what this means. When the product's running down, everybody knows that this means that line speed's going up. All that stuff is all developed because you can't yell down the line. You can't leave your work station and go down there and tell them we're changing specs, whatever. So it's developed. Cargill has 147 different languages and dialects spoken in that plant. A vast majority of those don't have English 4442, which is being required for these TFWs.

Q: Will this mean people will be sent back?

AJ: We haven't experienced it. But through our program and what we've held the employer accountable for, all the employers accountable for, is a vast majority of people are making it. When the government throws in new things, like having equivalent of a grade 12 in Alberta, well in El Salvador you only go to grade 9. In the rural Philippines, what they're deeming that you need to have is equivalent in the Philippines to a post-secondary education to be equivalent to the Alberta grade 12. That's unrealistic and it's another avenue I believe for both the federal and provincial governments to circumvent the public's and organized labour's response to these people need to be here. So if you raise the bar up and it sounds reasonable in redneck Alberta, that the guy at the corner store or the Chinese person that owns the grocery store in town, there's an aversion to people walk in. They want people: we're Albertans here in Canada, speak English. They don't want to talk to somebody that can't speak. It's okay in the big city but in rural Alberta especially I want to be able to communicate fully with you. You don't have to be able to communicate with me, but you need to understand what I want because I'm the native here. There's a pushback in regards when we hear that all across the province

where we have members that the public says or some of the public says and this government believes it, that you should be able to talk perfect English. So when I walk into your store I can ask you a question and I don't have to try to understand what you're saying to me because you're going to talk back to me in perfect English. That's the mentality. As well as that, it allows for employers to rotate workers through. You don't meet the criteria; so we'll see you later. That's wrong.

Q: How are these people performing?

AJ: They're prepared to do work that most Albertans don't want to do, no matter what the wages are. We tell our kids to go to school. You don't want to work in a meatpacking plant. You don't want to do this; you don't want to do that. They fill a need for the employers there. These people are no different than the people that immigrated to Canada in the last 200 years. They want an opportunity, they want a job to go work, they want to contribute to society; they want to build their life here in Canada in a place that's better than where they came from. That's all they want to do. Are they good workers? Great. There's a number of them that have come in; they've got their status. A vast majority of them stay at the plant but some of them come in and start their own business or their own entrepreneurs; they're taking off. One of the family works at the plant; the other one is looking after the kids or doing whatever. They're here for the long haul. They just need to be given an opportunity. They're not as prone, because they're starting to build their life, they're not as prone just to jump up and leave. There's 50 cents an hour over there or whatever. I'm building my life, and to buy my house and buy my car and look after my family I need to get a steady paycheque and we go from there. They're committed to Canada, and they're committed to making a better life for themselves.

Q: But it seems to be a readymade formula for breaking up families.

AJ: I don't know that TFWs are anything different than goes on with Fort McMurray or people from the east coast coming to work in Fort McMurray. With the inability of people to earn a living in their home area, no matter what country or city or town they're in, if they have to leave that area and leave their roots, leave their family, there's societal problems that come with that. It's kids without a father or a mother; relationships break down; new ones start when there wouldn't have been an opportunity for a new one to start if the rest of the family would've been there. We unfortunately import people; we don't import families that come with it. Even if there's provisions that may be used to bring a family over partway through the process of being nominated and accepted, that's a huge chance to take if you've got no guarantee that you're going to make it through this process. No matter how good the program we do or whatever, the federal government has the final say as to who gets to immigrate to Canada or not. So you go through that part. Whether it's somebody from El Salvador coming to Alberta or somebody from Newfoundland that's flying out to work at Fort McMurray, those family issues get ripped apart and the fabric breaks down. With that fabric breaking down, that causes all sorts of problems within society because it's there. You'd think that a government like this government, both federally and provincially, that profess that they're the keepers of the family values, would understand that to take the wage earner from some other country and plop him into a strange area and then take three or four years before you can safely bring your family over, it causes all sorts of havoc in everybody's life.

Q: How do you feel about the program?

AJ: I think that this is a global issue of poverty and the race to the bottom. There is no doubt that our Canadian economy is built on the fact that they have to export. Our governments that continue, whether it's the pork or beef, have for years said we're going to be the exporters of beef to the world, we're going to be the exporters of pork, and built that economy around that and built the economy around the export of bitumen or oil or whatever. The reality is that it's a global market out there. Unfortunately, the meatpacking

industry is no different than other industries. Domestically it was only domestic competition, that the ability to raise wages and better working conditions and such would be a lot easier than it is now. Now as we raise our wages and working conditions in Alberta and Canada we have to worry about what's happening across the border, what's happening in. . .

The global marketplace, we're not only trying to raise the working conditions and earnings for our members in Alberta and in Canada, but we have to worry about the competition from the world. We have to be innovative to try and let our members, put them in a position where they can earn as much as they can and afford to live. But the plant isn't in a position that it's in jeopardy because they have to export against the Brazils and the...As we go through it becomes scarier and scarier. You used to think with live cattle, live pigs, that there's only certain distances they could do it. Well Australia is now shipping live cattle to Indonesia to be slaughtered. The difference between paying \$15 or \$18 in Australia and 25 cents an hour in Indonesia is incredible. Our governments are running around trying to sign free trade pacts across the globe to increase competition, which only leads to situations where there's gonna be lower income for the exporting companies and countries versus finding someplace in a Third World country to do it. The European Union, Romanian workers going into Dutch packing plants on temporary contracts working for \$5 an hour when the Dutch workers are making \$25 an hour. That ability for them to do that is undercutting the European society. You're starting to see some of the results of that with what's going on in France over the increased retirement age. Workers are going to, as they continue to lose out to the corporate world, are going to become increasingly frustrated and angry.

Q: What did you do in the letter of agreement to ensure equal pay?

AJ: A worker is a worker is a worker. It doesn't matter what country they come from or the colour of their skin or anything else. That labour is valued, lots of times undervalued from our view, but we've agreed to a standard of what that labour is worth and, if there's a

progression, what that progression to get you to where it is. The employer had no option because of our contract and what we negotiated. These workers walked in and got the same rates of pay as any Canadian or anybody else that they hired.

Q: Are they denying them certain benefits?

AJ: Our contract applies across the board. That's been our approach all the way through. With Olymel or Cargill we've never had the problem. Part of our dispute in 2008 with Maple Leaf was over their unwillingness to meet the standards that we set for the employers that we deal with on TFWs. But there hasn't been a problem. There was a couple hiccups early on which weren't employer-caused; they were caused by the government and the different classifications that they attach to workers. One person, even though he'd had training within sanitation, quality control, had applied for and the company had given him a position in quality control within the plant. When it came out to the government that he had moved to this quality control position, viewed by them as being a skilled position, they were sending him back. They pulled his nomination. Under our collective agreement he had three months to come back to the bargaining unit. So he just reverted back to his bargaining unit position that he had before and it went through. But we argued successfully after that that, using the Cargill collective agreement, of which QA is under, saying this is a right that somebody has under our collective agreement working conditions, that they can exercise those rights. You say in your propaganda they're entitled to all rights that everybody has. So we got them to back off on that. The other one was a problem with a Filipino guy that had a ticket in the Philippines, moved into the maintenance department using his ticket. He had to go back to the bargaining unit as well because they were arguing that it's a skilled, ticketed position. If he wants to immigrate he can immigrate under this program over here, which is the high skilled program, but he can't do it under this one.

Q: How is their job security protected?

AJ: Every collective agreement has a grievance procedure. Through the course of negotiations with the employer, we've made it very well known that it will be, if they choose to send a worker back unjustly and we're going to arbitration, they're going to be on the hook for all those costs. We're going to make sure they're on the hook for all those costs. To date it hasn't been an issue. Maple Leaf, we went a step further because of their approach to labour relations and approach to the TFW program specifically at their plant in Edmonton, which is the only one we deal with. We identified an arbitrator who would deal with it quickly all the way through. We put in a special provision for that in order to deal with if there was a problem there, to move it along quicker with that. But we haven't; that hasn't been an issue for us. We've had some foreign workers that have been fired. If somebody goes through the attendance policy at most of our locations, they've had lots of opportunities to change their behaviour before they get to that point.

Q: When they're fired, do they have to go home?

AJ: Yes.

Q: What about health and safety?

AJ: With the training that's provided in the very beginning, specifically we have our health and safety people or one of them that deal with health and safety inside the packinghouse, and understanding that as part of their regular orientation over and above, substantially more than any other worker coming off the street does. We are dealing with different equipment than what most people have seen, even if they've worked within the same industry, not at the scale and line speeds that we have. Knives are shaped different; it's all different. It's a matter of going over first in the classroom, and second of all on the floor, the hazards and what's going on, and ensuring that we have interpreters that are

available and are active on the floor and stewards that speak the language as much as possible so people have access whenever they need it.

Q: What's Oscar's role?

AJ: Oscar is one of several stewards that are recent immigrants to Canada or in the process, that have come out through the TFW program. Oscar and they all do; we have stewards who are trainers on the floor who are Ukrainian and translate for all the Ukrainian workers. The unit chair at Olymel, her parents immigrated from Ukraine 50 years ago or 60 or 70 years ago. She had almost lost her Ukrainian language. The Ukrainian recent foreign workers have brought back her second language that she'd just about forgotten. Whether it's Filipinos, El Salvadorian, we cover off, have stewards. If we don't have stewards or union reps, we've got access to people who speak the different languages.

Q: What's the speed of the jobs?

AJ: Line speeds, the plant's not running at it now, but has the ability to run at about 1300 hogs per hour. It's almost beyond belief how quickly it goes. At times in the industry when we believed the line speed has been cranked a little bit, oh they got their wings out as they come around the corner now because it's going that fast. Depending on the job and whatever, you're talking about thousands of knife cuts in an hour, 15 to 20 thousand in an eight-hour day, stuff like that that's beyond belief for most people when it comes to what you're doing and keeping up. That's about the top-line speed there is worldwide at this point in time. One of the big plants in the U.S. kills and cuts and packages 32,000 hogs in a day. It's incredible, but it's there. When I started in the plant, the line speed was about 99 an hour, unless it was a payday Friday afternoon, when it's about 125 an hour. So you're 100 times faster now.

Q: What social barriers do TFWs face?

AJ: The rural or smaller Alberta was traditionally white Caucasian, maybe some French possibly or maybe some Native blood. It wasn't the multicolour that you saw in the city, multiethnic diversity that was out there. It becomes, it's still unusual, and it's still noticed if there's somebody that doesn't fit in. Just like Sesame Street, which one of these things doesn't belong, type of thing. Even myself – and I've been exposed culturally all across the province to probably every nationality there is – driving through small town Saskatchewan back in the summer, if there's a Black guy on a payphone on the corner of the street, I did a second look because it doesn't fit and it's not what you expect. Albertans are less tolerant than some other groups of people. You still hear the comments that they shouldn't be allowed to be here unless they can speak English. If somebody's having their conversation, there's three of them having a conversation in their native tongue at the cafeteria and somebody walks by or sits down, we immediately expect them to start talking in English because you're in Canada and I'm comfortable. When they came to our country or one of them came and sat at our table, nobody makes an effort to try and include them into the conversation or to find out how we can better communicate to them, because they're the outsider, unfortunately. It's getting better but it's still more difficult. I believe that that is part of the reason why the government keeps raising the bars on the English requirements. Jason Kenney, the minister involved for immigration, continues to talk about that. The example that he gave is the one at the Metropolis conference in Calgary not last year, the year before. As he's talking, that's what he's talking about, is that people that are in Canada that can't speak English and how that's not right. He complained as minister of immigration about an East Indian lady that was in Canada for 12 years and the government had to provide an interpreter at an immigration hearing for her. He believes that's ridiculous, that if you're going to be in Canada that you need to talk English, and no concept that most of the immigrants, and probably even including his relatives that immigrated to Canada, didn't speak English very well when they got here.

Q: How does the union assist people?

AJ: It's not as active as what it was when we had all the majority of the TFWs here. But it is still a centre where the people can come. Our local's view and most unions' view of what the union is is we're there to service the members. Part of us opening the training centre and providing the courses that we have through here, and the orientation, is that the members can come and get access to the information we have. For new workers we had City of Red Deer maps and we had our ESL instructor that also did the orientation for the new workers coming in, and would lay out all the information in regards to the shopping experience that we had. The one bank would come in and set up their accounts and lower rates on money transfers to the home country, and stuff like that. That all opened the door and helped them familiarize themselves and feel at home. They still dealt with the loneliness and still dealt with missing their families. But they knew that there was something here for them and somebody on their side.

Q: Where do we sit now?

AJ: Our experience, my experience, is that the tap has virtually shut off. Olymel had two LMOs that was denied, which caused us a problem. These are people that are in the process and are nominated already. Some of them have been given notice that their medicals passed at the federal level. Without those LMOs and extensions of their work visas, they would've been sent back and all the hard work that they've done and we've done would've been gone. There's select employers and favoured industries from the government's point of view that have successfully lobbied to keep or increase access to TFWs. Those industries are industries that have low, if no unionization rates, and there's no watchdog on it. If you look at the hotel, restaurant, fast food industry, they will continue to be able to use TFWs with the blessing of this government probably forever. We don't see it in the mainstream unionized facilities that was going before. It's nowhere

near what it was. Two of our employers haven't had a new TFW, one of them for over two years, and the other one for over a year we haven't seen any. The other ones virtually down to five or ten every couple of months. Part of that is the TFWs stabilized their workforce. Once they were established, they're filling those jobs and building their lives, which is the positive part for not only the industry but for our members. Our members were absolutely fed up with having a new person beside them every second day, expending their energy to try and train them, and then them being gone two days later or whatever. Within the industries we represent, the use of TFWs has virtually stopped. But there are industries that are still pushing for looser regulations from this government and still arguing for the ability to use that. The government's not only providing that, but they're setting the standards so high that these people will never be able to stay in Canada. You can talk the best English, you can understand the best English, and work at a fast food English. You'll never meet their income level in order to qualify to get put forward. Even if you do meet that, you will not be able to maintain it for the period of time that it takes. It's too expensive for those fast food people and they really don't want you to stay. So if somebody became a manager of a fast food restaurant, they may be able to do it. But until you get to that position, you're not making enough money in order to be able to immigrate.

I sat at one of the meetings when they were talking about these and listened to a lady who was representing Tim Horton's and Wendy's. That's not who she worked for but she's representing that restaurant fast food industry there. Just completely and utterly going after anybody that was suggesting that they should slow down that tap at all. Because you people, Canadians, don't want to work. If you look at the U.S., and I go back to my experience with Jack in the Box when I was down in Washington doing some organizing down there, those people at Jack in the Box made a living and they had benefits. There isn't a fast food restaurant that I'm aware of, unless you get to some sort of managerial level, where you have that option. So nobody's gonna stay. If you can't exploit them and they've gotta move on because they can't afford to work for you and you have no benefits coverage or anything, of course they're gonna move on. Provide people with something

that they can live on and live with. There's lots of people that would stay and interact with the public if the working conditions were good.

[END]