

Rashpal Sehmbly

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Interviewer Merryn Edwards & Don Bouzek; Camera Don Bouzek

ME: When I first met you, we needed a Punjabi-speaking union person. How did you come to the union?

RS: It was kind of interesting, because it was actually Merryn Edwards's sister, your sister, who actually approached me and said, hey, my sister is working at some sort of organizing drive and they need somebody to speak Punjabi. Do you speak Punjabi? I'm like, yeah, I can probably speak a little bit of Punjabi. Let's try this. What do they need? She said something about the janitors or something at the U of A. I'm like, okay sure. Who do I call? We ended up connecting and I ended up getting hired by SEIU as an interim organizer. So that's how that began. I guess part of that too, I was a postal worker and I'd been a postal worker since 1999. I guess part of my history though too is I grew up in the Northwest Territories; I was five years old when I moved there from India. My dad was a member of the United Steelworkers of America. So it was already entrenched in me, because I understood how unions work and the benefits and pensions and all the good stuff that came with it. I thought, hey anything we can do for any workers, let's do it. So I was more than eager to get on that campaign and help out.

Q: Tell me about your dad and how he came to NWT?

RS: In 1969 in the summer, my dad actually immigrated to Canada. He ended up in Mississauga, Ontario. He was working in different factories and he lived with a Chinese family; he rented a room in their basement. Eventually he found an ad for mechanics and some tradespeople for Cominco Mines. He never knew where Cominco Mines was located or where it was, nothing. So he basically just applied for a job. He was a trained heavy duty mechanic from the Indian army; so he had some qualifications for that. So he applied, not knowing what was going to go on or where he was going to go. I recall him telling me he applied and then about a month or two later, at least a couple months later, he got a plane ticket in the mail mailed to him with a letter saying, we're going to hire you as a mechanic; here's your ticket, come up north. He didn't know where up north was. I always tell people, I think he really wanted us to go up north because he

wanted us to be close to Santa Claus. That's the story I always tell people. It's unique, because as a child the very first – and it was wintertime when I arrived, or it was in the summer – but the very first winter I'll always remember Santa Claus as a little kid. Santa came to our little trailer that we had in Pine Point that we lived in. So then I came with my mom in 1974. My dad sponsored us and he went back home to India and picked us up and took us up to Pine Point, NWT. So I grew up there.

Q: Did he get involved in the union there?

RS: Well he wasn't superbly involved, but he knew his rights and he knew how to stand up for what his job entailed and all that kind of stuff. He was never a shop steward but I know he went to union meetings, because often he went to them and I always remember that. He always spoke of how the union was always basically fighting management to get better wages, better working conditions, and whatnot. I guess one of the instrumental things I remember as a kid was, so my dad wore a turban in the mine. Eventually the health and safety rules were that you couldn't wear a turban; you had to actually have a hardhat on. So all the employees were forced to wear hardhats and steel toes, which was okay. It only meant basically then that my dad had to then basically cut his hair. His hair was quite long, well down to his knees. When you tie it up, you can't tie it up, and you can't have it that long in an industrial setting. So he ended up having to not wear his turban, and then cutting his hair. One of the instrumental things I do recall of that was when that did take place there were some Indigenous elders that actually came to our house. I guess they spoke to him, because he'd already cut his hair by the time I went to Pine Point. But they would come every couple of years just to say, your hair is a cultural thing for you. It's a religious thing for you, but you sacrificed that to keep your family here and actually keep working. My dad was the sole breadwinner at the home. My mom never worked. She stayed at home to cook meals for us and take care of us kids.

Q: Did you leave when the mine shut down?

RS: The mine officially closed in 1988. It was a small lead and zinc mining town; it was actually one of the largest lead and zinc mining towns in the late '70s. That was a big iconic sign that was

right outside of town, one of the largest lead and zinc mining towns there. We left actually a year before the mine officially closed, and we ended up in Edmonton.

Q: Then eventually you got involved in a union yourself.

RS: I moved to Edmonton, finished high school here, and then eventually realized, okay I need to get a good job. But back then there weren't that many good jobs. I worked in the restaurant industry for a bit, I worked in light construction, I worked in a sign factory as well here in Edmonton, eventually making my way into Canada Post. I became a member of Canadian Union of Postal Workers in 1999.

Q: Did you get involved with the union right away?

RS: In 1999 I was hired as a Christmas casual, and then by 2000 I was hired as a letter carrier. I knew to get involved into the union right away, because at Canada Post one of the supervisors right after letter carrier training school, basically the supervisor tried to fire me my first week on the job. So I'm like, okay I knew there's a union here, I know I need to get involved, and what are my rights and what do I do. I actually reached out to Greg McMaster, who was the president at that time. He told me, stay at Canada Post; we'll help you help with whatever you need and stuff. So I just got involved with the union, started going to general membership meetings, and then became a shop steward as well. I did a lot of work more in representing our members for interviews and stuff like that when they're being disciplined by the employer, but also dealing with a lot of health and safety and human rights issues. So that was sort of the forte I was dealing with with the employer.

Q: Did you and your dad talk about union experiences?

RS: There was actually a strike in Pine Point one year when we were still up north. It might've been '84 or '85, a couple of years before the mine actually shut down. They wanted better wages and all that kind of stuff. I knew that the power of the working people, when you're together and you create that solidarity, you can actually get really good things. My dad did talk

about that as soon as I did get a job with Canada Post. He said, if there's a union, get involved, and you never know where you might end up with the union and stuff like that. He was kind of glad I was getting not only a good job with Canada Post, but good wages and benefits and pension plan. He was happy about that but he did say, get involved in the union for sure.

Q: Health and Safety has been one of your areas of focus with CUPW, right?

RS: When I first started with Canada Post there was obviously a lot of health and safety issues that were taking place in the workplaces. I just sort of fell into that role in a way. Then in 2017 I actually ran for the local health and safety officer position with the Edmonton local 730 for the Canadian Union of Postal Workers here. I was successful; I won that election, and I've been in that position since.

Q: What prompted you to want to get involved?

RS: I guess some horrific things maybe in a sense. I recall like I spoke about within my first week Canada Post tried to hire me, or sorry fire me from my job. Then in 2001 there was an incident where I was standing at a time clock in the evening waiting to scan out, and there was witnesses there. One of the supervisors came up to me. I didn't have a full beard at that time. I didn't even have a turban at that time. I had a small little beard. He asked me to, he said, next time you come to work you need to shave your beard off if you want to keep your job at Canada Post. That sort of riled me and I was like, no, nobody has the right to say anything to anybody, regardless of their religion or their culture. You have no right to tell me what I have to look like to you working at Canada Post. So that was one of those things. I guess the other thing that was going on, there was a little bit of bullying happening by supervisors, especially towards some of the women at Canada Post. So I helped basically support them as a shop steward, but I realized as big as Canada Post is, there's a lot of problems as well. So that's why there's a union. I continued to support not only our sisters but also any workers that required help. I just sort of fell into those roles.

Q: When you were told to cut your hair, it must have reminded you of your dad's experience.

RS: Yeah, and it kind of brought back sort of another memory too. I remember that there was a certain group of Indigenous people, like Metis, Cree, and I don't even know what groups they belonged to. But one of the things I do recall also was when they did come to our house one time just to see how my dad was doing and stuff. I think I was about nine or ten years old. We're all sitting there. One of the iconic things I recall was they were speaking about children that were being taken away from their homes and put into schools. Of course fast forward to today, and what they were really talking about was the residential schools that were taking place in the north and all across Canada. I remember there was a point where one of the elders actually looked at me. I felt like I was in class, trying to respect everybody. So I raised my hand and one of the elders said, Rashpal, do you have a question? I said, well I don't understand why children are being taken away. They have parents. So why is anybody allowed to just take them away, and you don't know where they're going? One of the things I remember probably in about kindergarten was there was kids that came to school, Indigenous kids, and for some reason they just disappeared. I never could figure out whatever happened to them. In my heart still today I feel like, where were they taken? Were they part of the graves that they now find? It's one of those things that's deeply affected, like were they one of those? Were they my little friends? I don't know; it's hard to say. You look at some of the old pictures today, and if you look at them closely you'll actually see the left hands of the Indigenous kids were actually placed to their side. They actually would tie their hand to their side so they would only use their right hand. It's that level of control that was taking place, almost forcing kids to do something and taking away their language.

Q: After your dad left NWT, did he end up growing his hair again?

RS: Actually by then his hair wasn't growing. So it was kind of like one of those things that happens. So he ended up having short hair anyway, and going bald I guess. Not completely bald, but it wasn't growing back. But the one thing he did do is he did start wearing his turban again. As children, he did teach my brother and I how to properly tie it if we ever wanted to as well.

Q: You were involved in some organizing work for CUPW.

RS: I think around the same time there might've been an organizing campaign happening with one of the drivers, like sorry, like a delivery driving company or something as well. So that's why I was already sort of helping out or trying to get some sort of organization happening with another organization as well within CUPW. I think that's how the same ideology came about and it was like, yeah, let's go into this step now.

Q: Maybe just describe that.

RS: Yeah sure. It was actually an organizing drive with Dynamex actually, the courier company. There was myself and we had three or four other CUPW members trying to organize that worksite. The only problem we did run into was the fact that there was already a drivers' association there, and it was established. So that created a bit of a problem. Certification didn't work for that process. There was a bit of a political fight too, because we were told to do one thing. We knew we were not going to be successful; yet we were told to think in the box only and just do this. Had we done things differently ourselves, I think we would've been successful. But it didn't work. That was actually one of our first times doing that. We had a regional rep out of Winnipeg, or Saskatoon, who actually came out to help us and support us and stuff. But we couldn't think outside of the box, which kind of ruined that drive at that time.

Q: Like signing cards outside the plant and that kind of thing?

RS: Basically what we were doing is basically just, and again it was the same thing. We had to go dumpster diving. We had a couple of the organizers with us who did that, and we found again phone numbers and names and addresses. It's amazing what you can find in a dumpster. We ended up contacting workers and stuff like that. It was interesting, because during that drive the employer actually thought it was one of their supervisors who had the list and that's who was calling all these people. Of course it wasn't; it was us. There was a mix of people as well. You had some East Indians, you had some Somalis that were driving, and of course some white drivers as well who were there. It was most interesting because the more diverse groups really wanted to be unionized, whereas the drivers that were white were just like, leave us alone. It

made for an interesting scenario of things. I remember we went to one house to sign a card for this one person who was clearly a very redneck person. Seeing me, I wasn't wearing a turban at that time but obviously I'm still distinct. I went to his house and his wife, I believe she might've been a nurse or something. She was already unionized; so she knew the benefits of a union. Of course this guy was just a typical redneck Albertan. He sees me and he's like, you're not even allowed in my house. His wife is like, no, please come in; I understand how unions work. Rashpal, please come in. The guy was really apprehensive and didn't want to talk to me at all. I said, I can sense that you're uncomfortable with me being here. So how about we do this? Take a piece of paper--so I gave him a piece of paper and I took a piece of paper. I said, why don't you write down every type of meat you have ever eaten. He goes, I'm an Albertan born, I was raised on a farm; I've had all types of meat. I'm like, good, just write them down. So I started writing down as well. He writes his stuff and I'm writing. He's done within a very short frame of time, and then I start writing and I'm still going. He's watching me; his wife is watching me. I look at his list and we compared lists and he goes, what's muktuk? You've eaten seal? What is all this stuff? I go, well I grew up in the Northwest Territories. So I was introduced to a lot of wild game. He's like, oh. Then all of a sudden he's like, so you hunt? I go, well we used to go with friends or elders and stuff like that to hunt, yeah. All of a sudden his whole attitude about what he perceived of me changed. By the end of the night after about a good half hour or 40 minutes talking to him, he signed a card. That was that iconic success story for that.

Q: We kind of poached you away from Dynamex and got you talking to workers on Justice for Janitors. Any memories you have of that?

RS: Yeah certainly. I guess one of the things I remember within the cultural group of the Punjabis – because there were a lot of elders there who were brought over by family on the provincial nominee program or however that worked, and they didn't speak a lot of English, very few words. Basically what they were doing is just helping the family out, supplementing extra income for the family with groceries and mortgages and stuff like that. Here's the thing, though. A lot of them had already retired from their jobs in India. Now they're coming back into the workforce again, and the very first job they're doing is cleaning and a janitor job. Some of these people were either doctors or teachers or other jobs, and here they are trying to

supplement and help their own family here. Part of that struggle that they had was the fact that they had a language barrier, which was quite evident, especially when they were trying to discuss things with other coworkers and stuff. One of the things I do remember, there was one East Indian fellow who, when we went to talk to him not only at the U of A but I ended up going to his house, truly believed he was a subcontractor. He had three or four buffing machines and wax machines or whatever. He had bought them himself. He was told, you buy these and you can have other people working for you. I said, okay so if you have other people working for you, are you paying them? He's like, well no. I said, well then you're not a subcontractor. So we looked at his paystub and there it was, there was nothing to indicate that he was a subcontractor. He was just another employee and that's how it was stated – employee number and Bee Clean and all that kind of stuff. So definitely a lot of confusion by how the employer there at that time was manipulating people to think that they were like their own little boss, which technically they were not.

Q: Were they afraid of losing their job because, with limited English, they were afraid they wouldn't be able to get another one?

RS: Yeah and I think part of that was they felt that, even though they didn't like the job, they realized they're working at night, nobody bothers them. There's not a lot of students at the university; so there's not a lot of interactions. They truly felt that if they lost this job that their family would maybe treat them a bit different. But the other offshoot to that was really that they would've then been stuck at home. Who really wants to sit at home all day long? At least when they're working, they feel like they're being productive and being a part of society and basically helping with the mortgage and stuff like that at home.

Q: A lot of them commuted long distances.

RS: I don't know how the bus system now is from Mill Woods, but back then they would literally tell me it almost took a 2-1/2 hour bus ride just to get to the University of Alberta sometimes, because they didn't want to go all the way downtown to take the LRT and that kind of stuff. So it

was quite a long journey for them, and part of that was coming to work early. What do you do? You're just sitting around, standing around, basically twiddling your thumbs.

Q: Was it a social opportunity for them as well?

RS: Part of it too, as within any cultural group, is that when you meet other people who all speak the same language, you have a commonality. Part of that commonality is also the fact that what village did you come from; we're from this village. You get that relationship happening where people try to find out, okay, maybe we're related from this village and that kind of stuff. So there's that social aspect of getting out of the house, definitely making new friends, even though they're your coworkers, but at least having that open conversation with them in your own language. I think that's the important part for any cultural group. If you don't speak another language, especially English or French, you're stuck with your own language. What do you do? Where do you socialize? Sometimes work was part of that socialization that was taking place.

Q: Were there problems with supervisors around meal breaks?

RS: I remember there were a couple of individuals who actually had diabetes or some other health issues as well. So they had to eat at certain times, plus take medication. That's the one thing that some of them wanted was to have an established meal break where they could go when they felt the need to go, not when they were unceremoniously forced to go. They always felt like they were being rushed into taking their breaks. It's just like go go go, and then come back and go go go again. It's almost like there weren't any proper breaks actually happening as well. So that was part of the complaint I heard a lot from some of the elders as well.

Q: Remember the incident of the supervisor saying they didn't need chairs for their lunch break?

RS: When I heard about that I was just like, okay so why does anybody else get chairs and tables to sit down, but then you guys don't? They did feel like they were being treated like third class

citizens, almost like a non-entity. It was kind of disturbing as well because it's like you felt their emotion about that. To most society they might not think about it, but it's like, why are you treating them different than any other worker? They deserve just as much respect and dignity as any others. That was one of those gross things to have to talk about as well. They felt truly that they were being treated like a lower caste or, you're a piece of garbage, is what one of them told me. We're not garbage, we're human beings, and we need to be treated that way.

Q: Could you repeat the story of the incident?

RS: The meal breaks themselves. The conflict started with the supervisor, who actually wanted the East Indian elders to sit on the floor. With that, they felt insulted, because other people had tables and chairs. They certainly felt like third-class citizens or they felt like, why are we being treated like garbage but other people are not? They did turn it into a cultural race thing in their minds because it's like, why are they better than us? It was kind of degrading to them and they definitely wanted to talk about that for sure. They wanted to have some sort of situation where they were also to take the breaks when they felt they needed to and wanted to, and not so much being forced into being rushed to take a break and get back as quickly as possible to get the work done. Definitely no compassion there, let's put it that way, by the employer.

Q: Did the supervisor actually say that they're used to sitting on the floor, or something like that?

Q: She did to me, ya. I think I remember asking her, what's up here? She said, oh they like it. It's part of their culture.

RS: So I guess somewhere along the line somebody must have mentioned to her, well you know, in the gurdwara, the Sikh temple, well they sit on the floor anyways to eat. Well no, that's a whole different thing. That's where it's about humility towards others and we're all on equal standing. But at work, no, that shouldn't be taking place.

Q: Any other memories, high points or low points, from the campaign?

RS: I guess one of the interesting high points was that, especially with the Punjabi-speaking workers, whenever we went to their house they always offered us tea and food. It was almost automatic. Even though we might have hit three other houses within a two-hour timeframe, we were constantly drinking tea, Faruk and I, tea and biscuits all the time. One of the things which was important is the whole family would sit with us and have the tea. When we explained to them what we're trying to do and how we're trying to help you, and in Canada you shouldn't be treated this way, it was almost like a family decision that was, yes, they're here to help you, let's sign the card. So that was sort of one of those things that I always remember that sort of helped the campaign for sure. It moved it along. When one or two of them were signing on, and of course with the help of Delano as well when he was that iconic person talking to everybody about getting organized and stuff, it sort of created an avalanche where other people, especially within the Punjabi group, one would phone the other person and say, well this is my so-and-so friend, he works in this other building, I'll get him to sign too. Here's his phone number; go talk to him. So it did create that snowball effect, which actually was quite effective. The other thing that I remember was going to houses where the children actually sponsored their parents over. They would tell us the stories of how their parents were being treated at the U of A at the job they were doing, and they were appalled. They didn't know what to do or how to get anything resolved. That's where we said, hey that's where we come in. Again, it was that same family ideology of, let's do it. So-and-so's uncle signed, so let's have you sign as well. It's good for us all, so let's do this. During the campaign, because I was going to the gurdwara as well, there was quite a few elders that actually went to the gurdwaras as well. I would meet up with them and they would always ask, hi Rashpal, how are you doing, how's the campaign going? I would always tell them, good. It created that interesting friendship, and some of that is still related. Even today, how many years later, some of their children, who are much older now, they still see me and say, we remember you from that campaign. So it's sort of like I'm that dude. That's how they remember me – the janitor dude that helped us organize.

Q: Do you know any of them who are still working at the U of A?

RS: I don't recall anybody. I sort of lost touch base, going back to CUPW and working there with Canada Post. So no, I don't recall.

Q: Do you remember some of them talking about Communism?

RS: It was interesting, because a good group of them were either Communists or Socialists, or they did participate in a lot of strikes. When we uttered the word union, right away it brought back these memories. I remember a couple of houses myself and Faruk had went to, and it was continued a whole hour just talking about how they had to struggle themselves back home. They did hunger strikes themselves, whether it was at universities or at work. They sort of said, you know what, it's the same thing. That was one thing that I remember was, do we have to go on a hunger strike as well at the University of Alberta? I said, no we're not there yet; I don't think we need to do that. But it seemed to me like some of them were prepared. They wanted to make that sacrifice so others, not so much for them, but others that came along after them if they left their job, would have something better.

Q: They seemed ready to go, and then that first meeting they got spooked.

RS: I think part of it was like this weird sort of thing where they respect their employer but they also want to be a part of the union. But they didn't want to lose their jobs. So they were sort of stuck in between those two, a rock and a hard place, and they didn't know where to turn or go. It wasn't until after that moment when we actually started going to their house and explaining to them, look, nobody needs to know that you even signed a card, other than us. So you're safe. Actually, if you think about it, when we had the university professors, some of them, that were onboard wanting to have the janitors unionized, we told them that and they were thrilled. They were like, yeah that's good that they're supporting us as well. Then there was that little push, I wouldn't say lying to them, but just saying, hey look, other employees want this, people are signing up. Once they realized, because they physically saw it. There were moments where we'd go to one house and they'd say, oh well so-and-so, we take the bus together, he lives right across the street. So then we'd go to that house and all of a sudden you realize four doors down so-and-so auntie lives over there and she works with us too. So it was sort of like this nice little campaign that kind of worked within the neighbourhood. And you're right, people had a big

journey all the way from Mill Woods, Silverberry, and Jackson Heights all the way out to U of A by bus. So that's a long journey in itself.

Q: It's interesting how people end up together to support each other.

RS: I usually take it back to sometimes there might be a religious institution like a temple or a mosque or a church or something that's central to an area. So that's why you might have where a lot of the Sikhs might live in Mill Woods or in the southeast, for example, or pockets in the north near Manning Freeway, because there's the other gurdwara over there. So you see that as well with mosques. Around a mosque usually, when you visit the actual mosque, you'll see a large community of Muslims that also live nearby, because they can just walk to the mosque or the temple or whatever religious institution they belong to.

Q: There was an event at the senior's centre as well. Did you go to that one?

RS: The senior's centre in Mill Woods? I don't recall that. I don't remember that one.

Q: There was a lot of willingness to sign cards and a lot of silent support, but when it came to being in front of the media, there was a lot more hesitancy to be public.

RS: I think part of the hesitancy to be in the public was again it was that fear of, I'm supporting my family financially, what happens if I get fired? Where is the extra income going to come from? How am I going to help my children? I guess finally when they made that balance of what's actually better--is it those benefits that we want? is it the better wages?-- then eventually they started coming out. So that was that symbolic thing of, you know what, we're all in this together and we need to support each other, especially when the key activists that were there were sort of like not only speaking to their own cultural group but they were also speaking amongst each other. So it created a bigger multicultural group of understand, hey we're all being treated the same; we need to stand up. That's basically what happened there.

Q: Did you see that dynamic, how they were able to communicate with each other with very little English?

RS: It was always interesting, because I think at the end of the day it was just simply like, sign the card. Card, sign, that's it. It's like, okay.

Q: Any other memories or disappointments or challenges about the campaign?

RS: I think the good thing about it maybe was the fact that there were family members. I remember there was a younger youth member who was related to one of the elders. He actually came out to one of the news media things that we did, and he helped translate his questions to yourself and some others that were sitting up at the front. That was one of those moments where when the media hit that within the cultural communities, I think that created a stir. It created a good stir because it was like, what's really going on? How are these workers actually being treated? These are not just workers; they're elders in the community. They're respected people from their families and community, and all of a sudden here they are working jobs where they're not being treated well. I think that created sort of a really good positive stir. I guess the negative, like the one thing I didn't really like, was the treatment of the stuff that I heard by the supervisor or supervisors that was taking place. Obviously, it was kind of disgusting to hear of. These are people who've left their own countries to come to Canada to just help their own families, and they're not treated with respect. Yet, within all cultures, we have the ideology anyway that we're supposed to respect our elders. But it definitely wasn't happening in the U of A at that time by some of those supervisors who were either telling people to sit on the floor to eat or hurry up from your break, or just mistreating them in those little ways. I guess part of it too is like to lie to them, to say that you're actually a subcontractor. Come on, what are you doing? It's for your own self interest. All you care about is your own self. You don't care about anybody else. That's the harsh reality. Is it something that happens in the whole janitorial world? It seems to be that way. People have a contract or they think they have a contract, and they hire their friends or family to do the job. Then all of a sudden it's like everybody down the chain gets less and less money. What are you doing? You're basically turning people who were workers into what they believe are owners of others in a sense. I wouldn't say slaves, but I

would say you're treating them that way. Even with anybody that was a temporary foreign worker within those programs as well, that's what happens. They're actually being treated like legal slaver, and this is in Canada. It shouldn't be happening. I guess the injustices to that is what happens to them if they do lose their job? The employer is going to send them back to their countries. How are they being treated as well if they have children, especially if they had their children here? Their children are Canadian, but they have no status. So what happens to the kids? That's always a hardship for the family and the mother of that child as well to think about. This is something I think not only society needs to think about but I think governments need to wake up; big organizations need to wake up, and start treating workers as human beings and not just as a number.

Q: There was one supervisor who was a Punjabi woman, and she was doing the same thing.

RS: I sort of remember those stories from the workers as well. Here they are. Only a little while back she was also a worker, and all of a sudden you give somebody a title and it goes to their head. That's what they felt like, is you give that person a title and all of a sudden they feel like they've got some sort of superiority over you. It's not a good feeling, especially when these are your elders that you're mistreating now. Why would we expect that from anybody? That's just not fair treatment to anybody.

Q: Did it get reported in the local Punjabi language media?

RS: I don't recall, but I do recall there was talks happening within the larger community of Punjabis as well. I think more iconic was when that youth especially, when they had to translate. Of course when it goes to media, before we see it as being translated, people understood it. So it did stir up that sort of ire in the community for sure.

Q: The Sikh student association got involved. Do you remember that?

RS: Yes, I do remember. Part of that was them wanting to have equality. Within Sikhism itself it's like we all need to be treated humanely and within equality. Nobody is above anybody else

technically. Yeah, that was one of the youth actually that I remember. He came out and actually helped translate for the media as well. That was really good.

Q: Can you talk a bit about the extended family aspect?

RS: I guess when let's say a son sponsors their parent over to Canada to live with them, these are multigenerational families. What you have basically is in a household you have the grandparents, you'll have maybe a couple of the uncles, and then the mothers and the fathers and their sons and the children and grandchildren all living under one house. Even today if you go back to India, the houses are set up that way. It's just basically large open areas with lots of rooms and a couple of kitchens. Everybody lives together to support each other, right? It's not like the traditional family here in Canada where it's the average two parents and 2.1 kids or whatever. It's not like that; it's a lot bigger. When you have more people in the family, everybody really wants to just pitch in what they can. Sometimes when they leave their own country it means coming to another country, Canada or wherever they end up, trying to still continue to help the family so the future generation, the grandchildren, will have something better for themselves. That means better education and the ability to go to college, where some of these grandparents may not have ever gone to college. Or if they did, it was a struggle to pay for those fees and stuff like that. I guess it's really about understanding that the larger family groups are there to support each other for sure, especially when you have to feed so many mouths.

Q: A lot of times the sons were working in the trucking industry. So they had union experience, and everybody would be chiming in.

RS: It's interesting now that you mention that. A lot of the houses we went to, because of those multigenerational families, there was at least one or two people that were part of a union already and knew the benefits of it. That could easily have been, without me even speaking in Punjabi, that was easy for them to translate or say to their own parents: this is what I get at my job. I'm a nurse; so I get these benefits: all that kind of stuff. So, then they relate to their jobs and say, hey this is what this union is trying to do. They're trying to get you those benefits or

something better. Typically, as soon as it's a better wage, even if it's 25 or 50 cents or a dollar, that little quarter is a lot for some people. That was really important. When you do have those multigenerational families and one person is part of a union, even one, you have an out. You have somebody there to support you, as well, while you're sitting there having tea and biscuits.

Q: Was there any reference during this campaign to the DATS strike?

RS: No, there was no reference to that at all. The reason I think probably was I don't recall any of the other generation of family being bus drivers. That's probably why. They're all in the trucking industry or in different types of jobs. I don't ever recall any one of them actually being a bus driver.

Q: Did the late-night shiftwork present challenges to you as an organizer?

RS: With this campaign with the janitors at University of Alberta, what was interesting was as organizers we were actually working very odd hours sometimes. Sometimes it meant waiting at a bus stop at 2 o'clock in the morning as people were either getting off or going to a bus or whatever way it was going. Definitely when you have shift workers, you have to sort of change your own schedule to meet their needs. For example, if they're finishing at 7 o'clock in the morning and you know it's going to take them a few hours to get home, they're going to sleep all day, and you try to make the proper arrangements as to when can you meet them before they have to take the bus. I do recall one situation where we met the person and they had to go to work. We said, we'll just drop you off. We'll take you back to the U of A, because that's sort of our central area anyway; we can take you. I do recall that. When you have that interesting thing happening with shiftwork, for sure you have to be able to adapt as an organizer to meet the workers where they are.

Q: You have to know the U of A campus pretty well, too.

RS: Yes, that's true. Especially, like which is the fastest way through not taking the main areas but just going through back alleys and backsides of buildings. For sure, yeah.

Q: With the whole Freedom Trucking convoy, I wondered if they were really truckers, because there were no Punjabis.

RS: I'm in a complete [54:47], not simply because I didn't ever once support the Freedom Rally, but I don't want to be mentioning that in video somewhere where Rashpal's talking about the Freedom convoys; what is he doing?

Q: Can you tell Merryn a bit about your life in Jasper Place?

RS: When you're younger and trying to find yourself, you want to have your own place. I ended up living a couple of blocks from the bus station just off of here. It was kind of interesting, because rent was really cheap, maybe \$500 and all utilities included – water, power, electricity, everything. It's like, great, I can take showers as long as I want. I did live in the area for a few years. What I recall of the area was definitely don't go out at night; it was kind of scary. The bus station itself, I mean it's much better now; it looks a lot cleaner. I actually drive by it every day now because I go to work on the west end here. I can tell you it was kind of scary at night especially-- a lot of nefarious things going on and stuff like that. But I needed to be alone and be myself. So I chose to move here in this area. Luckily, I had a vehicle. So I was able to go places without having to take the bus everywhere. That was kind of good.

Q: Lots of good things about multigenerational families, but not a lot of privacy.

RS: That's true. I do remember the area was always sort of run down. There was always garbage strewn about here and there, and people at night walking around drunk and hollering and screaming like that. It was just one of those things where you stay for a few years and then you realize, okay, I think I need to go back. I need to get out of here; I need to move somewhere else. So then you move on.

Q: That was your first apartment moving away from your family?

RS: Yeah, that was my first one. It was just one of those things. I did it.

Q: Was it a bit like Mill Woods in that it's very culturally diverse?

RS: Actually, if I recall, I was probably the only East Indian person in the area at that time. I don't recall any other East Indians. Maybe a couple of Chinese families and some Indigenous families. But I kind of stuck out as a sore thumb in the area when I did go for walks in the neighbourhood. I didn't see it as a culturally diverse area like Mill Woods. Not at all, no.

Q: There was a story about the Legion not allowing people with turbans.

RS: I certainly heard about it. What was kind of interesting to me was I thought, well, because my dad actually served in the Indian army and of course he wore a turban at that time in the army. I guess part of it was understanding that India fought with the British at that time. It's like, okay, wait a minute, so we were all fighting the oppressors at that time. So why would you not allow the population of the Sikhs that were wearing turbans not to enter a place that we all fought together? That was a weird thing in my mind. I could never understand that with the Legion. For me it was a little bit different, because when I grew up in the Northwest Territories the Legion not only was the place where I knew the men would go to drink, but during the off times there was meetings that were being held there and stuff like that; so everybody went. Nobody ever thought about the hat issue. Maybe I was too young, but I don't recall it as being a major issue.

Q: If you're going to be a member of the Legion, you can't be a Communist.

RS: It's funny, because I think we were in, where were we? We were in some small town as postal workers doing a ratification vote. We had during a couple of spots to use the Legion as the meeting hall; it was the only place we could have. It's like, okay, that's where we're going to use. Nobody ever said anything to me, because I wasn't wearing a turban but I was wearing a bandana. I don't recall anybody saying anything to me. Was it because I was a postal worker and

they didn't know who I was? I don't know; who knows. I have no idea. It's Alberta. What do you expect?

Q: You're involved in a lot of community organizing as well as union stuff. Do you want to talk about that?

RS: Sure. Last year in October there was a group of parents that approached me and said, hey Rashpal, is there anything we can do to help community? One of the parents was actually, my children and her children, they were both in Daly Grove at the time as kids, in kindergarten and stuff. We kind of separated ways because her kids went to another school about grade 5 or 6. We ended up reconnecting somehow. There was a parents' group that was doing a bottle drive at the Crawford Plains School as well last year in July. So I connected with them. We all got together one time in October and said, hey what can we do for community in the southeast of Edmonton? So what we did actually is we formed a group called the Collective Community Initiatives. That was sort of born out of just helping different organizations. We began last year in November by doing a donation drive for the WIN House women's shelter. That was a huge success. I filled up my whole van with feminine products, anything that women needed. There was clothes and socks and anything that was required, and we dropped that off at the WIN House. They were so thrilled that we did that work and were able to collect so much from just three or four parents getting together and putting it out on Facebook. Then in December we reached out to the Hope Mission. They needed winter clothing at that time and stuff like that. So we had the opportunity to collect for them. We ended up filling up two full pickup trucks worth of winter clothing – jackets, socks, and all that kind of stuff. So that was quite the successful event. In January actually there's a group called the Bear Clan, which actually originated in Winnipeg. They have sort of a parent sister company or organization here in Edmonton as well. So we reached out to them and asked them, what do you need? They said, we need knitted items. So I reached out to them in December, because we usually plan a month ahead for all our events that we do. They said, we need knitted items. So we put it out there on Facebook. The Mill Woods Seniors Association actually came by when we did the donation drive at the Southwood Community League. So the Mill Woods Seniors Association came by and they had two or three large bags of knitted items. It was amazing, the amount of stuff we collected.

There was scarves, there was toques, there was hats, there was sweaters. It was just amazing, the amount of stuff that we were able to collect. Judith was one of the organizers with the Bear Clan here in Edmonton. She was so thrilled and she kept texting me: I didn't realize you guys were going to do so much work. In February of this year we took a bit of a break. It was cold and we needed to just rest and stuff, so didn't do anything. Then in March we actually collected for an organization called Kids Kottage. Kids Kottage is basically an organization that if children are taken away from say a domestic abuse issue or some other situation where sometimes the police get involved and there's children in the house, they need a safe respite to go to. So we reached out to them, and again we ended up filling up my van with lots of bags of clothing for children and supplies and food and baby formula, diapers, and all that kind of stuff. That one, when I showed up to drop off the stuff, I asked the lady, so where do you want this stuff? She says, well how much do you have? I said, well I have a few bags in my van. She's like, okay just drive to the back and I'll help you unload. As we started unloading, she was like, your whole van is full. I go, yes it's full. After we finished and put everything down in the basement of their location, she was actually in tears. That was sort of like that heartfelt thing of like, wow, she didn't realize a small parents' group could do that much to collect that much donations for them. That was that, and in April we just finished up a food bank drive at Sobeys on 23rd Avenue and 50th Street. Sobeys was great, because they had pre-made hampers of food in plastic bags with a can of beans and some pasta and some other stuff in there for \$9. They were willing to help out as well. We contacted the food bank a month prior, and they brought their van out. We collected 1,038 kgs of food. I was quite amazed when they told us the number because it was like, wow that was quite a lot. So that was April. Then in May we're actually going to be, what are we doing in May? May is going to be, oh yes, Little Warriors. That's an organization that helps children who have been sexually abused. We're going to be helping them in May.

Q: For Mayday they helped out. . .

RS: So you got to meet Judith?

Q: Ya. She's an awesome leader. . .

RS: It doesn't take much to do that kind of work, the community work. A few hours on a Saturday once a month, and we're doing a lot of really good work with very few number of people. But it's really good, because we're giving back to the community. It doesn't take much. When you see people in tears because you've given them stuff and they're just so happy, that's the best thing that a person can ever have. I say create the poster, do it, and guess what, somebody will donate. Somebody will show up.

[END]