

CAW 2301 History Project



*55 Years of History from
The Workers' Voices*

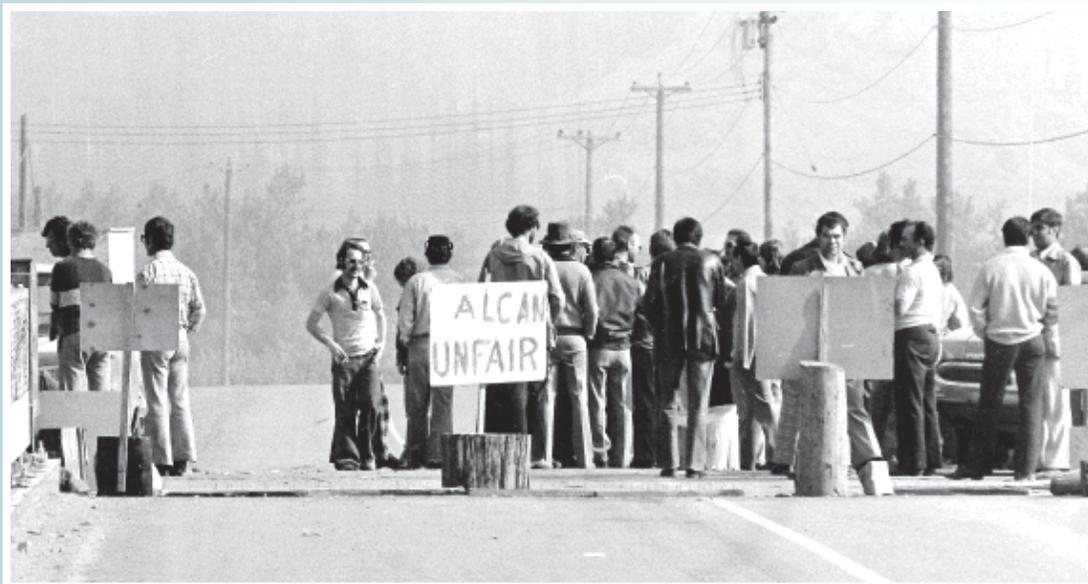
In March of 1974, CASAW changed their name by replacing Aluminum with Association and became the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers. The decision was made to adjust the name of their local union because they wanted to be more inclusive and not solely focused on aluminum workers. Afterwards, CASAW started to look beyond their provincial borders and got in touch with the Federation Des Syndicats Du Secteur Aluminium Inc. (FSSA), which represented Alcan workers in Quebec. The unions partnered together to create an informal coalition, the Aluminum Workers Association (AWA) and they even considered founding a more formal organization.



Wiho Papenbrock - The AWA was basically an informal association of Alcan workers in Quebec and Alcan workers in British Columbia. We had met once or twice a year back and forth and forged that development. There was some talk at that time in the mid-70s about maybe trying to form a formal alliance or form of affiliation between the two unions. That logistically and legally couldn't work. There was some different labour codes, different labour jurisdiction and the language barrier was a problem. So it never got to more than just an affiliation or something we called the Aluminum Workers Association, where we agreed to meet and exchange information and coordinate activities.

1976 WILDCAT STRIKE

The next major event for CASAW occurred when the Anti-Inflation Board guidelines came out in 1975 and decreed wage and price controls during contract negotiations between CASAW and Alcan. In November of that year, Alcan locked out their workers but the union managed to obtain a cooling-off period resulting in a negotiated settlement. CASAW wanted to go on strike because they did not want the contract but, according to Jim Sevigny, "Alcan did their pressure thing" and the government legislated them back to work. In 1976, the union was stuck with a Collective Agreement which gave them wage increases that were lower than inflation; they asked Alcan for some voluntary wage re-openers but this request was denied. Frustration was building within the membership. Before negotiations, the company stacked ingots around the smelter as an indication of the poor market conditions and to warn their workers not to ask for too much. During a union meeting that was discussing the horrendous working conditions and management in Building 226, feelings of dissatisfaction rose to the point where they decided to walk out in a Wildcat Strike. On a side note, the electricians were not too happy with their working situation either.



On June 3rd, 1976, CASAW's legendary Wildcat Strike had begun. By many accounts, this illegal strike was an intense experience. Horst Voigt, Picket Captain at Anderson Creek for the Wildcat Strike, recalls that people threw Molotov cocktails in town.

Charlie Pforte - We were at the picket line here picketing the company. They brought in riot police and suddenly there was 44 policeman, batons, shields, helmets the whole works you know. And they got a few guys, maybe eight or what, and they detained them for a while here in the courthouse jail, locked up there for half a day or something like that. And later released and, uh I don't remember if they had to pay a fine or something. But anyways it was intimidation by the company in cahoots with the government and we were really really mad at the company for playing shenanigans. There were hostile acts committed by some of the members against people who went through the picket lines. Knife in the tires, you know flatten them out, scratch the cars a little bit here and there. You know vandalism and such but I would say it was justified. We are sticking our necks out to promote the membership for a better contract and these guys, they undermine us, they stab us in the back.



Bill Garvin - Everybody just got fed up and walked off the job. And it was an illegal strike and we paid for it, the union. It didn't matter, we were making a point and we made the point. They had to bring in the, we call them the Storm Troopers, the SS, the Nazis, the police, but they were dressed like Storm Troopers, the big shields and all that, the batons and not. Of course they had masks, you couldn't tell who they were. So they just walked up over the railway tracks and pushed the workers back off the company property. It didn't get as nasty as the Yellowknife Strike because there was fun and games on the picket line. Guys going in to work, scabs we call them, going in to work in the trunks of cars and all that. The company had a helicopter bring them in. People, to the day they left the company, they suffered for it. For scabs, the workers blackballed them basically, which is just right. Cause you were trying to fight for them too and then when everybody went back to work and the problem was all solved, they got the benefits that the union was fighting for while they were in there making money working. All the best of food, all the cigars they wanted, and not penny cigars, ten dollar cigars. For weeks after, they were walking around the plant, smoking these things. That's the one thing that unionism doesn't like, scabs. Takes away your right, you don't have any clout with the company because of the scabs, they're willing to go and do anything.

Despite the frustration and the anger at scabs working for the company, the picket lines was a fun place to hang out.

Jim Sevigny - Those were good times. The in place to be was out at the picket line, they had the greatest parties out there in the evenings. They had a caterers truck, where Cors is now, the restaurant had a catering truck so they just filled it full of sandwiches and everything. We'd go out there and the union had paid for it all so we'd go out there and it was some wild times.

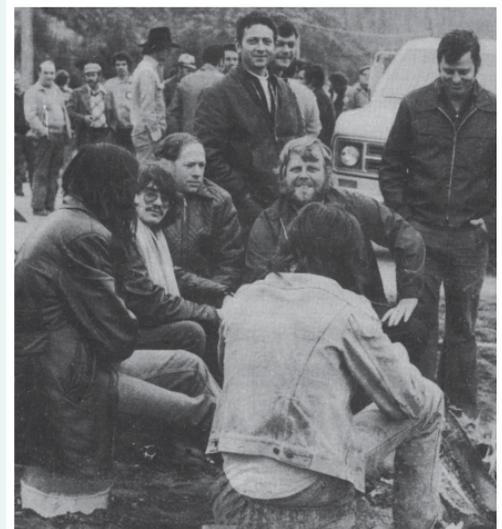
The FSSA assisted CASAW during the Wildcat Strike by sending some of their members to Kitimat.

Wiho Papenbrock - I remember there were eight picketers that Quebec sent out to assist us because they thought, if we were declared illegal and couldn't picket, then we could get the Quebec people to picket and they'll be immune from the BC labour laws, and y'know they couldn't touch them. That didn't quite work that way but I remember I put a lot of them in my basement eh. So a lot of them were staying with me at my house, sort of like unofficial strike headquarters at the Papenbrock house on 14 White Street.

Eighteen days later, on June 21st, the CASAW membership voted on whether they would return to work and the result was a tie with 312 for and 312 against. The union was facing some pretty severe penalties for both their organization and for individual members so the CASAW President, Peter Burton, cast the deciding vote and they returned to work.

It was time for CASAW and its striking members to face the music as Alcan was furious over the illegal strike and wanted to penalize the local union. Horst Voigt notes that "we were wrong legally but morally we were right." He states that the 1976 Wildcat Strike was the "cauldron of CASAW, we proved our mettle." Several CASAW members were arrested during the strike and charged with defying court orders. Wiho Papenbrock remembers that they had barricaded the road so nobody could pass through the striking Alcan workers. They were consequently charged with hijacking and theft of over \$2,000.00 because they did not allow the supply truck to cross their picket line. Papenbrock ended up spending a night in jail. On December 31 of that year, Alcan sued CASAW for \$1.3 million in damages for the Wildcat Strike. CASAW managed to negotiate the amount down to ten percent and they ended up paying \$135,000.00. Twelve individuals were charged but they were able to get off on a technicality so they did not endure any penalties, but three members were given six month suspensions. However, CASAW ensured that the suspended individuals did not suffer through financial hardship by giving them loans.

Brent Morrison - It's quite a big deal when you go on a wildcat strike for three and a half weeks with one of the largest corporations in the world. They don't like you going on a strike, having the right to go on strike in the best of times, the little working man being able to take a big company and head out and just stop their production. You can imagine how big a deal it must have been for a wildcat strike. You know they tried to fire the whole executive at the time but the Labour Board wouldn't let them do that. But they did allow the company to penalize them, they had to work for a number of weeks or months where they would work five days but only get paid for four. And also there were a number of employees that were given huge suspensions at the time, fairly significant suspensions. Ross Slezak actually was just getting started at the union at the time, he was a long time President of the union. He ended up getting about three months in jail.





Ross Slezak was one of CASAW's most dedicated activists and it was through his leadership that the union flourished. According to Jim Sevigny, the 1976 Wildcat Strike was "the beginning of his career, from then on, he just stuck it to the company every chance he got for the rest of his life." Kelly Lorain worked with Slezak and says that "Ross, he was like a rock. Working with him on our shift for all those years, anytime you needed help, talk to him, he'll give you all the time in the world."

Jim Sevigny - He touched everybody, he was the go-to guy. Even if you knew you were wrong, you'd get Ross and he'd get an argument in there and he'd get you off for something y'know because he had the gift of the gab.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Despite losing \$135,000.00 to Alcan over the Wildcat Strike, by 1977, CASAW was financially secure and had over a million dollars in their bank account. They used a large chunk of their funds on their next battle on health and safety issues. Horst Voigt reminisces on when there were quite a few Canadians coming in to Kitimat to work for Alcan around 1974. These people were young individuals with university educations and socialist mind frames. This influx of people signified when CASAW embarked on an era focused on health and safety.



Horst Voigt - A young fellow arrived here in Kitimat and he started with Alcan in casting. He started his job and the foreman showed him the tow motor he was supposed to drive. And the fellow looked at it and says, 'It has no rear view mirror.' The foreman says, 'Well, what's the problem?' He says, 'You can't drive a forklift without a rear view mirror.' So they started arguing and guess what? He put a tag on the tow motor, he tagged the tow motor out, and nobody could touch the tow motor. So the foreman got all upset, and then he went to all the other tow motors, and there were eight of them, and he tagged them all out. That was the style these young guys came. They started another revolution really, so to speak. And of course they all became shop stewards and all that. And so everybody looked, sat back, and said, 'Holy Moses, what's going on here eh?' But they had good points, they knew the labour laws, they knew all the regulations. It was like Steelworkers knowing in one respect, but these guys, they knew everything too. And so they wanted to build a new society. Basically what happened is the young people took over the local, that's really what happened basically. Because I was a shop steward and I was in the shop stewards council and so forth and these guys had energy.