

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Art Kube

Date: April 5, 2016

Location: Art's Home

Interviewers: David Yorke, Ken Novakowski

Videographer: Bailey Garden

Running Time: 01:45:15

Key Subjects: Alberta labour movement; B.C. Federation of Labour; Canadian Labour Congress; Collective agreements; Cooperative Commonwealth Federation [CCF]; Labour education; Labour history; Labour school; Negotiating; Ontario labour movement; Organizing; Poland; Socialism; Trade unionism; United Steelworkers; White-collar organization;

Art Kube was introduced to the labour movement while growing up in Europe, and moved to Canada as a young man. He was raised in a Socialist household, and soon became involved in organizing workers. He eventually became President of the BC Federation of Labour.

00:00 – 10:44

In the first section of the interview, introductions are made. Art explains why he has dedicated most of his life to the labour movement. He points to his background in the Metalworkers Union, as well as the Socialist faction of the Metalworkers. Art's mother was a member of a trade union, and brought him and his brother up alone, as his father was a Prisoner of War in the Soviet Union [until 1957]. Art and his brother attended a Socialist Kindergarten. He became a member of the Young Falcons, and was on the executive of the youth section of the Metalworkers Union. In 1954, he decided to leave Europe and see the world after finishing his apprenticeship.

Art ended up in Quebec City. He became a landed immigrant within two hours of arrival. He knew some people in Edmonton, so he got on a train and continued West, with \$45 to his name. By the time he arrived 3 days later, funds had dwindled to 50 cents. He had a trade, so he was able to start work right away. He struggled with English, but luckily, a man named Mike Sikora from the Steelworker's Union office could speak some German. The Steelworkers only had about 50 members, where the IWA had nearly 1500. He was paid 75 cents an hour as a steel fabricator when he first arrived in Canada. He worked with many CCF party members, who encouraged him to work up North on the "dewline". He laughs that the second language in Edmonton was "not French, but Ukrainian, German, or Polish", so relocating would force him to learn English. They were offering \$1.40 an hour.

10:45 – 13:15

When Art would return from shifts in Northern Alberta, he would stay with Jimmy Russell, who was a union supervisor. He asked Art if he would help to organize a group of German-speaking steelworkers. They were successful in organizing Dominion Bridge in both Edmonton and Calgary – close to 2000 workers in 2 years. They also formed a co-op, which Art helped to fund. Art joined the CCF around 1956. Floyd Johnson was the president at the time.

13:16 – 20:22

In this section, Art discusses how workers from Europe in the steel fabrication trade often had a previous union connection. They often only needed convincing that the union was a strong negotiating force. Art recalls participating in a one-day general strike in 1954, prior to moving to Canada. The strike was in protest of an attempt to ban the Socialist Party in Austria. Art was brought up in a Socialist household and credits this to building up a “resistance” to later notions of “red-baiting” and the like. He does say that some of the behaviour from the States bled into Canada, as there was an International Union movement.

20:23 – 22:10

In this section, Art makes a point about running against the administration at the Canadian Labour Congress. He says the replacement was chosen by the Board of Directors at the CLC, based on political action.

22:11 – 26:06

In this portion, Art discusses organizing with the Steelworkers. Mine Mill was also organizing workers in the area. He says there was a strong sentiment that “you never go through the back door to get a collective agreement”, and with Mine Mill, that’s exactly what happened. However, that isn’t to say the same did not happen with Steelworkers.

26:07 – 35:03

In this section, Art discusses organizing workers who weren’t in a union at all. “Unless you never came off the farm, you did hear something about the union”. It could offer them job protection and collective agreements which resulted in higher wages overall. Art says you had to overcome the “fear factor”, which came in two forms: a “soft” form, which came from management or employers saying they treat you well, but can’t afford anymore, or a “hard” version, which came in the form of “stooges”. They would “set you up” and get you fired – Art was fired 7 times, but was reinstated 5 times. Jimmy Russell worked with other unions, and had an understanding that “new construction goes to the building trades”. This made it much easier to deal with other unions. When dealing with non-union companies, workers needed assurance that they would be reinstated or cared

for if they lost their job. Companies used to be “quite good” at hiring those who were fired from non-union jobs. To a certain extent, it was difficult to organize in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Art would point out to unorganized workers – “What chance do you have to deal with your boss on an even basis? But if a few people get together, he has to at least listen to you.” He had to make a lot of personal contacts.

35:04 – 46:00

In this section, Art reflects on particular individuals. Bill Mahoney was a “Liberal...very devout Catholic”, who organized for the Steelworkers out of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Charlie Mallard was a strong CCF member. There were 3-4 groups “engaging the hearts and minds of working people”: the Trades and Labour Congress, the CIO/CCL, company unions, and the Catholic Syndicate. There was always a desire for everyone to get together. Charlie Mallard left his position as the national director for Steel to join the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Mahoney was up as a replacement for a local district supervisor, but opted for the national director position instead. Art points out that in Steel, “all the power is in the local”. Mahoney became a strong supporter of the New Democratic Party [NDP].

46:01 – 50:00

In this section, Art discusses Len Williams and other staff members of the Steelworkers Union. He points out that all the staff had arrived at the Union after struggles. He recalls Sue Cook and Tom Montgomery as the only ones who had previous contacts at the Union. He names several individuals who went on to work as Members of Parliament and other positions.

50:01 – 58:58

In this section, Art clarifies that he was only a staff member with Steelworkers for 5 weeks. He worked as a contractor aside from that. It also gave him a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction. He became a staff member at the CLC after being fired in Thompson. The Executive Council of the CLC wanted all the affiliate unions to stay out of Sudbury so that they could organize first, then all the unions with jurisdiction in the area would be brought in later, to judge which would take over. Art’s role with the CLC was to do this organizing in the area, which was challenging. He was in charge of the local labour councils, as well as setting up contract agreements, etc. It was a well-paid industry at that time (around 1967). The CLC had a position called the “white-collar organizer”, which Art held for a time. A large part of the OPIU membership were people working in union offices, and expected “the model contract”.

58:59 – 1:03:00

Art knew he could get a lot of help from public sector unions, since they have to negotiate comparably to the private sector. He would ride the streetcar, asking individuals one by

one to join, and also held a press conference. They announced they'd be setting up an office in London, Ontario. Shortly after, a London based employer announced a 22% wage increase across the board, and others followed suit. This made it even harder to get folks signed up.

1:03:01 – 1:06:10

Another thing that Art did was stimulate organization of white-collar workers in tech industries where the union had the plant organized. Altogether, there was a fairly good increase in union organization, and it was done because Art convinced the Executive Council of the CLC to provide per capita funding. Many unions in the area picked up members as a result, such as CUPE.

1:06:11 – 1:08:00

Art and Donald McDonald (former bookkeeper for a co-op in Cape Breton, United Mineworkers) “crossed swords” time to time, as Donald was not a fan of Art’s steelworker associations. Donald defeated Bill Mahoney for a secretary-treasurer role at one point.

1:08:01 – 01:10:40

The full-time secretary treasurer for the CCL was a United Mineworker, Pat Conroy. He “got himself into a real mess” because he said people on the Executive Council had to be Canadians, which the convention did not support. As his replacement, they found the former leader of the Nova Scotia CCF party – Donald McDonald?

01:10:41 – 01:21:18

After that, Art says in his own words, “I committed political suicide” – he ran for the secretary treasurer position at the CLC. He ran against Neil Reimer, from Alberta, and Donald McDonald as a right-wing candidate. Art was defeated. He was still on staff with the CLC at that time. Art felt he had a right to have a say in the policies he was enacting and putting into practice. After the election, Art drove back to Ottawa and called Joe Morris. He asked his wife Mary to get his packsack ready, as he expected to be working hard labour again. When he met with Joe Morris (new president of the CLC), Joe said he was glad to have Art back. However, a few on staff, such as John Montgomery, thought he should have been fired. Joe offered him two regional director positions – Newfoundland or B.C., and requested he take the BC position. He specifically requested Art ensure the BC Fed didn’t pass a resolution, “kick the shit out of the Congress,” and let the Fisherman’s Union back in the Federation. Art quickly found the best way to have the Congress’ present felt was through labour education. This was in the mid-1970s – George Johnston was Federation President, Len Guy was Secretary Treasurer. The CLC did not appreciate the structure of the Fisherman’s Union, which they felt gave them overrepresentation in terms of delegates.

01:21:19 – 01:33:18

In this section, Art talks more about becoming the regional director in B.C. around 1975, which became a bit of a news item. Art was always very open, and would say, “You don’t have to be afraid that I’m going to “red-bait” you... but I am going to outwork you.” Art made it his goal for the CLC to have a strong labour history education program. He attributes a large amount of the success in 1983 to this, as it empowered large numbers of workers to mobilize. One of the first things Art did was to write a constitution, which included regulations for the Fisherman’s Union. He doesn’t take credit for the BCTF joining the Federation of Labour, but he says “at least I talked to [them]”. The Harrison education program (run out of Parksville) started under Art’s direction. Art always felt that labour education had to be a “living thing”; “brick and mortar is not my cup of tea... I prefer money for programs.” He points to Victoria and Lethbridge as examples of a Labour Council which dedicated a lot of money to “maintaining their palace”. Labour education is not academic, in Art’s opinion, but rather a tool of the trade union movement and should therefore be held in the community, rather than “academic museums which have never been friendly to labour”. Art took his model from the Swedish and other European models of labour education, where workers are not asked to spend 5 days at work and the weekend in “labour school”.

01:33:19 – 01:43:45

In this section, Art talks about Jim Kinnaird. Art refers to him as “gentleman Jim”, and says “he was the face of the labour movement, and I was the worker”. Jim was great at building a consensus. He was acting deputy minister when he was elected President of the BC Fed. Jim would always tell Art to “take it easy”. When he suddenly passed away in office, it ultimately set the stage for Art’s position at the Fed. Art was not the only regional director to go on to hold the Presidency in the Fed. Jerry Stoney (IWA) wanted the position very badly, but didn’t have the support. Art says his success was that he never asked people to do things for him – he asked them to do it for the labour movement. He also ensured he knew everyone who had ever attended the Winter school. The other individual going for the position was Lief Hansen, of the Meatcutters. Art says George Johnston (another Meatcutter) did big things for the labour movement.

01:43:46 – 1:45:14

In the final section, Art mentions how he would usually struggle with a season of depression every year, when Winter (labour) school would come to an end. It was such an exciting and productive time for him that he would become disheartened when it was over. The interview is wrapped up, and Art agrees that another interview may be necessary, to discuss the Solidarity events of 1983.