

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Bill Zander

Date: June 6, 2016

Location: BC Labour Heritage Centre

Interviewers: Sean Griffin, Dan Keeton

Videographer: Ruby Best

Running Time: 01:39:42

Key Subjects: Agency surveillance and investigation; B.C. Federation of Labour; Building & Construction Trades; Canadian autonomy; Canadian Labour Congress; Carpenter's Union; Collective agreements; Communist Party of Canada; Injunctions; International trade union movement; International Woodworkers of America (IWA); Labour education; Negotiating; Organizing; "Right to Work"; Royal Canadian Air Force; Socialism; Solidarity movement (1983); Trade unionism; Union newspapers;

Bill Zander was born at home in Myrtle, a town of around 218 people north of New Battleford, Saskatchewan, Nov. 22, 1934, but spent his childhood in Vancouver, B.C.

00:00 – 04:15

In the first part of the interview, Bill introduces himself and his personal history. His family moved to Vancouver, B.C. when he was 2 years old. His father explained to him that after 1933, there was no work whatsoever in Saskatchewan, which forced the move. His father worked as a contactor (carpenter). They initially lived in a rooming house on Burrard, 2 blocks south of Georgia. Bill doesn't recall any sense of poverty growing up, but he remembers hearing lots about the carpentry and construction trade as a teenager at the dinner table. His father got a job at the shipyards which opened up around WWII – "the first good, steady job he had".

04:15 – 10:35

In this section, Bill describes his first working experiences. The family had moved to Delta, which was "farm country". He started in a bank, joined the Air Force [1952], then returned and worked at a lumber mill along the Fraser River. He gravitated towards the lumber industry – he worked for a time as a blockman for shingleweavers, where he met Harold Pritchett. Early on in his life, Bill had an influence from his older brother and a few uncles, who were members of the Communist Party. His father, "a good Dutch immigrant", was not in favour of that. Bill says even as a young man he was "on the left" politically and it was an "anomaly" in his history when he joined the Air Force (to see the world). He was working at the dry kilns in New Westminster, and became plant representative with the IWA. He ended up getting fired for siding with the union over the employer several times. This prevented him from further mill work. Harry Byrd was the

superintendent for Commonwealth Construction, and offered him work as a labourer. From there, he joined the Burns Lake local as a carpenter. There was no training provided in those days, though there was an apprenticeship program.

10:36 – 17:10

In this section, Bill describes how “hustle” was prioritized in the carpentry industry, over any formal education. Carpentry was a popular trade. Bill prides himself in the fact he became a good “finisher”. He worked up there for 6 months, and sent money back to his wife. He was married and had 3 kids by age 25. He was involved with the first election of Jerry Stoney to the IWA local – he ran against Joe Madden. He came back down to the Vancouver area and was involved in the local (1251, New Westminster) right away. There were a lot of smaller contractors around – in terms of new highrises and 3-story walk-ups being built, everything was union-made. He recalls the Sandman Hotel in Vancouver was the first non-union highrise to be built at the time, with some opposition. School and hospital additions were frequent contracts.

17:11 – 24:30

Bill talks more about how he became a leader in the union, and his politics. He became a job steward with Local 1251, and was part of a committee among leaders of the local. There was opposition to many of these leaders, and Bill was eventually asked to run as a Business Agent. He was hesitant at first, but was elected “in spite of the Red-baiting”. He had previously become a member of the Communist Party. Bill tells a family story in which his father reported his older brother to the RCMP for being a Communist. He recalls a night when in the Air Force that made him question the politics of the “Cold War”. Harvey Murphy, Homer Stevens, and Harold Pritchett were individuals he had encountered which influenced him positively. His advocacy on behalf of the workers is what he points to for his successful election (and re-election). Bill often ran without opposition. The RCMP and CSIS investigated him during some of these elections. This was around 1958-1962.

24:31 – 29:48

The construction industry was constantly organizing at that time. It wasn't until developers came in and promoted the use of subcontractors that union-sign up became less common. Bill would travel to individual job sites and get workers signed up. The membership grew to 17 000 in the Carpenter's Union in the province (up until 1984). Across the border, the Right to Work issue influenced Canada to follow suit. Bill points to Kerkhoff as an individual used by the Social Credit government in B.C. to “break the back of the building trades” in the early 1970's. He also points to the fact that there are a dozen trade unions involved in the construction trade – plumbers, carpenters, etc. which need to be coordinated.

29:49 – 37:04

In this section, Bill discusses the topic of injunctions. He recalls a “kerfuffle” (demonstration) that occurred in a New Westminster hotel, hosting the Social Credit party meeting around 1971 before the NDP came to power. The building trades had gone on a general strike and were ordered back to work. They did not comply with the back to work order, and the RCMP (under command of the Attorney General) raided the local offices of the Carpenter’s Union. The injunctions against the building trades at that time were later thrown out when the NDP took office in 1973. Bill refers to the “six-pack” of unions that were not wavering under the back to work orders – the Carpenter’s, the Electricians, Plumbers, and a few others; yet, there was a lot of fear, even among the Carpenter’s Union. There was a lot of discussion amongst the Executives of possibly going back, as they were facing enormous fines that could ultimately bankrupt the unions. Arnold Smith was the President of the Carpenter’s Union at that time, and was “pure gold” in Bill’s opinion. He recalls meeting with Arnold about their fears, to which Arnold replied, “...if you want to hand the keys of this office over to the Government, go ahead and do it, but I’m not having any part of it.” Bill says while he and others considered themselves militant, Arnold was the “real militant”. Having the NDP elected was seen as a huge victory by the building trades.

37:05 – 42:40

In this part of the interview, Bill discusses the support from the labour movement during actions such as those previously mentioned. They received a lot of support, and it became even more so after the NDP was elected. However, the Social Credit party did return, and the “right to work” movement continued to impact the trades. He also discusses the presence of the CRLA (Construction Regulation and Labour Association) in the 1960s which helped to regulate jobsites, set pay rates, etc. The 7-hour work day came in around 1965. Bill says the Penny Farthing dispute was a turning point in the trades. He feels that a civilian’s picket may have made a difference in the case of injunctions – the trades often had the support of the community despite being told not to picket.

42:41 – 50:35

In this section, Bill notes the current state of organizing in the building trades. He points to the “fracturing” of the many different trades as one of the contributors to today’s labour issues. He also describes his transition from Business Agent, which he was for 6 years, to Provincial Council President. He was elected by the Provincial and Canadian [Federal] Council of the Carpenter’s Union. Arnold Smith wanted Bill to run. Bill was the President for 14 years – from around 1975 on. He retired in 1991. The Council, he says, “had no teeth” and was influenced by the International portion of the Union. Bill spoke at many different conferences and handed out leaflets in favour of Canadian autonomy, and

was part of the movement away from the International. The International pulled them out of the Canadian Labour Congress, which was “typical”. Bill and the Canadian Council refused to be cut out of anything and insisted on rejoining the CLC, against the International’s wishes. They also belonged to the BC Federation of Labour. The Canadian Federation of Labour was an attempt at breaking away from the international movement, but it never moved forward in terms of true Canadian autonomy (there was only one conference in Winnipeg).

50:36 – 58:33

In this section, Bill further explains the attempts at Canadian autonomy in the Carpenter’s Union. They had “de facto” autonomy in that they would not allow the International to influence specific locals, but they continued to pay dues to the International Union. Bill played a large role in the International/National dealings. The International had more influence in provinces such as Ontario, less so British Columbia. “Kerfuffles” following Bill’s retirement continue to include issues regarding the International’s involvement. There is now effectively two separate unions operating in B.C. – one associated with the International, and the “Canadian breakaway” [became part of Unifor/other groups]. Bill describes it as “a hell of a mess” for a carpenter to navigate today, as different unions have different jobs/contracts.

58:34 – 01:04:31

In this section, Bill further discusses his membership and activism in the Communist party. He discusses a broad caucus of individuals that would often meet prior to Carpenter’s conventions. Many would be Communist Party members, but not all. There was often an issue which the caucus would attempt to bring focus to at the upcoming Convention [often education]. This was a powerful organizing force in the Union, but also led to calls of “red-baiting” from others. Bill says there was some instances in which individuals from the party would attempt “high-handedness” to push certain issues forward from the top – “it was wrong”, and he understands why some would go after them. Bill feels the IWA breakaway is one example of a mistake made by the Party influence, while others may disagree. Bill says the Party acted as a “compass” for him, and his family motto is “to share is fair”, which also sums up his ideologies.

01:04:32 – 01:05:56

In this part of the interview, Bill describes how, in his opinion, the trade unionists have lost their sense of self-worth. He feels someone should lecture at the BC Fed convention that “if it wasn’t for labour, there wouldn’t be a floor to stand on...” – Bill says that workers are convinced that they are the problem.

01:05:57 – 01:11:30

Bill returns to the topic of surveillance and investigation by the RCMP and other agencies (CSIS, etc.). He had multiple experiences in which he was investigated for his Communist Party affiliations. He notes that some members of the union were also agents of the RCMP. He was contacted by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association at one point regarding alleged CSIS surveillance, which they wanted to raise attention to as an issue. Bill was all for it, but he never heard any more of it. They wrote a notice to the membership at one point that if they were harassed by RCMP, to let executives know.

01:11:31 – 01:14:51

In this section, Bill discusses the issue of party association within the Trade Union Movement (for example, being part of the NDP). He, as well as others, feel it was a mistake in retrospect. Bill feels the Trade Union Movement represents working people under certain conditions, and needs to speak out for those people, regardless of political party affiliation.

01:14:52 – 01:26:18

Bill discusses Operation Solidarity. He was a member of the BC Fed's Executive Council at that time. When it first started, it was "euphoric; we were going to fight". There were great meetings around the province. He spoke with Father Jim Roberts at one point. However, he laments the Kelowna Accord, relating it to the Penny Farthing issue described earlier – "it was a shame that the rug was pulled out from underneath it". He recalls there were carpenters who actually cried when they were told they would have to come off the Penny Farthing strike, and the same thing with Solidarity. He recalls attending one particular Solidarity meeting in New Westminster, where both Father Roberts and Art Kube spoke, and Art broke down in tears. Bill was taken aback, as he still felt things were going great at that time. He was not in attendance at the meeting of the BC Fed executives, in which the Kelowna Accord decision was made. Bill says it was a "mistake" that no written contract was signed – but he does point out that it was a collective decision made by the council, not solely by Jack Munroe. He cannot recall any particular discussions by the Executive Council on the private sector's involvement. Many people among building trades were very upset about the Kelowna Accord – he says the "average working" person was likely more upset than those who were more involved in the trade union politics. They likely felt betrayal and a sense of loss and confusion. He recalls a similar disappointment around the "Right to Work" movement at a mill in Port Alberni. People there were so upset, the meeting almost resulted in an altercation.

01:26:19 – 01:30:20

Bill further explains the issue in Port Alberni mentioned previously – it was in the 1990's. It was another incident in which people felt betrayal. Bill describes it as a "game of chess" in which you have to think several moves ahead before making big decisions. Bill says "it's a slippery slope" – these losses may have contributed to some of the decline of union

membership in the building trades. He says, “You become acclimated to losing”. He also points to the loss of dedicated labour reporters at many major newspapers.

01:30:21 – 01:33:10

In this section, Bill describes the Carpenter’s Union newspaper, which was purposefully maintained as an educational tool. Bill feels this is important, and a part of the labour movement which isn’t being filled. He says the response he gets is “it’s all on the internet now”, but he says that paper still serves a purpose for ease of sharing, especially among the older generation.

01:33:11 – 01:39:46

In the final section of the interview, labour education is discussed, as well as member participation. Bill doesn’t feel it is a “leftist” priority, but rather a labour priority. The Carpenter’s Union invited all types of educators to speak at their conventions. Bill points out that some Unions do not even hold a convention – “How do you represent people if you don’t have dialogue... on what you’re doing?” There was often high interest within the union, and meetings were well attended. He wraps up by reflecting on how the union has changed since his time there. He also discusses how the Carpenter’s Union first promoted female participation in the union.