

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Peter Burton

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Interviewers: Ken Novakowski, Bailey Garden

Videographer: Bailey Garden

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Peter Burton was born in Pembroke, Ontario, and worked for the Georgia Straight in Vancouver before going into the resource industry in northern BC. Peter was President of CASAW in 1976, when the Wildcat strike by AlCan smelter workers in Kitimat occurred in response to wage control legislation introduced by the federal government, under Pierre Trudeau.

00:00 – 05:30

In the first part of the interview, Peter introduces himself and his background. He was born in Pembroke, Ontario, and grew up in Toronto. His father was a WWI veteran and a senior bureaucrat with the City of Toronto, so it was not a unionized household. Peter's first summer job was with the City, and city workers organized under CUPE were going to go on strike, to Peter's distress. He recalls his father telling him, "If they go on strike, you go on strike. Never cross the picket line." The Vietnam War was a polarizing and radicalizing experience for Peter as a young man, as it was for many others, and forced him to ask questions about society and become familiar with progressive ideas. Peter graduated from Western University in 1966 and worked for Expo '67 during the following year. He attended the University of Toronto for another year, before moving out west "with no great plan" other than to work. His first job in BC was running the Vancouver Committee to Aid American War Objectors, from 1969-1970. In 1970, he began writing and editing for the Georgia Straight for several years. They paid 50 cents a column at that time.

05:31 – 11:47

Peter met a woman while he worked at the Straight and they moved in together. She was a new teacher and got a job in Kitimat at the high school, so they moved up north in 1973. Peter got a job with Eurocan Logging, and later moved to the Eurocan pulp mill. He had no desire to work for AlCan, due to their mining practices in other countries. He jokes that he was “probably the worst chokerman in the history of coastal logging, but it was still an interesting experience”. He was part of the IWA at this job, but eventually quit in 1974. His wife was pregnant at the time, and AlCan was hiring, so he applied despite his hesitation. Because of his background working with the Straight, he quickly became involved with the union, first at the shop steward level, and later writing the union newsletter. CASAW had replaced the Steelworkers as the union for the site after an effort in 1972 to move away from the International union governmental structure. The business agent for CASAW was elected. Kitimat had a very high turnover rate for workers at that time, so AlCan chose to “re-deploy” workers as opposed to laying them off. Peter was moved around from job to job with this strategy, but he enjoyed the variety, unlike most workers who preferred stability. Between 1974 – 1975, Peter replaced another member as Treasurer of the local, and worked in many different parts of the operation. The only section he never worked in was pot-lines, of which there were 8. There were around 2000 – 2500 workers on site at the time. Peter recalls an unclean and unsafe work environment, which encouraged him to become more involved.

11:48 – 17:32

In 1975, CASAW was bargaining when the wage control legislation was introduced by the federal government. “For anyone who remembers, inflation was running at very high rates”. AlCan had historically paid the same wage increases as the pulp and paper union rates. The union settled on a rate, which fell under the newly introduced wage and price controls, and AlCan could not legally fulfill the agreement. This reached an impasse around the fall of 1975, and AlCan initiated a lockout of the workers. Peter describes the geography of the smelter and the mechanics of production, two important features to understanding the strike itself. There is only one privately owned road to and from the smelter itself, and the cost of shutting down and starting up the smelter is quite significant for the company. The union appealed for an exemption from the restrictions because of a historical relationship to the anti-inflation board, which lost, and as a result the rates were restricted under the new legislation in the collective agreement. This was a source of “significant discontent”. Peter points out that the nature of smelter work makes it vulnerable to individual or collective discontent and sabotage. AlCan had thousands of employees across Canada, and was very conscious of the fact that any decisions made at one site would have a ripple effect to other sites and bargaining units. Following the collective agreement, a lot of workers felt they had been cheated or wronged.

17:33 – 20:52

Peter describes a “growing discontent” with working conditions in general among what was a “skewed workforce”. He estimates around 20-25% of workers at the time had been there since operations started in the 1950s, and the greater bulk of the workforce was extremely young and new to the job, with almost nobody representing the middle generation with 4-18 years seniority. Peter feels the product of such a young work force was energy and ambition towards radical change. There were elections for President coming up in 1976, and Peter was encouraged to run despite only being there 2 years. He was elected to the position on a platform of rectifying the injustice that had been done with the 1975 collective agreement, without a real plan of how to do so. AlCan representatives have theorized that there was a long-term plan that led to the wildcat strike, but Peter says that was not the case.

20:53 – 28:42

Peter recalls the beginning of the wildcat strike. Peter and Wiho were called out to a welding shop where over 100 welders refused to work. Wiho Papenbrock was the Vice President or Secretary Treasurer at the time, and later went on to work for BCGEU. Tradesmen in canning shops and other shops around the plant put down their tools, and a general walk-out took place after about 6-8 hours. A picket line was put in place outside the plant, blocking the only road in and out. AlCan managerial staff worked to keep the plant in operation, anxious to avoid an unorderly shutdown or “cold shut”, which would result in metal freezing in furnaces and pots and extreme damage to equipment. AlCan was bargaining with the union representing smelter workers in Quebec, largely from a Francophone region. As far as Peter recalls, their strike occurred slightly after the wildcat in Kitimat began. Very shortly, the Labour Relations Board issued a back to work order, and the workers voted against returning to work. The elected Business Agent at the time spoke out in favour of returning to work, but workers overwhelmingly refused. AlCan filed an order in court and served an injunction to the union, which prompted another vote among members. Peter was aware of a series of labour disputes in the 1960's at Lenkirk-Electric, and the Fisherman's Strike, to name a few – in which organizers were jailed for contempt of court, and he was conscious of the fact this could happen in Kitimat. AlCan brought in supervisory staff from Quebec, delivering them to the site by boat or helicopter to avoid the picket line, and some membership started going to work, breaking the strike.

28:43 – 37:12

Peter describes an “interesting workforce” at the time, which was comprised of largely Greek, German, Portuguese and Italian communities. The picket line was barricading the road, and at various times, there would be anywhere from 30-60 to 600-700 people blocking the road, and it often became a “party time” atmosphere. Peter met several times with the staff sergeant of the RCMP and Peter Cameron, then a member of the Labour

Relations Board. Even more people voted in favour of staying on strike in the second vote, after the injunction, and so it continued for some time. The company made some initiatives to try to resolve the issue, but they went nowhere. Peter recalls the morning of June 12th, when RCMP cars, buses and riot police stormed the picket line in the early hours of the day. There were about 30 people on the line, and Peter was in his car with labour reporters Rod Mickleburgh and Joan Collins. The RCMP demanded the group surrender. Facing off with the police, a worker named Russ hoisted a log above his head and yelled, “Charge!” in mockery of the war-like conditions created by the RCMP. The group surrendered, and Peter was taken by bus to jail in Terrace, where he and others were held for around 8 hours. A representative from the Labour Relations Board had previously told Peter that his file at the RCMP was already large, from the “Red Squad” investigations of alleged communism/radicalism during his time at the Georgia Strait and his involvement with anti-war protests. Peter had a brother-in-law that worked for the Red Squad.

37:13 – 39:30

Peter recalls an incident in which a union member came to his house and requested permission to blow up the pumping station. The smelter uses a huge amount of electricity which needs to be water cooled and passed through transformers, and the pumping station pulled water from the nearby river. A group of workers, none of which were known to Peter and none of whom were active in the union, had already arranged dynamite around the station and back-up tank, but wanted his permission before proceeding. Peter realized, “Even if you hadn’t come and asked me, nobody would’ve believed that I wouldn’t- didn’t know about it, and I’d go to jail for a long period of time, but way more fundamentally than that, there’s 20 – I think 2500 hourly paid workers – they’ll be out of work maybe forever, but certainly for a long period of time. They’ll make that decision, not some anonymous group of guys who wanna blow things up.” Peter assumes the RCMP heard about this plan, as trained dogs were brought in to the site shortly after. One worker was hassled because his car came up positive for traces of dynamite. This was one of the more dramatic examples of police interactions during that period.

39:31 – 45:11

After Peter was released from jail, the numbers of striking union members returning to work started to increase, enough that the company was able to maintain operation (though not full production). Out of the arrests, 31-32 workers were charged with “Mischief”, which is a hybrid offense under the Criminal Code that can be a misdemeanour or a more serious charge with varying maximum sentences – anywhere from 6 months to 5 years in prison. The strike carried on until another court order was issued on the 21st of June, and another union vote was held: this time, it was split exactly 50/50 on whether to stay out or return to work. The company never believed that it was

truly a tie, in which Peter had the deciding vote as the union President. He made the difficult decision to end the strike and return to work. Kent Rowley was the head of the Canadian Confederation of Unions (CCU), with which CASAW was affiliated, and he had come out to Kitimat following the arrests. He was against Peter's decision to go back to work, and felt if they had the support of 1/3 of the workforce, they could win the battle. Peter disagreed, and the next day, AlCan initiated contempt of court proceedings against the union and around 34 specific members. They had fired and replaced their company law firm, and the timing became significant in the way things played out. The company had also initiated a lawsuit against the union itself, along with Peter, Wiho Papenbrock and Jim Brisbois (treasurer), for 1.3 million dollars. Despite this litigation, AlCan was also trying to "normalize relations" with workers again, as they were vulnerable to individual or group hostility. They had fired 30-odd people, including Peter. The first issue to be dealt with was the terminations.

45:12 – 52:55

The vice-chair who oversaw the termination hearings in Kitimat was John Baigent, a pro-labour lawyer who overturned the discharges and substituted six-month suspensions in their place. In the interim, Peter had resigned as President and applied to be elected Business Agent, which is the position he held throughout the court process. There was a lot of media attention throughout the strike, and Peter had flown down to the Labour Relations Board for various hearings, including a meeting with Alan Williams, then Minister of Labour and Deputy Minister Jim Matkin. Peter vaguely recalls speaking at a rally during the strike, though doesn't recall what he said. Bargaining was on the horizon in 1977, as the collective agreement was set to expire. Peter's mischief trial went to the Supreme Court, and he was tried first. All the evidence introduced were photos of Peter either speaking with police or speaking with employers at the gates – essentially, there was no evidence of his participation in any blockade. There was one photo of him speaking to the crowd with his back turned, which their witness could not positively identify Peter in, and so he was acquitted along with the others charged. He got to watch the RCMP burn the photograph and fingerprints they had taken from him upon arrest. The company appealed John Baigent's decision to substitute a suspension, which was upheld. The next trial to go to court was for the charge of contempt; CASAW hired two lawyers, Leo McGrady and Ian Donald.

52:56 – 54:40

Peter recalls Leo telling him to pack a toothbrush for the trial, because he wouldn't be going home for a couple of years. The judge hearing the trial was Justice Henry Hutchin, and found that the application for contempt citation had been made the day after the strike ended, and that the workers had defied an order from the Labour Relations Board, rather than the Court of Canada. This was distinguished from the earlier cases of contempt, where the court-ordered injunction was violated, whereas this contempt had

been purged by the return to work the day before. AlCan claimed they had given directions to their previous law firm to initiate proceedings prior to the strike's end, but that didn't happen in fact. The case was dropped as a result.

54:41 – 57:06

After the strike, there was a lot of internal retaliation against union members who had crossed the picket line. Peter was aware of this, but was not involved in any way, and chose to feign ignorance until Ian Donald contacted him and requested he put a stop to it. This was prompted by an attempted firebombing at the home of a pair of workers who had crossed the line. The workers were not home, but their wives and children were, and fortunately the firebomber was drunk and incompetent at the time. Peter had a meeting at the union hall and requested the workers to halt plans for any future retaliation.

57:07 – 58:15

The final trial to go to court was the 1.3-million-dollar lawsuit against Wiho, Jim and Peter, and the union was going into bargaining at the same time. This was Peter's first time bargaining for an agreement, and he learned a lot.

58:16 – 01:02:28

At the same time, the wildcat strike was happening in Kitimat, AlCan workers in Quebec went on strike. The union sent some workers from Quebec to bolster the morale of strikers in Kitimat. The workers in Quebec deliberately sabotaged AlCan, doing a cold shut of the smelter and destroying files in the President's office, in hopes that increased costs for the company would force them to meet the union's demands. This ultimately had the reverse effect, as it resulted in a long and bitter dispute that went on beyond the end of the Kitimat wildcat strike. This became important, because it fueled the idea that there was a conspiracy between the workers in B.C. and Quebec to have simultaneous Wildcat strikes. While there was lots of communication back and forth, there wasn't any real plan to coordinate the two, and they were both spontaneous, independent actions. However, Peter credits the simultaneous strikes with providing a sense of solidarity that likely increased the length of the collective actions.

01:02:29 – 01:07:15

The union made a 3-year deal in their 1977 collective bargaining. The Anti-Inflation program was set from 1975 – 1978. The company urged the union to sign the agreement quickly, as the Government had plans for an announcement regarding the anti-inflation board, "and what's available to you now will not be available two days from now". The union had to determine whether to believe this, and ultimately came to a deal. During the ratification of the agreement, there was a lot of hostility and resentment over the fact that they had settled the 1.3-million-dollar lawsuit. The company had withdrawn the lawsuit after CASAW agreed to pay \$100 000 over a period, with additional payments if another

strike were to occur. The following union meeting was quite contentious; a shop steward threw his badge at Peter and called him a “traitor and sell-out”, to which he replied, “What would you give up to save the union 1.3 million dollars? What benefit would you give up? A day’s vacation, a week’s vacation? What would you give up to save that money? We’re not going to go out on another illegal strike during this period”, and Peter still feels this was the right response. The 1977 collective agreement was ratified, and Peter was burned out at that point, and went back to work in the smelter for a while, taking a leave of absence from his role as Business Agent.

01:07:16 – 01:07:54

After a time working out of the labour pool for the smelter, Peter had separated from his wife, and she chose to move with their daughter back to Vancouver. He had no desire to stay in Kitimat, and so he followed, working for CAMAW on arbitration boards, until he applied to law school in 1979.

01:07:55 – 01:14:08

When Peter looks back and analyzes the events of 1976, there are some things he would do differently with his knowledge now. He tended to see the strike as “a one-off, something that didn’t have any enduring value”, but he now sees it as a “contribution” to the Federal Government’s decision to back off from wage controls, along with the events in Quebec. There were also criticisms coming from the managerial sectors at the time. He notes that unionization in the private sector has dropped, to the point of invisibility. He considers the fact that if it had been a larger organization involved in the strike, unlike the relatively small CASAW of the time, it would not have been sustained as long. A larger organization would have been at financial risk. On the other hand, Peter admits he was young and inexperienced, and missed opportunities for progress that larger organizations may have used to their advantage. He makes an aside, recalling that the labour movement was once largely dominated by private unions, who were opposed to the election of Dave Barrett (NDP leader) at first.

01:14:09 – 01:23:50

Parts of this section are extremely quiet. Peter feels the 1976 wildcat strike made another contribution to the labour movement. The Social Credit provincial government introduced wage controls in 1982, but it was clear they were influenced by the previous decade’s events, delivering a two-part system of regulations and guidelines. This introduced flexibility from both the government and union perspectives. He notes that since CASAW was not part of the BC Federation of Labour, the event may have had less enduring value, in the sense that the Fed would have applied the fight to a broader context, possibly getting the CLC involved. In the continuity of British Columbia, it is part of a larger history of “worker eruption”. “It was the development of a class consciousness of the working class, as a working class, and as a vital entity in its own right”. “The

diminution of private sector unionization, and the inability of a union organizer to penetrate certain sectors of the economy, means its an open playing field for the most reactionary forces in our society. It's all a balancing act.” He notes that public sector unions are inherently conflicted by their dual role as representatives of both government and union. He contrasts Canada with the US, since Canada's law allows the development of bodies like company unions. He notes that large private employers are declining in Canada, resulting in a collection of small bargaining units that are harder to organize.

01:23:51 – 01:30:09

In this section, Peter explains the value of labour history. “The level of conflict that characterized BC labour history up until the mid 70s, early 80s at the latest, has simply ceased to exist. There are very few, relatively few strikes, relatively few days off... the public unions have some... but certainly nothing like when Peter [Cameron] was the Vice-President of CAIMAW and they had a 6 month strike.... If people are going into bargaining that don't actually understand, on both sides, that don't actually understand that bargaining is about power, positioning and conflict, but conflict is not a bad thing. Conflict is actually necessary.” He says the past has a way of becoming the future. He talks about comparative industrial relations in Europe, as well as the higher rates of unionization and different forms of representation than what is in North America. If we do not understand our own history, he says it is difficult to understand the history of any other country or labour movement. He notes that the labour movement tends to romanticize certain singular events, but they deserve to be remembered.

01:30:10 – 01:37:51

In the final section of the interview, Peter fills in the rest of his personal history following law school. He worked for CAIMAW, which became part of the CAW. He did work for the Professional Employees Association as well as the union organizing technicians at the CBC. He took some time off, then became Coordinator of Collective Bargaining and Arbitration at the BCGEU, one week after Premiere Vander-Zalm announced the privatization plan. He worked in Glen Clark's office when he was Minister of Finance, then was involved in the process that resulted in the Corbin Commission. He worked for the Government until 1997. He contracted for a time before working as staff for the Minister of Health during the 2000's.