

SPFC_3803_U54_N_5_6_Side_1 Elroy Robson.mp3
Recorded 1964

Elroy Robson [00:00:08] [unclear] My name is Elroy Robson. I live in Ottawa. My phone number at the office is Central 3-4021. I went to work as an organizer for the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers on January 1, 1917. I have lived in various parts of the country. I have had fairly long stays in Winnipeg, where my children were born. We lived in Toronto for quite a long period of time, and we now—my wife and I—now live in Ottawa. I have been a member of my union of course from the very beginning. I might say that I am a professional person in the labor movement

Elroy Robson [00:01:15] not having worked very much on the railway. When I joined the Brotherhood, I was working for the Railway Department in Scranton Schools. I was a pioneer in organizing a Canadian union which was caused by the fact that there was no international union at that particular time to organize this group of railway workers.

Elroy Robson [00:02:04] This brought us into conflict with the American Federation of Labor [AF of L/AFL]. For the first 30 years of my life, I not only was working to build the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers, but we did so in spite of all the opposition that the American Federation of Labor could put up against us. I have held the position of organizer. I have been the Regional Director of Organization for the Canadian Congress of Labor, and I am the Vice President and the National Vice President of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers at the present time. I was a member of the Ontario Regional War Labor Board during the war,

Elroy Robson [00:03:02] active in the fundraising of the government in its Victory Loans and that kind of thing. I've also been active in welfare work. Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but after the war, I was made a member of the Order of the British Empire by the Queen. It's one of those things that you keep hidden in the labor movement, you don't boast about them. [laughter] I have been delegate to the Trades and Labor Council in Vancouver and Toronto. I was the President of the Labor Council in Toronto for about ten years. I was President of the Ontario Federation of Labor and the CCL [Canadian Congress of Labor] for about three years. If there's any other jobs in the labor movement around I probably was in those too. I have been delegate to the, TLC, Trades Labor Congress of Canada in years gone by and to various types of political conventions and so forth.

Elroy Robson [00:04:42] As I said before, I have been on this job now for 47 years and seven months, and there's not much room then to have many other employers. I don't know there's anybody that's got that record beaten anywhere in the country, but now that John Bruce has retired, I probably am the senior labor-scape that's in the country if you let me use that term.

Elroy Robson [00:05:11] I have had nothing to do with any kind of piecework, all our rates of pay were always on a monthly rate or an hourly rate after we got to the point where we could negotiate a collective agreement. But there was a long hard battle before you got to that stage because there were many, much discrimination. On one particular occasion here in Vancouver, I had organized the dining car employees at Canadian Pacific Railway.

Elroy Robson [00:05:57] I think between Winnipeg and western Canada there was about 400 or 500 of them and the CPR fired every one of them except about half a dozen. There was a Board of Conciliation established at that time under the chairmanship of Mr. McDonald. The railway company claimed that they had released the men for more

important war service, which we knew different. We were fired for joining the union, but the Board of Conciliation stated that they believed the railway company, they were fired for more important war services in spite of the fact that some of the people they fired were veterans of the war. One of them was a member of the Princess Pats, with some 100 wounds on him at the time. There was also a time when any efforts of the labor movement was met with much opposition. Organized workers were struggling at all times for recognition of their union. This was always the big problem. Of course, there was difficulties. in the form of political activity particularly here in the Labor Council in Vancouver, and on one particular occasion there was, after conscription came into effect, there was all kinds of talk about draft evaders and

Elroy Robson [00:07:21] white feather guys and all the wrong names they could call people, but there was one particular chap by the name of Ginger Goodwin, and Ginger Goodwin rather than accept the draft

Elroy Robson [00:07:35] went over into Vancouver Island and

Elroy Robson [00:07:41] somewhere or another and he was shot by the Mounted Police. Of course, the story was that he was shot in the back, which caused a great deal of agitation. When this matter was brought to the Labor Council here in Vancouver the workers were very indignant and called a strike—a general strike—the next day to take effect at 12:00. At 12:00, the workers, and the activity here in the city, faded to a standstill. I was in the Labor Temple at the time with a chap by the name of Victor Midgley, who was the secretary of the Labor Council. In the meantime I think there was an agitation car supplied to bring down a lot of shell-shocked soldiers who had returned from the Front. They gathered in front of that building that's opposite the Dunsmuir Hotel now. That was the old Labor Temple there. When I was upstairs with Midgley, a delegation of these people came up and when they were let in and asked them what they wanted, they told us they were looking for labor leaders, and we two would do. They attempted to throw us out the window but Midgley and I managed to get out on the coping of that building and he went one way and I went the other way. I managed to get in the office off the Cooks and Waiters and Bartenders' Alliance office that was there. When they finally discovered me in there they broke down the door, but this time they let me down into the street and out in the mob.

Elroy Robson [00:09:44] By this time the police arrived, and the police formed a wedge into the crowd and brought me back to the wall of the building. Needless to say, I've never said a word against a policeman in my life since that time. This was one of the incidents. Grey was the Mayor at the time, I think it was a Mayor Grey. He was appealing to all kinds of difficulties, the longshoremen in their hall were prepared to fight and they broke up the chairs in their hall, and each one of them got a leg of a chair and they stood in a solid mass on the stairway and defied anybody to come in and throw anybody out of there. That quieted down.

Interviewer [00:10:35] Who do you think organized the soldiers?

Elroy Robson [00:10:40] We attributed it of course to the Board of Trade, the Canadian Manufacturers' Association, the employer group, we attributed it to them, cause workers didn't have too many cars to bring these people down. There must be a fairly good historical record in the newspapers—

Interviewer [00:10:59] Yeah, there is, on that I was wondering whether you have any idea how these people—who actually organized your—

Elroy Robson [00:11:09] I don't know who actually did it. It was just taken for granted that it was the general opposition to the trade union movement, which was the—

Interviewer [00:11:18] The newspapers had some pretty—

Elroy Robson [00:11:20] Well, of course, the newspapers were very patriotic at that time and I presume that you didn't get too much support of the newspapers for the cause of labor, but it was just one of those struggles

Elroy Robson [00:11:36] of working people who arrive at the stage where we're at today.

Elroy Robson [00:11:47] Now, you want to know something about the—

Interviewer [00:11:50] Can we go on this for a moment, this conscription thing? I was interested in that. Were you in the Vancouver Labor Council at the time? Were you a local official?

Elroy Robson [00:12:04] No, I was a national organizer for the Brotherhood and I was operating all over the country. At that particular time I was organizing here in Vancouver—

Interviewer [00:12:24] It seems to me that somewhere said that the B.C. trade union movement was pretty well opposed to conscription, but the national Trades and Labor Council wasn't. They were more moderate. Can you elaborate on any [unclear]?

Elroy Robson [00:12:45] I would say that the Trades and Labor Congress at that time they were not—they did not lack loyalty. They may have been like the province of Quebec, had some objection to conscription. Perhaps bringing conscription into the country at that time was not a popular thing. It was an act by Sir Robert Borden and his ministers that created the Union government at the time. Some of the Liberals were for it, some agin it and all political parties and different points of view in the country. Who was for it and who was against is pretty hard to say.

Interviewer [00:13:36] What I meant was B.C. labor more radical on this issue, than the rest of the country?

Elroy Robson [00:13:43] I will say that there was a greater degree of progressive political thinking in B.C. than there was in eastern Canada. There was quite a political development in Winnipeg, but B.C. was probably the most aggressive.

Interviewer [00:14:03] To what extent was the conscription used for strike breaking? You mentioned the one case.

Elroy Robson [00:14:07] Oh, the conscription issue was strictly a matter of desperation for troops, and the desire to make the largest contribution they can possibly make to the struggle of 1914-1918. The motives were right, but all the people weren't just prepared to go that far.

Interviewer [00:14:35] I think the reason I ask this is there is some comment, particularly in the Fernie area, that conscription was used. That if the miners went on strike, the union leaders were immediately conscripted. I just wonder—

Elroy Robson [00:14:47] Up to that time there had been no legislation prohibiting strikes. The legislation prohibiting strikes came about when our own particular Brotherhood called a general strike of all our members in 1918. At that time, the flu epidemic was on and the labor market was at its very low level and a general strike could have been considered a pretty drastic upset of the economy, the war economy of the time, and particularly in the transportation field. That was when the government passed legislation prohibiting strikes during the war.

Interviewer [00:15:43] Do you remember why the strike was called?

Elroy Robson [00:15:46] Which strike? Ours? Our strike was called for recognition and we got, recognition of our organization at that time because the government put the onus on the Railway War Board to settle with us so that, as well as prohibit that strike. So they met with us and gave us a type of recognition, that is they agreed to meet what might be called committees of the employees rather than official recognition that we have today. Not that it makes any difference. We still have the same set up today as we had before, even with official recognition because we have developed our people over the railway company, and many of them are actually on a leave of absence to act as general chairmen and they had got that in 1918. That's what our strike was about.

Elroy Robson [00:16:49] With regard to political situations. Around 1900 and—I won't say the dates the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] was around the countryside. It wasn't very active particularly. There was the Independent Labor Party at that time. I think that Woodsworth's dates must come about 1919. There was the Independent Labor Party was in Winnipeg, and they had succeeded in electing some people to the City Council. I think sometime after that there used to be a Socialist Party of Canada. I think the Socialist Party of Canada became the Workers' Party, and the Workers' Party became the Communist Party. This is the development of that.

Interviewer [00:17:47] The Socialist Party actually split.

Elroy Robson [00:17:47] Yeah, the Socialist Party split, some went to the Workers Party of Canada and others developed in other ways. This is the development of the political movement. I have always been a member of the Independent Labor Party, which was the forerunner of the CCF [Co-operative Commonwealth Federation], and I have always supported the CCF and now the New Democratic Party. I've always been convinced that labor had to have a political arm, even for no other reason than to challenge the other parties into action and give them competition, as it were, for more progressive legislation. The struggle for recognition of the union developed to the point where there was a strike in the Vulcan Iron Works in Winnipeg for recognition of the union, and prior to that time there was the constant struggle for recognition of a union. That was always the first issue, to recognize the union. They had a small general strike in one case in Winnipeg to force the recognition of a union and that being a bit of a successful weapon, it was tried again in the in the Vulcan Ironworks to develop a recognition of the Union. I presume that there were people with wrong motives, but the great mass of the people were struggling for the one issue, and that was the recognition of the union. All the talk about the Winnipeg revolution in 1919 was pure nonsense. It was just a struggle for recognition of the union at the Vulcan Iron Works. If they had granted recognition, there wouldn't have been any general strike or

if they'd conceded to labor the right to organize without being dismissed and discriminated against you wouldn't have had these issues in 1919. Now, during this period of time, there was tremendous agitation against the American Federation of Labor. For one reason or other they were not progressive enough in the minds of a lot of people. They were very largely thinking in terms of craft organization and the idea was rapidly developing that industrial organization was probably the way the labor movement should develop. Instead of splitting the groups of workers up into about 20 different labor organizations, they should be more or less united in one union. This was the cause, in my judgment, for a great deal of anti-AF of L philosophy that was around Winnipeg. There was conventions called to discuss this issue and so forth. It was only after. The general strike in Winnipeg was called by the leaders who were part and parcel of the American Federation of Labor. The One Big Union [OBU] came after that strike and it developed over the countryside in western Canada from Winnipeg, through the various cities. It did not make the progress in British Columbia that it was able to make in Winnipeg. It was fairly stopped here, they just couldn't go east to Toronto, they couldn't go into B.C. I think this is where it was confined. They built the One Big Union up to about—I think they at one time some 40,000 or 50,000 members in it. I don't know whether that's correct, but certainly they had a very large membership at its height.

Interviewer [00:22:18] What effect did this have on the CBRT?

Elroy Robson [00:22:22] The CBRT having had so much opposition from the AF of L, and the efforts made by the AF of L to destroy the CBRT, and actually we were always on the side of anybody that was against the AF of L. Why we ourselves, from this very beginning, preached industrial organization and that is that all railway workers should be united into one union. This was in the philosophy even though he didn't carry it into effect. We were out organizing the unorganized railway workers. I presume because we were an industrial organization, in thought, if not in deed, was the reason why the AFL organizations were opposed to our efforts.

Interviewer [00:23:11] You didn't then come into much conflict with the OBU?

Elroy Robson [00:23:14] No, our people didn't join in the One Big Union, because we were separate and apart. We had some of our classes in the Transcona shops, some of them were members of the One Big Union, but on the whole, we maintained our position there. Actually one of the fellows that was in the OBU became General Chairman of our organization some years after, a chap by the name of Tommy McGregor. Very good boy at that. Well, you got here, that's the story of the One Big Union as far as I know. The Canadian Labor Party is something that I was never associated with and as I said before, I was associated with the Independent Labor Party. At one time, Woodsworth came to me, and he said, "I haven't any money and the Conservative Party is going to run a candidate against me in North Winnipeg." Some colleagues of mine, we went to work and we raised all the funds necessary for Woodsworth's campaign. They couldn't get any support from the AFL unions on that. They were strictly nonpolitical in every sense of the word, but the workers were way ahead of the union, and they would support the Woodsworth election and Woodsworth being a very, very fine man. That brings us down to the Workers' Unity League. Now, the Workers Unity League was an institution set up by the Communist Party of Canada

Elroy Robson [00:24:53] for what motives, you can guess as well as I can. It was, I presume, based on trying to get some sort of unity under the guidance and direction of the Communist Party. It faded out of the existence by the attempts to bring about unity again

with the AF of L. They turned all their Workers Unity League membership into various AF of L unions after due course and decision and so forth. Two books were published at that time by Tim Buck. One was "The Road Ahead" and "What We Propose" by Tim Buck. In one of those books the Communist Party made an exception of the CBRT because it was a progressive type of organization and so forth, but all the rest had to be united in the AF of L. The very next book which came out afterwards, this direction of the Communist Party was changed in that we were to become part of the America Federation of Labor. We were to be destroyed and united into an AFL union, the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks. That was a wish that didn't go very far, we snuffed it right under the gun and we were able to stop any break at all in that direction as far as we were concerned.

Interviewer [00:26:28] Before the Workers' Unity League, there was another organization in the States. It was called the Trade Union Education League. Did—

Elroy Robson [00:26:36] That was around alright, but it never got any hold here. There was some meetings of Trade Union Educational—I don't know if it was League. They issued and put around some circulars that I've seen in my day, but I've never found

Elroy Robson [00:26:51] where they actually ever had any real locals. Probably the Workers' Unity League was it rather than the United States. I don't whether they had a Workers' Unity League in the United States.

Elroy Robson [00:27:04] William Z. Foster was running one over there of some sort.

Interviewer [00:27:06] The Trade Union Educational League was the "boring from within" organization.

Elroy Robson [00:27:11] Yeah, well, this would be—

Interviewer [00:27:14] The Workers' Unity League came in the thirties.

Elroy Robson [00:27:15] Yes, it probably was. Always if you say "boring from within" so far.

Elroy Robson [00:27:22] Now you're down here somewhere where you talk about the ACC of L [All-Canadian Congress of Labour]. The Brotherhood was kicked out of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada in 1921 because there was a dual organization—a rising union in the United States known as the International Brotherhood of Railway Clerks. It was under—

Elroy Robson [00:27:49] at that time it was under a chap by the name of—I think his name is Fitzpatrick I think or something.

Elroy Robson [00:27:59] I can't forget his name now, but it was a rising union, long before Harrison,

Elroy Robson [00:28:06] the present top man in it who recently was there,

Elroy Robson [00:28:09] came over the picture and stabilized that situation over there. There was a chap named Adam Hay, who was the vice president prior to Frank Hall. Frank Hall succeeded Adam Hay. These vice presidents kept up a constant war against the Brotherhood and of course we kept up constant war against them. One of our weapons at

the time was not to be isolated. We called together a group of miners who were in the Canadian Miners' Union and some pressmen in Toronto. There's a few odd little Canadian unions in the country and the One Big Union, and we brought them together and we formed the ACC of L. and with that weapon in our hands, we carried on our war against the AF of L. and always preaching industrial organization. Then, of course, the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] started to develop in the United States and of course crossed our borders. You'd have general elections in Ontario to keep the CIO out of Ontario. Hepburn won the election, but the CIO didn't seem defeated at all. It seems it was peace after that and Hepburn was the first one to recognize the CIO in the General Motors in the east. The CIO was part of the Trades and Labor Congress until once again, the industrial organization came in conflict with the craft organizations and eventually the Trades and Labor Congress voted the CIO unions out of the Congress. I think this way split up in the Niagara Falls. Now we had a group of industrial unions in steel and rubber and so forth. The people in the ACC of L, including the Brotherhood, got together and developed the CCL, the Canadian Congress of Labor. It carried on in that way until they got together in the Canadian Labor Congress [CLC].

Interviewer [00:30:32] Just going back a minute, what was behind the split in '36 when the ACC of L broke up into the CF of L, Canadian Federation of Labor?

Elroy Robson [00:30:39] No, the Canadian Federation of Labor was away back in the in the early 1910s, '11s, or '12s or '14s. The Canadian Federation Labor was one of those that came in to from the ACC of L.

Interviewer [00:30:59] But in '36 when Burford and David—

Elroy Robson [00:31:03] Oh, well, this was Burford of course. The ACC of L and the Brotherhood was led all these years by Aaron Mosher. A.R. Mosher was a straight shooting, honest, progressive guy. Burford decided as the Treasurer of the Congress, decided on a policy of sweetheart agreements and almost developing what we decided was a racket. Personally I fought this thing in Toronto. McLean was in Ottawa at that particular time as Secretary Treasurer of the Brotherhood and he fought with Burford and Burford resigned from the— The OBU was out of it by this time, out of the Congress, and Burford resigned from the Congress. I think he set up something himself in direction. He kept on running a paper, soliciting advertising and got a lot of support.

Elroy Robson [00:32:06] Somewhere along the way, he issued The War Worker. I guess that was in the Second War. It was a type of

Elroy Robson [00:32:19] labor racketeering that didn't hurt the workers, but probably took some money out of the coffers of the employers. This was the lawyer, Mosher and Maclean and myself weren't standing for this kind of almost strikebreaking tactics of Burford's and this is what was broken up about.

Interviewer [00:32:42] They went together and formed the Canadian Federation of Labor.

Elroy Robson [00:32:44] Yes, I think then that—see the Canadian Federation of Labor had been absorbed in the ACC of L. Then he went back and formed another organization. Whether they called it the Canadian Federation of Labor again, I don't know. One of the OBU fellows I think played around with Burford there a bit, because the OBU then had developed into a gambling institution on baseball and got pretty—I'd say low down to stand for a trade union. I think Bob Russell was—

Elroy Robson [00:33:23] kept a pretty straight path, but even then I think that Bob had to compromise on some things.

Elroy Robson [00:33:30] I notice that you're asking a question here about the unemployed associations during the Depression. During the Depression we formed a—there was all kinds of efforts made to take care of the unemployed. They made tramps out of a lot of men and also a lot of women. Finally they found out that by—should I say organized traveling—they'd get off in a small town and by their very numbers would go and ask for food. One would go to get tea, another sugar, or something else of that nature. Of course the town was glad to get them out of town, and they would gather their stuff up and get on the next freight train. It wasn't uncommon to see a freight train with hundreds of these transient workers. No police in a small town or railway police could handle a situation of that kind. So they roamed back and forth on top of boxcars and that kind of thing. Then the government established in Manitoba—they had it out here too I think—relief camps. The government paid \$5 a month to the people working in these relief camps. Then they had another program of giving the farmer who would take any one of these unemployed, they'd give the farmer \$5 and the worker \$5 for him to work on the farm. There was people in the cities that—many of them under relief—and there was relief stations opened where people could eat, soup kitchens you might call them. Mass feeding, as it were, so that people wouldn't starve. In Winnipeg, we formed the Unemployed Association and Bob Russell was the chairman and I was the secretary. We had various organizations that helped us. Some—of course the old AF of L and its reactionary point of view—just didn't do nothing. We ran a decent Unemployed Association and we'd take up the problems of unemployed and we'd see that those relief stations were operated well. The monotony of the food, knowing what they were going to get every Tuesday or every Friday or so forth was something that bothered them, but on the whole we used to go out on an inspection. We'd advertise they were coming down, and the net result is that at least every effort was made to lift the whole standard so that by the time we got there I never found much fault. As a matter of fact, I always enjoyed any meal that I ever got there, as a matter of fact. Workers used to find fault with us advertising. They wanted us to get out and catch them, as it were. Of course, our philosophy was by advertising they'd clean up everything and get it in good shape, and all else would start off all right. If you get bacon being cooked for mass people, it would be, you know, more or less boiled in fat. Where it was laid all out, it was very good quality stuff, but it wasn't the crisp bacon they'd get in the individual frying pan so therefore they'd say it was half cooked, etcetera and so forth. We found that the food that they got was very, very good as far as we were concerned. This is what we did with the Unemployment Association. I had nothing to do with the Post Office sitdown demonstration anywhere.

Interviewer [00:37:28] Just before you leave the thirties. You were semi-recognized, the CBRT. You had a form of recognition. Did you lose this at all during the thirties?

Elroy Robson [00:37:40] No, as a matter of fact, we established this relationship with the railway company, and to the credit of the railway company, they scrupulously lived up to the collective agreement during that period of Depression. Probably more so than even at other times. This is one thing that I always gave the railway credit for. While wage cuts were 10 and 15 percent my own wages in the organization cut 35 percent. This was the railway's attitude and very often allowed us to operate almost what you might call a hiring hall. They'd come to us and say, "Who is laid off in other departments," and so forth. You'd go and get these people for the thing that was needed. The interesting part of it was a few years ago now I guess, time goes so fast, but I remember one fellow saying to me, "You

know Elroy, I remember when I come down here and had to work for one hour a day and was glad to get it. [laughs] This was the environment of the time.

Interviewer [00:38:57] The people who stayed employed, the ones that didn't lose their jobs, how well off were they, relatively?

Elroy Robson [00:39:06] The people that had their jobs probably were not well-off because, wages were cut. Railway wages were not particularly high and when you get down to the point where you were getting 35 cents an hour.

Elroy Robson [00:39:25] Many workers who lost their homes, or got quitclaims on them. Even though a moratorium was established by the government and most governments to, as long as they pay the interest, they can

Elroy Robson [00:39:38] hang onto their home and their taxes, if they could handle that.

Elroy Robson [00:39:47] There was other people in the family that were unemployed. The workers on the whole did not enjoy any prosperity

Elroy Robson [00:39:58] from the time the Depression started

Elroy Robson [00:40:01] until you got back into the war economy

Elroy Robson [00:40:02] of the 1939-1945 war. It took a

Elroy Robson [00:40:07] longer time to recover from the Depression in Western Canada because, not only was the Depression in Western

Elroy Robson [00:40:15] Canada created by such things as unemployment, things like that, but there was

Elroy Robson [00:40:21] crop failure after crop failure in the country and the farmers were destitute, as well as workers. I have seen the time when I bought 55 pounds of turkey for a five-dollar bill, some of which I sent down east to some railway friends of mine. I also saw a farmer trying to get five dollars for a 350-pound pig. We had a crate of eggs of 12 dozen, get change out of a dollar. In Transcona you could get a bushel of potatoes if you bought a dozen oranges.

Interviewer [00:41:07] If the prices were so low, wouldn't the fact that you got a 15 percent wage cut and the prices dropped by half, wouldn't that give you—

Elroy Robson [00:41:12] Well that, you see, is relative to the fact that probably everybody was supporting somebody else. I, for instance, had my brother with me who wasn't earning any money at the time. While it was easy to feed somebody you still had a lot of things that weren't cut in price, such as your coal bills. Rents probably depreciated but there were still the problem of taxes and interest and people that had their homes. On the whole there was nobody went off, no matter who he was in my judgement or in those Depression years because they were very, very difficult years. I presume even the capitalist didn't have any fun because he was doing his damndest at probably trying to hold it. Trust companies, for instance, while they would foreclose on a building they wanted to get rid of them. They didn't want to keep these houses. If you had any money at that time, you could have bought from the Trust company, get a pretty good bargain in a

house without any trouble. This applied in Toronto as well as Winnipeg and so forth. As a matter of fact, I bought a house myself in Winnipeg and I realized that all I could do if I sold it,

Elroy Robson [00:42:36] all I could get out of it would be enough money to pay what I owed. So I decided to buy a bargain for myself and keep my own house. For a good many years when I was in Toronto I used to send down 10 dollars a month to pay for this house which I run into as a matter of fact, the wartime housing

Elroy Robson [00:42:55] rental control. I had rented my house at a very low rent in the middle of the winter. I was getting, I think, 30 to 35 dollars supposedly the rent, paying so much to the rental agent. The guy that was in the house was renting upstairs for 40 or 50. Luckily he eventually moved and then I was able to sell the property at a better price than I was able to get. I didn't get out of it what I put in it, I had \$1,500, I know, and I paid \$1,500 in interest in order to pay off the \$1,500 I owed. It was costing me \$1,500 in interest. Over the period of time it took me to pay, that was just \$1,500 in interest. Then I asked the Permanent Loan Company to give me a statement off it, and they wrote back and said they couldn't give me a statement, it would cost me three dollars. So I simply wrote back and told them that, I apologized profusely for asking the Canada Permanent Loan Company to give me a statement of the account without offering to pay for it. [laughter]. They got the point all right. I sent them the two or three dollars, whatever it was, and I got the statement back because it's a record of the actual interest that I paid.

Elroy Robson [00:44:27] Milestone.

Interviewer [00:44:30] [unclear].

Elroy Robson [00:44:32] What's that?

Interviewer [00:44:33] That would be interesting to use it to illustrate [unclear].

Elroy Robson [00:44:42] That state was all written out by a pen and ink. The Ottawa Trek, was—that's the one they stopped I think with the Mounted Police—R.B. Bennett stopped that somewhere close to Regina with a squad of RCMPs.

Interviewer [00:44:56] What else can I do for ya? I've looked over this pretty well and seen the strikes [unclear].

Interviewer [00:45:03] This is one thing. Not only the strikes that your union was involved in, but also the ones that sort of—well like the Winnipeg strike. Were you involved at all in any of the the longshoremen strikes on the west coast during the thirties?

Elroy Robson [00:45:23] I don't know. You've got to have somebody that's more familiar with the whole thing. Winch, the Member of Parliament here. He's son of the Winch that was running what they call the Auxiliary. The Longshoremen's Auxiliary was operating here in which was kind of a freight handler on the dock handling the freight from the dock to the cars. The longshoremen were bringing in from ship to the shore. They had this Auxiliary. Now, of course, they've got the whole thing under one set-up. Winch's father was very active in the Trades and Labor Congress at that time. I don't suppose there's anybody living that could give you a history of the thing except by perhaps a search in the newspapers that would give it. I was very young and these people that I was associated with were older.

Interviewer [00:46:25] What about during the thirties? Did you get involved in any of the big strikes then?

Elroy Robson [00:46:38] The thirties. Where did you get your big strikes in the thirties?

Interviewer [00:46:40] There was a big longshoremen's strike in '35 or '37 here.

Elroy Robson [00:46:46] No, we didn't get involved in that. I guess that was somewhere where they switched over wasn't it? To the Bridges' organization. This would be the transition there. There's a chap around here by the name of Bairnie He'd probably—Jim Bairnie?

Interviewer [00:47:04] I have his name and I phoned him up but he says he's a bit hesitant to talk with [unclear] I think. You know him well?

Elroy Robson [00:47:14] Well, not too well. I got some acquaintance with him and so forth. This fellow Pritchett is probably has some fairly good history.

Interviewer [00:47:23] Those are two names we have.

Elroy Robson [00:47:25] Pritchett's a very young fellow.

Interviewer [00:47:26] He says he has all the stuff.

Elroy Robson [00:47:29] He probably has—he's the head of it there, and a fine lad. A very, very fine boy. Looks very intelligent. I don't know whether—I'm sure Jim Bairnie if his memory is good—he'd have records of knowledge because he's in between the period there.

Interviewer [00:47:49] Did you know a fellow of the name of McKinley in the ACCL and left with Burford?

Elroy Robson [00:47:55] McKinley.

Interviewer [00:47:56] From Vancouver, the Amalgamated Building Workers.

Elroy Robson [00:48:00] No, I know about the Amalgamated Building Workers in the east, but McKinley don't sound like a name that I know.

Elroy Robson [00:48:15] They stayed a long while in this country. They were really old country carpenters that maintained themselves, and they had official recognition until finally they were wiped out by collective agreements with the Builders' Exchange.

Interviewer [00:48:36] When the CIO got organized, what contact was there between the ACCL and the CCL? On the top-level, was there—

Elroy Robson [00:48:52] What contact was there between the CIO and the ACC of L? You're talking about the CIO in the United States?

Interviewer [00:49:01] Yeah.

Elroy Robson [00:49:02] The CIO gave us an official blessing from Phil Murray. Pat Conroy, who became the secretary of the merged organization, was a miner from Alberta and the United Mine Workers. He was the official director of organization for the CIO in Canada. That was the contact between the two of them, and they were international unions—the United Steelworkers of America, United Rubber Workers, Packinghouse Workers and so forth. They were strictly United States unions operating in Canada.

Interviewer [00:49:57] What about, here's another one. The ACCL. Did you go out and organize many new unions or did you—

Elroy Robson [00:50:04] Oh, yes. The ACC of L gave a foundation to many of the CIO, because the ACC of L organized the Steelworkers at Sault Ste Marie. It was a going concern when it went into the Steelworkers Union. I organized all the Full Fashion Hosiery Workers in Ontario, and I went over the United States and brought over into this country, the Textile Workers Union of America. Sam Baron who read where he got mixed up with Teamsters Union there and wrote this long story some time ago. Sam Baron was the guy they sent over to take over. Then there was the Oil Workers, who I'd organized the British American Oil Company and some more of them. This is where the Oil Workers come in and took over. These fellows would never come in here without the blessing of the Canadian Labor Congress. They had to be asked. They didn't come in crowding out or trying to destroy, they just [unclear]. I remember the Oil Workers distinctly just wouldn't move until they—and the Chemical Workers was the same way. They wouldn't—.

Interviewer [00:51:20] Blessing from your organization?

Elroy Robson [00:51:22] Blessing from—.

Interviewer [00:51:23] the TLC?

Elroy Robson [00:51:23] Not the TLC because the TLC they were out of the Fed, but the ACC of L—the CLC was operating within a limited number of the CIO unions and others were added after that, such as the Textile Workers, the Oil Workers and the Chemical Workers Union. The people I had on my staff, a good many of them, were taken on as the Director of Organization and the people I had on my staff, good men, went with those organizations.

Interviewer [00:51:57] The original reason the ACCL was set up in its constitution was this insistence upon Canadian organizations?

Elroy Robson [00:52:07] Yes.

Interviewer [00:52:08] What reaction was it to bring in the CIO internationals?

Elroy Robson [00:52:15] Oh, there was a common cause on industrial organization and the ACC of L attitude on Canadian organization was something that was used in the absence of anything better. Waving the flag and selling a Canadian union was a good weapon that kept the ACC of L floating. Of course, governments gave no encouragement whatsoever to Canadian unions. Governments were always against Canadian unions. In Ontario, this is largely because most of the appointments that government made in labor requirement generally were AFL people. No Canadian union to my knowledge never got any help from government. I always felt that. I made some progress with the Department of Labor in Ontario when I was down there largely on the basis of acting intelligently and

decent and winning friendship of some of the conciliation officers that would work very hard for me in order to get some union I was working on recognized. I think I'll stand by that statement that governments never helped the Canadian union, they were always on the side of international unions.

Interviewer [00:53:57] Is this because they were—do you think because they tended to be more conservative?

Elroy Robson [00:54:06] Don't know about that, but probably we were always, we always had the target of industrial organization. The things that we wanted are the things that are in effect today. In an organization like the Machinists' Union or the Electrical Workers now is a big industrial organization, but it was always a craft before. You go and see the number of people that were the electrical workers on the railway might have had some importance to the organization in years gone by, but they've got all kinds of industrial plants organized in the IB—the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The same thing applies to the Machinists' Union. The craft as a machinist is a dead issue. It's a big industrial organization like the Steelworkers to a great extent, and the Automobile Workers they're in that whole picture. The things that we were advocating, pioneering all the way through, was this Canadian industrial organization and these were probably the, perhaps the employers might have liked the idea of perhaps a Canadian union, but they didn't like the idea of an industrial union. Whatever the reasons was, there was no help. Maybe weren't effective enough to force an issue. We often say that the employer always wanted, if you had an international union, you wanted a Canadian union, if you had a Canadian union, you wanted a company union, if you had a company union, you didn't want the union at all.

Interviewer [00:55:35] As a matter of fact, wasn't the CIO unions was much more—gave the Canadian divisions much more autonomy?

Elroy Robson [00:55:46] Oh yes, the Canadian—the CIO come in here right in the very beginning and established a great deal of national autonomy, which was also in line with our own thinking. I think we say is that our thinking in our early days of the Brotherhood is the thinking now of a great part of the labor movement, very little craft organization. I can remember guys that became leaders in the OBU used to fight me and Mosher and so forth, on the basis that craft unions were so much superior to industrial unions. I remember a guy named Clancy in particular, and Alan Meikle and Bob Russell and these fellows, they were all lived in craft and they were the ones who went for the One Big Union. Bent over backwards. There was a lot of struggle to build the Brotherhood, and as far as we were concerned we got a very fine, clean, democratic union. Our image out here on the coast may not be as good as it ought to be, but the organization as a whole is really an excellent democratic union. A few ill-advised workers around here is not putting our image the way it ought to be. I tried to improve that while I was here, by the way.

Interviewer [00:57:28] Do you want to shut it off? I want to ask—