

Interview with Arthur J. Turner (1964)

Interviewer: Bill Picket

Transcribed by Donna Sacuta

Bill Picket [00:00:00] Well, this is an interview with Mr. Arthur J. Turner, M.L.A. Mr. Turner, could you talk about your union affiliation?

Arthur Turner [00:00:14] I take it you're talking about the war period. Well, during that period, I worked at the Esquimalt Navy yard and also at Yarrows. Later on at the Foundation Company that which was building the wooden steamers. During that period, my experiences were very interesting to me being a socialist and an active trade unionist and I was first affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and later after moving to the Foundation Company, I had to join the Sheet Metal Workers Union, that is the Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers Alliance because they had control of the sheet metal shop at that time.

Arthur Turner [00:01:10] In between those periods was one which in my opinion was very interesting to trade unionists, particularly socialist trade unionists. That was the O.B.U. [One Big Union] came into existence and I was an active member of the O.B.U. at that time, being the Vice President of the Victoria Shipbuilders' Unit, and I was also a member of the Education Committee of that unit. We were most active at that time because during that period most of us who were affiliated with the O.B.U. had to carry the two cards because the established unions had control of the shops.

Bill Picket [00:02:04] Well, could you give us an explanation of why you think the O.B.U. allowed [unclear].

Arthur Turner [00:02:18] Yes, looking at it in retrospect, it's perhaps easier to understand than it was at the time. As a matter of fact, we were so close to it that it was difficult to get a long-range view, which we can now do. In the first instance, we were faced with what we might call the established international unions with the headquarters in the United States. Secondly, we were faced with the fact that the trade unions in eastern Canada were a long, long way behind the thinking of the trade unions or the trade unionists in the western part of this country. The frustrations of those two factors helped to build a rebel opinion which manifested itself in the urge and the apparent need to form some kind of large industrial union which would embrace all kinds of work, including tradesmen and unskilled workers as well. The question resolved itself as to how we would differentiate between tradesmen and labourers because we realized the time wasn't right to have all in one union, so we were toying with the idea that we would have units with classifications so that they would maintain for the time being wage differentials.

Arthur Turner [00:04:12] At that time also, there was another factor and that was the revolutionary upsurge, which was showing itself and had shown itself in the Russian Revolution of 1917. A number of revolutions in middle Europe during a few years later, and at the end of the First World War the breakdown of the German government and the

German Revolution. All these things combined to show the need, to show us the need for a different kind of trade unionism, one which could cope with that new situation which was manifesting itself across a large part of the world. At the same time, it would satisfy us as the protests against the orthodox trade unionism, which had control of the trade union movement in North America.

Bill Picket [00:05:25] Do you remember any instances of the frustration with the eastern unions?

Arthur Turner [00:05:26] Yes. It was during the time I was a member of the International Association of Machinists. At one of the meetings we were preparing motions for the agenda of what was going to be at the conference at Calgary. First I've got to tell you that the trade unions in the west had been frustrated to an extent that they have decided to meet separately in Calgary. Of course, as I have said many times, all the important motions, that is important in our mind, which were sent to the agenda of the national conferences called by the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, they were all soundly beaten.

Bill Picket [00:06:33] They were all beaten?

Arthur Turner [00:06:36] They were beaten, and we figured that we couldn't do anything. We took the attitude we couldn't do anything with the eastern trade unionists, so it was decided to call a Western Labor Conference. When we were preparing some motions for the Western Labor Conference in 1919 and one which, I suppose was, which was revolutionary and still is, that the Soviet form of government was suitable for Canada. And that would give you an idea of how impressed we were and the feeling of a number of trade unionists that something different had to be put into motion if we were going to make any headway.

Arthur Turner [00:07:26] Strangely enough, although I didn't expect it to be accepted, the motion passed.

Bill Picket [00:07:33] Was there debate on it?

Arthur Turner [00:07:34] Oh yes, there was quite a debate on it. It passed at the Western Labor Conference in Calgary in 1919. Much to my surprise, but it does indicate the feeling at that time, that such a motion would pass because to say that we would scrap our present form of government and use the Soviet form was decidedly a revolutionary attitude. While that was an outstanding example. It nevertheless did express the feelings of a large number of, or most of, the militant trade unionists here in the west at that time.

Arthur Turner [00:08:18] Now, I want to add this too. This is important in my opinion. The O.B.U. came quickly, originating in Winnipeg and spread across western Canada. It was sort of spontaneous combustion because of the expressed need for a radical change in the industrial union setup. Unfortunately, when one of the large unions, that was the longshoremen's union, which had the greater number of members in Vancouver, they

defected from the O.B.U. We felt then that because this large union, the longshoremen, had defected then the feeling subsided and we could notice at that time that the O.B.U. was going down rapidly.

Bill Picket [00:09:31] Why did the longshoremen make the decision?

Arthur Turner [00:09:26] I can't tell you that, Bill, because in my opinion there was some machinations inside the union. It was never known to many of us anyway. Some of them might have been closer to the situation in Vancouver might know. But it was never known. It was known as an overnight upset, an overnight change of attitude by the longshoremen's union. It came as a heavy, disastrous blow to us. It raised our hopes that the O.B.U. would become an important, a continuing factor in Canada, when we lost what I believe was the largest union at that time, certainly the most militant union at that time.

Arthur Turner [00:10:29] I have reason to believe, though I couldn't prove it, that it was an inside job.

Bill Picket [00:10:35] Well, how did the O.B.U. work out as a union in Victoria, your unit?

Arthur Turner [00:10:43] Well, we met regularly as the shipbuilding unit. The shipbuilding unit was the one I was associated with. We met regularly but at that time, when we met we were passing all kinds of theoretical motions, all kinds of radical ideas and there was nothing very practical about it. We had hoped that the idea would grow and grow so that we would be able to sort of crystalize the new organization. But instead of that, it wasn't long after it began when the whole thing began to fade away. When an organization is fading away then all you can do, all the enthusiasts can do, is to hang on as long as you can, hoping that it will change for the better. So we didn't do very much in a practical way, except propaganda. .

Bill Picket [00:11:50] You didn't make any gains on the [unclear]

Arthur Turner [00:11:52] No, none whatsoever. Actually, it became a struggle for existence. The locals, for instance in the International Association of Machinists we had drawn so many members away from it in Victoria that it was only a very small nucleus of an organization that just a few had sufficient to hold onto the charter. As soon as the O.B.U. started to fade away they returned to the local, a return of local activity in the Machinists' Union. As one went down, the other came back, the old came back again. So during that period, there was no chance of making any economic gains for the workers. It was a matter of who was going to survive, and that's how it finished.

Bill Picket [00:12:43] Were there any officers of the International Association of Machinists, did they stay loyal to that organization or did they take on the O.B.U.?

Arthur Turner [00:13:25] As I recall, most of the officers of the local stayed with the local. The events leading up to that, the officers were helpless because there were so many militant socialist-minded members on the floor, and they had to take dictation from the

opinions of the members on the floor. While we had one or two members on different committees, they were never in full control of the local itself.

Bill Picket [00:14:09] I see. What about, did you have the support of the—did you have big turnouts at the meetings of the O.B.U.?

Arthur Turner [00:14:19] Oh yes, we had big turnout because we were drawing in members from the various unions, not necessarily the machinists only. From the labourers' union, the riggers and the painters and the boilermakers. When you get groups from each of them paying more attention to the O.B.U. than they were to their own locals, the older unions, then you can imagine that we did have large meetings, very enthusiastic meetings, while they lasted.

Bill Picket [00:14:54] The average member there (unclear)

Arthur Turner [00:14:55] It seemed that way, yes, because the locals of the established unions became very weak. They were almost helpless as locals because of the struggle that was going on. You might say that ordinary trade union business at that time came more or less to a standstill in the struggle for power between the two.

Bill Picket [00:15:39] Why do you think you lost out? I mean, it can't only be the longshoremen, surely. Why did they go back to the craft unions? Why did eventually the craft unions win out? Or the old unions. I mean, surely it wasn't just a matter of the longshoremen.

Arthur Turner [00:16:03] Well, I put it this way. When you're in what I would describe as a revolutionary period, and it was a revolutionary period for the whole world. When you were in a period at that time, there is a considerable factor of emotion. Just like during an unemployment crisis, you organize the unemployed. There's an emotional factor which consolidates a certain opinion bringing those people together, all those opinions. It's something that you can't hold very long. That emotion has to be tracked into something practical. In other words, you have to show practical results. Otherwise, you can't hold that kind of an organization together. The O.B.U. was not able to deliver practical results to its members, such as were delivered from time to time by the other unions. You can understand what I mean. So there was a considerable element of emotion attached to it. When you can't deliver and the emotion subsides and you find that you're beaten down.

Bill Picket [00:17:39] The leadership for the O.B.U. nationally. Did it come from British Columbia trade union movement?

Arthur Turner [00:17:49] No, the national leadership came from Winnipeg.

Bill Picket [00:17:49] Who were the leaders in B.C.?

Arthur Turner [00:17:54] Well, that's a difficult question to answer at this point because I have no notes on that matter. As I recall, in a general way, the active socialists in the

Trades and Labor Council of Vancouver and that would include Jack Kavanagh, Bill Pritchard, and Alvin Wells and several others. Tom O'Connor and several others in that group. I can't recall their names at the moment. At the same time as this was happening, the Trades and Labor Council of Vancouver contained a very strong O.B.U.-minded element which included the officers at that time. I can recall, the issues of the then B.C. Federationist were dedicated to promoting the O.B.U. That was when if you were to examine issues of that time for sure you would find that was the attitude that was taken. When I mentioned about the longshoremen's union defecting, I'm sure you would find that recorded there as well, because while they were ardent socialist propagandists they nevertheless they did face the facts that appeared.

Bill Piket [00:19:48] Well, what about Victoria?

Arthur Turner [00:19:53] In Victoria, the same thing applies. The active socialists were the leaders of the O.B.U. Two that I can recall, one was Jack Stevenson, now passed away, an active member of the carpenters' union. Another one was a man by the name of Moir, I have forgotten his first name, who was the president of the Shipbuilders' Union at the time that I was Vice President. Another one that was very active was Dick Cranshaw who was a foreman cocksmith at the navy yards at the time. They were a few of them.

Bill Piket [00:20:49] Did Harry [unclear].

Arthur Turner [00:20:49] No, no relation at all, no family ties, although Dick Cranshaw had some [unclear], but it was a different family. I worked with Dick Cranshaw in the shop.

Bill Piket [00:21:07] [unclear] I'd-like to talk about the anti-conscription feeling and the events that you went through in Victoria.

Arthur Turner [00:21:28] During the same period, not only the O.B.U., but the general feeling among trade unionists in British Columbia, at least on the coast anyway, was that they were opposed to conscription. The feeling was running very high in Victoria as well as Vancouver. I recall one incident quite clearly when at a meeting of the Victoria Trades and Labor Council we had decided to hold a protest meeting in one of the downtown theaters on a Sunday night. Well, there were official speakers from the Victoria Trades and Labor Council. The theatre was packed. We hadn't started very long, when a group of uniformed army officers and a number of soldiers came in the doors and raided the meeting and broke it up, by sheer force. Following that or during that same period, there were stationed at the Willows Camp in Victoria a number of conscripts from Quebec, and you know, you remember, of course, that the feeling in Quebec was violently anti-conscription and they did conscript a number of the young fellows. In order to get them away from their home environment, they brought them to Victoria. Change of location so they thought it might have a temporizing effect.

Bill Piket [00:23:20] That was a mistake, bringing them to Victoria.

Arthur Turner [00:23:21] Yeah. They brought them to the wrong place. But anyway, they were stationed in Victoria at the Willows Camp and they were booked for Vladivostok, because the white elements, the anti-revolutionary armies were

Bill Piket [00:23:46] Was this during the war or the Russian Revolution?

Arthur Turner [00:23:47] It was during the war. As I would describe them, they were unwilling to go. They were restless and they were unreliable. Well, the interesting thing was that when the time came for these to embark for Vladivostok, they were marched down from the Willows Camp down to the C.P.R. dock where the ship was waiting and a number of them refused to go aboard. The army officers, the officers in charge threatened them with loaded revolvers, forced them because they didn't want to get shot, so they went aboard. That was the feeling at that time. The tragedy was that it was a working-class band, a band of workers, a brass band which was formed at the Foundation Company which led these conscripts, marched ahead of them and led them to the docks. A parade through Victoria so as to create an atmosphere that, "Here, the Victoria people want you to go." A large number of these were given time off to put on this show to lead the conscripts down to the ship to go to Vladivostok. Of course, they were a different breed to those of us who didn't believe in conscription, the workers that had joined this band, a patriotic band, from the word go.

Bill Piket [00:25:42] Did you have a communication between the anti-conscription trade unionists and the [unclear]?

Arthur Turner [00:25:56] Across Canada, do you mean?

Bill Piket [00:25:58] No, in Victoria [unclear].

Arthur Turner [00:26:08] There was no organization. It was a matter of doing what you can when the time came to do something. We did talk about forming some kind of national organization to oppose conscription on a national plan but it never developed. It died when it was born. It was stillborn.

Bill Piket [00:26:35] So you weren't really tasked with--.

Arthur Turner [00:26:41] No. There was just that feeling, they were anti-conscriptionist [unclear] in Victoria and we did what we thought was best, and they didn't want to go. They certainly were opposed to going as well as being against Canada being in the war. All these things together just made one picture.

Bill Piket [00:27:07] There was nothing you could do or nothing you did?

Arthur Turner [00:27:17] We delivered what was strong enough to make an effective protest. When you're up against armed soldiers, you have to obey their officers under threat of being shot at war, because treason is a capital offense. If these conscripts had

refused to go aboard they would have been shot right there. It'd have been mutiny. It is either that or do something about it.

Bill Picket [00:28:09] What about this meeting now you had in the theatre. You said it was packed. How many people were there at this anti-conscription meeting.

Arthur Turner [00:28:29] It was the Columbia Theatre, I believe that was the name of it on Government Street. There were very big theatres in those days. It would likely hold 300.

Bill Picket [00:28:42] The people who came to the meeting other than the officers, were they against conscription?

Arthur Turner [00:28:59] The audience? Oh, yes. Otherwise, they wouldn't have come. There was no disturbance in the meeting. The meeting was enthusiastic for the reason it was called, that was to protest conscription and everything was going along fine until the officers barged in and put the soldiers down the aisles, and they were all armed of course.

Bill Picket [00:29:25] Were they sent by anyone? Did the army send them?

Arthur Turner [00:29:29] We never knew. These things could happen by the officers in charge of the camp. I'm not going to say that they were sent by the government or the military command at Ottawa or wherever it was. It might have been something sponsored by the officer commanding at the Willows Camp. We'd never know that. We didn't have any inside information. One example of the attitude of the workers during that period, which I'd like to describe to you, Bill. All during this period is that I'm speaking of everything was in a state of flux. The old order was being disturbed to the extent that nobody knew what was going to happen. Well, we knew, the trade unionists are the ones that I'm speaking of, they adopted an attitude of defiance. There was a regular anti-boss feeling, a labour point of view. An example of this, I can recall while working at Yarrows, was our works committee. Incidentally, we had Works Committees the first time which we had in England during the war. Shop Stewards formed a Works Committee. They never had it before. Our works committee called a meeting during the lunch hour. We used one of the shops. Then the whistle blew for the end of the lunchtime, but we had the doors shut, with guards on the doors so that nobody could get out. We carried on our business until we had finished, regardless of the fact that the whistle had blown. When we finished the doors opened and we went back to work, about seven minutes later. Something we'd never have dared to have done under ordinary circumstances. They were so defiant at that time. The defiance wasn't confined to our side. The office was equally defiant. I'll give you this instance. During one period we were getting strike pay. That was the I.A. of M. from international headquarters. It came in the form of a single cheque to be distributed by our group. Well, the bank refused to cash the cheque. You realize what that means. It was a legal transaction, money sent from the headquarters of the I.A.M. in the states to us to be cashed at a bank in Victoria for strike pay. The bank refused to cash it. It had nothing to do with the bank. Nevertheless, the bank was taking sides. There was quite an argument for a while but then then later on the bank cashed the cheque.

Bill Piket [00:32:44] How long did you have to wait?

Arthur Turner [00:32:44] We waited about a week. We waited about a week before we got this cheque cashed. We thought, "Now what's next?" The banks are taking sides, what's it to do with them. But it just shows that at that time, anyway, the banks were on the side of the government and they were against the alternate labour movement as such and refused to do business. It wasn't their conception of the way government should be run. They were taking an anti-trade union attitude to the whole business at that time.

Bill Piket [00:33:23] What was [unclear]?

Arthur Turner [00:33:23] I couldn't remember. I don't remember which bank it was now. I think Percy Bengough was the Regional Director at that time. He was working in British Columbia. Percy Bengough was never a socialist or anything, he was just an ordinary trade unionist.

Bill Piket [00:34:07] Which strike was this?

Arthur Turner [00:34:20] I'm not too sure which strike that was. It wouldn't be the general strike which was in sympathy with Winnipeg. It'd be a strike of our own because there were strikes by individual unions. I'm sure of that because the I.A. of M. headquarters in the States was certainly not involved in the general strike which was in sympathy with the workers in Winnipeg. I'm quite sure of that. It would be one of our own particular strikes over a separate dispute.

Bill Piket [00:35:13] Could you say something about the Socialist Party of Canada, your experience with that.

Arthur Turner [00:35:21] I can talk about the original Socialist Party of Canada, which was functioning when I first came to Canada in 1913. At that time, they were opposed to trade unions and they were opposed to reforms. They took the stand that a trade union was a part of the capitalist system, and all it was concerned with was to get a bit more of the national pie and not to take the whole pie over for the workers. They said that anything that bolstered up the capitalist system and made it more workable and more acceptable was anti-socialist and therefore should be opposed in other words. A case of you must have socialism or nothing. In my opinion if a man is hungry, he doesn't want socialism, he wants a good meal. Nothing but a good meal will satisfy him. From that, the time he gets fed the fear of tomorrow is removed. The fear of unemployment is removed. Then you have a chance of educating them and showing him that the capitalist system must eventually be replaced or least radically changed if there's going to be any permanent benefits coming to the people who produce the wealth. That is entirely different than either socialism or not. In other words, they wanted a social revolution. Nothing short of that would satisfy them. Anything less than that was reactionary.

Bill Piket [00:37:01] What was their attitude to individual trade union officers?

Arthur Turner [00:37:05] Well their attitude to trade union officers was that they were supporters of the capitalist system.

Bill Picket [00:37:19] Did they change their minds then?

Arthur Turner [00:37:20] Well, they did a lot of propaganda work, among the trade unionists in respect of the selling pamphlets and books and distributing leaflets and all that sort of thing with the objective of promoting the social revolution. Yet, in spite of that, they weren't logical because in spite of that, many of them were members of a trade union and they took officerships in trade unions which was a violation of the fundamentals they advocated for on socialist platforms. You can't very well be logical and say, "Well, to advocate trade unionism is reactionary," and then become an officer of a trade union at the same time. Unless you try to rationalize it to say, "Well, I move in among the trade unionists so that I can better advocate my socialism."

Bill Picket [00:38:24] [unclear]

Arthur Turner [00:38:30] No, I wouldn't say that. No, I couldn't accuse any of them of trying to wreck the trade unions. They were using the trade unions as a platform. Everything that they did, everything that they proposed had the objective of furthering the socialist idea.

Bill Picket [00:38:51] Well, what then was the attitude of most trade unions to the Socialist Party?

Arthur Turner [00:39:01] Attitude of indifference. That is during that period. I want to say this on that. I'm not replicating the idea of a dysfunction and the usefulness of the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party of Canada in spite of their illogical attitude on many things, they laid a very successful groundwork of socialist opinion in this province, which showed all over this province, and I've travelled over it three times at least, you'll find scattered in different areas and sometimes in a very remote area you'll find former members of the Socialist Party or those who have been influenced by it. They in turn did a lot when the situation changed after the Russian Revolution, then the German Revolution and the formation of the C.C.F. (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) in 1933 and much later. The change of opinion resulting from a change of circumstances helped the C.C.F. as much as they wanted them. A large number of them became active members in the C.C.F. Warren Sykovison was one. Billy Tom O'Connor is one. They were active members of the Socialist Party at one time. John McInnis is one. They became stalwarts and pioneers in the C.C.F.

Bill Picket [00:40:47] There's a little-known book on something about the Socialist Party, a small group maintaining it and taking all the records of the C.C.F. Do you know anything about that?

Arthur Turner [00:41:08] Taking all the records?

Bill Piket [00:41:08] The C.C.F.?

Arthur Turner [00:41:13] Well, within the—

Bill Piket [00:41:13] Taking all the records of the Socialist Party.

Arthur Turner [00:41:13] You see, there's a lot of confusion about the Socialist Party which preceded the C.C.F. and the one that followed. That needs to be straightened out, because the Socialist Party which I've been talking about, went out of existence long before the C.C.F. was formed. It passed away when the Third International was formed, and a plebiscite was taken by the members of the then Socialist Party as to whether they would affiliate with the Third International, which was the Communist International sponsored by the Soviet Union. [unclear] the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Before the plebiscite was taken the group that wanted to join the Third International said in effect, "We won't wait for the plebiscite, we'll join." And that was it. When that happened the party fell apart. One group joined the Third International and the other group more or less disappeared. Later on, another socialist party came into being which was an outgrowth of the Federated Labor Party and the Independent Labor Party. You have to know there was a Canadian Labor Party too, [unclear]. There was also a Social Democratic Party here. None of them very effective. They all indicated that there was some kind of feeling that had to be crystallized, or should be crystallized, [unclear]. So the I.L.P. moved into the realm, or into the field, about changing its name to first of all I.L.P. (Socialist), which was in brackets. When that wasn't good enough the next was the Socialist Party of Canada. I'm not too sure the year of that but I believe it is in 'The Compassionate Rebel'. In 1932 there was the Calgary convention which preceded the Regina Convention in '33 at which the Socialist Party of Canada, the then Socialist Party of Canada, this one was represented. Then that same Socialist Party of Canada, or which Arnie Webster was the secretary and I was the President, was the charter member of the C.C.F. in British Columbia, the only affiliate to the C.C.F. from British Columbia. So it's a different party to the one that I spoke about, which was opposed to trade unionism and opposed to any reforms. They were even opposed to the participation in parliamentary action because it was taking part in the capitalist system. [unclear] It frittered away. The idea frittered away because they wanted things, they wanted employment, they wanted pensions, they wanted compensation, they wanted all these sort of reforms. If a socialist labour party of some kind, whatever name it was, hadn't come into existence then some other party would have taken over.

Bill Piket [00:44:55] What party were you in? You said that [unclear].

Arthur Turner [00:44:58] I was in the Federated Labor Party, I was in the Canadian Labor Party, I was in the Independent Labor Party and the Independent Labor Party (Socialist) and then the new Socialist Party of Canada, and then into the C.C.F.

Bill Piket [00:45:24] I meant your application for membership in the Socialist Party.

Arthur Turner [00:45:31] The original one? I was living in Victoria for the first six years we were in Canada, and then at the end of the war Yarrows was broke up I came to

Vancouver and it was then I made application to join the original Socialist Party. They told me that, well they were suspicious of me, figured I didn't know enough about the movement, enough about socialism, advised me to join the economics class. Through the economics class in their opinion, I would graduate to become a full-fledged reliable member of the then Socialist Party. I refused because I had in my own mind, I was confident that I knew enough about the socialist movement to warrant becoming a member of the Socialist Party. Although, I wouldn't subscribe to the idea that you had to ignore trade unions and ignore reform. I realized that if you shut yourself off from the audience masses of people, actual mass of workers who want something to eat, and want security and want [unclear] that you will become a small intellectual sect with no influence over the masses of people. One mistake that a socialist party should never make is divorcing itself from the masses of people to whom they must appeal and convert. You can become a little intellectual clique, you can shut yourself up in a packing case and nobody hears you. You have no influence at all.

Bill Piket [00:47:36] [unclear].

Arthur Turner [00:47:42] You talk to yourselves.

Bill Piket [00:47:43] Well, when you said you didn't join [unclear].

Arthur Turner [00:47:51] No, no, no. As a matter of fact, I had in Victoria, because the members of the Socialist Party there in Victoria knew me quite well they asked me all the time to join the Socialist Party of Canada in Victoria. I didn't have time. I was spending so much time with the trade union movement, I figured it was a better field, a more fruitful field to work in than to shut myself off in I a little room among a few discussing theoretical points of dialectics as we called them, what Marx meant by theory of value, conceptions of history and those things (laughs).