

## **Kitimat Wildcat Strike of 1976**

### **Transcribed by Patricia Wejr**

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:09] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that shines a light on events and people from BC's rich labour history. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we tell the story of the dramatic 1976 wildcat strike by members of the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers - CASAW - at the huge Alcan smelter in the Northwest community of Kitimat. The bitter strike divided the town then and continues to do so. Forty years after the bitter confrontation, local City Council voted to support a plaque commemorating the strike in Centennial Park. In the face of citizen opposition, however, Council rescinded their approval. Instead, the BC Labour heritage plaque was put up in the offices of Unifor Local 2301, which now represents the smelter workers. You will hear the local union president at the time, Peter Burton and vintage on-the-spot interviews by a young Jim Sinclair for Co-op Radio. I covered that strike as a young labour reporter for the Vancouver Sun, and you can hear Jim Sinclair's interview with me shortly after police arrived to bust up the union's picket line. Of all the stories I covered during my many years in the labour beat, the wildcat strike in Kitimat remains the most memorable. You will also hear "Something Good Worth Fighting For", another original song written for On the Line by Bill Hood and performed by the Gram Partisans. But first we hear from CASAW recording secretary Jim Brisebois, who sets up the dispute for Co-op Radio. It took place in the shadow of the federal government's wage control program.

**Jim Brisebois** [00:02:05] Last October, our contract ran out, and when the anti-inflation board declared the new arithmetic guidelines for the control of wages, the company immediately took the position during our negotiations of you're getting 8 and 6%. Nothing more will be discussed or negotiated. Here is the final offer, and if you don't accept the offer, we're just going to lock you out. And it is the wintertime and there's snow on the ground and, you know, unemployment at that time was really high and the people up here in an isolated community are afraid of things like that. Justifiably so. Later on, as it developed, the anti-inflation board allowed other groups to get increases of 15 and 16%. And that made our guys really angry. I think that, along with the high-handed method the company used to force us to accept that contract. It was just coercion and intimidation, there's nothing else. They were publishing the offer and passing it around the plant and getting the foremen to go around and tell the guys, you know, if you don't sign this, we're going to lock you out. And just intimidating, intimidating, intimidating.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:03:08] Part of that intimidation was an announcement by Alcan that rents on company houses and apartments were increasing 10.6%. And the cost of safety clothing for workers inside the smelter would be going up by as much as 20%. This added insult to injury in a work environment that was already challenging. Co-op Radio talked with one of the workers about conditions in the smelter.

**Alcan worker #1** [00:03:35] Just working in there, it's really hard to describe because you go in there, there's aluminum ore, it's flying all around, you know, hard to breathe. If the temperature outside goes above about ten degrees centigrade, you know, in there, it's just really incredible. The heat, it's hard to work and it's just hard but you have to work in there to really understand what it's like.

**Alcan worker #2** [00:03:54] I more or less take care of the pots.

**Jim Sinclair** [00:03:58] What are some of the problems with working in that situation?

**Alcan worker #2** [00:04:01] A lot of gas, a lot of dust and an awful lot of heat.

**Jim Sinclair** [00:04:04] What effect does that have on you as a worker?

**Alcan worker #2** [00:04:06] Physically, it tires me out. You know, I put in my six hours work and I'm just beat by the end of the day.

**Jim Sinclair** [00:04:13] How do you feel about the way the company's been handling that situation?

**Alcan worker #2** [00:04:16] They have no consideration for the people. They're out to make their money and that's it. They've shown it to us in the last ten days that all they want is their money, and us to go back and make it for them.

**Music: 'Something Worth Fighting For' performed by the Gram Partisans** [00:04:28]  
At the head of Douglas Channel eastward in from Hecate Strait, workers up at Alcan chose to control their fate. A contract had just been imposed, their wages were foregone. And this new Canadian union dared to take the whole thing on. It was June of 1976, wage controls were the law, but these workers knew their power if they were quick on the draw. So they walked off without warning, forming a strong picket line and blockaded the main roadway, often hundreds at a time. You see these workers fight for justice, their main tool a picket line. A trade union fundamental, it still echoes over time No you won't win every battle you know you might just win the war. The solidarity it's something good worth fighting for.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:05:58] On the job dissatisfaction, worker complaints about arrogant company managers and the unfairness of federal wage controls proved too much. On June 3rd, 1976, simmering discontent erupted into a full-scale revolt. Union President Peter Burton:

**Peter Burton** [00:06:18] It started with -- I can't remember the name of it -- but it was a huge welding shop that had several hundred welders working there. And they refused to work. So the company called us, we were out, talked to the guys and then the guys in the - - tradesmen in the mechanic shops and a bunch of other shops, which were three-quarters of a mile away. They decided to down tools, too. And that's really when it began. It escalated very quickly. Eventually there was a general walkout. And I think that all kind of happened within the space of about, if I recall correctly, in the space of about six or eight hours.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:07:09] Almost all of CASAW's 1800 members joined the wildcat. At a heated union meeting that night, they rejected the executive's recommendation to return to work. The vote was 60% to stay off the job. They demanded the company reopen their contract to reflect higher wage increases won by nearby pulp mill workers. The strike became an all-out siege. Workers barricaded the only road to the smelter with boulders, logs and a plywood fence. Trapped inside were 400 non-union personnel struggling to keep the potlines operating. If they went cold, Alcan would have been faced with a multi-million dollar restart. Food supplies were flown in by helicopter and float planes. After three days, Alcan brought in 200 reinforcements from the company's smelter in Arvida, Quebec, which had been shut down by a legal strike. The company also went to the Labour Relations Board and the courts to force their striking employees back to work. Peter Burton:

**Peter Burton** [00:08:16] So the picket line went up and most people supported the strike. We received an order very quickly from the Labour Relations Board to return to work. And I was young and perhaps more idealistic than I am now. So we held a vote and the vote was overwhelmingly to stay on strike. So then Alcan filed the order in court as the Code allowed, and we were served with that.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:08:46] On June 8th, the BC Supreme Court issued contempt of court charges against 55 strikers, including the union's leadership. The possibility of large fines and even imprisonment only toughened the workers' resistance. That evening, at a massive steam bath of a union meeting, more than 60% voted once again to ignore their executive's strong recommendation to return to work. Jim Brisebois:

**Jim Brisebois** [00:09:16] It would have been quite easy for the Local executive, the leadership of the union, to come out and say to the membership, okay, let's take them on now. Let's really give it a good fight. We can beat these guys and all this and that very emotional rhetoric. However, we sat down and we considered the situation seriously and we recommended to the membership that they return to work. And in fact, at the second last meeting, the membership meeting that was held, we did urge them to return to work. And it wasn't jokingly, we meant it seriously. We, at that point considered that we didn't have a chance to beat the company, that they probably wouldn't reopen the contract and probably a number of us would go to jail for no good reason. If you're not going to win, it's no use getting totally destroyed. You know, you're better to give in when the giving in is good. However, the membership, they made the decision for us and they decided to fight. And it's just fantastic. It's a fantastic feeling because the Local, the membership have a really lot of respect for the Local executive here. And I'm not saying that because I'm part of the executive, but you know, we have a really democratic union and we tried to provide them with a responsible leadership. And I think they can really appreciate that. And they decided this time, no, no way, guys, we're going out on strike. And you can either help us or you can, you know, get lost. You can do what you want, but we're going out on strike and we're going to fight the company. It was obvious to us after the second last meeting that the membership wasn't going to buckle under, that indeed, they were going to fight to the bitter end if they had to.

**Music: 'Something Worth Fighting For' performed by the Gram Partisans** [00:10:43] So they voted to defy the law and then voted again. They were sick of all of that dangerous work and the selfish corporate plan. They decided they would choose and they would see it through. And the threats of jail and mounting fines would not make them move. You see these workers fought for justice, their main tool a picket line. A trade union fundamental, it still echoes over time. You know, you won't win every battle, you know you might just win the war. With solidarity, it's something good worth fighting for.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:11:43] Meanwhile, there was shocking, tragic news from inside the smelter. Kevin Rooney, a 35-year-old engineer unused to working on the potlines, fell victim to the sweltering heat and died of a heart attack. By then, RCMP Superintendent Gordon Dalton had arrived. On a visit to the union barricade, he told the workers he wasn't concerned by their picketing, but blocking the highway was a criminal offense. If it continued, he warned, you are going to be the loser. The plant is going to be the loser and the community is going to be the loser. When picketers refused to allow company managers returning from Kevin Rooney's funeral back into the smelter, police action seemed inevitable. Peter Burton describes their arrival as dawn broke early the next morning.

**Peter Burton** [00:12:38] At the picket line or at the barricade, on that morning I was sitting in a car with Mickleburgh and a woman named Joan McLellan who was the CBC reporter for Prince Rupert. We were sleeping. There were maybe 30 odd people there. It was about 4:30, 5:00 in the morning. Through the mist, you could see this long stream of headlights coming up. It was RCMP cars and buses. I don't know how many officers they had -- a lot. And they were fully decked out in riot gear. And, you know, the shields and batons, they had dogs, they had guys with shotguns. The media guys didn't know it was going to happen. So the only reporter who was -- the only two reporters who were there were Joan and Rod. All the television guys were trapped behind the thing. So there's no footage, actually, which is unfortunate.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:38] As Peter Burton mentioned, I was one of only two reporters to witness a scene I've never forgotten. Co-op Radio interviewed me not long afterwards.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:48] Finally, as a lot of people had speculated, the police showed up and they really showed up. It was about ten to six in the morning and there was just this long -- the first sign you saw that they were coming was just this incredibly long line of headlights in the early, early dawn. It just didn't seem to end. And even then, you know, people were pretty bleary eyed. I know I was myself. I thought maybe this is a bunch of union guys coming out to the picket line, you know. And all of a sudden I saw two huge buses and I knew, this is it. And the Local president, Peter Burton, was there asleep in the same car that I was in. And we sort of shoved him out into the cold to get arrested and staggered out. And in just a matter of seconds, it was just unbelievable how quickly the police -- I don't even remember them leaving the bus or leaving their cars or anything or walking anywhere. Suddenly there they all were, about 150 of them lined up in front of the buses, and they had riot sticks, three-foot-long riot sticks and the crash helmets and the visors. And no one was saying a thing. They just stood there in about five or six rows, you know, about 50 yards, 200 feet away from these, from the union people. And there were only 16 of them there, you know. It just looked; it looked pathetic. And the union guys, of course, were just -- they couldn't believe it. I mean, you wait for something, you never think it's going to be like that, that ferocious, not ferocious, but awesome, you know, just awesome. And you didn't know what the mood of the police were. I wasn't facing the police, so I knew, you know, I didn't get a feeling that they were going to charge the guys and then break their heads or anything like that. But, you know, if I'd been facing them, you know, you're not sure of that. So they were all lining up there and rubbing the sleep from their eyes and all that kind of stuff. And this was going to be the end of their ten-day barricade, obviously. And one of the guys, about 45, a guy named Romeo, just looked at it and he was a bit older than the other people that were arrested. He was struck, I think, by the absolute ludicrousness of the situation and had a twig or something in his hand and started waving it and went one, two, three, charge. And down he went, down the road about ten yards towards these 150 police all by himself and nobody went with him. And then he went back and sort of laughed himself but no one was laughing among the picketers. They didn't want to get those cops uptight. And the RCMP superintendent then quickly informed them that they were in breach of the criminal code and they're liable to arrest. That's when he said, either you come, now or we come to get you. And they didn't waste much time making up their mind. And Peter Burton, the Local president, just turned to the people and said, well, there's not much point with forces like these because they were at one point talking in terms of lying down on the road and, you know, going limp and all that kind of stuff. But I mean, it just was all out of the question when the time finally came. It just would have been ridiculous.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:16:34] Peter Burton fills in what happened after their arrests.

**Peter Burton** [00:16:37] So we got out -- I got out of the car. And they came in and they said, you know, from a distance away, you have five minutes to surrender. It wasn't like disperse or go away. You have five minutes to surrender. So we surrendered. They put us in a bus. They drove us up to Terrace and threw us in jail in Terrace. So we were there for eight hours or something like that. And then we were released. Anyway once the police released us, we carried on. I think the numbers of people of our own members who were going to work started to increase. The company was able to maintain, not so much production, but they were able to maintain the operation. And so out of the arrests, 31 of us, 31 of 32 were charged with mischief and mischief under the Criminal Code is a hybrid offense. It can be a misdemeanor or it can be a more serious charge with the sentence varying depending, maximum sentence varying, I think six months if it's a misdemeanor and up to five years etcetera. So we were charged with mischief.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:17:48] Once Burton and the others had been taken away, it did not take long for a front end loader to push the union's barricade into a ditch. The siege was over. But that was not the end of the strike. Three hours after the CASAW picket line was dismantled, eight FSSA members from the strike-bound Arvida smelter in Quebec set up their own picket line. This was real union solidarity, says Jim Brisebois.

**Jim Brisebois** [00:18:16] Well, I guess up until this point, we've had a lot of discussion with the FSSA in Quebec over the past year or a couple of years, but there's never been a demonstration to our membership in some tangible form of the support we could give each other in a strike situation such as this. I think the arrival of the FSSA picketers from Arvida, demonstrated to our membership that the FSSA was indeed sincere in their wish to support us and to have us support them in any endeavor of this sort. And it just had a really profound effect on our membership. It made them aware of the solidarity of the FSSA with us and of the fact that together we probably could beat Alcan. And it made them feel great. And it brought, it made our people stronger and better able to fight the company I think.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:19:08] Despite the Arvida union's picket line, a growing number of strikers began returning to work. Feelings ran high. There were fistfights, slashed tires, parking lot confrontations and threats. On June 18th, the Labour Board ruled the FSSA picket line was illegal and it came down. Two days later, yet another vote was taken on whether to face the inevitable and end the strike. Peter Burton recounts what happened.

**Peter Burton** [00:19:41] And the strike carried on until I think, what, the 21st of June, we'd received another court order. We had a vote. And the vote was a tie. The company never - - and I'm sure others -- never believed it actually was a tie. And then under Robert's Rules of Order, I got to cast the deciding vote and I said, no, we're going back to work. It's over.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:20:05] Although the government's wage controls were bitterly opposed by all union organizations in Canada, none rallied to the cause of the smelter workers fierce strike against them. A major reason was that CASAW was an independent Canadian union unaffiliated with the BC Federation of Labour or the Canadian Labour Congress. They left CASAW to battle on alone. Community support was also divided, but not the local media, which sided almost completely with the company. Peter Berton talked about it with Co-op Radio.

**Peter Burton** [00:20:42] The press, the local media, you know, I think it's the general opinion of the members that the local radio station is nicknamed the Alcan Broadcasting Company, and they don't have a nickname for the local newspaper. But, you know, that's just a fact of life in a, you know, northern company town. I think probably anywhere that, you know, the workers aren't going to get much more than, you know, sympathy, which is between shit and syphilis in the dictionary, from those people.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:21:11] With the strike over, the company wasted little time seeking retribution from the union and its leaders.

**Peter Burton** [00:21:18] So I think the strike ended on June 21st and they filed the contempt papers on June 22nd, I think the day after the strike ended, after the vote. And so the union, myself and some, not all the executive, people who had been more active during the dispute, more active than the other guys. And they also -- and I don't remember the timing -- but not too long after, they initiated a lawsuit against the union, myself, Wiho Papenbrock and a guy named Jim Brisebois, who was the treasurer, for \$1.3 million. So against the union and the three of us as individuals for \$1.3 million. So that was kind of the end of the dispute. The company, despite all of that, started to make efforts to have normalized relations again because on a day-to-day level, they were too vulnerable to individual or group hostility. So they wanted to try to normalize relationships and rebuild some relationships. So on the one hand, they're you know, you're being prosecuted, and you know, all this other stuff's going on. And oh, they fired -- that was the other thing -- they fired 30 odd people, including me. So the first issue up was the terminations. And the vice-chair who heard those terminations with a hearing in Kitimat was John Baigent and he was the vice-chair. And so he overturned the terminations and I think substituted six months.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:23:06] In his surprise ruling, John Baigent concluded that a lengthy suspension or outright firing in a company town like Kitimat, where there was no other viable employment, was qualitatively different from similar discipline in other locations. It was a way of life. And therefore the punishment should be mitigated. Then came the criminal trial for mischief. And once again, there was a surprise ending. Peter Burton:

**Peter Burton** [00:23:36] The next legal proceeding was the criminal trial for mischief. And Selwyn Romilly, who's I think still a judge in the BC Supreme Court, was the provincial court judge hearing it. And they tried me first, logical from their perspective. All the evidence they introduced were pictures of me talking to the police or me talking to management at this barricades. So they had no evidence that I was actually -- this is the trial for mischief -- that I personally was actually part of any blockade, which was the mischief. There was one picture in which clearly I was speaking to the crowd, but they couldn't, the witness couldn't identify it was me. I could tell you it was me. I had my back to the camera, they're on the other side. So I got acquitted of that, of the mischief charge and they dropped the charges against everyone else. From their perspective, you know, convicting somebody else and letting me walk away would have been humiliating, I think. So I got to go to the RCMP station and watch them burn fingerprints and the photograph that they'd taken. It was actually a great photograph and I asked the guy for it, but he wouldn't do it. Pound sand buddy!

**Music: 'Something Worth Fighting For' performed by the Gram Partisans** [00:24:56] So these brave CASAW members held out for over 18 days in the face of all the pressure that the state could throw their way. For the rights of working people, they continue still to be a symbol that lives on today, inspiring guys like me. [instrumental] You see, these

workers fought for justice, their main tool a picket line. A trade union fundamental that still echoes over time. Though you won't win every battle, you know, you might just win the war with solidarity and something good worth fighting for.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:26:40] Only Alcan's lawsuit for damages exacted a price, and even there, CASAW managed to negotiate the company's original \$1.3 million claim down to 135,000, although that was still a considerable sum.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:27:03] The Kitimat wildcat took place nearly 50 years ago, but it lives on as an example of workers rising up to take spontaneous action against a company that had pushed them too far. No matter the result, it was also the first major job action against wage controls, with enough drama for a multi-episode series on Netflix. We hope we've done it justice. As always, thanks to the other members of the podcast collective, Donna Sacuta of the BC Labour Heritage Center, Patricia Wejr, who edited the interviews and drafted the script, and John Mabbott, who put it all together. Bill Hood wrote the song "Something Worth Fighting For", which was performed by the Gram Partisans. Peter Burton was interviewed by Ken Novakowski and Jim Sinclair headed the Co-op Radio team that traveled to Kitimat during the strike to do those on-the-spot interviews. And I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.

**Theme song, 'Hold the Fort'** [00:28:13]