

John MacLennan

Beginnings

I was born in Gateshead, County Durham; it is situated on the South-side of the River Tyne. It is directly opposite to the city of Newcastle. The area had been a coal mining area going back to Queen Elizabeth 1 st time. It was once an industrial power-house. It was famous for Coal mining, shipbuilding, Railway, and making Mining machinery. When I started working at 15, its decline was imminent.

My families were working class people. My grandfather on my dad's side was Christian Socialist; He worked on the railway operating the telegraph. He helped organize the North Eastern Railway workers into the union, and received a medal for it. My father was a steelworker before joining the British Navy, after the war he worked on the railway. While working there he was working alongside black African Newcastle university students. Because they were students they got less pay. My father fought and won them the same pay. During this struggle they were at our house all the time.

My first memories of growing up were we lived in Slums both in Newcastle, and Gateshead. At the time there was no choice. We had a cat that used to catch rats; it was so noted for killing them that people would come and borrow her for the night, to deal with their rat problems, When I turned 8, we move to a brand new house, in the outer part of Gateshead. A small mining village called Wrekenton. These were council houses that were built by the local Labour Government. My town had voted Labour since 1909, and has not voted any other way since.

Looking back our house-hold was very political, my grandfather's sister always called me "a proper little Molotov," after the famous Soviet Foreign Minister, because like him I was always answering "no" to everything. On my way back from Russia to Canada, in 1978, I was told, that when one of my uncles was dying he was told that I was in the USSR; he said was not surprised because his Grandfather was big supporter of the Soviet revolution.

On my mother's side, my grandfather was a tory, my grandmother was labour. They were always arguing. All their children, including my mother supported

Labour. My grandfather brothers were miners; they too were strong labour supporters. I was at the 100 th birthday party of my grandfather, and I was talking to his brother in 1983, I said just to make conversation “this Arthur Scargill leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, (NUM) seems to be alright.” He just looked at me and said he was a “sellout”. This was just before the Thatcher government smashed NUM in 1984/85.

One his sons, my uncle Jimmy when he turned a 100 years old in 2016, at his birthday party, the lord mayor of Sunderland, was attending his party. Again I was again just making conversation, “ is the Mayor Labour?” He said “he`d better be, or he`s out on his arse.” My uncles and cousins` either worked in Shipyards, mining, or heavy industry. I started my working life as an Apprentice Sheet Metal Worker at a small non-union company of about 60 workers. I was there for nearly 3 years, I left and worked at a mining machinery place for a year on a Capstan Lath, as an operator. Along with bunch of workmates I had made there, we all quit and got jobs in the Shipyards. My problem was I too young, and was unable to start. It was all very serendipity you could quit jobs one day and get another the next.

I happened to be engaged to a Canadian living in Gateshead, and that time we saw an ad in the local paper interviewing people for jobs in Canada. I got an interview, and was accepted. We then married, and while waiting, to leave for Canada, I got a job with Gateshead city Council. First I was cutting grass, and looking after flowers and plants, then I was moved into the City`s graveyard. I left England in September 1965, by boat from Liverpool and landed and was processed in Quebec a week later. Next day we docked in Montreal, and we travelled to Toronto. When I got off the train the person who we were staying with took me down to Goodyear Tires, and was hired to start the following week.

I would have tried De Havilland`s but they were on strike there when I landed. A month later in October 1965, I began over 12 years at De Havilland /McDonnell-Douglas. While growing up in England I had no direct contact with unions. I did have when I worked on the Capstan lath, and Gateshead city council, having union membership, was automatic. It was a condition of employment. While

working for the city I did experience the strength of the union, where I grew up it rained nearly every day. The union steward would pull us off the job, if it rained. We`d have some tea, played cards, when the boss came around and asked us to go to work. The Steward would check to see if it had stopped, even if there was a slight trace of rain, he would chase the foreman, and decide if/when we would return to work. There was an exception if someone had scheduled a burial.

Union & Political Bio

1965 to 1977 worked @ DE Havilland – McDonnell-Douglas Malton, Ontario as Assembler /air craft Mechanic

Local union UAW 1967 work force was 6000, 7000 plus workers

Shop steward, Vice/chief Steward, executive board

Local committees' bylaws, education, political action,

Delegate to Brampton, & district Labour Council, Executive Council of the Ontario Federation of Labour 1968 to 1976, OFL delegate from 1970, to 1978. Delegate to 1976 CLC convention 1976, Quebec City,

Delegate to the 1970 Ontario NDP convention, Toronto voted for Stephan Lewis, over Walter Pittman, for Ontario Leader.

Involved in Historic Strike at McDonnell-Douglas aircraft in 1971, After twice voting to turn down the proposed collective agreement, the International Board of the UAW, (which include Canadian Director Dennis McDermott) cut-off the strike benefits' and sent us back to work.

Our Canadian local fought against the imposition of US wage controls in Canada, that had been imposed by President Richard Nixon, This strike was debated both in Ottawa and Queens`s Park. It was one of the first steps, in the Canadian section of the UAW, and setting-up the CAW, and eventually UNIFOR.

Unfortunately, the wage settlement fell within the guidelines of the Nixon wage controls.

I was Involved in left causes at Local and the conventions. Unity Caucus at McDonnell-Douglas, Left cause at B&DLC , Left and Communist caucuses at OFL/CLC, and Waffle Caucus at NDP convention.

Big difference in 1973 when UE, Mine Mill, and West Coast Fishermen allowed back in to the CLC, after being banned since 1949.

Still out-side was the CCU, and CIMIA, who waged major strike struggles, at Texpac, McGregor Hose, Artistic Woodwork, and Dare Cookies, big fight against the use of Scabs. Because they were outside the CLC leadership told its members not to support their picket lines.

Major fights in the late 1970`s, CUPW strike 1978 CLC refused to support, government declared illegal, JC Parrot, CUPW leader went to jail, and major strike at Inco, Sudbury workers on strike for over 9 months.

Local president undermined by region 6, president Stew Cooke, Dave Patterson, after the strike ran against Cooke and defeated him.

In 1976, I was selected to go to Family week at the UAW`s family Education Center at Black Lake, Michigan, Barbara and I, flew there from Toronto, Met lots of US CAW workers, it was for two weeks 1976 was 200 hundredth anniversary of the American revolution, and Jimmy Carter was in the White House. We were the only Canadian there. Gord Wilson, who was Canadian education director and asked me if I wanted to go.

During me time at Black Lake, I was laid-off from the job. Then you had to be notified by telegram if you were not at work. At the same time government legislation said I had to get 8 week notice. The telegram said that I should not to report to work, stay home and they would send me my paycheck by mail. McDonnell-Douglas didn`t want me in the plant because I could run for Shop Steward, and would end up with super seniority, and couldn`t be Laid off. They wouldn`t take me back. So I sat at home getting paid.

Then I got a phone from a buddy in the plant who told me they had made a mistake and laid-off too many people. So I should not answer the phone, or door.

The reason was because they had to put the telegram or letter in your hand, or speak to you in person. I avoided the company for two weeks, and continued to get paid for my time off.

My time at McDonnell-Douglas was limited, as militant Left activist; I was fired for fourth time which I lost at Arbitration. It took 6 hearings for close to 9 months. In addition, to the four firings and I was suspended 14 times. Which was anywhere from a day, up to a month.

During my time waiting for my arbitration, I got involved in B&DLC's unemployed committee, which allowed me to go before the board of referees as an advocate for unemployed people

We also held big political meeting in Brampton with politicians from both the cities, and federal and provincial levels. The local MLA was Premier William Davis. These meeting had 500-600 present, lots of media coverage. I also was to meet with unemployed committees in Toronto, along with Ross Sutherland, from Kingston unemployed committee, who later became EA at the T&DLC with Mike Lyons.

A big pusher in Brampton for the unemployed committee was Buzz Hargrove, who was a UAW rep, at American Motors in Brampton. One other major issue we won was for Women workers to be hired at the auto plant. American Motors excuse at the time for not hiring women was there was no women's washrooms. Others I worked with in Brampton were Val Bjarnson, and Gary Locus from UE. One my earliest people I met there was Bill Howes back in 1968, who was a leader there in California Grape Boycott, like most people this was out introduction to direct political action.

My first meeting of the OFL executive I meet Mike Lyons, who was to become LC president, who had also worked in Brampton at Northern Telecom, who was at this time a rep for the PSAC, and he steered me around the OFL building

I joined the CP in 1973, several months later after an incident Local 1967 UAW leadership called a "sick-in" in most member didn't take part in. The Bargaining committee was fired, the elected executive board was suspended for 3 days to a

month, all committeemen and stewards were suspended for 3 days. It was a total leftist mistake! I was then part of a campaign that was organized by Jack Kirby, and myself to get International UAW leadership behind us to win the case of the "Douglas 5"

One of the major reason for the called "sick in" was that company had suspended two officers of the union for coming back late after supporting the Artistic Woodwork picket line, the morning after CCU's Madeleine Parent had addressed the Stewards Council the night before.

1974, I first travelled to the USSR, I was part of a CP delegation, went Moscow, Volgograd, and Baku. When I got back wrote about my visit in the local union newspaper. Later that year I was the driver and bodyguard for Angela Davis, when she was in Toronto speaking at U of T, and other meetings around the city, in the black community.

In January 1978, I travelled to Moscow, for 9 months to study Marxism, at the Lenin Institute, I travelled to St Petersburg, and Zuckately, and Baku, in Azerbaijan.

I started working for the CP starting in Sept, 1978, in Toronto, with trade unionists until 1980. I then worked as an organizer with members who were members of UAW around Ontario. This took me to St Catherine's, Oshawa, Brampton, Windsor, London, Scarborough, and Oakville.

I started working with Geoff Bickerton, CUPW, John Calvert, CUPE, Jim Turk, UE, Doug Allen (later of CUPE), and the Action Caucus. Helped co-ordinate resolutions, along with back ground research papers, and developed convention kits, for CP members.

I also was a CP party, Canadian Tribune fundraiser, which took me to North Bay where I met Bonnie Robichaud, after a discussion with herself and her family we planned a campaign to win her case against sexual harassment.

During the following period I became Labour Secretary, which allowed me to work with trade-union comrades from BC to Newfoundland. I helped Dave Werlin AFL

president challenge Shirley Carr for CLC president, and JC Parrot, break the slate of the CLC.

I led a delegation of trade unionists to the last meeting of the WFTU, in Moscow, in 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Spoke twice, cause a bit of an uproar when I challenged the convention about sexual harassment.

The Tribune was approached by the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild, (SONG) if they could organize the Tribune staff. The request was because they had been approached by the right-wing Polish local Newspaper, and want to balance their presence on the board. Because I wrote a labour Column each week, they had me take up the position. I was then elected labour council delegate.

The membership included a fight for SONG to leave the TNG, and end up joining the CEP, and eventually UNIFOR.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1981, had repercussions in the CP Canada, which ended in a split.

While the Tribune collective ended, I was able to continue in SONG as a member @ large. This included some ongoing union organizing. When we became members of the CEP, their organizing staff tried to organize "Auto Mart" who stood outside handing out leaflets. This they did in spite of protests from the inside organizing committee. I was sent in to try and save the organizing drive by the local.

It was a lost cause, had to try and build the inside committee, and we did get a 46% vote for union. Most of the inside committee lost their jobs, still feel bad when I see the Auto Mart ads on TV.

We did have a successful organizing drive at Chronicle Journal, in Thunder Bay, a Conrad Black newspaper. Help of the Winnipeg Tribune staff. The CEP had the Winnipeg local service them, it's lot closer than Toronto. But the Drive was done over weekend starting Friday morning and Lorne Solotnick flying back Monday morning to register the union at the OLRB. We had the help of Evelina Pan President of Thunder Bay LC.

The Winnipeg local in CEP, later successfully organized the Newspaper carriers, in Toronto SONG was asked to organize the carriers at the Star. There was a lot of cross-over with these carriers also working for the Globe, and the Toronto Sun. Worked for several weeks on this campaign, problem became when Star negotiating committee negotiated more for the editorial staff at the expense of the carriers agreeing to them being depending contractors. This has become a big problem for all precarious workers.

This led to Brad from the Sun, running against and knocking off Song President John Deveral I from the Star. During this period helped Gail Lem, become Media VP, for the CEP

I was also sent into Oshawa, after “The Oshawa Times” closed its doors in midst of a strike. They had started strike paper, the CEP poured money into it to see if they could replace the owner Thompson to buy into the community. I was put in charge of circulation both in Oshawa, and Whitby.

During this period the Ontario NDP become the government, near the end of their term I became the organizer for the Unemployed Workers Council, (UWC).

Held a Toronto Unemployed conference in Toronto that had Bobby Jackson, (an Original organizer from BC, on the 1935 on to Ottawa Trek) spoke to the conference. There were over 120 delegates in attendance, where we elected a steering committee. The same day we march to Queen`s Park, and spoke to the new Tory public hearing meeting. We also moved the UWC, away from the T&DLC

Worked closely with John Clarke and OCAP, both of us were later members of the organizing committee for” the Ontario Days of action”

I had many hats during this time, UWC, LC delegate, manager of the “Rank N File” band who played every Days of Action around Ontario.

During Toronto Days of Action, the Friday city shutdown, UWC was given assignment to shutdown Hill Crest TTC maintenance yard.

In 1999 went to do a course at Seneca community college to become a “Web Master” started doing websites for local unions. Started using a digital camera for photography.

John Cartwright at that time became President of Toronto, and York Region Labour Council, asked me to shoot photos at the annual Labour Day Parade, which I did for over the next 20 plus years

In 2011, for the 140 anniversary of the TLC, to celebrate the council produced a book of my photos called “the Spirit of our movement”. This led to an exhibition at the Worker`s Art and Heritage Centre in Hamilton. I also had an art exhibit in Belfast in 2003, and photo exhibit Havana, Cuba, in 2015. I also had exhibitions in Vancouver, Ottawa, and Mayworks, in Toronto

While I worked on the Labour Council website I trained the staff to update their own site. Covered all of the Aboriginal and Workers of Colour conferences, Worked the \$10 dollar minimum wage campaign, “Made in Canada”, and a Million Reasons campaigns, as well as the “Good Jobs” conferences