

This recording is a follow up interview with Dean Johnson, a retired Local 502 longshoreman and former shop steward. In this interview he shares stories about being a longshoreman, work culture, and his time working at the Westshore Coal Terminals.

Interviewers: Michelle La; Peter Hall

Interviewee: Dean Johnson

Date of interview: June 13, 2014

Date range of topics covered: 1961 onwards.

Sound Recording Length: 56:18

Johnson was born and raised in New Westminster. He got his first longshoring work in Prince Rupert at age 16, but then when he was 17 he starting longshoring in New Westminster in 1961. In 1975 he started a steady job at Westshore. In this interview he talks about the day-to-day routine of a longshoreman, the disputes and camaraderie amongst longshoremen, taking breaks at work, encounters between longshoremen and sailors, Westshore terminals, wolfing, walkouts, literacy, the “River Rats,” and pensions.

0:00:00 – 0:04:59

- In this section Johnson describes the activities and atmosphere in the union hall on 10th Street in New Westminster where the dispatch office was, between 1961 and 1975 when Johnson worked primarily in New Westminster and Surrey. The hall was a place where people talked, learned about what happened the day before on the docks, discussed new safety measures, traded information about new machines and how to operate them or how to do different tasks, but also talked about their personal lives and joked around. The hall would be open at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning to 6:00 in the evening. People would go there if they wanted to find out how to get work as a longshoreman, and would be instructed to speak with the dispatcher.

0:05:00 – 0:19:19

- In this section, Johnson talks about how longshoremen engaged with one another, and different types of disputes or camaraderie that would arise on the docks. He first speaks about the reputations longshoremen could get with their brothers if they proved unworthy of being treated nicely by them, such as if one was known to be a thief, if they didn’t stand by their union, and if they stole money as happened in the 1960s with one president. He also talks about how longshoremen tended to stick around, and that very few people left once they became members. Those that did leave to get other jobs, for example “up north” where it was rumoured you could make a lot of money, regretted leaving. Because the union handled its own grievances, workplace disputes among longshoremen were handled internally. The business agents would also issue fines or suspensions for bad behaviour, and Johnson speaks about being fined once. Johnson also spoke about the veterans of WWII and the Korean War who were still working in his early days, and the reputation they had. He relays a funny story about a veteran talking back to a foreman.

0:20:00 – 0:25:59

- In this section, Johnson talks about breaks at work. Lunch was one hour, unpaid, and started at noon. On lunch breaks, longshoremen would go to any number of restaurants or food service establishments in downtown New Westminster, though Johnson specifically remembers three pubs: the Russell, the Dunsmuir and the Windsor.

0:26:00 – 0:37:11

- In this section, Johnson focuses on his time at Westshore Coal Terminals starting in 1975, which was different in that it had a paid lunch. It was different from the other terminals and docks in many other respects as well, including the fact that it was not under the BC Maritime Employers Association. As such, workers there were initially paid a bit less than those elsewhere in Local 502, but that later changed. One tended to work a full eight-hour shift whereas at other docks one might have only worked four hours, but would get paid for a full shift. Westshore had a reputation as being a lousy place to work at the time, but Johnson reports that it was a good place to work, and that he liked it there because, among other reasons, it was steady work and a good place for longshoremen who were family men. One tended to either work alone or in pairs. Johnson also notes that, like the locations further up the river, workers at Westshore also had events committees, and he mentioned the fishing derbies that were held twice a year. He also tells a story about a brief walkout after a dispute with a foreman there.

0:37:12 – 0:45:09

- In this section, Johnson talks about encounters between longshoremen and sailors and seamen who were aboard the vessels that the longshoremen were loading and unloading. There were often language barriers, which Johnson describes. Longshoremen never took direction from captains or seamen, only from their foremen. Encounters between longshoremen and the workers aboard the vessels were, more frequently limited due to the fact that the ship crew would want to go into Vancouver after having spent so much time at sea.

0:45:10 – 0:56:18

- In this section, Johnson concludes the interview by talking about a variety of topics, including “wolfing” and going back and forth to Vancouver. He also says that Local 502 longshoremen always “out produced” those of Local 500. He describes an incident where he participated in a walkout due to safety issues caused by a belligerent foreman in Vancouver. Toward the end of the interview he tells stories about illiteracy on the waterfront, the River Rats, and pensions transferring over from BCMEA to Westshore and disability payments.