

This recording is a follow up interview with Joe Breaks, a resident of South Surrey and retired longshoreman. Breaks was president of ILWU Local 502 from 1972-1979 (minus one unspecified year). The major themes of this interview are union activities including traveling cards, safety, labour solidarity, the distinction between mechanization and automation, and law enforcement surveillance. Breaks also describes hazing that young, casual longshoremen received from older longshoremen in the 1960s when longshore work was organized in gangs.

Interviewer(s): Michelle La

Date: 26 June 2014

Date range: primarily the 1960s and 1970s, but includes mention of the 1935 longshore strike and some discussion of more recent events.

Sound Recording Length: 1:35:03

Section 00:00 – 05:22

Breaks describes Local 502 support for striking Filipino seamen on a Greek registered ship at Fraser Surrey Docks in the early 1970s when Breaks was president of the Local. The seamen had not been paid for several months and set up a picket line, which the longshoremen would not cross. Several of the longshoremen took seamen home and fed and housed them. After about 2 weeks both the Greek and Filipino ambassadors got involved along with Tom McGrath (business agent for the international seamen's union) and members of Local 502 in negotiating a fair settlement for the Filipino sailors. Ship was trapped because the longshoremen threaten to erect "water pickets" which would keep the tugboat operators out.

Section 05:23 – 15:18

Breaks notes that seamen often chose British Columbia as a place to strike because they could be assured that the longshoremen would honour their picket lines. He discusses the poor working / living conditions for seamen generally, but that strikes arose out of desperation. He asserts that the conditions on American, British, Japanese registered ships were not so dire. Notes that some longshoremen developed social relationships with seamen, some of whom visited New Westminster frequently. Breaks describes an event when a crewman fell down the ship's hatch; also mentions that occasionally longshoremen fell down the hatch – describes one serious injury, discusses some of the limitations of workmen's compensation awards in the 1970s which encouraged longshoremen to work even when injured.

Section 15:19 – 20:05

Breaks describes loading fertilizer that was given as aid to India in the 1960s. He recalls that he worked loading 112lb sacks of fertilizer for 6 months straight. He describes the work process with a gang of 8 (in the ship's hold) that allowed men to "hang the hook on the topside." He also describes the procedure for loading a more explosive fertilizer product that required special handling.

Section 20:06 – 22:27

Discusses longshore work that followed Russian wheat deals in the 1960s. Much of the wheat was in 100lb sacks and was handled in a manner similar to the fertilizer. Sometimes wheat was poured into the ships, followed by a layer of sacked wheat and then topped with lumber.

Longshoremen were given dust masks, but they were uncomfortable and ineffective some most did not wear them.

Section 22:28 – 35:21

Discusses the handling of lumber, one of the most important commodities shipped from New Westminster. Describes the process for hand stowing lumber, 9"x3" boards that could be up to 40ft long, the procedure for building up "floors" and for winging up. Breaks describes being hazed, which he refers to a being "tested," when he was a young longshoreman. Longshoremen who could not pass the test were often chased off the gang, some out of longshoring. Some side runners were "kinda mean," but new longshoreman had no recourse. Breaks states that racism was not a factor in hazing, but rather it had to do with personality and willingness/ability to do the job. Returns to talk about poor safety conditions, particularly on the Liberty ships (recycled WWII naval ships) owned by Aristotle Onassis. Describes the longshoremen's practice of inspecting ships for safety, which he says was initiated by the "young guys" who started working in the 1960s, a period of expansion. Ships are in better condition today, in part, because ships no longer contain the cargo lifting gear that was easily damaged.

Section 35:22 – 48:22

Explains the distinction between automation and mechanization. Notes that mechanization completely changed the job, made it physically easier – this occurred over Breaks' first 10 years on the job. Membership of Local 502 has expanded since mechanization because the amount of cargo has increased. Nonetheless, the ILWU collective agreement provides compensation for mechanization and automation-related job loss. Breaks goes on to describe the current system of "ratings" that were introduced when he was the Local president, making seniority less important for job advancement. The local now limits the number of people in each rating to keep skills fresh and to ensure that everyone with the rating gets work. Earning ratings can improve pay. Ratings are different than journeyman's tickets for welding, mechanics, or electrician, etc. Describes separation between dockworkers (Local 511) and deepsea (Local 502) and their amalgamation in 1963 (later he says 1966). Describes some of the different work done by dockworkers.

Section 48:23 – 49:44

Discusses the opening of Westshore Terminals (coal) and the need to ramp up hiring and skills training because of the heavy equipment used there. Returns to relationship between deepsea and dockworkers, who were called "backdoor bandits" after they were merged into Local 502.

Section 49:45 – 1:13:41

Discusses various longshore conventions in Canada and US. Describes process for electing officers, and enumerates the kinds of issues discussed at conventions and caucuses. Describes relationship between US and Canadian divisions of the ILWU. Pilots on the Panama Canal recently joined ILWU. Discusses value of the work done by river & deepsea pilots and difficulty of becoming certified. Returns to describe the history of the establishment of ILWU in the 1940s and Westminster Waterfront Workers Assoc. following the 1935 strike. The "Canadian Area" of ILWU was established in 1967 or 68. Describes various union newsletters and their content. Local 502 also sends delegates to the BC Federation of Labour and is also part of the New Westminster Labour Council. Tells a story about travelling to Los Angeles with Dave Lomas in

which the US Customs official was already aware of their names and affiliations. This leads to a discussion of Canadian government surveillance of labour leaders, including a break-in at the union hall in which documents were rifled, but nothing was stolen. Mentions general strike over the “anti-inflation board” and efforts at government intimidation. Offers an explanation of why truckers are not part of ILWU.

Section 1:13:42 – 1:17:06

Breaks explains “travelling cards” that allowed longshoremen to work at other West Coast ports. Breaks’s father had one to work in LA when Breaks was a child. Travelling cards still exist, but immigration rules make it difficult, if not impossible, work across the border. Travelling cards still work between West Coast Canadian ports, and serve as a way to move temporarily when work is slack.

Section 1:17:07 – 1:19:45

Describes an attempt by a previous local president to employ the widow of a longshoreman (Ruth) at the Annacis Auto Terminal in the 1980s and the negative reaction of members because the irregular way that the hire was made. The first official female hire was Denise Block around 1991. Breaks thinks that there are now approximately 50% women in the lower ranks of the ratings boards.

Section 1:19:46 – 1:35:03

Reflects of current individualism among longshoremen, which Breaks attributes to the fact that people no longer work face-to-face. Explain the origin of the Education Committee that Breaks leads. Explains a “shape up” and discusses what he teaches. Describes the current process for registering new longshoremen, which began around 1997. Breaks concludes the interview by explaining the recent cooperative relationship between ILWU and the BC Marine Employers Association (BCMEA).