

This recording is an interview with South Surrey resident and former Local 502 president Joe Breaks in his home. The major themes of this interview are union issues and work.

Interviewers: Andrea Walisser; Peter Hall

Interviewee: Joe Breaks

Other people present: Joe's wife, Elaine Breaks

Date: 9 July 2013

Date range: primary date range is between 1960 to present, but 1912, 1935 and 1958-59 are also mentioned

Sound Recording Length: 2:15:47

In 1960, Joe Breaks got his first work at the New Westminster dockyards. He joined his first dockworker "gang" in the winter of 1961. He was sworn in as a full ILWU Local 502 member in 1965. From 1972 to 1979 he was the Local 502 President, except for one (unidentified) year in between. He retired in 2006. During Breaks's career the work of a longshoreman changed significantly as a consequence of increased mechanization, and especially, containerization. The jobs and duties of a longshoreman, and the politics of being Local 502 president are described.

Section 0:00:00 – 0:19:14

- In this section, Breaks speaks about his early years as a longshoreman including the various employment types one could have. There were casuals, card men, "gangs", spare boards, and fully-fledged union members. Breaks describes how "gang" members were dispatched. Gangs went from thirteen to eight to zero when they were phased out. Thirteen-member gangs comprised eight men down below (four on each side of the ship), one hatch tender, two winch drivers, and two sling men. The internal dynamics of the gang are described. Competition for work in the 1960s between members (not casuals) is described as fierce; there was a "peg-in" system, which was first-come-first-serve. Often people would come in to "peg in" at 71 Tenth Street between 4:00am and 5:00am.

Section 0:19:12 – 0:26:26

- In this section, Breaks talks about his favourite and least favourite duties. His favourite duties included moving finished lumber ("timbers") as well as lead and zinc because they were easy to store and stack. His least favourite duties included working with animal hides, lifting wheat bales, cement sacks and coffee because they were heavy and cumbersome.

Section 0:26:27 – 0:33:39

- The fate of the thirteen member gangs is described, including its diminution down to eight members and then ultimately zero. Breaks explains the changing job duties of sling men, the relationships between longshoremen outside work, and the relationship between longshoremen and foremen.

Section 0:33:40 – 0:40:38

- Here Breaks discusses the relationship between longshoreman in the New Westminster/Fraser region and Vancouver, "wolfing" or travel, and going back and forth between the two locals.

Section 0:40:39 – 0:46:19

- Here Breaks discusses various employers of longshoremen: Kaiser, Westshore, the BC Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA).

Section 0:46:20 – 0:56:26

- 1969 contract negotiations and strike described at length. This was the moment in the history of Local 502 that Breaks identifies as the year in which “we almost lost the entire caboodle.” It was a hard struggle in which longshoremen bitterly disagreed with one another about strategy and whether or not to go out on strike. The strike caused some members to have to speak with their banks to renegotiate the terms of loans. Some had to go to foodbanks. The entire leadership of the Local was subsequently “fired”.

Section 0:56:27 – 1:03:56

- Here Breaks talks about the 1970s, including being legislated back to work for the first time in his lifetime in 1972. From there is a discussion about contract language, the relationship between longshoremen and teamsters, the unintended consequences of the containerization on dock work and shipping, including a recapitalized union pension fund.

Section 1:03:57 – 1:09:30

- Breaks’ role within the internal bureaucracy of the local, including his first involvement on the executive starting in 1966. Run-ins with other unions (eg. Teamsters) and the courts. The politics of the amalgamation of union locals.

Section 1:09:31 – 1:18:16

- Begins by talking about Louis Goldblatt, Bob Robertson, and Harry Bridges, who were all part of the central union (ILWU), and their roles in the “march inland”, statehood for Hawaii, and opposition to Japanese internment in World War II. A discussion of cross-border learning and travel cards to do work in the US.

Section 1:18:17 – 1:22:56

- Resumption of discussion about wolfing, but also work exchanges between longshoremen from Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland.

Section 1:22:57 – 1:26:37

- Casuals, non-mandatory retirement, issues about hiring and issues that affect younger workers not yet in the union.

Section 1:26:38 – 1:39:17

- Responsibilities of a local president. Negotiations with the employer were sometimes quite heated, and particularly so with the BCMEA, which set the tone for employer-longshoremen relations after the BCMEA succeeded in its effort to get the Local 502 president thrown in jail or fined \$50,000.00 for contempt of court.

Section 1:39:18 – 1:50:08

- Breaks relays stories about fights on the docks between and among workers including with the “35 scabs” which he says occurred around the time “when I started.” Also, stories about interesting characters in the union, people from other countries (eg. Hungary) or workers

who spoke other languages (French-speaking longshoremen from Maillardville), and finally the first women who were admitted to the union, in 2000, which Breaks admits is “late.”

Section 1:50:09 – 1:58:33

- Interview returns to the topic of the previously existing locals, including Local 511, which has since merged with the Local 502. 502 was “deep sea” and were paid 50 cents an hour more. Breaks discusses specific wage differentials between individual jobs on the docks. Seniority issues and the problems that arose when the locals merged.

Section 1:58:34 – 2:06:25

- Longshoremen family picnic had wives and children attend once a year, and it still goes ahead. One time the police asked a longshoreman’s wife about Breaks, thus leading to a discussion about the “pinko list.” Break-in at the union office, and other intimidation tactics including men in suits who followed picketers, including Breaks. On the latter occasion, the men in suits got out of their car, walked up to the picketers (including Breaks), pointed out each person present and named everyone. Breaks rhetorically asks of these mysterious men, “How’d they know all that?”

Section 2:06:26 – 2:15:47

- Discussion about Breaks’ last years as a longshoreman, including the last nineteen years of his career being at Westshore. No specific reason why he gave up presidential/leadership role in the Local. He notes that people did not worry about “technology”, they just thought it was modernization of the industry. “M&M” meaning modernization and mechanization fund. Contrary to the notion that technological innovation reduced demand for labour in his job, Breaks notes “industry expanded to fill the spots.” Finally a discussion about the moment in history, which had the least among of dock work and activity, 1982-1983.