

This interview is with Shane Johnson, who is a current longshoreman and member of ILWU Local 502.

Interview Date: October 7, 2014
Interviewers: Michelle La
Date Range: 1987 to present
Sound Recording Length: 1:18:41

Shane Johnson is a longshoreman and the son of Dean Johnson (who also worked as a longshoreman in New Westminster and eventually at Westshore before he retired) and husband of Faith Johnson, also a longshoreman. Shane worked at Fraser Surrey Docks, Annacis Auto Terminals, and Fraser Wharves. Though he does not state in this interview where his current work location is, the interview with his wife Faith on October 21, 2014 revealed that he works at “the coal port” (Westshore Terminals). In this interview, Shane talks about types of work on the waterfront, the culture of Local 502, and how work has changed since 1987. On several occasions he identifies Deltaport as having brought about a lot of systemic change to longshoring, including bringing in new technologies and also an increase in the number of women employed in longshoring.

Section 0:00 – 07:36

- In this section of the interview, Shane describes how he began longshoring. His father was a longshoreman, and so he picked up some shifts as a longshoreman to make money while he was attending Simon Fraser University, before getting kicked out of university. He was “scared out of my mind” when he started longshoring. He said before he started “all I knew was there was a lot of hard work and a lot of drinking.” His first job was working on rebar down below in the hatch with three other guys he never met in his life. Some weeks there would be no work, some weeks it would be one day of work a week or every two weeks. It took years before he started being able to get two, three and then four days a week of work. If he didn’t get a job at one of the dispatches for the morning, afternoon or graveyard shift, he would hang out at Sloppy Joes (Pacific Café at the time) or head home.

Section 07:37 – 18:27

- In this section, Shane talks about the types of work, including his favourites. When he started in 1987, it was a lot of manual labour still including for example the loading of sacks, which is now containerized. He eventually got a forklift rating. At the time there was no training, they just took volunteers who, as Shane notes, often had no idea how to operate the machinery. If after “7 or 8 times” you did not get fired, you could ask the dispatcher for the forklift rating, and he would put a little red tag on your dispatch plate. Eventually he also learned the “top rack,” which he said involves being “top side” and driving the cranes on the ship. For that however, the company preferred trained people. He also got a checker training, which involves keeping track of cargo going on and off the ship using a booklet. You did not get a choice in jobs until you worked your way all the way up to “A Board,” the casual highest board. There, you could pass on a job if you did not want it. Shane preferred anything that was an early finish, including driving “spoon” on the pulp cars. Rail cars would come in with square bails of pulp, and you would drive a forklift with a flat blade. As soon as you unloaded nine cars, you could go home. “A quota job,” Shane called it: people who did that work would often be able to go home before lunch if they did it quickly enough, and would sometimes race each other. The foreman would pick you if you were especially fast. The

dispatcher would dispatch using a sheet, and the foreman could, in those instances, select from the sheet as to who he wanted doing which job.

Section 18:28 – 28:47

- In this section, Shane talks about safety on the dock. The company implemented speed limits for forklift operators, after which the job got boring. Shane recalls that when they started making training programs that that was when they brought in the safety training. He recalls that that safety was also built in to the training for the work done by the “topside driver.” This was about eight or nine years after he started. Shane saw a foreman get killed due to a faulty crane with rusty breaks on a ship. According to Shane, shipping companies did the least amount of maintenance on a ship as possible. He remembers that in the early years, things like steel-toed boots and safety vests were not mandatory. Hard hats, and safety vests, according to Shane, depending on the job, often caused safety issues. He cites the example of safety vests getting caught in machinery and hard hats obstructing your vision, depending on the work.

Section 28:48 – 33:04

- In this section Shane talks about transportation to and from work, and listening to the old-timers. He moved from New Westminster to Surrey before the Skytrain came in, which was nevertheless convenient because by then he was working on Fraser Surrey Docks. He also spoke about listening to the old-timer stories. He said by and large, people are grateful they don't have to do the same forms of heavy lifting and manual labour that his father's generation did.

Section 33:05 – 36:39

- In this section, Shane talks about his status as a son of a longshoreman. Shane talked about being known as “Dean's kid,” because his father was well known on the docks. He said it was about twelve or thirteen years into his job as a longshoreman that he finally heard someone instead refer to his father, Dean, as “Shane's Dad.” You learned very quickly who was whose son, and so on. People would mention that “so-and-so is my uncle,” or cousin or father, and so on.

Section 36:40 – 39:31

- In this section, Shane talks about lunch, socialization at work, and the dispatch hall. People would hang out by the “sling shacks” by the ship, or go to the lunchroom at the dispatch hall, or, if they lived close enough, they could go home as Shane used to do when he had an hour lunch break and lived and worked in North Surrey. Now it's changed to a thirty-minute lunch. Shane laments a future where people won't have to report to the dispatch hall because he said it's a place where you could “Get to know people that you're not working with all the time.” Here he transitions into talking about the dispatch hall, which he describes as a lively, noisy place where people trade stories about the workplace and what people did on the weekends, and so on. He said it's “easier to make friends with fellow longshoremen,” because everyone understands where they're coming from. People with office jobs for example “can't relate to us in our workplace.”

Section 39:32 – 45:53

- In this section, Shane talks about the effect of mechanization on work. Previously, you'd be working in an 8-man gang, he says, but now you can be in the cab of a machine by yourself "listening to orders coming through a CB radio." He describes the mechanization shift as something that happened quickly and "overnight," and Deltaport coming on stream is what caused it. All of a sudden there were "rubber tired gantries, rail mounted gantries, and everyone was driving a bomb cart." Everyone was being separated. Even the checkers were in a tower, where they would be by themselves. Deltaport was the "major change." He did not have feelings of alienation, but just being "out of the loop." "You almost feel like a robot now in the machines," he said. There still is camaraderie, it was just more intense previously. Shane said that it used to be you knew everybody's name. Now there could be sixty people on a work site, but you might only know two or three people. Despite all the mechanization and large numbers of people working there, people are still friendly and play poker and it's easy to start a conversation with longshoremen who you don't know.

Section 45:54 – 57:19

- In this section, Shane talks about the transition from casual to member, hierarchies at work, and participation in the leadership of Local 502. There's a definite hierarchy between casuals and members. It took Shane twelve years to make membership, in 1999. To the generation that started as casuals at Deltaport, Shane is now an old-timer. Shane stressed that he feels he owes a lot of respect to the old-timers for going on strike and doing all the things necessary to make longshoring a good job today. He said "if they didn't stand up to fight for what we have," it wouldn't be such a great job. Shane says he couldn't wait for the privilege to walk the picket line, but he hasn't had to because they've always signed contracts. He wants to be able to tell the stories the old-timers have. In one way you never want to have that he says, because it's better to have good contracts, but on the other hand it's a "feather in the cap" to be able to say "I've helped the union" by going on strike and fighting for rights. He has served on the Grievance & Credentials Committee and the Dispatch Committee, but he has not yet become a member of the executive. The Grievance and Credentials Committee would go over grievances to see if they merited a consequence. It would also screen casuals to assess them in advance of swearing them in to the union. He said he thinks he "sometimes" got preferential treatment because of his father, though alternately some foremen would give him worse treatment depending on whether or not the guy liked his father.

Section 57:20 – 1:0

- In this section, Shane talks about women on the waterfront, and people from non-white racial/ethnic communities on the waterfront. In 1987 when he started, there were no women members and no women casuals. He said Deltaport changed everything. So many machine jobs and checker jobs, you didn't have to be really physical to work at Deltaport. Suddenly, smaller people – men or women – could start doing these new forms of work. It was a big shock at first. They tended to be daughters or wives of longshoremen. Women were accepted very quickly. He said "Most of the women can pull their own weight." There are so many opportunities for training now that you can do training for non-labour intensive positions, and that has helped women. Nowadays it's commonplace that you're working with women, and Shane talked about how his wife is now down there. In the beginning, guys would assume women could not handle it, but Shane places this in the context of men being hard on each other too, especially on newer casuals. So women had to work harder just to be respected by other longshoremen. Shane goes on to point out how there are also "a lot of East Asians," African Canadians, Serbians and other people from Eastern Europe. There is a diversity of

languages and accents spoken at work. Sometimes it can be awkward if one group is speaking their language in the lunchroom for example, and you can't get in on the conversation.

Section 1:05:44 – 1:10:39

- In this section, Shane talks about the history of the union, educating younger members, and social life within the union. He says the education committee is “very important” and needs to be able to pass on information about the union to newer generations so they can know how they got here. He also talked about the Youth Committee, which attempts to get young people more involved. He said there are a TSI hockey team and a Westshore hockey team, but the River Rats baseball team doesn't exist anymore. There are banquets, an annual car show, a Local 502 rock band, and the Pensioner's Picnic at Cultus Lake, random summer barbecues at the Union Hall, and so on.

Section 1:10:40 – 1:18:41

- In this section, Shane talks about the future. He agrees that in the future things will be computerized, and you will be dispatched the night before your shift, and you won't need to go to the Dispatch Hall. That will be bad because it will weaken your connection to the union, but it will also help individual longshoremen save time every morning before he or she goes to work. Shane talked about winter schools, where either the ILWU or other labour federations will train longshoremen in matters such as worker's compensation and so on. Then, he talked about going out on strike, which Shane has not had to do since he became a member. Shane's son was, at the time of this interview, in training to become a longshoreman at the training centre on Mitchell Island, where, for example, he was being trained how to do lashing. At Mitchell Island, current and new employees alike can undergo training.