CAW 2301
History Project

55 Years of History from
The Workers’ Voices
President’s Message

The importance of a union is just to provide support to all workers regardless of race, creed, nationality. That everyone be treated equally, fairly and safely. And that we can obtain a good life system to support us like wages, benefits, and pensions. Also, it’s another avenue to challenge the government of the day to speak for workers.

It doesn’t matter which union you belong to, or group. The struggles have always been the same. Now that we’re with the CAW, you can see the issues that are happening on the East coast are the same as on the West coast and they’re right across Canada. If we just stand together we should be able to make a good improvement and a good standard in quality of life. We can set an example that every other worker, whether union or not, deserves and just have a good standard of living right across Canada, which would also help set standards around the world.

Gary Warren
CAW Local 2301 President
2009—2012
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Kitimat Project</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Aluminum Smelter</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemano</td>
<td>11-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Aluminum Council of A. F. of L</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United Steelworkers of America</td>
<td>15-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers</td>
<td>20-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976 Wildcat Strike</td>
<td>26-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Safety</td>
<td>29-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemano Completion Project</td>
<td>37-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Auto Workers Local 2301</td>
<td>41-46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kemano Closure</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes</td>
<td>47-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Committee</td>
<td>51-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernization?</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio Tinto Alcan</td>
<td>54-56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE KITIMAT PROJECT

Prior to 1951, the Kitamaat valley was occupied by the Haisla peoples and surrounded by trees, plants, and wildlife in a picturesque, mountain setting. Originally, this area was called Git-A-Maat, which meant “People of the Snow” in the Haisla language. The Haisla had seen white people before 1951, but these visits had not drastically affected their traditional lifestyle; this changed when ten white people arrived on their shores in the spring of that year. Alcan Headquarters in Montreal, five-thousand kilometres away, dictated that these men were to start construction for Alcan’s Kitimat Project.

Twenty-three years earlier, the provincial government of British Columbia sent engineers to northern British Columbia to determine how much hydroelectric power could be produced from the lakes in that region. Under the Industrial Development Act, they invited the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan) to develop the area and Alcan responded by dispatching surveyors in 1948. On December 29th, 1950, Alcan and the provincial government signed the 1950 Agreement, which would last for forty-four years. This agreement gave Alcan the right to develop the Kenney dam, create the Nechako reservoir, and produce ridiculously inexpensive hydroelectric power for their aluminum smelter. It also enabled Alcan to buy land at dirt-cheap prices. Once this agreement was signed, the provincial government displaced the Cheslatta T’en peoples off their traditional lands so that Alcan could flood the valley for their reservoir. In effect, the Cheslatta River was dammed before the provincial government even began negotiations for the Cheslatta lands. Furthermore, the initial settlement granted them only one-fifth of the amount that non-Aboriginal residents received per acre and denied them relocation assistance.

In total, there were five components to the Kitimat Project: the Kenney Dam, Power Tunnel, Powerhouse, Transmission Line, and Aluminum Smelter. First of all, the Kenney Dam was built to reverse the Nechako River water flow to westward. This process formed the Nechako Reservoir. A mountain was splintered into six-million tons of rock and clay, then reassembled in the Nechako River Canyon to establish the largest rock-fill dam in the world in December of 1952. Next, a ten-mile long power tunnel with a twenty-five foot diameter was created when crews of workers blasted through the mountain from four different sides: two crews attacked the east and west side and two other crews started working from the middle of the mountain. This tunnel would conduct water from the Nechako Reservoir to the Powerhouse. This third element of the project was completed by July 10, 1953 and excavated 570,000 tons of rock in the process. The powerhouse housed the most powerful impulse turbines in the world in 1954. Meanwhile, surveyors mapped routes for the Transmission Line on helicopters. The distance of the Transmission line between Kemano and Kitimat was only fifty miles, but it was the most complicated part of the project due to extreme weather conditions, rocky cliffs, and crevasses. In order to withstand powerful winds and heavy ice loads, scientists created the largest overhead transmission cable of the time. The Kitimat Works Wharf was completed in May, 1953 and the Kitimat Smelter was ready for production on August 3rd, 1954, when the Duke of Edinburgh came for a visit and poured the first fifty-pound ingot.
Thousands of workers were needed due to the magnitude of the project, but these men required housing. The Aluminum Company of Canada beached a three-hundred foot sternwheeler, the Delta King, from California to accommodate four-hundred single male employees. Additional camps were built as more men flocked to Kitimat to participate in the largest construction project ever undertaken in Canada at the time. Fred Glover came to Kitimat in 1954 and worked for Alcan for seven months. He recalls the innovative approach that workers used to turn off the lights.

For our bunkhouses, we all slept together in one big room. There'd be at least five beds anyway in there and we’d be crammed together. We used to jump into the bunkhouse, get into bed, the last guy in bed put the light out eh. He'd just pick his boot up and throw it at the bulb and smash it. And if he missed, well then another guy threw his boot but the next day there’d be glass all over the floor. If you forgot about it you'd get out of bed and get it in your foot in the middle of the night, going to the washroom or something.

![The three-hundred foot sternwheeler, The Delta King, was beached to accommodate four-hundred single male employees while the town site was being built.](image)

In order to obtain this sizeable workforce, Alcan recruited from all over the world; this resulted in thirty-six different nationalities comprising their labour force. Colin Coates, an Alcan employee from Component Rebuild, loved the ethnic mosaic that existed in Kitimat:

Guys from Hong Kong, Ghana, Germans, Portuguese, lots of Portuguese guys, Italians, you name it, East Indians, worked with them all. All great people. Y'know it's so diverse here, coming here and being exposed to all these people, different nationalities and that. Everybody's in the same boat here so it was great. And the kids, I thought kids won't know anything about prejudice, they grew up with all these different nationalities like that, and I thought this was wonderful.

Bill Franklin - We used to play a lot of cards. I learned bits of pieces of many languages playing cards in there, how to swear in five different languages.

George Ivanakis, an electrician at Alcan for forty years, was “happy to be working with so many different nationalities.” Of course, the differences in language created significant work barriers but Alcan tried to rectify this issue.

Fred Glover - Alcan got the idea that if they put somebody that came from Europe or any other country that couldn't speak English, if they put them with an English speaking person they would learn English from that person. So I wound up with an Italian fellow that moved in with me and I remember his first name, we called him Joe. But every night his friends would come and they, y'know Italians like to drink wine so the wine bottles would come out, and they would speak fluently in Italian all night long so I was starting to learn Italian but they certainly weren't learning any English from me. And this continued night after night, month after month, but it was okay, I enjoyed the wine, but I didn't understand too much Italian either so it didn't work for either of us.
Alcan played a major role in the development of Kitimat. Not only did the Company offer a Home Purchase Assistance Plan to give their employees financial aid, which would enable community growth, but they took a very active role with Kitimat’s services, infrastructure, and buildings. Alcan hired Clarence S. Stein and an architectural firm, Mayer, Whittlesey, and Glass, from New York City to design Kitimat. Initially, the community did not have a hospital, so Alcan operated one on their beach. In addition to taking care of plant fires, Alcan’s Fire Department also serviced the community by fighting house and forest fires. The Nechako Neighbourhood Centre was opened by Alcan and the company installed the first lighting in Kitimat. Their local publication, the Ingot, was used to inform their employees on updates in the community, as well as the company and aluminum industry. After a short time, Kitimat boasted its own newspaper, educational institutions, a hotel, YMCA, churches, shopping centres, a theatre, and a service centre. In fact, a National Geographic article from the 50s suggested that Kitimat was going to be the next Vancouver, with a projected population of 50,000, and it was known as “The Town of Tomorrow, Today”. Bill Garvin, an Alcan retiree from Exhaust Maintenance, would not have lived anywhere else:

I've had a great forty-four years in Kitimat, the second best thing I ever done, I married my wife and we moved to Kitimat right after that. And been here ever since. I came for two years. I think you'll find talking to any of our people, anybody here came for two, three, four years in the beginning. And it grew on us, we've all stayed here. It's just unreal when you say to somebody, oh my wife and I, we came here for two years to get a little bit of money to build a little house back home. Hey so did I. But everybody you talk to, you only came here for short term. But they end up making this their life. And I have no regrets, I love Kitimat, I love the people.

THE ALUMINUM SMELTER

By 1956, forty percent of the electricity produced in British Columbia was generated in Kemano. Alcan had lofty ambitions for their aluminum smelter in Kitimat. Bill Garvin remembers what the Company’s earliest goals were:

Alcan's public intentions were to build potrooms all the way up to the sand hills from the present town site. That was their original intention when they put out the project to the government to get the rights to come in here and get the land and all. It was to build potlines all the way up to the sand hill. Of course that never happened, they just jumped the creek and that was it. They didn't jump the other creek, just stayed where they were. Their excuse then was that the soil on that side was unstable, they couldn't do it. But that whole area is reclaimed land from the sea, and if you could build what they've built on that part, surely further up the line you could've built something better. Because you were moving away from the sea then. And this was all reclaimed land from the ocean. Then, their intentions might have been good at the time but when they learned the scope of the project, it was way above their head and financial means. They had to scale it back and do it in such a way that people weren't getting mad at them, and the governments of the day weren't getting mad at them because they're great believers in public perspectives.
Although Alcan’s labour force boasted 2079 employees by the end of 1955, the Company found it was a little
difficult to retain their workers. The employment situation was quite different from what it is today and men did
not have as much trouble walking off of one job right into another. This factor combined with the smelter’s
working conditions resulted in a high turnover rate. Bob Morden, a millwright at Alcan, states that:

> In those days it was a dirty, filthy place. I worked in lines 1 and 2, D shift. I remember going
> into the old first aid building and I remember eighteen of us walked in for the medicals and
> basically if you could walk and talk and breathe you would get hired. I think a year later
> there were three of us left and that would be 1975 and another year and six months later
> there was only one left and that was me.

Gary Warren recalls a similar incident:

> On our first introduction into the potrooms there were twelve of us. When we entered 2C
> west passage way, two of the new hires turned around and walked away and quit right
> away on the spot because of the smoke and fumes.

> Colin Coates - People would come and leave the same day, it was incredible. The turnover
> was just phenomenal. It was nothing to say about five sheets of paper posted. There’d be a
> page with job transfers, job changes. There’d be a page with new hires. There’d be pages
> of terminations. Because in them days you could walk out of this job and walk into another
> job.

Horst Voigt remembers how Alcan tried to hold on to their workers through incentives:

> Reason was the wages was quite low here so people left in droves. So Alcan got really
> concerned. They would arrange charter flights for instance. We used to fly to Europe,
y’know stuff like that. But they were always afraid people wouldn’t come back
> anymore. Say for instance, if I would go for four weeks, they might send you a postcard
> saying, ‘Horst, how’s it going? Hope to see you in two weeks’, something like that.
> Because the turnover was getting higher and higher.
“Defonce” may not be a word in the English dictionary but Alcan workers know this term well. Ask any of the old timers and they’ll tell you that “defonce” means “KABOOM!” A defonce occurs when cryolite paste leaks and reacts with the bath, which is 900 degrees, to create an explosion. Bill Franklin, CASAW’s youngest Chief Shop Steward, says that his first introduction to the lines was like a scene from Dante’s Inferno:

I walked into lines 7 for my first day of training. I was outfitted with the protective gear, face mask, the whole works and I was told to sit at the bottom of 3B, and somebody would come pick me up. And as I was sitting there, they had a defonce. Well, this was a particularly bad one, the stud went right through the crane, right through the roof, there was flames all over, smoke. And out of this mess, you couldn’t see nothing but the flames and the black smoke, comes this old guy with a hunch in his shoulder wearing a double respirator, with a cigarette stuck through it like a hole, you’ve got this cigarette sticking out of that. What the Hell am I doing here? I mean, you’re looking at this mess going nobody’s gonna live here. That was probably the worst introduction I’ve ever had to any company, and in terms of Alcan it was probably the worst experience I’ve ever had there.

Bob Morden narrowly escaped from another defonce:

I saw lots of defonces in Lines 1 and 2. I almost got caught in one, one time. I worked in 1B west and pot 100 always blew up. We knew it always blew up. So my buddy was pulling studs and I was on the pot. I turned away and I was walking and I just stepped off the pot onto pot 99. All of a sudden I noticed it really got light behind me, well I was like 145 lbs, 150 lbs, I could run like the wind. So I sprinted down eight pots. At the moment I chose to sprint, there already were flames that were amplified and it blew up around, came up around the cover plate and went up. My buddy, very calm, stuffed the stud back in and he looked for me cause he thought I was caught but I was down ten pots and I was like Holy Jesus Christ man, I would’ve been fried eh. But it was common and you knew what to do right, you knew how to treat pots, which they don’t know how to do anymore. But yeah, it was common to see studs like that, pots like that blow up.
Noel Walker, an Alcan retiree, was not envious of the crane operator's situation when he saw a defonce:

They had a large defonce and it was enormous. There was a section of the roof that blew off and the operator on the crane, operating that crane, he was tuck up in the cab because the fire was all around, the crane was on fire and he couldn't get out because his ladder was gone. And he was stuck up there. The Plexiglas that he's encased in, that melted away, but fortunately, the fire department arrived in time to get him down from there. It was pretty scary.

The work environment at Alcan was pretty awful. Randy Kolodinski, an electrician and OH&S Rep, reminisces about his experiences in the lines:

They warned me that it was going to be bad but, of course, nothing can really prepare you for that kind of heat and dust and everything. I remember one time when a pot started arching and it actually shorted itself out. It was like World War II going off in the section, there was a lot of smoke in the area, sparks flying into the ceiling. The foreman came running out of his office, he heard all the banging and everything, he started running into the smoke and before he got too far, he ran back and shut the power off. But yeah, the whole line was ready to blow up at that point. Once they got the power off, they started repairs right away. So that was one of those exciting things that happens in there.

Bill Garvin notes that:

The conditions in the pot rooms were absolutely deplorable but we didn’t know any better. Now, if you ask these people to work in these kind of conditions they’ll be screaming bloody murder.

Gary Warren recalls that Alcan tried to remedy the high temperature working conditions by forcing their employees to ingest “disgusting” salt tablets that they kept in little bins outside the lunch rooms so that they could retain fluid. This extreme heat led Bill Franklin to try an experiment in the potrooms:

It was so hot you could fry an egg on a cover plate, I actually did it. Just to see, I cracked an egg and, sure enough, the damn thing fried.
Not only was the working environment blistering hot and hazardous, but the equipment at Kitimat Works was difficult to use. In addition, almost all of the work was completed solely using manual labour. Erkki Lasanen, a retired carpenter from Alcan, notes that transportation was different in the old days:

We didn't have any buggies, electric buggies, when I started there. We had two tricycles. Take some material, if it wasn't too big, you could put in the trike and it would go away. They were all solid tires, not very comfortable.

Bill Garvin recollects on working in the smelter before there were ore trucks:

In the pot rooms, all the equipment was manual. When you put ore on the pots, you didn't have the ore trucks. You had them called Buggy's Prams, you fill those things up manually, take it down, and put it down on the pots manually. Buggy's prams are the big strollers in British terminology, here it is a stroller, a big steel stroller with a wheel. One guy pulled and other one pushed.

Eventually, the plant introduced ore trucks to their workers but they were not the air conditioned vehicles that workers are used to today.

Bob Morden - We used to have to drive ore trucks which were open canopies and they had pedals. There's not too many people left who drove these things I think, having been here like 30 odd years. They were basically a real pain in the butt to drive. These ore trucks were two pedals on the floor and four levers and you had to drive backwards. In essence it was like reverse steering. And I remember my first day in the ore truck, cause you couldn't have two guys in the ore truck, and I was bashing and crashing into the concrete beams at the back because you had to go down the back. And I thought, Jesus, I'll never learn this, I just can't fathom this because it's reverse and after about three weeks I kinda got the idea to think backwards and then I had it. You were literally steering the wheel, arm, foot come up, break, other foot down, petal, shoot, bang, down, ore and then of course you're not in an air conditioned ore truck so what happens is you flip the lever, the shoot comes up and you are covered in ore. And this was typical. Today they wouldn't operate, the guys in the lines would refuse to operate.
However, all work and no play would make the smelter a dull place to be so the workers contrived ways to add some excitement into their work-lives. For years, some of the shifts had social clubs where they would organize dances, softball teams, and hang out together on their days off. Some of the foremen even arranged for their crews to have barbeques during the shift. There was some fun shenanigans during the shift too, Kelly Lorain remembers how they played sports and cooked in the lines:

The center passageway that we have there, when we used to work graveyard shift we used to use those burner cleaners that we have, we used to use those to play hockey at night time because they were shaped like a hockey stick, so we used to have little mini hockey games in the centre passageway when we were on night shift because there was nobody around.

And then me and the one guy that worked in the next building over, we brought in a Frisbee because we had to stay out in the section to watch for lights so we would stand out in the middle of the centre and look for lights but if there was no lights on me and him were just throwing a Frisbee back and forth from one building to the next, that was on the cement and everything. And then our foreman came out and he caught us and he was like, ‘Hey, you guys aren’t doing any work.’ And he just grabbed it and he kinda just threw it on the pot. It’s plastic right so it took like half a second to melt so that was our game over incident. We had a lot of fun with it but, I mean, obviously he didn’t want us to y’know, there was always the possibility we could have twisted our ankle or something while we were doing this so ‘Nope, sorry, game over’, grabbed it and just threw it in the pot.

A lot of my friends, they fish, and they used to bring in fish, and we used to put it right on the pot crust and cook it eh for three hours. But we had an incident one time where nobody told our wheel driver, and he went and broke the pot and put the whole fish in the pot. So we lost the fish right. It was pretty funny.

Erkki Lasanen laughs about one of his memories about a co-worker. His co-worker had brought barrels of alcohol from the liquor store, put them in different containers, and hid them all over their work station. Years after his co-worker died, the carpenters were still finding hidden bottles of brandy or cognac and everyone knew about them except for their foreman.
Sixty-five kilometres southeast of Kitimat, there was a small but lively little community called Kemano. Alcan needed any problems that arose in Kemano to be immediately resolved so that their aluminum production would not be inconvenienced. Thus, the Company needed employees that were quickly accessible on a twenty-four hour basis but the voyage between Kitimat and Kemano was not always a pleasure jaunt.

Bill Franklin – A lot of people in Kitimat, I don’t think have actually experienced the force of the storm out there. I’ve seen waves that were 20 feet high. The Canadian II was a 120 foot long boat and it would roll over on its side and you didn’t think it was coming back up. It would roll back up and all you’ll see is sky, the mountain would disappear, it was a very narrow channel. We were on it one time when the waves were crashing over so high that the wheel house, which was on the third story of this boat, was covered in ice. We had to get out there with axes and chop the ice off and keep us from sinking.

Consequently, Alcan built a company town in Kemano and filled it with amenities and infrastructure so that their employees and families would be happy despite their isolated location. There was a post office, dairy, medical clinic, library, meat-cutting centre, golf course, tennis courts, pool hall, and a curling rink.

Children of Kemano employees could go bowling, swimming, skiing, race around the Go-Kart track, and play badminton. There were clubs galore for everything from ceramics to yachts. In addition, Kemanoites enjoyed the stunning scenery while they went hiking or fishing and there was always plenty of wildlife for entertainment. Kemano was a tight-knit community where people could leave their doors unlocked. In fact, some residents even left their car keys in the ignition in case their neighbours needed it for emergency purposes.

Sarah McLeod, an Alcan employee at the Wharf, thinks that:

It was the best place to grow up, definitely. We didn’t have malls and things like that, but it didn’t matter to us because I didn’t know right. We were so young when I went there but fishing is the best, we all had snowmobiles, we were all on shooting teams, like shooting a 22 rifle, stuff like that, and yeah, I had a great life growing up there. Good school, good teachers, it was a real community, everything was always done as a community you know, special events, different things. We even had a swim club.
Larry Scott, a Kemano employee in the Powerhouse, thought that “for people living in Kemano, Alcan treated everybody here really good.” The company town only provided education for elementary school so when Kemano employees’ children became old enough to attend secondary school, they had two choices: they could go to high school in Kitimat or they could attend a private school and Alcan would pay for half of the cost. If they chose the latter, the Company would even pay for the flights to the school and back to Kemano for Christmas and summer holidays.

This community also hosted an abundance of events for their residents, such as winter carnivals and sweater days, where Kemanonites would be encouraged to wear clothing using innovative methods. Another popular Kemano event was the Fish Bake at the Rod and Gun Club.

Larry Scott - When the town site was here, we had a Rod and Gun Club. I believe when I first started here, it was the August long weekend, they used to have a fish bake. That was with everybody in town, they would go out, anybody that had boats would go out and get fresh crab or they’d catch fresh fish and they’d bring it back to the Rod and Gun and have a great big feast. It was phenomenal, I couldn’t believe it when we first got here. Later on, it would happen more or less in September rather than August because there was more fish biting in September and people would rather do it in September because there was a lot of people on holidays.
Although there were not as many union members living in Kemano compared to the numbers in Kitimat, Bill Franklin recalls a time when Kemano hourly employees were able to make a significant impact on the local union:

Kemano only had like 60 employees or union members. Kitimat had something like 2500. We were going into our next set of negotiations with Alcan and the union had their negotiating committee set up. One of the guys that had been the negotiator for Alcan had been fired and so the union thought, ‘Well, maybe we should hire him to do our negotiations for this side.’ The Kitimat local had a meeting, they only had like 15 people show up and they said, ‘No, we won’t hire him.’ So we had a meeting in Kemano, after all we’re still part of the same local union right. So we had a vote, and out of our 60 members we had 50 show up, and all 50 voted to hire him, which was what really pissed Kitimat off because they said no and we said yes, but they had to hire him because we put it through. And I think he was a very good help with negotiations that year, we got a lot of things that we probably would not have got because starting out, we were all volunteers and nobody had a clue what was going on.
THE ALUMINUM COUNCIL OF A. F. OF L.

The American Federation of Labour (A. F. of L.) was the largest union alliance in the United States from the 1900s until the 1950s. This confederation signed up Alcan employees into their first Union, the Aluminum Workers International Union, which is also known as the Aluminum Council. This Union was an amalgamation of nine building trades and was more of an association than a full-fledged union. The Aluminum Council was certified on February 2nd, 1954 and they negotiated their first collective agreement with Alcan approximately four months later on June 21st. Many Alcan employees considered this American union to be a company union that used favouritism in their promotions and were not concerned about the safety of their membership. Karl “Charlie” Pforte, an Alcan retiree with 43 years of working in the smelter, was not happy with the Aluminum Council’s leadership:

Company union, completely controlled by the company, not that they said it. Nothing could be negotiated with the company unless the union was involved with it. And they always watered everything down that they were trying to achieve. We had an uphill battle with these guys and one day we said ‘To Hell with it.’
THE UNITED STEELWORKERS OF AMERICA

The United Steelworkers of America saw this dissatisfaction as an opportunity to increase their membership in Alcan but the A. F. of L.’s Aluminum Council did not permit Steel organizers to enter Kitimat. The Steelworkers evaded this issue by sending Wally Ross, a Steelworkers Organizer, to work as an employee at Alcan.

Charlie Pforte - Had some organizers in here coming from outside, the Steelworkers. One fellow that I associated with was Wally Ross. He had a lazy eye and the other eye was a bit off centre, he looked kind of funny but he was a tall guy and he was straight forward. He was living in the camp at the time, over that side of the Rod and Gun Club right now. He came in and he says, ‘Anybody here has any experience with unions?’ I said, ‘Well I’m a union man from way up, Germany eh?’ The metal union over there and I was there as an apprentice. When I came to Canada I forgot all about it. Here in this place, in Kitimat the aluminum smelter, memories came back and I said, whoa what the Hell? How come they haven’t got a decent union here? The union here, I found out quickly, was totally a company union. When you said something there in the union they would tell the company. There were no secrets, everybody was blabbering their mouths off. The circumstances was such that I didn’t want to be associated with that union here. When Wally Ross came in and talked to me in that hut there where the Rod and Gun Club is, he said ‘We should do something about the union. It’s completely under the leadership of the company. Union really doesn’t do anything for you guys.’ So we had a long talk and he said, ‘Well I’ll talk to organize the Steelworkers, they’re not too bad, got headquarters in Pittsburgh, the States.’ And he said we’ll have full autonomy here.

In June of 1954, Wally Ross was the President of the Aluminum Council and he was accused by Alcan’s counsel, Walter Owen, of being a United Steelworkers of America Organizer. Ross nonchalantly replied, “That is quite right. I am an organizer for the Steelworkers Union” and he was consequently fired from Alcan. Before long, Walter Ross was publicly campaigning and organizing for the Steelworkers. He even placed ads in the Northern Sentinel that challenged A. F. of L. to debate with him in public on why workers should have the right to select their Union. Ross was successful in his efforts and on August 14th, 1956, the United Steelworkers of America, Local 5115, was certified to be the Union for Alcan’s employees. At first, the Steelworkers made some positive changes for their membership and their first negotiated contract was respectable. The Steelworkers Local 5115 union publication was called “The Island” and informed their membership of important updates. In 1958, when some of their Union members lost their jobs as a result of the seasonal lay-off and were considered to be non-employees by Alcan’s Property Department, the Steelworkers tried to convince Alcan to delay their mortgage payments and lower their rent.
Unfortunately, the Steelworkers did not maintain their satisfactory leadership for long. The Steelworkers had only lasted so long in Kitimat because most of Alcan’s workforce consisted of new immigrants who were grateful for the employment opportunity. In their 1966 contract, the Steelworkers relinquished an advantageous C.O.L.A. clause in exchange for a dues check-off clause. On June 17th, 1970, the Steelworkers Local 5115 issued a strike notice to the Company and this event was the start of the United Steelworkers of America’s demise. Soon after, on July 8th, the Steelworkers Local had a work stoppage for twenty-four hours. Six days later at 12:01 am, the Steelworkers’ first legal strike started. Before long, the Steelworkers obtained a permit from the Kitimat Council to operate a non-profit grocery store for the duration of the strike so that their members could afford to purchase food items.

Alcan tried to make life more difficult for their striking employees by retaining vacation pay and even went as far as sending the boat holding their vacation pay back to Vancouver. The strike continued for three and a half months before the Company made an offer to Local 5115 that did not have any substantial differences from their original offer. The offer was not ratified at the membership’s vote and the Steelworkers were not happy with the results. The local Union asked the international Union for a loan of one million dollars at the going interest rate and the request was denied. A Steelworkers representative flew in to Kitimat from Pittsburgh and told the Local 5115 membership to return to work since “the kitty is empty, there is no more money.” Horst Voigt recalls that “as the months started dragging on, the Steelworkers didn’t want that strike, they didn’t help us very much at all.” The local union could not continue to strike without the support of their international Union and when their strike pay was only ten dollars per week. The 1970 strike ended on Tuesday, October 27 and the workers returned to work without any gains for their efforts. Even worse, the Union let the Company change their June 27th contract date to October 26th, 1973.

Three months after Local 5115 went back to work, the United Steelworkers of America announced that they were going to give the United Auto Workers ten million dollars, interest-free, to help with their strike even though they had told Alcan employees that they did not have the financial resources to assist in their strike. In 1970, the aluminum market was suffering and it was difficult for aluminum smelters to maintain production levels due to the oversupply of aluminum. Kitimat Works’ three and a half month strike enabled American smelters to avoid laying off their workers, many of which were United Steelworkers of America members. Furthermore, leaked confidential company documents indicated that Alcan knew exactly when their employees was going to return to work.

Bill Garvin - The Steelworkers were, unfortunately, a company union while they were here anyway. They were a big company union. Our strikes were always set up so it was a low time in the sale of aluminum so we went on strike. When the aluminum picked up, we went back to work when we were doing a Collective Agreement. One year they done it and it was their downfall. They took us out on an orderly shutdown, in a strike you’re supposed to get out, but the union and the company made arrangements so that in order to shutdown, all the pots were saved. They were lifted out of the molten metal and so the pressure was off the company to make an agreement with the union. And all these orders came from Pittsburgh, which is the Steelworkers’ head office. And they were told, ‘Okay give them an orderly shutdown and two weeks later you go on strike.’ We went on strike because there wasn’t enough money in the Collective Agreement and we were on strike for three and a half months. We went back to work for ten cents less than they offered us. And all the aluminum that had been stock piled down in the parking lot, the week after the contract was signed and done, it was all gone. It was all bought and paid for, we were just storing it here. But that’s the way big companies operate, not just Alcan.
The Alcan workers were extremely disgruntled with the United Steelworkers of America. A hefty chunk of their union dues, sixty percent, was sent to the United States and the local membership did not see any benefits from their dues.

**Erkki Lasanen -** The complaint was that they are getting an awful lot of money out of Kitimat and we’re getting nothing back because money went to United States and that was the main straw for forming CASAW.

The Steelworkers were exceptionally rude towards their immigrant members and Klaus Mueller Sr. recalls that these union members were told to “sit down, shut up, and speak again after they had learned to speak proper English.” The local members had no voice or clout in their own union. Instead, the International Steelworkers sent their representatives in to Kitimat to govern the local.

**Horst Voigt -** When we had the membership meetings, there was a motion put on the floor. Even as we were trying to make amendments to the motions and so forth, these Steelworkers, these guys were so skilled, eventually they brought new amendments and at the end we voted for the original motion anyways. Because we were slow speaking English and all that kind of stuff right.

Alcan hourly employees felt betrayed by the United Steelworkers of America. The local membership earned less money than they were entitled to and the length of the contracts were not ideal as the local membership preferred to have shorter Collective Agreements.

**Charlie Pforte –** They sabotaged us. We negotiated a certain amount of money and Steelworkers in Pittsburgh said no, that’s too much, said we have to sign a contract. Sticking point was to have a contract over one, two, three, four years and I was rooting for a two year contract but I didn’t get it. They settled for a three year contract. And the first year of the contract was good, got a decent increase. The second year was already pretty skimpy, just enough to keep us quiet. And the third year of the contract was a real sell-out by the Steelworkers. You got to remember that, that’s when we got together, the Magnificent Seven, and we decided that this has to be stopped. We tried to figure out what are we going to do to get the Steelworkers out.
The 1970 Steelworkers strike signified the beginning of Wiho Papenbrock’s career as a union activist.

That strike, I think, sort of evolved me into a trade union leader or activist I should say. And I remember it was either just prior to the strike around that time or maybe in the aftermath of the strike that I put my hand up one day and said I’m going to volunteer to be a shop steward. So I was sworn in as a shop steward, I guess in 1970, by the Steelworkers. There was a legal strike, a three and a half month strike in 1970, in the summer and that was a very bitter strike initially against the company because we wanted more money but it turned into a bitter strike against the Steelworkers union. And that strike basically was the nail in the coffin and sowed the seed for discontent for a group of us. And I was not the leader of the group because I was way too young to assume that role but I was certainly interested in getting a union that I thought better represented the workers. And I analyzed what happened there and I saw the politics of the union at that time. I don’t tar the Steelworkers union, I think I tar the local leadership of the Steelworkers then, they just simply didn’t understand what was happening. So during that summer there were camps building and when we were ordered back to work under threat of losing our strike pay by our union, we actually voted, a hotly contested vote, and we voted to accept the same contract that we had voted to go out for earlier in the summer. Nothing had changed, they just put the same table back on the offer and people under pressure, economic pressure, they were off for y’know four months on strike and they said if we didn’t accept it they were going to cut off strike pay. People like myself, we had done the analysis and said, ‘Listen, we paid you a couple million bucks in strike pay over the last couple of years and we haven’t gotten that money back yet.’ Long story short, we went back to work. Membership voted on same offer shortly thereafter that. Then we started meeting in camps and the union was actually split between those that didn’t like the union and wanted a different union, and of course the Steelworker diehards that were going to hang on as long as they could.
Many members of the local union had enough of the United Steelworkers. They wanted to have control over their local affairs, finances and dues, and they were determined to have their money stay in Canada. By this point there was hostility growing between the membership and the Steelworkers and there were “lots of arguments but it was getting nasty” according to Horst Voigt. Voigt recalls that the first incident where the local members defied the international union was when they did not vote for the local President that they were told to vote for by Steelworkers in Pittsburgh. The Steelworkers were shocked and told the membership that they could not do that or else they would not receive help from the States but the Kitimat Alcan workers refused to comply. The local membership started to rebel against everything. The next confrontation happened when they challenged the Chair and tried to oust the present Steelworkers’ executives.

In Prince George, there were similar circumstances that took place in another independent Canadian union. The Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada (PPWC) local had separated from their “International” (but essentially American) Pulp Sulphite union. The Kitimat workers started talking to the PPWC about their dissatisfaction with the Steelworkers and by the spring of 1971, PPWC representatives visited Kitimat to raid the Alcan employees into their union. Despite the Steelworkers’ attempts to tarnish the PPWC’s reputation as communist and being a company union, the Kitimat workers were very much in favour of joining the PPWC. Before long, the PPWC applied for certification to the Labour Relations Board of British Columbia (LRB) but their application was rejected because the Steelworkers accused the PPWC of committing errors during their sign-up period and the LRB discarded the application without a hearing.

The International Steelworkers charged seven local members (the Magnificent Seven) for their involvement in the PPWC certification attempt, but the Local 5115 membership refused to charge their brothers. However, executive Steelworkers in Pittsburgh were determined to incriminate these local members and they sent two international Directors to “motivate” three Kitimat members to restore the charges.

The accused were given the opportunity to appeal their charges in Washington, D.C., but the United Steelworkers did not give them any financial help to attend the special commission. Due to the travelling costs, Klaus Herre and Anthony Badior were the only charged members that could attend the hearing and they remember it as a terrifying experience.
Before they returned to Kitimat, they went to Vancouver to meet with Fred Mullin (President of the PPWC) and George Brown and Jess Succamore (Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers (CAIMAW) Officers). These three men helped the local membership by raising awareness about the injustice where Canadian workers had to defend their Canadian union activities to an American tribunal in the States. In addition, Mullin, Succamore, and Brown assisted the local members in their preparations to remove the Steelworkers from Kitimat Works. Kitimat’s Alcan employees decided that they would not try to join PPWC again as they wanted their own local independent union.

Charlie Pforte - There was some people here that came to visit us from other unions. A whole bunch of other representatives came to talk to us when they found out we were not happy with the Steelworkers and they were against the Steelworkers too. They said, American unions, they’re just here for a fast buck, and money’s going back to Pittsburgh. Well anyways, we sat together and put our hats together and said the best way is to have an independent union. Our own union. And there were all kinds of proposals on the table you know and finally we said well… CAIMAW was a good union by the way. But then we decided in having our own union. I mean, why do we have to put up with somebody else’s union.

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF SMELTER AND ALLIED WORKERS

There was an underground force of about thirty-five devoted workers who consistently held meetings and discussions on the formation of their new local union, Canadian Aluminum Smelter and Allied Workers (CASAW). The first founding convention of CASAW was held in 1972 so that enthusiastic activists could sign up new members. Unfortunately, it became clear that, despite the energy and hard work put in by core leaders, more funds and experience were needed. In addition, the founding convention did not adhere to some of the mandatory legalities, thus this convention was invalid and the CASAW founders set a second convention date.

The founding convention officers were: Vince Gaspar (National President), Ed Dowker (National Vice-President), and Ray Haeussler (National Financial Secretary). Some other key players involved with the beginning of CASAW are: N. Komlos, Klaus Herre, Bill Penner, Kurt Daumann, Gerry Seeman, Kent Ruppenthal, Charlie Pforte, John Karpenko, Jim Kadamelakis, Werner Knoll, Peter Oleniuk, and John Blitis. Klaus Herre had retired from Alcan for health reasons but CASAW organizers were determined to keep him involved in the fight against the Steelworkers. However, this newly formed union did not have many financial resources so CAIMAW donated funds for Herre’s wages. In addition, Brother Jess Succamore from CAIMAW was invaluable in his help with CASAW and the PPWC sent speakers to Kitimat to motivate Alcan employees.
The Steelworkers declared war on CASAW and assailed the new union with negative propaganda. They spent an extravagant amount of money and energy in their attempts to convince Kitimat that CASAW was a communist organization. Bill Franklin, an Alcan summer student during this time period, was accidentally invited into a Steelworkers meeting on squashing CASAW.

I came back up here to work, I checked in the hotel and the phone rang. There was this voice, ‘Is this Bill?’ And he was whispering. So I whispered back, ‘Yes.’ It was me and two of my buddies were there. We were celebrating so we were feeling pretty good. Anyway, this gentlemen says, ‘There’s a union meeting at 8 o’clock tonight and we want you to come.’ I’m 18 and I’m thinking, why would they want me to go to a union meeting. So okay, fine. So I went there, a couple sheets to the wind, y’know feeling pretty good. Walked in and there was the head of the Steelworkers there, the vice-president for BC, the Steelworkers’ Agent, the whole works and they were doing their strategies of how to deal with Alcan and some of the rumblings that were going on around at that time about an independent union. And they looked at me and this guy said, ‘Oh this is Bill from Kemano.’ Well, they actually were after another guy from Kemano who was a member of the Steelworkers and he was over here. So they just fluked out and got me. And they were talking at that time of, ‘Well, we should do some head bashing, teach these guys a lesson.’ One old fart stood up and said, ‘Yeah, I’ve got a chain.’ I looked at him and I’m like, ‘Who the Hell are you going to hit with a chain? Get serious, you want someone to clobber you?’ They looked at me and I said, ‘I don’t even think I’m who you think I am.’ I told them what my last name was and they went, ‘Whoops, wrong guy, can you leave?’

CASAW activists started to raise awareness in Kitimat about their new local union with the help of CAIMAW and PPWC. They focused on the fact that their dues money would no longer leave Canada but it would remain in Canada for the benefit of Canadian workers. The local independent union was also supported by Kent Rowley, the Secretary-Treasurer of the Council of Canadian Unions (CCU, which was later known as the Confederation of Canadian Unions). CASAW did not have the financial resources that the Steelworkers had to raise awareness about their organization but, during the sign-up campaign, CASAW leaders spent countless hours visiting houses, distributing leaflets, and countering Steelworkers’ accusations. Charlie Pforte’s CASAW wagon was prominent in the organizing drive.

Bill Garvin - When trying to organize into CASAW, Charlie would go around town, he had a little Volkswagen. And he had a big big sign on it, and he had music playing and all. And he’d drive around town, condemn the Steelworkers basically, and telling us to get away from the Americanism and become a Canadian union. That was an interesting time with Charlie. Charlie was one of the fighters.
Despite the tremendous effort made by CASAW organizers, their initial sign up campaign was not as successful as they anticipated. The Steelworkers’ smear campaign was winning over some of the workers and their affiliation with the BC Federation of Labour resulted in this organization attacking CASAW as well. The local union asked Brother Succamore for help and he came to Kitimat to help CASAW with organizing the campaign. At his advice, Brother Kent Rowley flew in to encourage Alcan workers to sign up with CASAW and he prepared an inspirational televised message that would convince Kitimat residents they should choose a local union over an “international” one. Brother Rowley assured viewers that CASAW would be an effective and successful union. He also pointed out that it was absurd that their labour union was controlled and dominated by an organization in a foreign country; Canadians need national autonomy.

The Steelworkers could see that they were losing the battle and increased their propaganda and distribution of leaflets at an exponential rate. They even paid for TV spots that disrupted programs on a frequent basis, which consisted of Steelworkers emphasizing their superiority over CASAW and tried to convince viewers that going “Canadian” was wrong.

The International union was unsuccessful. After an intense campaign, CASAW leaders were able to obtain the number of sign-up cards mandatory for their application. By then, the New Democratic Party had defeated the Social Credit party in the provincial elections so when the Steelworkers tried to dispute the application again, CASAW’s application was not rejected without a hearing this time. At the hearing, the Steelworkers failed to present any evidence for their allegations and the Labour Board arranged for a government supervised vote.

Prior to the vote, CASAW brought in Brothers Kent Rowley, Jess Succamore, and Fred Mullin to talk to their supporters at an enthusiastic mass rally meeting. The official vote was conducted at the Alcan Tour Building from October 18th to the 20th and CASAW won by a substantial margin with 71.5% with 1,112 votes. The Steelworkers only received 305 votes and could not believe that they lost. CASAW became famous throughout Canada as the little union that could. Against all the odds and negative propaganda, the local independent union with a grassroots background conquered a powerful and influential international union. The diverse ethnic groups within Kitimat’s workers unified in an unstoppable force against the Steelworkers. Brent Morrison, former CASAW President and CAW Business Agent, states that:

_They were dumped here by our membership by one of the largest numbers of all time._

_Wiho Papenbrock - We adopted our own constitution, formed a society, and then we raided ourselves. Yeah, we signed ourselves up into our own union that we formed ourselves. We gave it a name and registered ourselves as a trade union and we had a vote and of course we were certified as the Union for smelter workers in Kitimat._
CASAW was certified to be the local union for Alcan employees on October 25th, 1972, but the Steelworkers were not quite ready to give up yet. They may have lost Kitimat Alcan workers, but there was still Kemano:

Bill Franklin - There was actually a movement to try and keep the Steelworkers in Kemano and form a separate local. So they were campaigning very hard to get this established and trying to sign up members. The end of that little exercise was the Steelworkers-to-be had a meeting, Clem and I went to this place where the meeting was being held. We walked in and because we were both well-known as being anti-Steelworkers, they thought they’d probably try to keep us away. Well, I’m not the world’s smallest guy and Clem at that time wasn’t either, so they sort of looked at us. The guy in the door looked over at the Steelworkers’ Agent, he said, ‘Well, what do I do?’ ‘Well they are Alcan employees, they are union members, you have to let them in.’ So we were in there sitting and, of course, nobody wanted to say anything we were known to be independent members. And so that was the one and only meeting they had and it died because they thought, well where’s this going to go?

At that point, the Steelworkers were finished and left Kitimat, but not without their finances and assets. Before they returned to Pittsburgh, they emptied the local union’s bank account which was recorded at approximately $17,000.00. In total, the assets they took with them was estimated at $100,000.00.

Bill Garvin - They lost their rights to be here. Pittsburgh called them up and they took everything, right down to the pencils, and emptied the building. And that was the members’, here in Kitimat, that belonged to them. They should’ve, by rights, gone to CASAW but it was shipped out during the night to Pittsburgh. All the office equipment, chairs, tables, you name it. There wasn’t computers in those days, typewriters, pencils, pens, paper, rulers, everything. When we finally got in there as CASAW, it was completely gutted. There was nothing there.
From that point forth, CASAW worked hard to establish their local independent union as a revolutionary, militant organization. While they still had fun, Wiho Papenbrock reminisces that “we were all pretty heavy into the social life at the time, we did a fair bit of beer drinking”, they were efficient and exceptionally responsive to their membership.

Byron Ramdatt - You can just walk down the street and talk to somebody. Right from the top like the President. Any one of the Executives, you can sit down and talk and tell him the problem. And that made it very very good. What I realized is that the people who formed the Executive were all the guys that work in the plant; that worked from potlines where I started and they work on the floor and so they understand first-hand where we’re coming from, what things are like, conditions and everything.

Eventually CASAW’s national membership would grow to encompass local Kitimat employees from the Hudson’s Bay, Dairy Queen, Drummond McCall Steel Warehouse, Westburne Electric, Bravo’s Welding, Mr. Mike’s Restaurant, and the District of Kitimat. Their national locals included the Royal Oak Mines employees in Yellowknife and Alcan workers in Richmond. However, Kitimat smelter workers, CASAW Local 1, made up eighty percent of the national membership. The first officers of the Executive Board for CASAW Local 1 were: John Karpenko (President), Ray Haeussler (Vice-President), Wayne Smeader (Recording Secretary), Gerry Seemann (Financial Secretary), Werner Knoll (Treasurer), Kurt Daumann, M. de Medeiros, and Ernie Wittmann (Trustees), and Charlie Pforte, Garth Baker, L. Thomas (Guards). The first CASAW logo was designed by Dieter Baer.

Right away, CASAW Local 1 went to work for the needs of the membership. The Shop Steward Council was formed and committees were created for Job Evaluation, Grievance, Accident Prevention, and Labour Relations. Charlie Pforte was on the Job Evaluation Committee which assessed jobs to determine whether employees were entitled to pay increases. Every month they would evaluate two or three jobs to increase the wages. By the time they gave their first report to the membership, they had increased job payments by over $60,000.00.

Soon after the membership dues were received, Klaus Herre became the first Business Agent for CASAW Local 1. Additionally, CASAW employed their first part-time secretary and bought some used typewriters. In order to avoid the previous situation where they lost all their assets and finances to the Steelworkers, CASAW founded the Deep Snow Labour Society as “a legal manoeuvre to keep their assets” according to Rick Belmont. The organization owned all of CASAW’s assets, including the building, and was responsible for the tenants. It was a registered non-profit society under the Societies Act, held annual meetings, and had their own Executive Board. The Directors of the Deep Snow Labour Society were the CASAW Trustees and its officers consisted of some of the Executives and elected general members. The National CASAW Executives did not have much money and they usually originated from the largest local anyways so they shared Local 1’s building.
Wiho Papenbrock, former CASAW President and Business Agent, recalls that the former Steelworkers’ union hall was not the most pleasant place to be.

The old Steelworkers’ hall used to be a trailer in the old part of town, right beside the Portuguese Club and the Greek Club. We just had a little shack of a trailer for a union hall. In 1973, we got our own union office and we were quite proud of that. We had our own building and it wasn’t a trailer.

The first building owned by the CASAW’s Deep Snow Labour Society was located in the service centre across from the Kitimat Hotel.

CASAW activists did not have much knowledge about Canadian Labour laws or union formalities so CAIMAW came to CASAW’s rescue again by sending a representative, George Brown, to organize a stewards and negotiations seminar. Once the CASAW leaders were elected, they joined the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU) since this Canadian alliance of unions shared CASAW’s principles of nationalism and radical activism.

The local independent union was rapidly establishing themselves as a successful organization. CASAW’s first national convention was held in the spring of 1973. The Hotline was set up as the union’s publication in April, 1973 and the first editor was Ray Haeussler. Charlie Pforte designed the first Hotline logo. By the time the first Hotline was published, CASAW had set up several more committees for the benefit of their membership: Hospital and Welfare Committee, Public Relations Committee, Apprenticeship Committee, Editorial Board, and Steering Committee.

Up until October 26th, 1973, CASAW was stuck with the substandard contract that the Steelworkers had negotiated, but they were determined to gain as much as they could during the next set of negotiations with the Company. The CASAW membership voted 96% in favour of a strike and they ratified their first contract with 64%. The local union successfully negotiated for a 21% increase in wages over the next two years despite the Steelworkers’ prediction that a small Canadian union would never be as successful as their powerful American union.

Charlie Pforte - When we tossed out the Steelworkers, of course we had to do a lot of work when you organize a union. There was an upcoming contract at the time. When we negotiated the first contract, we had a lot of goodies in there.
In March of 1974, CASAW changed their name by replacing Aluminum with Association and became the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers. The decision was made to adjust the name of their local union because they wanted to be more inclusive and not solely focused on aluminum workers. Afterwards, CASAW started to look beyond their provincial borders and got in touch with the Federation Des Syndicats Du Secteur Aluminium Inc. (FSSA), which represented Alcan workers in Quebec. The unions partnered together to create an informal coalition, the Aluminum Workers Association (AWA) and they even considered founding a more formal organization.

Wiho Papenbrock - The AWA was basically an informal association of Alcan workers in Quebec and Alcan workers in British Columbia. We had met once or twice a year back and forth and forged that development. There was some talk at that time in the mid-70s about maybe trying to form a formal alliance or form of affiliation between the two unions. That logistically and legally couldn't work. There was some different labour codes, different labour jurisdiction and the language barrier was a problem. So it never got to more than just an affiliation or something we called the Aluminum Workers Association, where we agreed to meet and exchange information and coordinate activities.

1976 WILDCAT STRIKE

The next major event for CASAW occurred when the Anti-Inflation Board guidelines came out in 1975 and decreed wage and price controls during contract negotiations between CASAW and Alcan. In November of that year, Alcan locked out their workers but the union managed to obtain a cooling-off period resulting in a negotiated settlement. CASAW wanted to go on strike because they did not want the contract but, according to Jim Sevigny, “Alcan did their pressure thing” and the government legislated them back to work. In 1976, the union was stuck with a Collective Agreement which gave them wage increases that were lower than inflation; they asked Alcan for some voluntary wage re-openers but this request was denied. Frustration was building within the membership. Before negotiations, the company stacked ingots around the smelter as an indication of the poor market conditions and to warn their workers not to ask for too much. During a union meeting that was discussing the horrendous working conditions and management in Building 226, feelings of dissatisfaction rose to the point where they decided to walk out in a Wildcat Strike. On a side note, the electricians were not too happy with their working situation either.
On June 3rd, 1976, CASAW’s legendary Wildcat Strike had begun. By many accounts, this illegal strike was an intense experience. Horst Voigt, Picket Captain at Anderson Creek for the Wildcat Strike, recalls that people threw Molotov cocktails in town.

Charlie Pforte - We were at the picket line here picketing the company. They brought in riot police and suddenly there was 44 policeman, batons, shields, helmets the whole works you know. And they got a few guys, maybe eight or what, and they detained them for a while here in the courthouse jail, locked up there for half a day or something like that. And later released and, uh I don’t remember if they had to pay a fine or something. But anyways it was intimidation by the company in cahoots with the government and we were really really mad at the company for playing shenanigans. There were hostile acts committed by some of the members against people who went through the picket lines. Knife in the tires, you know flatten them out, scratch the cars a little bit here and there. You know vandalism and such but I would say it was justified. We are sticking our necks out to promote the membership for a better contract and these guys, they undermine us, they stab us in the back.

Bill Garvin - Everybody just got fed up and walked off the job. And it was an illegal strike and we paid for it, the union. It didn’t matter, we were making a point and we made the point. They had to bring in the, we call them the Storm Troopers, the SS, the Nazis, the police, but they were dressed like Storm Troopers, the big shields and all that, the batons and not. Of course they had masks, you couldn’t tell who they were. So they just walked up over the railway tracks and pushed the workers back off the company property. It didn’t get as nasty as the Yellowknife Strike because there was fun and games on the picket line. Guys going in to work, scabs we call them, going in to work in the trunks of cars and all that. The company had a helicopter bring them in. People, to the day they left the company, they suffered for it. For scabs, the workers blackballed them basically, which is just right. Cause you were trying to fight for them too and then when everybody went back to work and the problem was all solved, they got the benefits that the union was fighting for while they were in there making money working. All the best of food, all the cigars they wanted, and not penny cigars, ten dollar cigars. For weeks after, they were walking around the plant, smoking these things. That’s the one thing that unionism doesn’t like, scabs. Takes away your right, you don't have any clout with the company because of the scabs, they're willing to go and do anything.
Despite the frustration and the anger at scabs working for the company, the picket lines was a fun place to hang out.

Jim Sevigny - Those were good times. The in place to be was out at the picket line, they had the greatest parties out there in the evenings. They had a caterers truck, where Cors is now, the restaurant had a catering truck so they just filled it full of sandwiches and everything. We'd go out there and the union had paid for it all so we'd go out there and it was some wild times.

The FSSA assisted CASAW during the Wildcat Strike by sending some of their members to Kitimat.

Wiho Papenbrock - I remember there were eight picketers that Quebec sent out to assist us because they thought, if we were declared illegal and couldn't picket, then we could get the Quebec people to picket and they'll be immune from the BC labour laws, and y'know they couldn't touch them. That didn't quite work that way but I remember I put a lot of them in my basement eh. So a lot of them were staying with me at my house, sort of like unofficial strike headquarters at the Papenbrock house on 14 White Street.

Eighteen days later, on June 21st, the CASAW membership voted on whether they would return to work and the result was a tie with 312 for and 312 against. The union was facing some pretty severe penalties for both their organization and for individual members so the CASAW President, Peter Burton, cast the deciding vote and they returned to work.

It was time for CASAW and its striking members to face the music as Alcan was furious over the illegal strike and wanted to penalize the local union. Horst Voigt notes that "we were wrong legally but morally we were right." He states that the 1976 Wildcat Strike was the "cauldron of CASAW, we proved our mettles." Several CASAW members were arrested during the strike and charged with defying court orders. Wiho Papenbrock remembers that they had barricaded the road so nobody could pass through the striking Alcan workers. They were consequently charged with hijacking and theft of over $2,000.00 because they did not allow the supply truck to cross their picket line. Papenbrock ended up spending a night in jail. On December 31 of that year, Alcan sued CASAW for $1.3 million in damages for the Wildcat Strike. CASAW managed to negotiate the amount down to ten percent and they ended up paying $135,000.00. Twelve individuals were charged but they were able to get off on a technicality so they did not endure any penalties, but three members were given six month suspensions. However, CASAW ensured that the suspended individuals did not suffer through financial hardship by giving them loans.

Brent Morrison - It's quite a big deal when you go on a wildcat strike for three and a half weeks with one of the largest corporations in the world. They don't like you going on a strike, having the right to go on strike in the best of times, the little working man being able to take a big company and head out and just stop their production. You can imagine how big a deal it must have been for a wildcat strike. You know they tried to fire the whole executive at the time but the Labour Board wouldn't let them do that. But they did allow the company to penalize them, they had to work for a number of weeks or months where they would work five days but only get paid for four. And also there were a number of employees that were given huge suspensions at the time, fairly significant suspensions. Ross Slezak actually was just getting started at the union at the time, he was a long time President of the union. He ended up getting about three months in jail.
Ross Slezak was one of CASAW’s most dedicated activists and it was through his leadership that the union flourished. According to Jim Sevigny, the 1976 Wildcat Strike was “the beginning of his career, from then on, he just stuck it to the company every chance he got for the rest of his life.” Kelly Lorain worked with Slezak and says that “Ross, he was like a rock. Working with him on our shift for all those years, anytime you needed help, talk to him, he’ll give you all the time in the world.”

Jim Sevigny - He touched everybody, he was the go-to guy. Even if you knew you were wrong, you’d get Ross and he’d get an argument in there and he’d get you off for something y’know because he had the gift of the gab.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Despite losing $135,000.00 to Alcan over the Wildcat Strike, by 1977, CASAW was financially secure and had over a million dollars in their bank account. They used a large chunk of their funds on their next battle on health and safety issues. Horst Voigt reminisces on when there were quite a few Canadians coming in to Kitimat to work for Alcan around 1974. These people were young individuals with university educations and socialist mind frames. This influx of people signified when CASAW embarked on an era focused on health and safety.

Horst Voigt - A young fellow arrived here in Kitimat and he started with Alcan in casting. He started his job and the foreman showed him the tow motor he was supposed to drive. And the fellow looked at it and says, ‘It has no rear view mirror.’ The foreman says, ‘Well, what’s the problem?’ He says, ‘You can’t drive a forklift without a rear view mirror.’ So they started arguing and guess what? He put a tag on the tow motor, he tagged the tow motor out, and nobody could touch the tow motor. So the foreman got all upset, and then he went to all the other tow motors, and there were eight of them, and he tagged them all out. That was the style these young guys came. They started another revolution really, so to speak. And of course they all became shop stewards and all that. And so everybody looked, sat back, and said, ‘Holy Moses, what’s going on here eh?’ But they had good points, they knew the labour laws, they knew all the regulations. It was like Steelworkers knowing in one respect, but these guys, they knew everything too. And so they wanted to build a new society. Basically what happened is the young people took over the local, that’s really what happened basically. Because I was a shop steward and I was in the shop stewards council and so forth and these guys had energy.
Alcan was not taking enough initiative on their own in trying to improve the health and safety of their employees so CASAW stepped up to the plate and waged war against dangerous and unhealthy working conditions. Aldo Paolini, a retired electrician from Alcan, comments that the union was instrumental in getting Alcan to focus more on safety concerns.

A lot of the safety issues were tackled by the union and then somewhere along the lines Alcan jumped onboard because they did recognize that this was good for us. Sometimes they needed to be, as sort of like how the expression goes "led to water before they would drink" I think that, especially in my time from 1980s onward, with the changes that were brought to this plant because this plant was really a real polluter, at least the people working there, because of the respirators and the rules for working conditions, a lot of people are going to be better off because of it. Certainly before 1980s, a lot of people worked in the plant, and when you sit there and you look at the crustbreakers they used to use, which are still at the plant, by the tour building, and you have to sit there and look at the fact that a guy was sitting on top of that machine and breaking crust. You probably, in those days, you didn’t even wear a respirator, so those people, some of them, are obviously suffering from industrial diseases.

CASAW and its membership had had enough of the worksite deaths, accidents and health issues. Colin Coates was concerned about some of the consequences from working in the smelter.

You got pitch burn on a regular basis, you were black every single day and I mean black black because it was part of the process. They produce the paste for the pots and there was a screening and grinding and milling and it was all carbon dust there. So carbon dust was black and then it was mixed with pitch. So all that mechanical work, it was all associated with dirt and dust collection. Nothing to see, go up in our dust collector in the morning and see three feet of black dust in there and have to get in there and sort the dust collector out and find the bag that’s leaking and so it was ugly. At that time they would give you paper coveralls when you had a dirty job and I still have yet to define what they classify as a dirty job because I was dirty everyday. And there were no laundry facilities, which we have now. You took your coveralls home on the weekend and tried to wash them. Well, I lived in an apartment, and it was the Alcan apartments, you’d try and wash them coveralls in there and you might as well take them out to the yard and hosed them down first because you couldn’t get them clean and it left all this black stuff in the washing machine and so I thought, this is not a good idea. Eventually, we kinda talked them into giving us some paper coveralls and you’d try to hang onto them as long as you could eh. But it was nothing like we have now. So it was difficult to keep clean and on the weekends you felt pretty much like a vampire because you couldn’t go out in the sunlight because you’d burn. Your neck, your face, it was a chemical burn, pitch. And then they’d come up with all these, ‘Oh well, make sure you put the barrier cream on.’ Well, you know when you put this cream on your face, you sweat, you’re just like a big sticky lollipop and all the dust and pitch sticks to you anyways so that’s a lost cause. I'll be driving home and, before I got to the overpass, I had to pull over on the side of the road because I just couldn’t see anymore, my eyes were just streaming, burnt y’know and it was just awful. And there was no way you could really avoid it because you worked in that stuff. We’d put gloves on, paper coveralls on, you’d tape your gloves up around your wrist and your boots so you’d try and keep them up but you sweat lots then.
Charlie Pforte remembers a number of fatalities that occurred in the plant. Several of them could have been prevented if the individuals were wearing proper safety gear.

He slipped off the access shoot on top of the silo and he was supposed to have a safety line on. You never go in there without a safety line. And that guy, he slipped off the rung and he fell into the ore and disappeared in there. It was the Japanese ore; the Japanese ore is like water. Once you’re in there, bloop, you go all the way down. Several accidents close by which I witnessed and I said to myself, ‘Boy oh boy, pray to my God that something like that doesn’t happen to me.’

George Ivanakis ended up in the hospital after his accident at work.

I had this small accident burn my face with a small defonce. I was pulling studs and there was a small defonce and the pot was explodes. I jump and I went through the flames and I get cut. Some of the flames cut my face. I spend about three, four days in the hospital.

Bill Franklin recalls an incident where his co-worker was not following very safe work practices.

I remember watching one guy one time who had been there for like twenty years. When you pulled a stud back then, you had to sleeve the hole before they pulled the stud out and that was to stop the molten tar from pouring down through, and if there was a crack, hitting the metal, and that was what causes a defonce. And this old guy was standing there and he says, ‘Ah you don’t have to sleeve, you just use the shovel.’ We had these little thin paste shovels. So I’m watching him, he had this glorious white beard and long white hair and everything else, so up comes the stud, he shoves the shovel over the hole, well, it didn’t work. And flames shot off, his beard disappeared, his eyebrows got burnt, the hair was on fire, and I’m going, okay I don’t think I’ll do that.
Manual Baptista was a journeyman welder in the 226 welding shop who was close to retiring before he had a life-altering accident in the smelter on January 28th, 1997. Here’s his story told by Bill Garvin.

Unfortunately, he was one of the unlucky individuals to be involved in a serious incident in a shop. Where he was leaving his work area to go to the lunchroom, he had to cross the centre aisle in the shop and a tow motor was reversing up. There were no alarms on the tow motor, no watchperson following the toe motor down the centre. Manuel stepped up from behind the screen and he got pulled up into the wheel well of the tow motor and damaged a lot of his body and his brain. Created a lot of damage from which he has never fully recovered. Although Manuel can get around a little bit with his walker, he never recovered his full faculties of speech and use of his arms and hands. And life is getting pretty hard for them. Things are pretty tough. They’re doing the best they can and enjoying life as much as they can in Vancouver. Their children and grandchildren are down there, but their heart will always be in Kitimat, they love Kitimat and the people. When I’m talking to Leonetta, anytime, she always says that she’ll be forever grateful to the union and especially to the late Brother Ross Slezak for all that he’s done for them over the years when any problems arose. The membership of the union will be forever grateful to Manuel for all his efforts on their behalf by serving as an officer of this union.
After a while, the union successfully improved working conditions for their membership. They even managed to get the Company to install laundry facilities in the plant so that their employees did not bring home carcinogenic materials to their families, which was what they were previously doing.

Bill Garvin - You were working in there without protection, we had no face protection, no hearing, no hardhats, everybody wore baseball camps, little bump caps as we called them. There was no such a thing as wearing protective wool clothing and that fire retardant clothing. You wore whatever you had. Over the years the union fought to get all this as they discovered all the problems. The union fought and got it through the contract, not just CAW but CASAW, got all these things in place and put it in your Collective Agreement so the company couldn’t say, ‘Well we’re not paying for that.’ The company had to pay for everything. But all and all, over the years, I would give the company credit. They did do what they had to do for the protection of the worker.

Byron Ramdatt – The union fought for better safety equipment, better mask, better vehicle to do the job. It makes it a healthier place and safer. But conditions are still there. Still the way it’s done. But through our battles, lots of battles getting safety put in places, better gloves, masks, clothing and all those things. Makes it a safer place so in that way it’s a better place to be around, but the conditions are still there so you have to use all these things to protect yourself from the conditions.

The working environment was significantly improved. Alcan upgraded the floors and roof ventilation. They put double burners on the pots instead of one burner, wet paste was replaced by dry paste (which solved the problem of defonces), and dry scrubbers took the place of wet scrubbers. The plant became a cleaner and safer area to work in.

Kelly Loran - The main thing that they did was the Duclaux clamps for the crane men to pull the studs themselves, that was probably the best thing they ever did because it got everybody off of the pots.

Jim Sevigny - The tour bus used to go down the west passage way, we’d be at centre passage, and the guys would say, ‘Go down and kill that light.’ You’d see this light down there and it was so smoky. You could just barely see the light. I’d go down there and it was the tour bus. It wasn’t the light, they knew that. But now you can see the clock on the wall at the end, it’s so clear.
In 1976, CASAW commissioned their first study, a Vegetation Study, on the effects of Alcan’s emitted chemicals and fumes on the surrounding flora as it was clear to some Kitimat residents that there grounds for this study.

Aldo Paolini - When I first came over here, on the side of the hill, there was all the trees on one side of the plant on the side of the hill. There was a whole section that were all dead and some people were saying that that was some sort of plant disease or something but the plant disease was the emissions from the plant and the wind was blowing it northwards towards Terrace and so all the pollution that went all along the side of the hill basically killed all the trees.

“Alcan-cer” is a frequent term at Kitimat Works to acknowledge the relatively high rates of cancer among Alcan workers. The Company had always denied this health risk of working in their smelter but CASAW knew better. In 1977, they commenced their groundbreaking study, “CASAW Study of the Effects of Aluminum Smelting on the Health of Alcan Workers in Kitimat, British Columbia, Canada”, which was spearheaded by Jim Brisebois. Brisebois contacted an American Epidemiologist, Dr. Bertram W. Carnow, Professor and Director of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the University of Illinois, to conduct the study and Brisebois was the Field Coordinator for the project. This study cost the union quite a bit in terms of financial resources, according to Brent Morrison, “In 1977, 250,000 dollars for a small union such as ours was an awful lot of money, but it was money well spent in the end.” Dr. Carnow came to Kitimat and ran lung and bone function tests on CASAW members. The epidemiological study found that there was a large number of Kitimat smelter workers “with abnormalities of function and disease, particularly of the lungs and skeletal systems.”

In 1978, CASAW considered merging with CAIMAW but they ultimately decided that they would remain an independent local union.

Wiho Papenbrock - A couple of times we talked about trying to merge with CAIMAW and there was, in fact, a very serious effort to get our members to join that union. The reason that failed was because of the structural differences. Where CASAW was defined by individual local autonomy, CAIMAW had a more central organization. More like the CAW where they provided the staff representatives, the expertise, the arbitration expertise, but in return you would turn over fifty percent of your dues to the national union. And we were paying like five percent to the national union, which is our own national union. So there was a significant structural difference between the two and as a result, it didn’t go. The workers decided to reject the invitation by CAIMAW to join them and we decided to stay independent. Because you know we had the affiliation with the FSSA in Quebec and we had a pretty comfortable relationship in the area with labour and we were accepted and acknowledged as a credible union.
In July of 1980, CASAW was finally triumphant in their five year fight against the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) to include fluorosis in the list of diseases on Schedule B. Charlie Pforte played a huge role in raising awareness about the consequences of fluoride by distributing flyers in the community. Rick Belmont jokes about the effects of fluoride on Alcan workers saying that “years later when archaeologists dig us up, we’ll be in perfect shape, we’ll glow.”

Even though CASAW’s 1977 epidemiological study was challenged and not accepted by Alcan, it was sufficient to prompt the Company and WCB into collaborating with the Union on the next health study in October of 1979, “Health Study of Workers of Alcan Smelters and Chemicals Ltd” (also known as the Longitudinal Study). The Occupational Lung Disease Unit of the Respiratory Division at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was contacted to undertake the health study and WCB financed this project. The co-directors of the study were Dr. Moira Yeung and Dr. Stefan Grzybowski from UBC. The Longitudinal Study was able to achieve 93.9% participation out of the 2,397 individuals in the workforce and consisted of questionnaires, physical exams, and chest x-rays. Dr. Yeung and Dr. Grzybowski also conducted allergy skin, breathing, blood, and urine tests.

Randy Kolodinski - I've been involved in a couple of different studies I think, there was one done by a university here. I'm not sure if it was Simon Fraser or the University of BC. But they did come up and did a cancer study. We were tested very extensively on lung function, and different allergy tests, and they did a lot of poking and prodding, and that kind of stuff. Oh yeah, I remember getting all the needles up my arm with all the different y’know are you allergic to all the different things they could try. The pollen, and the cat dander, and dust, you name it, they tried it all out on me.

The tripartite Health Study found that “workers on the potlines have an increased frequency of respiratory symptoms and of lung function abnormalities” and that they were exposed to a substantial number of pollutants; especially benza-pyrine (BAP) and particulate polycyclic organic matter (PPOM, also known as coal tar pitch volatiles) contaminants in the potrooms.

In February of 1985, CASAW embarked on their next landmark health study, in conjunction with Alcan and the Division of Epidemiology, Biometry and Occupational Oncology of the Cancer Control Agency of British Columbia (CCABC), which was funded by WCB and a grant from the BC Health Care Research Foundation. This study, “Mortality and Cancer Incidence in Workers at the Alcan Aluminum Plant in Kitimat, B.C.”, is also known as the Mortality Study or the Cohort Study and was published in October of 1989. Drs. Pierre Band and John Spinelli from the CCABC led the study. From CASAW, Bill Garvin, Lyle D'Hondt, and Ron Hoag, along with Alcan's Hygiene Department, were instrumental in arranging the necessary preparations for conducting the study that involved 4503 participants. This study found that Alcan workers had higher chances of brain and cervical cancer. Furthermore, employees that were exposed to PPOM (coal tar pitch volatiles) had increased risks for lung and bladder cancer, in addition to non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.
Aldo Paolini vividly remembers the day that one of the doctors acquainted Alcan workers with the study's conclusions.

He presented one of the studies that had been done, and he showed graphs and whatever of how a guy that was working in the lines. They would take blood tests through the week, or through the time that he was working and they would find something that was going into his blood and they would take blood samples one day, two day, three day, four day, five day, and then he would take two days off and then they would take his blood again when he came back. And so he showed us these graphs and he said, 'Well as you can see these, I'll call them pollutants or whatever, were dissolving into his blood, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and then Friday it got up to a certain level and then well he goes home for the weekend then he comes back and it's back basically to normal.' So he sort of pooh-poohed it and I was looking at his graph and figuring that doesn't look good to me, and for sure that couldn't have been good for anybody. And those were the times when there were men working in the lines who were not wearing really good respirators. So I think that that kind of an attitude that, oh well just a little bit of pollution is ok, it's never okay. And from then on things changed. The plant itself became cleaner but the guy working in the lines, the thing that made it easier for him to work was the respirators, the change in the type of respirators that we were using in the lines. Afterwards, like somewhere along the lines the business about bladder cancer came up and it took a long time to recognize that it was the pollutants in the plant that was, for some, it was causing bladder cancer and it was a huge fight that the union had to go through to get it recognized. When in actual fact it should've been pretty obvious, I mean the company always denies everything. Well I shouldn't say always denies everything but certainly in that case, it had to be the union who took the fight to the company because certainly, the people that were affected by bladder cancer, it would have been unfair for them to have to take on Alcan.

Brent Morrison notes that it would have been extremely difficult for many WCB cases to be accepted without these studies while Bill Garvin recalls that this mortality study resulted in significant changes to their personal protective equipment (PPE).

They just brought in the worker protection gear in the late 70s, previous to that we wore what they call the Martindale mask. It was just a little piece of cotton on a cloth background and it just was on your neck like that. It just went over your mouth and part of your nose and it didn't form to your face, it just was there. Most of the guys used to poke holes in it for their cigarettes when they were in the potrooms, we didn't know any better back then. Then, over the years it started to come out that there was known carcinogens in the stuff we were using in the potrooms. So the Company started looking at, this was in the mid 70's, the Company started looking at other forms of respiratory protection, and that's when they came out with a doctor type mask that fit with a little aluminum strap up to your nose and around your mouth and that. Of course, it progressed over the years to what they have now, with the seal and the air cartons and all that. But all of this came about because the union insisted on studies being done. One in particular was the Mortality Study, the effects of the chemicals on your body as far as cancer is concerned. Because we had a real concern about it, and that was back in the early 80s, that started looking at the mortality study. Take a control group of people from the potrooms and monitor them for going on, the problem with it then, we didn't know it, that cancer has a latency period, especially the asbestos cancer, mesothelioma, it has a latency period of 25 to 30 years, where it can lie dormant in your body then pop up, we had a lot of people that passed away that weren't aware of what the problems in their body were, the medical profession didn't know either then. It took a lot of studies and experiments with the government and all of them. Over the years they finally figured it all out and that's when the Mortality Study was completed.
In the same year, CASAW worked on the Joint Shiftwork Study with Alcan, which found that most workers preferred to eliminate shiftwork. The next significant milestone for CASAW was the creation of a Mutual Defence Fund with FSSA in Quebec. The agreement was signed in October of 1985 but the fund did not start until January of 1986. This pact gave both unions financial security in case either CASAW or FSSA went on strike and would be supported by contributions from almost 9,000 workers. Also in 1986, CASAW conducted a follow up study to their Longitudinal Health Study. After four years of negotiations, CASAW won the fight with Alcan over 12-hour shifts on April 17th for their Castings and Potrooms members, with an 81.5% vote from their membership in 1989.

One month after the Mutual Defence Fund commenced, the Union presented their next major study, “CASAW Technological Change Impact Study” or “Makin’ Metal”, but this project was completed without Alcan’s participation or help. They received a $100,000.00 grant from the Technology Impact Research Fund of Labour Canada and CASAW spent $75,700.00 of their own funds on this study, which commissioned Aspect Consultants Inc. “Makin’ Metal” found that the Alcan workforce shrunk by ten percent due to technological change over the last five years. In addition, this study discovered that workers were not completely against technological change, but they wanted their input to be recognized during the technological decision-making.

**KEMANO COMPLETION PROJECT**

In 1979, Alcan announced that they would use the rest of the water that the 1950 Agreement decreed the Company could use and they applied to the Utilities Commission for an Energy Project Certificate to start Kemano II. This declaration led to a legal skirmish between Alcan and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) over the potentially hazardous water levels for the migrating salmon. The issue was resolved with the 1987 Settlement Agreement signed on September 14th between Alcan, the Government of British Columbia, and the Federal Government, which confirmed that the Company had the legal right to use more water from the Nechako River. However, Alcan agreed to give up water rights to the Nanika River and the Chelsatta River while setting up a program to keep an eye on the fish habitats. This agreement resulted in the Kemano Completion Project (KCP), which is a scaled down version of Kemano II. In 1989, a Collective Labour Agreement was signed between the Allied Hydro Council (17 craft unions) and the Kemano Completion Project Employers’ Association (created by Alcan for companies with KCP contracts), signifying the launch of KCP.

![Photo Credit: Anthony Adams](image-url)
This project had an initial estimated cost of $800 million, would increase Kemano’s power generating capabilities by seventy-five percent (520 megawatts), and consisted of five components. A cold water release facility was to be built at the Kenney Dam to increase chances of survival for Chinook and sockeye salmon; this part of the project was estimated to cost $70 million. To increase water-flow through the Nechako Reservoir, the Tahtsa narrows would be dredged. Four more generators would be installed in Kemano to produce the additional 520 megawatts. Another sixty-eight kilometre transmission line would be built between Kitimat and Kemano. And lastly, an additional sixteen kilometre power tunnel would be created parallel to the current tunnel through Mount DuBose.

Cliff Madsen – The existing tunnel has a lot of problems with it because the rocks are breaking off inside. So what happen is when those rocks come down the waterfall they smash things eh. The problem is you can’t turn it off, but if you had KCP you could run all the water through that new tunnel, make power, keep the smelter running, shut down the original tunnel, fix the walls and then you would eventually have two really good tunnels out of there.

Once KCP was completed, Alcan intended to sell back the former Cheslatta land to the Federal Government for $1.00 so that the Cheslatta Tribe could have their traditional lands back. Larry Scott recalls that the Kemanoites and KCP construction workers used to frequently socialize together.

We used to have a lot of fun too. At first, there used to be, well the town site people and the KCP people cannot co-mingle, we can’t have this happening. And it stemmed from years ago, I wasn’t around for it, I just heard about it, when Eurocan Pulp and Paper was in here and a lot of the wives left their husbands to go with these construction workers or the loggers and all that. And they feared the same thing, when KCP was gonna go on, so they went no, we’re not going to have this happening or they can’t come in. As years went down, they started in 88 or 89, and then 90 there was no mingling, and then later on we’d end up curling together, we’d have golf tournaments together, it was wild and fun. Lots of fun. The workers for KCP would always come in and golf. Golfing parties we had, and golf tournaments, and even the people that looked after the camp, they had a recreation coordinator, set up tournaments with us and curling bonspiels. Man, it was a lot of fun. Even when they were working, when they were doing the blasting, the dynamiting of the tunnels, we were in the powerhouse all the time. And when they started blasting, getting closer and closer, you could just feel the whole mountain shaking and sometimes generators would trip offline due to the vibration and it was kind of exciting in here towards the end. Well, we’re in the control room and there was a blast wall put up, and just on the other side of the blast wall they were dynamiting and blasting, and you could hear the rocks hitting the wall, it was great, it was wild.
However, not all British Columbians were ecstatic about the KCP. Some of the major opponents to this project were environmentalists, the fishing industries, wildlife activists, and First Nations peoples such as the Haisla and Carrier-Sekani Tribal Council. Some of the environmental groups included “A River Forever” and “Rivers Defence Coalition”. An organization called “Save the Bulkley” was formed by residents from Smithers, Telkwa, and Quick areas to oppose the KCP. One of the most noteworthy challengers to KCP was Rafe Mair, a former lawyer who became a radio broadcaster. His political career includes working as the Minister of Environment, Health, Consumer and Corporate Affairs, and Consumer Services. Mair voiced his rather negative opinion on KCP in his radio program, the “Rafe Mair Show”.

**Aldo Paolini** - Rafe Mair went on a continuous barrage for something like two years and we had the radios on in the plant and we’d listen to it and anybody that spoke down at that or had something to say for the project was basically cut off and wasn’t allowed to say anything.

**Cliff Madsen** - He ran a talk show and, at that time, the big thing for the longest period of time, a year or so, was the Alcan project. And he took a very strong position against the Kemano Completion. So at the time, the NDP was in power, Mike Harcourt, and the Liberals went on record saying that they would not support the project and then the NDP eventually killed it. So Rafe Mair was probably the, I would say, the biggest sort of impetus that moved people and public opinion against the project. What he attempted to do was to expose how it was a bad deal for British Columbians and anybody else where he could find an angle that would make the day’s discussion. He had me on the air once and I knew how he operated. He was predicting doomsday, he would come up with an idea, than he would think it through, and a lot of his things were doomsday sort of scenarios. ‘If this happens, the smelter will shut down because the company will simply sell the power.’ And of course what we’ve always talked about was the modernization and protecting our jobs. And getting sort of a new safer better place to work. And if that means Alcan makes more money that’s fine. We didn’t see the potential for them to actually shut the smelter down. So I refused to debate with him on air because he’s the one that could cut me off.

I told him, ‘Listen, if you have me in your studio I'll debate with you, but I'm not about to do it here where you can simply cut me off.’ And he respected that and that was the end of that. We came to find out later that this fellow who was always on with him actually has a fishing lodge or cabin or something to that effect on the Nechako. So they had a personal interest, of course, in not losing the water or risking losing the fish or anything like that. They came hard and heavy and, I would say, is probably the person responsible for it all falling apart.

CASAW’s position on KCP was that they conditionally supported the project and they sometimes faced criticism for this stance. The Union thought that KCP would be a great opportunity for residents in Northern British Columbia to obtain employment and they wanted to be sure that Alcan shared this vision instead of focusing on selling power. Also, CASAW wanted to ensure that the environment in the region would not be significantly harmed. Initially, the Union was associated with the Rivers Defence Coalition whose original position was that they wanted KCP to be responsibly completed. However, their goals changed to focus on shutting down the project and, at this point, CASAW withdrew from the alliance.
Due to all the legal controversy over KCP, Alcan announced that they were going to discontinue construction in June of 1991.

Larry Scott - When they shut it down, they just walked away, like it was gone, all the manpower was gone. Then they brought in crews to slowly dismantle the camp. We had enough equipment here for two complete generators, plus a lot of other equipment, transformers, everything to do with the powerhouse, a lot of it was here. And believe it or not, they tried maintaining it, and they did, they had a crew in here maintaining it. Then last year, or I believe it was two years ago, they finally got rid of it all and sold it as scraps because it was just too old for them to reuse it again. They couldn't use it and the technologies have changed. So it was all gone, the only thing that's left here is what's called a mole, the mole digs the tunnel, that's still here. Because they have half the tunnel dug from Horitzky Camp to Kemano, that tunnel's complete. And at the time they were turning the mole around, and they were going to head to Westpassa lake, and that's when they shut the project down.

On June 16th, 1992, Premier Mike Harcourt commissioned Murray Rankin and Arvay Finlay to create a report on the KCP, “Alcan’s Kemano Project: Options and Recommendations”. This report was completed in October of that year and recommended that the Government of British Columbia conducts a public review on the KCP to “clear the air”. Thus, the British Columbia Utilities Commission public review of the KCP was initiated in January of 1993. That same year, Alcan told the provincial government that they were short of $350,000,000.00 in their estimated cost for KCP and would need more power revenues. Two years later, on January 23rd, Premier Harcourt decided to cancel KCP.

Alcan had already spent half a billion dollars on KCP by this point and sued the Provincial Government of British Columbia for this loss. This lawsuit was resolved on August 5th with the 1997 Settlement Agreement, which included cheap electricity for Alcan (Replacement Electricity Supply Agreement), maintenance of their water licence, and a tentative promise, based on economic feasibility, by Alcan to build a new Pre-bake Potline smelter by January 1st, 2010.

However, some of the Union Executives believe that the Kemano Completion Project could have been completed.

Rick Belmont - They could have finished that job before they were officially told to stop, but they didn't because they were going through a cash flow problem at the time. What they did was they stopped it and used the government as an excuse and sued the government for five million and that's how they got the power agreement, a resolution to the lawsuit.

Brent Morrison - The court ruled that there must be an environmental review done and it didn't say stop. But at the time, in my opinion, there was a bit of a money crunch. Alcan said they had the money put aside for it but nevertheless big companies like this rely on borrowing cheap money and that's where they like the AAA credit rating, to borrow cheap money, that's how they operate. Whereas, I think at the time, Alcan was down to about a AA credit rating or something like that, it was a lot lower than triple anyway, and a bit of a money crunch so they had, in my opinion, they had better things to do with half a billion dollars.
In the meantime, before Premier Harcourt decided to cancel KCP, CASAW was contemplating changing the structure of their local union.

Wiho Papenbrock - We were pretty progressive but we were unable to actually have the same effect because we weren’t part of a larger body that could support us. In the 80s when the first Operation of Solidarity came along, of course we were out in the forefront overshadowed always by the Labour Council activities. I remember CASAW leadership going to CLC (Canadian Labour Council) meetings with a voice but no vote. It was a bit frustrating because we were the single largest union in the northwest. Most influential, most active, most progressive and we would go to Labour Council and we couldn’t vote on anything. So I think that built up over time even though we had a good relationship with them. Over time I think people came to the realization that we had to do something different.

Despite CASAW’s successes, most of the membership thought that they needed to belong to a larger union. They were affiliated with the Confederation of Canadian Unions, but this alliance of unions was diminishing and shrunk significantly since CASAW first joined. Since Alcan’s workforce was shrinking, CASAW’s membership was declining too. In addition, the CASAW Local 4 (Royal Oak Mines, Yellowknife) and Local 7 (Alcan, Richmond) strikes put a great strain on the National Union’s resources. Also, some members of Local 1 saw the National to be a burden since it was mostly their members that were involved with the National and they would not need to do that work if they belonged to a larger union.

Brent Morrison - We were a small union, but a very proud little union and I think we’ve done very well for those years, but it became a period of time when it was felt that we’re not able to stand alone anymore. If we ever go to a huge battle with a large corporation like Alcan we’d probably be in trouble, so we felt that we had to belong to a bigger union, a bigger Canadian union.
The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) was a good candidate for CASAW to join because they shared the same values as the local union and also broke away from an American union to become an independent Canadian organization.

Cliff Madsen - We called it a merger but really, more of a swallowing up from the CAW then us merged. Basically our local, which of course is the big local out of the all the different smaller locals that made up our National, we had a committee with myself and Brent Morrison from our local, and then Ross Slezak from the National and we met with representatives with the Canadian Auto Workers, it was Buzz Hargrove and Hemi Metic. What actually started was, the year before, Buzz Hargrove and his brother had been up here fishing and I'm not exactly sure what they were fishing for, but anyway they ended up going fishing with Ross Slezak and kinda shooting the shit about the idea of us joining with the Autoworkers. And then fast-forward a year later, we've put this committee together and we started meeting with them. And of course, our biggest thing was we had been a fiercely independent Canadian union since we broke away from the Steelworkers and so we kinda thought it would be a tough sell anyways, looking for just bigger broader representation. We saw the bigger picture where belonging to a larger central labour body was probably going to be necessary for us to survive as a union as opposed to staying small. Our major affiliation at the time was with the Confederation of Canadian Unions and I think the sum total of all the unions involved was 70,000 workers, or something along those lines. At any event, we wanted to become part of the Canadian Labour Congress and the bigger picture so the Canadian Auto Workers were pretty much the most attractive thing at the time as they had sort of a similar background to ours in that they broke away from their American parent, the United Auto Workers. So the idea that they were also Canadian appealed to us. They had a militant representation at the time. Most of the others that we considered were more company unions, but not that bad but, at any event, the Canadian Auto Workers were the ones we settled in on.
Some of the CASAW members were worried about joining a centralized union as they were worried about losing their local autonomy.

Byron Ramdatt - I was scared. I was really scared about that because this union was doing well by ourselves here and CAW, they have a good reputation but still they’re there and headquarters are back east. I’m always scared about people in the big office back east, always have to sit here and wait for decision to be made somewhere else, that’s why I’m so happy that all decisions were made right here.

Kin Ming Lo - I like to be a member of CASAW than member of CAW, for CASAW is more localized. Yes or no, sometimes you get good point, bad point. Sometimes if you’re member of big union you get more support but when you’re the member of small local union everything is localized. So it’s harder to say which is better or worse but I prefer to get our own local union here.

Even though the local union would have to pay fifty-seven percent of its membership dues to the National and the local would not be as significant on the CAW National scale as they were in CASAW, there were many benefits to be gained from this merger. The local union would gain political clout and have access to their research department and large strike fund. Another strong benefit of CAW was their Port Elgin facilities and education programs. The National paid for the Local Executives and some key activists to fly to Ontario to have a first hand look at these services. Since so much money was going to be leaving Kitimat, Cliff Madsen, CASAW Business Agent during the merger, insisted that the CAW National paid for the Local Business Agent’s wages.
In June of 1994, the CASAW membership voted on the merger with CAW and the results indicated that 73% of the members supported the merge. CASAW became CAW Local 2301 on July 1st, 1994. The local number, 2301, was chosen to acknowledge 23 years of CASAW’s independent Canadian unionism and their previous local designation. The merger proved to be advantageous during the next set of negotiations.

Bill Garvin - Our first contract, Alcan was adamant that there was nothing there. We weren’t getting nothing, but when they realized we had the backing of a quarter of a million people across Canada with regards to finances, they took a different look at it. And that’s when a lot of our people realized belonging to a huge union is a huge benefit to anybody. To the point where we even got them to write our benefits into the Collective Labour Agreement two contracts ago. And now we can negotiate our benefits. Up until then, the company’s response to us when we talk benefits at the table was, ‘It’s not negotiable, it’s not negotiable. We’ll give you what we want.’ Now it’s in the collective agreement, it is negotiable.

On August 1st, 1997, CAW Local 2301 offered a pre-paid medical flights service to their members. In July of 1998, the local union, with much help from Brent Morrison, won their seven year war with WCB over three widows’ lung cancer cases and the widows won their lifetime pensions. Gary Warren refers to Brent as a “workhorse, spent many many hours doing his job as President and Business Agent.” Alcan argued that the lung cancer was caused by cigarette smoking but the WCB Appeal Division stated that ten years of exposure to Benzene Soluble Materials (BSM or tar fumes) was enough to establish this carcinogen as a “significant contributing factor” for lung cancer.

Brent Morrison - We had a seven year battle with WCB trying to establish some lung cancer cases. We had three precedent setting cases that went forward, and it took a good seven years to complete the fight. At the end of the day, we pretty much can establish lung cancer cases. We can establish them as the responsibility of WCB and Alcan. It does say in the WCB Act of BC that prolonged exposure to Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PPH) and long term exposure will cause lung cancer, so that’s in Schedule B in the Act. And that means that individuals are given the presumption that the disease was caused by exposure, long-term exposure in the smelter. And it’s a strong presumption and it’s very hard to defeat for the employer. What is surprising is that in many cases Alcan would not accept responsibility for the environment in the smelter in the fact that it does cause disease. They would put some of the best lawyers in the province up against us in fighting these WCB claims.
Alcan’s denial of their smelter causing lung cancer left a bitter feeling in some of their employees.

Byron Ramdatt - One of the things that stand out in my mind every time, something that got me years ago, this guy had lung cancer and years after that the company fought the case. The company appealed the case and said, ‘Oh he was a smoker sometimes, that’s why he died.’ Already determined that he was working from Alcan. He died and the lady was getting compensation, they wanted to take it away. They try to think that we’re so nice but you have to look under the way they treat people when they’re sick and when they die. There’s a lot of history on that at Alcan, they fight it down to the grave. That’s why I’m proud to be a member of the union, it’s my best investment yet. Best insurance on your life.

The next health precedent set by CAW Local 2301 was in 1999 when they won their first non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma WCB case for an employee who was exposed to tar fumes and passed away in 1986. This victory marked the first time in Canada that a WCB case for this disease was won over BSM exposure in an aluminum smelter and the employee’s widow gained a retroactive pension payment as well as a monthly pension for the rest of her life. In early 2000, CAW Local 2301 was successful in winning their first kidney cancer WCB case for another Alcan widow. Next, in 2001, the union conducted a follow up study to their 1989 Mortality Study, which focused on the years 1986 to 1997. The purpose of this study, carried out by the British Columbia Cancer Control Agency, was to include more employees and have a better understanding on the cancers that Alcan workers could get from working in the smelter.

Prior to 1999, Alcan stated that their pensions and retiree benefits are non-negotiable but CAW Local 2301 disproved this statement. During this set of negotiations, the union managed to obtain the 85 point system (Bridge Qualification) for retirement where workers could retire without any penalty once the combined number of their age and years worked in Alcan equalled 85. Rick Belmont was the spokesman for these negotiations and “deserves an awful lot of credit for that as President of the time” according to Brent Morrison, and Alcan workers now have “one of the best private sector pensions in the private sector unions in Canada.” The CAW-Canada Pension Specialist, Jo-Ann Hannah, came to Kitimat for two weeks to help with the bargaining process and preparing the pension plan. Hannah and the CAW were instrumental in helping the local union achieve the pension gains.

Brent Morrison - With the profile of the CAW, and they’re very high on promoting pensions and stuff like that, so I think that was very very significant in us trying to achieve the improvements to the pension plan we were able to get. I venture that it would have been very difficult to get those improvements without having joined the Canadian Auto Workers. The profile was very important in my opinion.
John Desousa was happy to be a CAW member, specifically after the pension plan gains.

That was a necessary move for us to still be a union. We still had autonomy and control of our union but that gives us a lot more resources and it was one of the reasons I think that we made the huge pension move. I don’t think we would have made it without them because they have a lot of resources that CASAW didn’t have. We’re still our own union but now we belong to a bigger branch, they have a lot more resources than we can call upon. That was a good move I think on our part.

**KEMANO CLOSURE**

On July 20th, 2000, Alcan erased Kemano from the maps and the community of 220 people was shut down. This move was projected to save Alcan $13 million per year.

Cliff Madsen - Alcan found a way in one of their cost cutting measures to basically run the powerhouse with a skeleton crew and they could actually shut down the town site. So now what we have there is a small camp, and they have a couple of crews of workers that go in with twenty or twenty-five workers each time.

Instead of having operators in the powerhouse 24 hours a day, they installed a digital control system in 2002 which enabled the Kitimat control room to operate the plant from a distance. Now they only required Kemano employees for major issues. Rick Belmont and the union’s Kemano Closure Committee worked hard to obtain appropriate severance pay, relocation costs, transportation, interest-free loans, and camp premiums for the Kemano Alcan workers.

Larry Scott - In 1999, I believe it was April of 1999, they said, ‘We’re gonna shut Kemano down the following year’ and that was just a devastating blow to everybody here. Cause in February we had, we’ll call them higher up bosses from Alcan came in, and they were asked the question, ‘Are you shutting down Kemano?’ And their answer was, ‘No, not in the near future.’ And then two months later, Boom, we’re shutting it down. At that time it was really devastating to everybody but you look at the business side of things where it cost so much to run the town, everybody here, and maintain the houses, it made sense. It took a lot of time for it to sink in to people, to get over the shock that, okay well you’ve raised your kids here, now it’s gone, there’s nothing left. And then once they got rid of the town, they got rid of all the houses, and they were all burnt down. But it’s not as bad as it sounds, when they burned the houses down they had volunteer fire departments coming in from all over the place. They would start a house on fire, they would set a room on fire then they would put it out. And they would have little scenarios going on inside each house and it was a way for them to train, to learn how hot a fire gets, and these guys said it was the best training most of them had in their entire careers.
Over the last few decades, the town has changed its visage. The lively little community was fading away and businesses were closing. Colin Coates remembers what Kitimat used to be like:

It used to be a very vibrant little town. On a Friday and a Saturday that City Centre used to buzz. Used to go down on a Friday night, there was people everywhere, drinking coffee, yakking, socializing, the stores were all open like y’know because of all the stores back then, there was all kinds in here. The Hudson’s Bay used to be here then where Trigo’s is now. The funny thing is it was all the same faces, you recognized all the faces. You go over there now and you don’t recognize anyone. The odd one, but very few people I recognize now. A lot of old timers that hang around and retired, I recognize a lot of them people but you don’t really, not like it was back in the 70s, and 80s I should say as well. It was just a buzz in that place, there was all kinds going on there. Slowly and slowly it just chipped right to nothing right now. We spend very little time in the mall anymore. It’s sad to see it but I remember when it was just going, there were people everywhere.

Alcan was also undergoing changes. The company shipped in a new Kitimat Works Manager from Montreal, Louis Delage, and he was responsible for callously cutting a significant number of staff jobs in 2000. Fortunately, hourly jobs were protected by the union. He was referred to by some employees as “Louis Delete” or “the Axe Man”. In addition, the company changed their guidelines for employees celebrating 25 years of working for Alcan. Previously, Alcan had a wonderful policy where workers could have a dinner for friends and family at the Nechako Lodge or at a restaurant of their choice. The new cutbacks resulted in eliminating this individual commemorative party and replacing it with “one group hug”, according to John De Silveira, where employees who reach the milestone can celebrate the event together, but could only bring their spouse and had to leave their families at home.
Their involvement in the community was decreasing and, in June of 2001, Alcan announced that they were going to focus on two products: aluminum and power, instead of predominantly being an aluminum company. There were insufficient water levels in the Nechako Reservoir so the Company announced that they were going to reduce aluminum production by shutting down Lines 1 and 2, reorganize the workforce, and sell power to BC Hydro. If there was extra power, it was going to be sold to Powerex. A Low Water Crisis Agreement was signed between CAW Local 2301 and Alcan, which protected the workers’ jobs and wages while aluminum production was curbed.

Cliff Madsen - For a lot of years, they just sold surplus power, you know a little bit here and there, it changed every year. And then what happened was there was a bit of a downturn and a dry spell so the water was in a bit of a crisis. Alcan in Kitimat actually shut down capacity and two or three potrooms were shut down. So the union basically negotiated there would be no layoffs and as soon as the water was back, the company would need to refire the potrooms and so on. Well, part of that never happened, there's still two buildings that are shut down. Line 1A and Line 1B are shut down still to this day. Even though the water is back and even higher than it's ever been. They made a business decision not to restart those things. So that pissed us off and we filed grievances against them. So those things remained down now and of course we haven't seen any expansion. Then what Alcan actually did was, they had the water, they didn't start the potrooms, now they were selling power with idle capacity. Then everybody started looking at that differently. Now they said, 'Well, hold on a sec here. There's no reason they can't start up, why are they simply selling power?'

So then the focus kinda shifted and there was some real real lucrative years there when there was no electricity in the States and everything that could be sold from British Columbia was sold at huge huge profit. And Alcan basically took advantage of that, so the state of California was buying power through a corporation called Powerex, Alcan was selling power to Powerex. What happened was, after it was all said and done, George Bush actually came in and passed laws that said, 'We will not pay more than this much money per kilowatt.' There was gouging going on.
By 2002, the Ingot stopped publishing anything that was not directly related to Alcan. Even retiree pictures were excluded from the Ingot although they returned shortly after. Hans Kuppers, an employee at Alcan, had created a cartoon character called “Alman” for the Ingot using stories and experiences from individuals at Kitimat Works. In 1980, Montreal Headquarters decided that Alman was inappropriately using the Alcan logo and it had to be struck from the character. Colin Coates enjoyed reading Kuppers’ Alman comics and was disappointed with all these changes:

Hans, he always did the little cartoon thing about all the characters, the different characters. It was a very personal thing because somebody would do something stupid outside and Hans would get a cartoon out of this. He never put any names in there but everybody could see who it was and it was so neat. Of course we had the Ingot, and the Ingot, it was about real people as far as I was concerned. It was about all the people that work here y’know and everybody could relate to it and there was good information from the company in there and everything. Well, Louis Delage, or Louis Delete, killed that one too. Got rid of the Editor and promptly moved his girlfriend in there. The Ingot was no longer the Ingot. The Ingot has finally disappeared and has turned into a corporate magazine, if you will now, which I have no interest in. They could keep it for me, I don’t care, I don’t want to see it.
Cliff Madsen reflects on how Alcan changed their approach to their involvement in Kitimat:

Alcan has always been a big contributor locally to sports and everything else. I remember when I was on the executive board of minor hockey years back and to our chagrin, all of a sudden, the company wasn’t that accessible anymore. What they made us do was, they created this thing called a Millennium Fund and all their donations and so on would go through the Millennium Fund, back around the year 2000 I guess. What you had to do was you had to apply similar to what a contractor would have to bid on a job. We made a thirteen page proposal for minor hockey and at the end of the day we ended up getting half of what we used to get with no open door policy. We used to always have this option if we were ever in really dire straits we could call on the company and they’ll always help out. Through the Millennium Fund, it was here’s the money we’re prepared to donate, it represented about half of what we would traditionally get, and don’t come back. That was another sign of things changing right. At the same time, Alcan was announcing that they were the lead sponsor for the lacrosse tournament in Prince George, they were lead sponsor for the dragon boat races in Vancouver, they had just purchased partial ownership in Science World, and they were lead sponsor in the media awards for British Columbia. So basically the writing was on the wall that they weren’t so interested anymore in the local aspect, they wanted to get a better public image provincially. And once again, that was just about the politics. Someone said, ‘Hey, nobody knows who we are here. Let’s start putting money into some of these opportunities province wide where we would get name recognition and we would get recognition in everything else.’ That’s what they were doing, and once again it hurt us locally. It’s not to say they cut us off totally, the local groups, but everything was restricted. It was a big burden, you’re a volunteer group and you’ve got to put together a thirteen page proposal. It’s hard enough just running the show with your minor hockey or whatever and all of a sudden they changed all of that.
WOMEN’S COMMITTEE

The Kitimat Works smelter was a male-dominated environment and, at times, it was a difficult working experience for the female Alcan employees. Wendy Silver, an Alcan retiree from A Casting, remembers how work was initially stressful.

Training back in the day, you get on the machine and you drive. I was operating the overhead crane and I would cry and cry and cry because I didn’t know what I was doing. The guys would walk off the floor. So you learn to be tough. You learn to suck it up, buttercup.

Sarah McLeod - We’re women in a man's world, I’m telling you right now, and you have to either be tough or you won’t make it. Everyday it’s something different and men are very different to work with than women and you have to be tough, really tough. I like working with men but it is challenging at times. But you know what, you just go with the flow, whatever they give, give back.

Aldo Paolini - I know that there was a time in the plant where there were pictures that were offensive to women, lockers you know on the front of the lockers you know. and there was a sort of a culture that wasn’t quite right and the union, along with the company, brought changes that made it more comfortable for women to be able to work there and harassment issues were addressed and so now I think that the plant is a much better place to work.

As a result, some of the female workers decided that it was time to do something about it.

Wendy Silver - It was Carmen who approached me a few years back when they wanted to start it. She was working dispatch and she said, ‘Wendy, we’re thinking of starting a Women’s Committee.’ ‘Pfft, I want nothing to do with it, nothing to do with it.’ She says ‘Why?’ ‘We’ve got equal rights here, this is Alcan.’ Then she started to talk to me and I thought, y’know what, you’re right. There’s PPE issues, there’s other issues y’know that don’t involve the men. That there should be a special committee. I did say to the ladies that I knew in Casting, the ones that worked upstairs in traffic, hey even if a staff person has a problem, come to us, we’re all humans. Y’know it don’t matter. We’re all there for the same purpose, to make money. So I would even say to women, look if there’s something we can tune then we’ll take it further. If I can’t solve it or if Carmen or Karen couldn’t solve it, then we’ll go further. We’ll search it out.
The CAW Local 2301 Women’s Committee held their first meeting, chaired by Rick Belmont, on March 7th, 2006. Belmont also helped the Women’s Committee write their mandate and believes that “the committee is stabilizing, I think they’re finding their legs within this union.” After the first meeting, the Executives for the Women’s Committee were: Karen Jonkman (Chairperson), Carmen Charbonneau (Vice Chairperson), and Wendy Silver (Recording Secretary). Giselle Sisson also played a major role in initiating the committee. Their motto is, “CAW Women Kick Ass” and this was clearly evident in their fight to obtain appropriate PPE and clothing for women. Despite the company’s assurances that their clothing was unisex, women’s PPE was available by the end of 2007. Karen Jonkman recalls one of the more notable questions asked during the meetings with the Company.

Wendy Silver – If the clothing is unisex, then why do the long johns have a hole in the front?

The first official function for the Women’s Committee was a hot dog sale held on August 11th, 2006 and it successfully raised $383.95 for Dunmore Place. Another one of their events, co-hosted with the Tamitik Status of Women, is a candle light vigil for the December 6th Memorial to acknowledge the murdered women at l’Ecole Polytechnique de Montreal in 1989. The Women’s Committee also offers courses for women activists to help them take leadership roles and ensure that their voices are heard. Reg Pelletier, an Alcan employee in the Basement Crew, thinks that “it’s about time the women got together and deal with their women issues.”
MODERNIZATION?

Three days after the hot dog sale, Alcan announced their plans to modernize the Kitimat Smelter on August 14th, 2006. While the current smelter produces approximately 250,000 tonnes of aluminum, the new smelter would be designed to produce around 400,000 tonnes. This $1.8 billion undertaking was projected to start in late 2007 or early 2008, but was planned to be completed in 2011.

Cliff Madsen - The only course we have to look forward to is potential of modernization but we've been through that one for years and years and years and its never materialized so, until it does, I'm just gonna go on as if it's another day. We've had the absolute best of times prior to the recent economic condition, they were making more money than they've ever made before. They made huge huge profits. That didn't prompt them to go forward. They also had, prior to that, had cyclical downturn and they didn't go forward in the downturn anticipating an upswing. So my question is, 'What is the condition that would prompt them to go ahead?' Basically, I've come to realize that it's got nothing to do with anything except the boardroom and it's whatever the case can be made on any given day for Kitimat Works to be the one to get the green light. Because the project itself is a sound project but what will it get to take them to say yes and actually make the move. I don't believe it's got anything to do with anything except when they wanna do it. Because if they had it done prior to the last good times, I can only imagine the money they would have been making through those three or four years. But they didn't. Sometimes it's better to invest in the downtimes because then you hit it big when things come back on track. They've had that chance too and they just never did.

Ian Auton - A lot of people have been waiting for the expansion for a long time or the rebuild modernization and stuff like that. I mean there's no company in the world that is going to tell you the exact date of when it's going to happen. The date it's going to happen is when it's going to happen. So you can't really force a company into saying when you're doing it. The only reason why it's getting so sticky is because this has gone on for a long time. Years and years about expansions and that was the whole idea to begin with was an expansion and to increase the tonnage and stuff like that and through technology and stuff. They basically don't have to do an expansion, they can do a modernization and lessen the workforce and still put out the tonnage with the technology. So they went from a big plant hiring more people to a smaller plant with less people pumping out just as much. And basically everybody just wants to see it get done, at least it'll give us more employment in the region. And with more tonnage coming over the company it should bring in secondary industry too, smaller secondary industry that can use the port facilities in Prince Rupert. With the new smelter it’s going to put out more tonnage, we’re going to have more vessels coming in, more raw materials, should be other shops opening up in Kitimat, Terrace, welding shops, steel fabricating shops, and all sorts of stuff like that.
On July 12th, 2007, Rio Tinto (a mining company) placed a $31.8 billion bid to obtain Alcan. By October of that year, Rio Tinto officially took over Alcan and Kitimat Works became Rio Tinto Alcan. However, many of the Kitimat smelter workers were not very pleased with this change.

**Rick Belmont** - As you become part of a larger and larger organization, the less significant you become and that’s very very obvious lately over the last few years as Rio Tinto has been taking over. I don’t like mining companies to begin with, they're ruthless, they're tough they don’t want to give anything. It’s all about profit rates. Although Alcan has been focusing on aluminum I have my doubts about Rio Tinto. They don't care about local jobs or the local community. In the early 80s, I was on the Executive for a few terms and CEOs from Montreal would come into town. And they would openly say, ‘We have a responsibility to the community.’ They had a real commitment and wasn’t afraid to commit to it. Now there’s no loyalty to the community. It’s not about longstanding business; get every penny you can now and figure out the future later.

**Colin Coates** - The sad part about the whole of this thing is I have yet to see any representation from Rio Tinto, as a company, to come to Kitimat and stand up in front of the workers and tell 'em who they are, what their goals are, what they expect, and meet everybody on a face-to-face thing. Like you could split the plant up into groups and like our quarterly meetings we used to have, which seems to be about every ten years now I think, not quarterly now, I don’t know which quarter they’re talking about, but anyway, we used to have them at Riverlodge. It’ll be nice to have something like that where they come and y’know you got one-on-one. Give the people some opportunity to tell them what they think and, well, where are we going like y’know but whether that’ll ever happen, I very much doubt it. But who is Rio Tinto? We don't know who the heck they are, it’s that red logo.

**Erkki Lasanen** - For anybody that works now, they complain that the spirit has changed. Well, for me, it is hard to say anything because the spirit at the time when I was there, it was good. At least in our shop and most of the other shops that i know. Well, I know that the attitude of the company has changed, yes, and for the workers prospective, not for the better.

**Bob Morden** - I still say I work for Alcan. I don't work for Rio Tinto, I work for Alcan. I'm an old timer so that’s the way I’m going to talk. I don’t like the new company, I think it’s running the place into the ground. That’s just my opinion.
Some of the Alcan hourly employees have noticed significant negative changes in their working conditions.

Elizabeth Cloakey - The company just is not taking care of things, right. They're not taking care for the equipment and I think that, from what i've seen, it seems like there's no regard for property and equipment by management. Run everything to failure and then run it some more it seems like. And so the whole of the plant, the morale is so low that it breeds a lot of contempt for management, for the working conditions, for everything. well, I've heard in the past, people saying, well y'know, you shouldn't have so much pride in your work, just rush through it, that sort of thing. That is a good way of killing a lot of your productivity. People just don't feel like what they're doing is worthwhile it seems. It's quite frustrating and there doesn't seem to be any way to change that because there's no money and there isn't an ear for any of those types of concerns because nobody seems to have the power to do anything right, to make it better or improve things. It's just been a downhill slide.

Sarah McLeod - Our equipment right now is being run almost to the ground, they're not replacing it, our forklifts. Y'know it's rough, some of our dump trucks, they're hanging in by a thin thread. There are some things that, yeah, we're not very happy with. I don't do nothing unsafe and I make sure my workers don't do nothing unsafe, y'know we all work as a team. But they're depleting the work force, there's a lot of work out there and there's not very many people.

Jim Sevigny - When we started, the foremen, they had all been potmen. They all knew the job right from y'know doing it themselves. A lot of the foremen now, they've never been a potman. The company considers a manager's a manager's a manager so it doesn't matter where you're from or what department, you can manage. So they'll stick people in there that have no experience in the lines and say, 'Okay, now you're a supervisor for this.' You just shake your head sometimes because you should know something of the job. Well, they know a little bit of it, but we had one foremen come in and said, 'I don't know how to do this.' 'You're our supervisor and you don't know how to do this?' They never did it in 1 & 2, he was from 1 & 2, so you just shake your head and say okay. You always respected the foreman because he had been there, he done it, he knew what he was talking about. You couldn't BS him too much because he knew what the job was y'know, your excuses would have to make sense. It just lost a lot of respect for the job in a way because with that type of supervisor, they didn't think much because they didn't care.
Cliff Madsen - You really see it in the morale at the smelter. The morale is down and, of course, when morale is down everything else suffers so safety suffers, working conditions are much worse I think now than they were ten years ago. That’s just because the assets gotten older and they’re trying to run things basically on a shoestring budget and basically what suffers is the assets. So, little by little, they let things slip and I had someone that I know recently that got hired on here on a contract basis and they got to see the smelter today compared to about fifteen years ago when they were here. And he couldn’t believe how much it had gone downhill. So it’s all about profits and all that and it’s too bad when they went that far but now it’s hard to even recognize this company, they’re totally different.

As a result, it has become more imperative than ever to have a strong union presence at Rio Tinto Alcan for the Kitimat smelter workers.

Brent Morrison - An employers’ job is to make a profit for their shareholders. Their first concern is not workers, the union’s first concern is workers. I would say, regarding wages, working conditions, health and safety, and pensions, the company is just not going to hand these things over. It’s just the human nature of the beast is greed, y’know greed is just the nature of the beast of us humans and the employer has that like any individual has that and so they’re not going to part with these things easily or part with their money easily or give you good benefits easily or give you good pensions easily. So that’s where we’re going to require the assistance of unions. Every group in society has a voice, all the union is, is the voice of the worker.
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