

Jim Turk Transcript

Interviewer: Okay, so I'm talking today with Jim Turk about the struggle against free trade. Welcome, Jim, thanks for speaking with me. So, I thought maybe to start out, it might be good to just ask you when you first heard about trade free trade. Do you remember around what time and in what kinds of circumstances you started hearing free trade as an issue?

Turk: It would have been—what—like in the early 80s, I imagine? I had been teaching Labour Studies at the University of Toronto and Canadian Studies. And after I got tenure, I was really unhappy with academic life and compensated for that in two different ways. I got really involved politically, managed a number of election campaigns and was elected president of the Ontario NDP, but also oriented my research more to my interest in labour studies and was doing research on the Cold War period in Canada and what happened to the labour movement. focused on the United Electrical Radio [and] Machine Workers Union of Canada (UE), which during the Cold War period was the principal object for the attack by the state and by most of the rest of the Canadian labour movement. as part of the attack on left wing unions. The UE was the third biggest CIO union in the United States. It had amongst the best contracts of industrial unions in Canada and was the one union most closely tied to the Communist Party. The secretary treasurer of the Union had run openly for the Communist Party for years and was proud of it. The President always denied he was in the Communist Party, but in fact was on the Central Committee of the Communist Party. All the left-wing unions in Canada in the United States during that period were devastated by the attack on them by the state and the rest of the labour movement. The UE in the [United] States went from 300,000 members to about 60,000 members. In Canada, almost all the left-wing unions, e.g., the fur and leather workers; the mine, mill, and smelter workers; the IWA (many of whose were in the Communist Party, Generally, those seen to be Communists were outed, and the left-wing unions were largely destroyed. Interestingly, the UE, which was the principal focus, in Canada grew in size. I had received a Labour Canada research grant to find out how this happened. I had spent many hours at the UE office going through their files, as I had done with the unions trying to shut them down – the Steelworkers, the Canadian Congress of Labour, the new created alternative electrical workers union (the International Union of Electrical Workers. I was writing my book and several years after the time I had spent at the UE office going through records, I had gone back out to the Electrical Workers archives to check some references for my book. In that trip, I the new UE president who asked me if I knew of a graduate student who might want to be their research director. At that point, I really wanted to get out of the university. So, I said, "Well, I'd be interested." I got the job and amongAnyway, then I went on [...]. So in that context, both politically and in my trade union work, issues of free trade come up. When I was at the United Electrical Workers, I was a research director and headed up their health and safety work. Their membership were mostly in big electrical manufacturing companies -- General Electric and Westinghouse were the largest but there were any others, too. In the late 70s and early 80s, General Electric had 14 plants in Toronto. Its largest plant was in Peterborough with about 5000

workers. Then they started closing plants, relocating production, either in the southern United States or in low wage countries outside of North America or Mexico.

Interviewer: Sorry, around what time is this happening in the early 80s?

Turk: This was happening in the early 80s. I started, let's see. I think I started the work and I took leave from the university initially; it was really hard to give up tenure so I couldn't persuade myself to make that big jump all in one step. Also at that time, if you left, the money paid to you did not go to your department and but to the dean to administer as they wanted. So, I took a leave of absence and went to work at UE, I think it was '81, and immediately started dealing with plant closure issues. Part of my job was organizing fights against the closures and doing the analysis as to why they were closing. The rationale was "Well, it's cheaper to produce elsewhere and have trading arrangements." So that was the context of much of the discussion of free trade in the course of doing that work. I started working with other organizations that were focused on trade. One of the principal ones at the time was an organization that was composed of a number of the major church groups. The organization you may have come across was called GATT-Fly, and two of the key people, researchers, full-time staff of it, were John Dillon, and Dennis Howlett. And they were doing some of the most innovative, creative work about trade and what neoliberalism was meaning (the term neoliberalism wasn't used as much quite then GATT-Fly was funded by the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church, the Anglican Church. I think those were the principal funders. To do this economic work, we also had formed at the time, the Pro-Canada Network, which later was renamed the Action Canada Network. It was chaired most of the time by Tony Clarke, who had been the staff person for the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops which had been doing work on these issues. There was a whole network of people, largely around the more progressive churches, that were doing interesting analyses of the harms of free trade and then subsequently the particular harm of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and what that would likely mean. The auto workers were part of the collection of people that we worked with, given that the free trade arrangements around auto parts would be put in jeopardy by this. It was a very active group. GATT-Fly was just an exciting group to work with and were doing so much creative analysis. So, I was working with them on the analysis, but also then working with trade unions across the country. First in conjunction with research directors in other national and international unions, and then in '88, I went to the Ontario Federation of Labour, which had offered me the job to be their education director. I continued the work there. I tried to reach out to unions, we brought this forward as issues to Canadian Labour Congress conventions and Ontario Federation of Labour conventions. GATT-Fly did a lot of work [on] material that was used in the churches. So, we tried to engage civil society in these issues. GATT-Fly put out a lot of material, I even remember a paper I wrote, I think it was in 1985, called *GATT Will Get You Too* which was countered the claim that wonderful things were going to flow from embracing the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), and pointed out how that would backfire. So, there was just a lively group of people, analysis, and concern being expressed at that time. Over the years, as the more progressive elements of the Catholic Church got replaced under subsequent Popes by less progressive elements, they backed away from this joint work, the funding for GATT-Fly, started

diminishing. Another person who'd be useful to talk to for all this is John Foster, who headed the work for the United Church in this area.

[...]

Turk: So, that was the most vibrant hub of opposition. I would say intellectually vibrant hub and they helped spawn the Pro-Canada Network that became the Action Canada Network. We subsequently created the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, which I chaired for nine years involving much of the major civil society organizations in Ontario – seniors, women's organizations, churches, unions, among others. We organized events. I don't know if anyone's told you, we organized a big event in opposition to the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement at Massey Hall.

Interviewer: Yeah, that comes up a lot.

Turk: Margaret Atwood was key in that and Rick Salutin was crucial to connecting with the writers and other artists who performed. So, they're all these different kinds of activities going on.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you wound up connecting with GATT-Fly, like with a shared circles in terms of social movement activist work?

Turk: I'm sure that the context was dealing with what was happening long before the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement came along with the movement of manufacturing plants outside of Canada, which would have been facilitated by the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. They can move to low-wage states in the United States and still benefit. So, I mean, there was very much a concern that antedated the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement about the movement of manufacturing outside of Canada. And in dealing with that issue, I looked around for who was doing interesting work, and so John Dillon, Dennis Howlett, and those at GATT-Fly were amongst the more interesting groups of people. But then Tony Clarke and his work when he was with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Then—you know, it wasn't that big a group of people dealing with these issues at the time. So, we all had contact with each other or found each other and developed the contact and then formed the Pro-Canada Network to share information and collaborate in our advocacy efforts, and then also started doing that on a provincial level.

Interviewer: Do you know—I know this is a bit—you might not be able to answer this because you weren't directly involved in these church networks, but do you know what was motivating church groups to get kind of involved in this kind of work and focus on economic issues?

Turk: Well, in each of the churches that I mentioned, there had been a long time left or liberal tradition of liberation theology as in the Catholic Church, progressive theological traditions in the Anglican and United churches. Various moderators in the United Church worked with us and then there were far less progressive elements in those same churches, too. So, it was—so when the more progressives were in senior positions in the church, like the moderators of the United Church for example and the key bishops in the Canadian Conference for Catholic Bishops that made their support for this possible and then as the politics within the church changed, as there were several more conservative Popes who appointed more conservative Cardinals. The direct action of the Canadian Conference for Catholic Bishops gradually changed. There would be still

some progressive staff who worked for them who we worked with. So, I think there's a long-standing tradition of liberal theology in each of those churches long before trade issues came out, but when trade issues came up, or when what was happening to workers in Canada became an increasingly visible problem, those progressive traditions in church saw those as relevant issues to be addressing.

Interviewer: Can you speak to what made the GATT-Fly work so innovative and creative? I remember I saw a little booklet, a long time ago, that GATT-Fly produced, which was all about like kind of corporate mapping. I don't know whether it was produced, but it was like [...] it developed this whole methodology around mapping out these kinds of connections between corporations and governments and things like that. [...]

Turk: I don't know if I can answer your question. It happened to be the people who were there, like Dillon and Howlett, that were just very bright and had good analysis. I think GATT-Fly started as a pretty hand-to-mouth operation. So, these were progressive people who are really quite committed, were drawn to it. Then as there were more resources, they could do it. I spent hundreds of hours in the small GATT-Fly office. It was in a house downtown Toronto. It was a really cozy place. Their walls were filled with files. And they used old detergent boxes, because they didn't have the money to buy proper file boxes. So, they would do detergent boxes, which they'd label and then keep the files. It was just a really vibrant place. I think it was the particular people. I mean, Dillon was a superb economist. Dennis subsequently went on—was a staff person for Canadians for Tax Fairness, to be a counterpoint of the [Canadian Taxpayers Federation.] So, they just were really quite talented. And there was a core of staff that fed on each other and then they were joined by those of us who were research directors of various progressive unions. So we, you know, we just all came together and GATT-Fly was sort of a... hub. Sam Gindin and the auto workers, and I would convene meetings of research staff, of unions; we sometimes later especially do it through the CLC. But in these early days, it was more informal. Many of us were based in Toronto, which made it easy to get together and have discussions. So, it just happened to be the people. I can fully imagine they could have had a different kind of staff and nothing much would have materialized.

Interviewer: Yeah, and it's interesting, the milieu of Toronto too. I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about what Toronto was like as a space for kind of social justice organizing and how people in Toronto kind of got together around free trade issues?

Turk: One of the strengths of Toronto was simply its size, in the number of major organizations that had their headquarters there and a lot of their staff there. Some were based in Ottawa, like Tony Clarke with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. So, they would come down for meetings or we would sometimes go there. The Pro-Canada Network became a more formalized coalition where we could get together, as did the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice. But it was just—I think—a product of the size and number of organizations that were in Toronto, and it was a time when there were large organizations that—in which there was a significant progressive element, whether it be in the Catholic Church, the United Church or the Anglican Church at the time, or in certain unions like the United Electrical Workers, the Auto Workers, the postal workers, who made their staffs available. It was a moment where a lot of those things came

together. We see sort of a vivid contrast to what's happening now, where the labour [movement is] in much worse shape as are the churches. What happened in the early '80s and through the '80s and '90s, just couldn't or is very unlikely to happen now. Maybe that can be reconstructed, but it was a moment when there was a strong progressive element in a number of different sectors. That continued through, really from the early '80s through the mid '90s. One of my jobs at the Ontario Federation of Labour, I think was in '93, when we were concerned about trade as we organized. I was responsible for organizing with the Rainbow Coalition in the United States a big march where Jesse Jackson would lead the coalition in the United States and Bob White would lead the coalition from Canada and we met on the Rainbow Bridge and marched together into Canada to have a big joint rally expressing concern about where trade policy was going.. So, I mean there was dynamics that were possible because of—you know, I mean the leadership of the Auto Workers, which was the biggest private sector union in the country and was very supportive as was the leadership of CUPE on the trade union side. That made a huge difference. Then smaller unions like UE and Postal Workers. So, we had a vibrant presence at CLC conventions in the '80s and the Ontario Federation of Labour conventions. There were similar dynamics happening in the churches. That happened... all came together at that moment. You know, there were a lot of things... I'm sure you've been told the story of how when Mulroney and the Americans were signing the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mike McBain from the Action Canada Network streaked across the stage holding the American flag. We did all sorts of those things, or filling Massey Hall with performers and so on. There were just activities that were possible then, that built on and fed the enthusiasm, but also dependent on there being that pre-existing enthusiasm to carry on.

Interviewer: Can we get into the labour movement a little bit more? Because my sense is with the labour movement, it was a pretty diverse group. At that time, there were tensions maybe between the more national unions and the more international unions. I was wondering, in terms of moving towards a position against free trade, who were the key players in the labour movement really pushing forward with it? And was there any resistance to that in the labour movement?

Turk: The history of the labour movement [in] Canada has been a history of division. The issue of national and international unions has had... I think it's been oversimplified. But there has been a division going back to the formation of industrial unions in Canada in the '40s, with the principal antipathy [being] between the Steelworks Workers union and the Auto Workers. So even when both were international unions, they were structured in different ways and they had different traditions. So, there was a much more progressive tradition within the auto workers. They were [...] the most democratic international union in Canada. But that's because [of] the divisions that existed within it historically. There was a significant presence of Communist Party activists in the Auto Workers. There were certain big locals of the auto workers like the GM plant in St. Catharines, where the leadership were on the left, some communists. The auto workers had two caucuses: they had a left caucus and what was called the right-wing caucus. Much of the leadership of the Auto Workers had been split between those over the years and so the left was a combination of Communists and Trotskyists and left social democrats. The right-wing caucus were conservative social democrats and liberals, and others. They fought because they were roughly equal numbers in the auto workers in the '40s, '50s and '60s. The auto workers emerged

as a much more democratic union because one caucus didn't have the wherewithal to dominate. Whereas the Steelworkers were dominated by the more conservative social democrats from the beginning and always saw their role politically was to support the CCF and then the NDP, and not to ever be critical of it even when it took positions that may be harmful to workers. Whereas in the Auto Workers they always had a more ambivalent relationship with the CCF and later the NDP. The Auto Workers caucus was just like the Steelworkers. The left and right caucuses had huge battles in the 40s and 50s within the union, so it was really quite a vibrant union for that reason.

Then the Postal Workers, which were built on a much more progressive tradition, where, for example, it was union policy that nobody who worked for the union or was an officer was paid more than the average wage in the sorting plants. So, there was no advantage to becoming a full-time staffer in the union, you didn't make more money or anything, you did it because of your commitment. That was the same policy in the UE. I mean, I took a huge pay cut when I went to work for the UE, because you were paid the average wage, including the President, the average wage [under] the GE Collective Agreement. So, there were these giant progressive dynamics at the time. Long before the free trade issue. So, when the free trade issues came up, I mean, everybody was concerned about the outflow of jobs to the US and so forth. [...] There was no difference between the Steelworkers and Auto Workers and on those kinds of issues, but were differences in how aggressively they pushed the issue and what tactics they used. There was a difference in emphasis. These weren't central issues of most public sector unions, except in some of the public sector unions where the key people in their research departments were quite progressive. So, Gil Levine, who was the director of research for the for CUPE was a very progressive guy. So, he was very much part of this.

When the provincial government employee unions wanted to join the CLC, they had to form NUPGE -- they had to form a national union because only national (or international) unions could be CLC members. NUPGE was largely to be a post office box through which they paid dues-- a national entity that could be a member of CLC. The big provincial public sector unions, like OPSEU, couldn't be members because they were provincial and you couldn't join the Canadian Labour Congress unless you were a national union. So, you suddenly had the makeup of the CLC changing during this period with more and more public sector unions and then NUPGE became more than a post office box, even though its resources were dwarfed by the resources of its member of provincial unions. In the politics of the CLC oversimplified, there was sort of an alliance between some public sector unions like NUPGE and with the less activist industrial unions, who are for the most part international unions. But it was complex. So for example, in the UE, even though [an] international union officially until the 60s, the UE in the United States gave the Canadian section of UE complete autonomy in 1947. The Auto Workers on the other hand, didn't have autonomy or become the Canadian Auto Workers until Bob White and Sam Gindin and others went through a pretty dramatic exit from the UAW. The Steelworkers never became effectively independent. So there was a lot of variation in that time, but it didn't exactly coincide with progressive and reactionary. Then there were the building trades, which they get characterized as being conservative and aligned with the Liberal Party, but there were divisions within them with the Sheet Metal Workers, for example, being on the progressive side

and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Labourers being on the conservative side of things. So, the picture was a very mixed picture, but there was a vibrancy in the labour movement in those days and a more distinct, progressive left-wing presence. When we'd have left caucus, [...] John Claude Parrot and I would chair the left caucus within the CLC. We would have a third of all the CLC delegates attending left caucus meetings. Similarly within the NDP in the '80s, I chaired the NDP's left , and, for a while, was simultaneously President of the Ontario NDP, which was an odd thing. We'd have 40 percent of the delegates attending left caucus meetings. Now, if you had left caucus meetings at an NDP convention today, I doubt if you could fill a room of 30 people. So, it was a different time and there were a lot of dynamics that led to that, but it made possible the organization of opposition to what was happening as a result of these changes, as reflected in the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and subsequently NAFTA.

Interviewer: That's great. I'm just wondering if building on that, if we can kind of remember any kind of key moments in the labour movement? Where the labour movement or the CLC or UE move decisively towards a position against free trade and where they're meetings, where did this happen? What were the meetings like? Around what time were they happening? This kind of thing?

Turk: In UE's case, I don't think there was a decisive moment where they moved from support for free trade to opposition to... I think it grew out of analysis of what was happening in capitalism and what they were experiencing in terms of manufacturing jobs being moved out of Canada. Plants being closed was something that people were sensitive to and aware of. I don't think there was ever strong support for free trade in the labour [movement]. Generally, I think the variation was more how actively they fought it, when they just fought in the sense of how actively [they] fought plant relocations or plant closures. In UE, there was vigorous opposition to that. There were big campaigns when General Electric had announced that it was moving a plant. Similarly there were active campaigns when there was an indication that corporations were in the process of considering that for the auto workers. Throughout this period in the '80s and '90s, there were strong efforts to resist concessions. You know, the claim was, "Well, if we can't get these concessions we're going to have to move the plant to Mexico." The American UAW's reluctant to fight concession demands seriously is what finally led to the split of the CAW from the UAW. The UAW was going along with these concessions thinking that there was a way to save things, which our analysis and the auto worker—Canadian Auto Workers -- analysis was "No, this doesn't save anything." So the issue of fighting the logic of free trade and internationalization of production, was a consistent theme through this period; there wasn't a moment when this "began" but there was gradual... and there was division, you know, in the steel industry it's not so easy to move a steel plant, whereas an auto parts plant is easier to move. So, there were dynamics in particular industries. Then there were other industries that were just... where the labour costs were so high that there was virtually no possibility of saving them. So that was much of the garment industry and the textile industry. So, they were just devastated, but some of those unions or at least some of the progressive staff in those unions got those unions to be very supportive of our broader efforts to oppose the Canada-US Free Trade agreement.

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit more about some of the day-to-day work that was involved in building a movement against free trade? Like were you attending meetings of organizations that were kind of building opposition to this? You mentioned GATT-Fly, but I was wondering if you were going to Pro-Canada Network meetings or if maybe the UE had organized committee where you could do work to kind of create materials, organize events to oppose this kind of stuff.

Turk: Well, in terms of my job at UE as research director, given the UE policy and direction was very supportive of challenging these plant closures, and more generally, the notion of free trade. I had sort of freehand to engage in those things, so I spent lots of time at GATT-Fly and talking with others in the trade union movement like Sam Gindin and Geoff Bickerton (research director of the Postal Workers. There was sort of a network of union research directors that we talked to all the time, in a variety of venues; both in relation to the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress -- on a more day-to-day basis and also regularly through things like the Pro-Canada Network, which I was involved in from the beginning of it. Then through GATT-Fly we would exchange materials and there's just a network of people who work together a lot in a variety of different ways. The Pro-Canada Network became quite an important vehicle for bringing together a broader range of organizations, seniors, women's organizations, cultural organizations. We saw it at the time that it was a big, big [gain] to get Margaret Atwood to be one of the key people at our event at Massey Hall and working with people like Rick Salutin. You know, Rick would be writing things and various columns and so forth. So, I mean, there were a variety of venues and opportunities. It was a more organic opposition rather than just one organization or one setting being key.

Interviewer: Yeah, and you did a good job of showing how there's all these different dynamics happening in these different spaces that were kind of converging around.

Turk: That's right.

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about some of the key events? If you were to make a timeline of the events kind of leading up to the adoption of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement? Some of the key events that kind of galvanized opposition?

Turk: I'd have to go back and try to reconstruct that. I wouldn't trust my memory well enough. I mean, all of this activism that went on for more than a decade, in my case, sort of all merges together, so I wouldn't trust looking back, but I could try to put one together. [...] It would certainly be worthwhile to talk to Sam Gindin who is probably the most important person in the trade union movement on these issues. Also, probably the most brilliant analyst and academic in the labour movement. You know, he played the absolutely decisive role in the whole tactics and strategy of the CAW—of the auto workers pulling out of the UAW, and I don't know how much you know about his background. He had done his PhD at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is a Marxist—was a Marxist, had been hired at the UPEI [University of Prince Edward Island] to teach and had been approached by Dennis McDermott who was then the director of the UAW in Canada, who said, "I want to hire a left-wing staff person, because the communists are so strong in our union. I have to understand them." Sam will tell you the proper version of the story, but "I want to hire you and you'll have complete freedom, except you can't do anything that attacks

me, but I want to be able to understand these folks, so I need some senior staffers who I can talk to understand the analysis,” and so forth. So, Sam became the research director for the auto workers and McDermott had come out of the right-wing Caucus and then he was succeeded by Bob White, who had been his administrative assistant. That’s ’the whole pattern of leadership in the auto workers – unlike in the public sector unions where if you go on staff your political careers are over. In private sector unions, staff are chosen from local union leaders. Then you work your way up the staff hierarchy, and you can then re-enter as a political leader in the union. So, most of the presidents of the auto workers had been administrative assistants to their predecessor. Like Buzz Hargrove was to Bob—anyways. So White inherited Gindin, and White, (who is one of the brightest people I’ve ever met in my life even though he dropped out of school when he was 14) and Gindin had somewhat different politics, but they really developed a respect for each other. Gindin played a formative role in everything White did as president of the auto workers, including the movement away from the UAW. White, in his autobiography, talks about how the role played out. So again, he would be a key person to talk to, as well as Geoff Bickerton, who was the research director for the postal workers.

[...]

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that's great. I was wondering... we've talked a lot about organizations, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the kind of analysis that was developing around opposition to free trade in Canada at the time. So, what kind of analysis did you develop as a researcher for UE? [...] Were you working with other folks in developing a critical analysis of what free trade would mean for Canada?

Turk: I would say that that group who I just named are the ones I primarily worked with. We were approaching the issue in largely similar ways, and we talked a lot in our analysis. We informed each other and so the analysis that we developed emerged out of those kinds of discussions, there was no key person. I think the brightest and most competent of that whole group was Gindin, but it was very much a collective effort. On the ground, for those of us in trade unions on the industrial side, we were experiencing the outflow of plants and really saw through the explanation that internationalization of production and free trade was a more efficient and useful way to expand and to build country. I mean, we saw that as wrong and wrote in our various ways about why that was wrong, but our analysis was very similar. I can't credit where it started or whatever, but we relied on each other a lot. Howlett, and Dillon, and Gindin – especially Dillon and Gindin, had been trained as s and had a better, deeper academic background in these issues than somebody like I did. But we really relied on each other and then the meetings of the Action Canada Network and the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice became really critical because it brought in all sorts of other people who had broadly similar analyses but brought the perspectives of their different sectors. They helped make clear how these changes were meaningful in the lives of people in their sectors. You know, we had people from tenants organizations, women's organizations, and seniors' groups who, for example, talked about what was happening to pensions. So it was a really rich, vibrant time, but [increasingly] something we don't have so much now.

[...]

Interviewer: Another thing I wanted to just briefly touch on is getting into the analysis. Very often [...] the opposition at that time is described as one of [...] left nationalism where people are mobilizing kind of left nationalist ideas as a way of thinking about what would happen with free trade. You could see it in a lot of the posters and stuff with the US absorbing Canada and things like that. I was wondering about how prominent left nationalism was in the movement at that time and how it was framed and articulated in opposing free trade?

Turk: Left nationalism [...] was an important element in all of this. I think most of us—I'm trying to think how best to say this—a lot of the people who were engaged in fighting the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement were left nationalists and their argument was compatible with what others, or the rest of us were raising, but different from it. I mean, they were simply opposed to Canada being absorbed by the United States. Whereas I think most of the rest of us were concerned about that but recognized that it was a broader issue than just that. The internationalization of capital and the initiatives being undertaken in terms of GATT, and subsequently the World Trade Organization, raised far broader issues. So, it did allow the further disappearance of Canada as a meaningful entity, but the problems were broader than just that. So, there were some differences within groups of those who were strictly left nationalists, who were none of these people that I've been talking about, but a lot of left nationalists were supportive of what we were doing, because they saw that the implications, one of the issues we were raising did address concerns that they had. But I think it would be unfair to characterize the majority of the work against the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement as simply an anti-US, pro-Canada, Canadian nationalism, aspect. So Canadian nationalism was an element in that, but it wasn't a sufficient explanation or way of understanding the larger implications of what was happening, I would say.

Interviewer: What about Marxist or socialist groups mobilizing during that time? Did they have a big presence in the movement against free trade?

Turk: In their own minds, yes. In reality, no. So, you know, at the time [...] to some extent like today, there were certainly a number of Trotskyist groups and Maoist groups that were taking good positions on opposing Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, and subsequently NAFTA. I don't think they played a critical role in what we're describing here, but there were a whole bunch there. There was the Labour Forward group, which was one of the Trotskyist groups. Judy Darcy had been a member of one of the Maoist groups and there was another competing [Maoist] group. So, you know, around the fringes, people like Judy Darcy then went on to become significant trade union leaders and moved well beyond their early beginnings. But I don't think those more ultra left groups were critical in this, although they were visible. At every demonstration there would be all these people selling, or handing out, their newspapers, and speaking. Some people had remarkable commitment and stuck to it. I have a certain admiration for their commitment and diligence, even though I disagree with some of their political philosophy. So, they were there and would be supportive of left caucus at the CLC or OFL, often were more of a harm to us in building support, because they'd be used by the right to [red bait] all the rest of us. We didn't want to fall in the trap of disavowing them as a way of saying, "No, we're okay." So, it's complicated. There were some... we were trying to build a broader left

coalition within the labour movement or within the NDP, which got undermined sometimes by ultra leftist stuff. So how do you manage that?

Interviewer: It also sounds like the NDP, the labour movement, just had these larger [left] caucuses that maybe integrated some of this kind of political economic analysis into the way?

Turk: Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Turk: So, around the fringes of that were [...] groups as well. Not in the NDP but in the labour movement or Trotskyist groups, and in both NDP and the labour movement, but they were quite minor elements in at the time. We were actually able to include a significant portion, as I say, there was one NDP convention where 40 percent of the delegates were attending left caucus meetings. At one Federal NDP Council meeting we focused on Ed Broadbent, who, as leader had had embraced NATO in direct contravention of NDP policy. The Left Caucus was so strong that its motion to censure the for speaking publicly in opposition to NDP policy passed—

Interviewer: Wow.

Turk: —which is unheard of. Ed became more progressive as he got older and that continued after he left the position as the leader. Going back to your main question, there were some of the more marginal groups that were very visible, were supportive, but were a mixed blessing, as we tried to build a broader left opposition to criticize the direction Canada was going.

Interviewer: How about the role of the NDP in all of this? What were the dynamics like for the NDP at the time and in taking a position against free trade?

Turk: I'm trying to remember. I think the challenges in the NDP were challenges that have been faced by social democratic parties everywhere, where they can be just a little more activist form of liberalism or alternatively can bring forward a different, more progressive position. That came up all the time in the NDP from [trivial?] ways, like, “Do we call ourselves democratic socialists or social democrats” Behind that discussion were different visions of what the party was and whether it had to be more cautious or to advance more fundamental calls for change.

Interviewer: Maybe it helps to contextualize in the context of the '88 elections. So, kind of moving into the '88 elections and how the NDP kind of positioned itself on free trade. It's interesting, the relationship with the Liberals, right, because they were also opposing free trade at the time.

Turk: By the mid '80s I was spending virtually all my time in coalition work and in trade union work. So, I was no longer a member of the NDP Federal Council. I didn't hold any position in the Ontario NDP. I was a member, but I really wasn't very central in what was going on within the NDP. I think at the time, I felt that the likelihood of the NDP taking a good position was dependent on our success in mobilizing civil society more generally. I really can't answer very much about the internal dynamics of the NDP at that period. As for the most part, my political work was being done through the Pro-Canada— Action Canada Network and the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice. Building those kinds of civil society coalitions, doing education and civil society building, those would be productive in terms of the general public. If anything, was

going to move the NDP to a more progressive position, it would be that kind of public pressure rather than working internally. In the labour movement within the NDP, there were lots of contradictions. I just remembered—I don't even know the year— this was sometime in the '80s—I think it was around free trade, but I'm not positive. So, I'd have to check this if I could. Being first of all... I was at a microphone at the at a CLC convention -- at a con-mic on the issue, I think it was around free trade. Bob White was the first in line at the opposite mic (a pro-mic) and he gave this talk supporting what the NDP was doing, which was in direct contravention of the CAW's own policy. So when I got to speak, I said, "You know, I'm just aghast. Here's who I think is one of the best leaders of the Canadian trade union movement speaking in favor of this resolution, which violates his own union's policy." Now, I only point to that as an example, where there was a lot of pressure on trade union leaders, not to embarrass the NDP, so even really progressive ones like White, whose union was at the forefront of these things, would pull back at NDP conventions, there was enormous pressure. I remember Barb Byers who had been president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and was a really progressive trade unionist, would talk about... the leadership of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour alternated between progressive left trade unionists and more cautious trade unionists. Whenever the NDP was in opposition, a progressive person would get elected the president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. When the NDP was in power, the unions really worked hard to make sure that nobody would ever be critical of the NDP would be elected to the SFL presidency.. So, there are all these complicated tensions at the time and so I think the best we hoped for was to try to get the NDP to take as good a position as we could. But we didn't... we never thought that the leadership for moving in a progressive left direction would come from the NDP.

Interviewer: More generally, I'm interested in the mood of the anti-free trade movement at the time. Were you ever hopeful that it would stop free trade from happening? Do you feel like that was like a real possibility when organizing again?

Turk: Unfortunately, there's not a simple answer to your question. The only way one can keep oneself going is challenging capital. So, one has to be hopeful. So yes, we were hopeful that it would work, and I think if any of us had to bet we would have thought the odds were not greatly in our favor, but we weren't motivated by thinking "Well, we're gonna do this because we think we can win." We were motivated to do this, because we thought it was the right thing to be doing. If we were going to be politically active, we might as well fight for the right thing to do. There's no point in doing all this for, you know, for any other reason. So, we were hopeful that it would work, but I think that we knew the odds were pretty substantial.

Interviewer: Are there any successes or wins that, you know, strategically or tactically, which generated hope? In feeling like, "oh yeah, we could maybe win this or we're changing the tide in terms of how people are thinking about this stuff."

Turk: That's one of the specifics I can't answer. Yes, there were a number of small victories here and there, either getting various unions to speak out who had always been silent before; getting members of the NDP caucus or sometimes in the Liberal caucus who would take a good public position; or getting delays in government wanting to move ahead with their trade agenda, -- things getting delayed as a result of opposition. There was even Mike McBain who went across

with the American flag as Mulroney was sign[ing the North American Free Trade Agreement]; we rejoiced about symbolic things of that sort.

Interviewer: The Massey Hall event also sounds like it was—

Turk: It was. It really was uplifting and I don't think it caused anybody to think “well, now the tide has turned,” but it did help us keep going in feeling that there was a lot of public support for the positions that were espousing.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of people at that event?

Turk: It was. The room.... the place was Massey Hall and was filled. There were people waiting outside to get in.

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about the event and what it was like? You got Margaret...

Turk: I would have to look back at it. So yeah, I have various memories. I have a visual memory. I can see the crowd and the place and how happy we were seeing this packed hall. There were a variety of performers, but I would have been... I have this... can't remember Gordon Lightfoot performed. [...] I remember Margaret Atwood just because of the discussions we had to have with her to do this and she was quite supportive. But let me look back and see what I can find and look at my records. That'll stimulate some memories, I can better answer your question.

[...]

Interviewer: I mean, one of my last questions is basically just kind of getting more into the legacy.

Turk: Right.

Interviewer: First of all, you know, with the outcome of the '88 elections. Did that change your orientation to free trade after the elections happened? You know, it seems like it marks the shift to a different kind of movement against free trade.

Turk: In what sense? Do you think that's the case?

Interviewer: Oh, well, maybe I see it differently. You know--

Turk: Oh, no, I'm not disagreeing with you, I just would like to understand your question a little more?

Interviewer: Well, it's like, you know, the elections happen, the Conservatives are voted back in power. Canada-US Free Trade Agreement adopted. Then there's this—I'm wondering about how you reacted to that kind of moment, first of all with the '88 election and how that impacted the movement against free trade at the time. Then thinking about how things turned out afterwards through the 90s, with the Liberals getting elected, the adoption of NAFTA, right? That kind of stuff leading up to the WTO and those kinds of struggles through the 90s.

Turk: I can only answer your question sort of generally. I remember feeling very discouraged that the Conservatives won, but then I don't think most of us ever saw the Liberals as really opposed to free trade. In other words, I don't think we saw the '88 election results as a sign, as a seismic change, that the pressures to move in the direction of greater internationalization of trade have

abated, or there was less acceptance of the logic of free trade. I don't think we had great hope in any of the three political parties as really understanding what this meant and what it would be required to challenge that. You know, we worked hard to show almost every country that became a major power became a major power by using the very tools that are being given away here, that protectionism was the reason in which Korea was able to become what it was, and so forth. As I say, I don't think there was any of the three parties that really grasped that in its full, that were really willing to say no. We actually have to use the tools of buying domestically, of providing protection for industries as a way of building our economy. So, there was a gradient from the Conservatives who were most explicitly rejecting those views to the NDP that may have espoused them somewhat, or the Liberals that espouse them a little less, but, at the end of the day, they really didn't seem equipped or willing to do the kinds of things that would be necessary to change the direction and respond to the vibrancy of the opposition. I didn't see any diminution in the activism and commitment within the Action Canada Network. Our continued opposition was strong in the trade union movement and in the broader civil society in the later 80s. In the early 90s, as I said, we had that big rally with Jesse Jackson, I think that was '93. So, I think in the movement raising these concerns, there are still a lot of vibrancy in the labour movement and in the broader civil society groups. Then, this interestingly morphed in a very different direction after the Tories won the election in Ontario, after the NDP government was defeated in Ontario, and we were able to use the infrastructure that we built in fighting free trade to start organizing Days of Action. My job at the Ontario Federation of Labour --after the auto workers had organized the first day of action in London, Ontario, changed. I was assigned to the job of starting being responsible for helping coordinate the organization of days of action in all the other major cities in Ontario. We went to Hamilton and then to Kitchener-Waterloo, Peterborough, and ultimately Toronto, North Bay and other places. These were truly broad-based civil society actions and were made possible by the connections that had been built in the fight against free trade. The connections amongst women's organizations, seniors, labour, religious groups, and so on in Ontario was able to be used in this fight against the Mike Harris government.

Interviewer: Yeah, no. That's great to hear, you know, I think in speaking to the legacy of all of this, like how it created that infrastructure, right? It's really—

Turk: But what's discouraging is when we moved into the Days of Action, we were very clear that this was a moment when we were trying to create an infrastructure that would carry on in that community afterwards. We would go into a community, four weeks or six weeks before the event, I would actually live there and bring together a steering committee of local religious groups, senior's organizations, women's organizations, labour, and so forth, to begin meeting to plan the event. While the broad-based steering committees made the decisions for the day of action, most of the person power for the actual work was from the labour movement. I think most of the labour leaders were, as was Gordon Wilson, the president of the Ontario Federation of Labour, for whom I worked, felt this was a way to build the NDP. Most of us doing the work had a broader vision of this as a way to build progressive community movement for social change. This difference led to tension in all those Days of Action events. The steering committee would meet for weeks beforehand. We built for a day for which we tried to organize a general

strike in that community and approach individual, local unions to walk out from work that day and then have large marches that would culminate in an event with a series of speeches in some large place in that community. But since that event was only the excuse for all the work and the march. What was important was not the end event but the march and bringing all these people together. Listening to a series of speeches, was not going to be the peak of it. It was just something we had to do, but for a lot of leadership of organizations the peak was those speeches and getting to speak and we almost had fistfights amongst staff of unions who were approaching us to say, “Well, we want our leader to be the first speaker,” or “What do you mean he’s seventh in this?” For people in the march, which was hundreds or thousands in Toronto; hundreds of thousands marched and people came out and looked on. It was that vibrancy of those collective efforts and that kind of work. We hoped that the steering committee in that work would continue and I’m not sure that was very successful in the long run. [...] The Mike Harris government, was really cutting back and demoralizing people. It was hard to sustain the enthusiasm after that.

I think the enthusiasm even though we didn't win the free trade fight—

Interviewer: It was building.

Turk: The enthusiasm continued.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Turk: Then [...] by contrast after the broader defeats that the Mike Harris brought, government brought in cuts to almost every aspect of work whether it was welfare rates, or education funding, or whatever; we lost everywhere. We had the kind of demoralization that didn’t happen previously, even though we had not been successful in the free trade fights.

Interviewer: Yeah. Interesting. I just had one kind of chronological question. So, you leave UE in ‘88 is that—

Turk: That’s right.

Interviewer: Okay. I was just looking at your CV, it says that you joined the OFL in 86.

Turk: Okay, so I left the union at ‘86. I'm sorry, I'm confusing... I formally quit my tenured position at the University of Toronto in ‘88. I mixed up the years. So yeah, I was at UE for five years. So, I think would have been from ‘81 to ‘86.

Interviewer: Okay.

Turk: Then I went to the OFL at the end of ‘86, and I was director of education there until ‘96, I was there nine and a half years when Judy Darcy asked me to come and be her executive assistant at CUPE when she was the national president. The work I did at the OFL was very much a continuation of the work that I had done at UE with respect to broader social justice organizing., I had been representing UE in Action Canada meetings and I'm here culturally and I continue to play that role on behalf of the OFL and was continuing my connections with these people even though I had moved and I had additional duties. But I continued playing a key role in all these things when I moved to the OFL.

Interviewer: Was the OFL really prominent in anti-free trade organizing as well?

Turk: It was supportive of anti-free trade organizing, but all labour federations are really simply that—federations of the member unions. So, you can say the OFL was prominent, but in fact it was people from the postal workers, auto workers, and the other progressive unions that were committed on that issue, who made it possible for OFL to be active and to take strong policy positions and so forth.