

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Cathy Walker

Date: March 28, 2017

Location: BCLHC Office, Burnaby, BC

Interviewers: Sean Griffin, Bailey Garden

Videographer: Bailey Garden

Running Time: 01:45:29

Key Subjects: Anti-war movement; Asbestos; BC Federation of Labour [BC Fed]; Burnaby, BC; Canadian Association of Industrial, Machine and Allied Workers [CAIMAW]; Canadian Auto Workers [CAW]; Canadian Commonwealth Federation [CCF]; Canadian Electrical Workers [CEW]; Canadian independent trade union movement; Canadian Union of Students [CUS]; Cascade Electronics; Chinese trade union movement; Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada [CEP]; Corrective Collective; Environmental issues; International trade unions; Labour Environmental Society; Labour Relations Board [LRB]; Lenkirk Electric [strike]; Machinists Union; New Democratic Party [NDP]; New Democratic Youth [NDY]; Occupational Health & Safety [OH&S]; Occupational hygiene; Ontario; Port Moody, BC; Sexism; Simon Fraser University [SFU]; Strikes; Student's for a Democratic University; Student movement; Toxic Free Canada; Unifor; United Steelworkers [USW]; University of British Columbia; Vancouver, BC; Vancouver District Labour Council [VDLC]; Vietnam War; Voice of Women; Wildcat strikes; Women's Caucus; Women's liberation movement; Women's rights movement; Worker's Compensation Board; Worker's Occupational Health Centre; Workplace Health & Safety [WH&S]; World War II [WWII];

Cathy Walker was born in Vancouver and grew up in Burnaby. She became involved in the anti-war movement and student movement while at University, and became President of CAIMAW Local 1, going on to hold various positions at the regional and national level in CAW. She has since been involved in environmental and international trade union activism.

00:00 – 07:30

In the first part of the interview, Cathy introduces herself and her personal history. She was born in Vancouver on Dec. 7, 1949 and grew up in Burnaby. Her father was a mechanic and a member of the Machinist's Union. She recalls getting the union newsletter (The Machinist) each month, which was printed from the United States. Her father was active in the union and she remembers that strikes were hard for the family, as strike benefits were minimal. He worked for a company where he knew he would be fired at 10 years, as they tried to avoid paying pensions to workers. He accepted a new non-union job on the condition that he would get the union pay rate. Every month, he would

go down to pay his dues, despite no longer being a member. The Machinist's Union was unsure of what to do with these funds, as he was the only one who did this, but he insisted that he owed it to the union, despite the fact he had lost his job. Cathy's father was a principled man; he refused to put his money in a savings account at the bank, as he felt banks exploited working people with mortgages, loans, and interest. Her mother was also progressive, though she wouldn't have called herself that; she supported the Canadian Commonwealth Federation [CCF] and was against the war in Vietnam, hosting draft dodgers in Cathy's old bedroom after she moved out. Her mother joined The Voice of Women and was active in peace work. Cathy was an only child and attended Burnaby Central High School. She went to Simon Fraser University, during a time of political uprising on campus. She had joined the New Democratic Youth at age 16, in 1965. She was first studying Physics & Chemistry, and became involved in politics with members of Students for a Democratic University and the Women's Caucus within that. There were also several elections during this time that motivated her towards politics as opposed to science. She had a great opportunity in the summer of 1969 to join a delegation from the Canadian Union of Students to Cuba; seeing a socialist country first hand was "eye-opening". She participated in many international student movement conferences, which exposed her to progressive ideas like Marxism.

07:31 – 09:55

Cathy discusses what drew her to organizations like the New Democratic Youth, which was more than an electoral organization; she recalls sponsoring a conference on Indo-China. She appreciated the opportunity to broaden horizons and take discuss what she considered "radical" ideas at the time, including social issues such as abortion or gender equality. There was a real sense of social and intellectual fermentation.

09:56 – 12:47

Cathy talks about her involvement with the Corrective Collective. The Women's Caucus had established its own office downtown, moving off the university campus, and became highly involved in the women's liberation movement. There were several members that were organizing a conference, and realized there was a need to share history for people to understand the issues. They came up with the idea of a graphic novel (simply called a comic at the time) that explored historical topics such as The Depression. They had a team of writers and cartoonists, and produced a collection titled, "She Named It Canada". It has since gone through many reprints. They called themselves "The Corrective Collective" to describe their attempt to "correct history", as most had been told from a right-wing, mainstream perspective.

12:48 – 16:35

Cathy made the decision to leave university without finishing, as did many others that were part of the student or women's rights movements; they felt that if they were truly

going to serve the working class, they had to be part of it. Cathy knew people in the progressive worker's movement, and knew people in the Canadian Electrical Worker's Union (CEW), which was newly formed following the Lenkirk Electric strike of 1966, primarily by female workers. They had just organized a plant in Port Moody called Cascade Electronics. Cathy got a job doing electronics assembly at this plant. Cable Vision started in Vancouver, and this plant made parts for it, which was interesting. She became part of the union almost unconsciously; she jokes that she had become accustomed to going to meetings, and just showed up at the union meeting expecting to be involved. Others at the meeting reminded her to finish her probation period first. She was the only one who would show up from her plant, and so was asked to be her plant representative and a member-at-large as soon as her probation finished. She became a trustee of the union as it continued to grow, and it became known as the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers (CAIMAW). They gained many members who left international unions such as USW or IBEW in favour of an independent Canadian union. Cathy became Vice-President of the local, and was later elected President.

16:36 – 18:50

Cathy elaborates on the Canadian nationalism that became prevalent in BC's labour movement. She partially attributes this to a legacy of 1967 and the 100th anniversary of Canadian confederation, as well as the opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War and the desire to differentiate ourselves from the United States. The early '70s was also "a time of incredible militancy", with wildcat strikes happening across the country. There was also an increasing inflation rate, which made working people see the value of union protection. Workers at the Cascade Electronics plant saw Cathy as "a bit of a young rabble rouser", but they were okay with this and appreciated her representation.

18:51 – 21:23

At the time, the workforce was mixed. There were many middle-aged women who were happy to have a factory job, as there weren't many in Port Moody; largely, there were people in their 20s-30s, with a predominantly white workforce. By the mid to late 1970's, there was a larger number of Indo-Canadian workers present in the industry, though mostly given jobs considered "undesirable". Cathy did not think of herself as a trade unionist at the time.

21:24 – 26:35

Cathy describes the "serendipity" that led to her being President of the local. She made a point to never let anyone know she could type, because she knew she would be asked to be Secretary-Treasurer of the local. Instead, she moved from Trustee to Vice-President. The President of the time, a "good trade unionist from the old school", was terrified of chairing meetings, and did not show up. Automatically, Cathy had to chair the meetings, and he was removed from his position due to a union bylaw that allowed no more than 3

absences from meetings. Cathy was given the position of President in his stead, which was slightly controversial without an election. She also took on the coordination of the union newsletter. CEW officially merged with CAIMAW in 1969, but retained their name for some time afterwards, until becoming known as CAIMAW Local 1 BC. The union was very active, leafletting non-union plants and organizing around the province. Jess Succamore was the Secretary-Treasurer of the CEW, and the regional Vice-President was George Brown; they were the only two paid staff at the time of the merge. They had a tiny office above the bicycle shop on Jubilee, and “didn’t have a pot to pee in”, which was part of the motivation to merge with CAIMAW. Cathy became Local President around 1973/74.

26:36 – 31:35

Two big issues were racism and sexism. When Cathy first came on as a shop steward, one thing she did was bid on a “male job”, as a telephone cable inspector. She was the only qualified applicant, with her background education in chemistry and physics, but she was a woman. There was a provincial Order of Council that had been passed at the end of WWII to get women out of the shipyards and mills, under the premise of “protecting women”; females were forbidden from lifting anything heavier than 30 pounds, as it was a threat to their health, and this regulation stayed on the books. The union filed a complaint to the Labour Relations Board, but unfortunately, the decision was legal. The NDP was elected provincially in 1972, and formed a commission that asked women about their issues. Colin Gabelmann and Rosemary Brown were part of the committee. Cathy and representatives from the union alerted the committee to this order of council, and as she recalls, it was rescinded the very next day. This opened access to all sorts of jobs. Women were often laid off rather than being reassigned to these jobs prior to this. Cathy enjoyed the work she did at the plant, especially the satisfaction producing a finished product.

31:36 – 37:45

Cathy elaborates on the election of the NDP in 1972. There were several gains made in Occupational Health & Safety through changes to the Labour Code and the Labour Relations Board. Peter Cameron, who was the first regional vice-president following George Brown, took over labour relations during this time. They hired an additional representative from the affiliated CASAW local representing AlCan workers out of Kitimat. Cathy first came to bargain as President of the local, and served as representative in Worker’s Compensation appeal cases. As the union continued to grow, it was decided that other people should take on other policy areas. Cathy took on Occupational Health & Safety as part of her portfolio after the NDP government was defeated in December 1975. One of the first thing the newly elected Social Credit Government did was remove Terry Ison from the Labour Relations Board, because of Employer’s Council demands. Knowing that he was on his way out, Terry sat down with Cathy and provided her with insight and

lessons from his time at the LRB so that the labour movement stood a chance with a potentially hostile board. Cathy loved the opportunity to learn about the physics, chemistry, biology and other science that made up workplace health and safety prevention efforts. The legal and medical side was “arcane” but she learned how to navigate it quickly, and made a large proposal for changes to WH&S regulations.

37:46 – 45:44

Cathy talks more about Terry Ison and his contributions during his 2 years at the LRB. He actively sought and hired bright people to the board. Many gains were made during this time, sometimes through direct action on site. Cathy often ran WH&S workshops as part of her role with the union on topics such as noise, asbestos, ventilation and more, and members from the Board would attend. There were many progressive safety inspectors. It was a time of experimentation in factories, and there were new chemicals added to the sand used in foundry molds that made workers sick. The union worked with progressive researchers from the University of British Columbia to measure worker’s lung function to force change with the chemicals and ventilation on site. It was difficult to access information at the time, particularly because she was only working on WH&S part-time; Cathy wrote to Geneva at one point to request information on international health and safety standards. This was considered “cutting-edge” compared to the work other unions were doing at the time. She attributes this partially to her academic/scientific background that other health and safety representatives may not have.

45:45 – 47:45

Cathy talks about two individuals responsible for introducing “occupational hygiene” at UBC, both members of Local 1. Susan Kennedy was a CAIMAW member from Freightliner, and Kaye Testy was a member who organized MacGill Industries. They both went back to university for their PhDs, and were the first to address the topic. Eventually, Cathy’s position at CAIMAW became elected (Vice-President of Health, Safety and Environment) but was never full-time. Cathy served on the National Executive at the same time. It was only with the CAW merge in 1992 that she became a full-time health and safety rep.

47:46 – 52:15

Cathy discusses how she navigated the controversy that surrounded CAIMAW (regarding raids on United Steelworkers) to develop relationships in the trade union movement based on health & safety. Early on, there was an “agreement” with the health & safety folks from other unions such as Verna Ledger and Bruce Elphinstone from the IWA to meet as a labour caucus, because “health and safety was too important to play politics with”. They held common positions on topics such as noise exposure, which worked well. She recalls visiting a site organized by USW in Trail, where the workers had no information on the hazards of lead. In situations like this, it was “easy” for CAIMAW to

appeal to workers; “what’s the point of being in an American union that doesn’t provide you even basic information?”. In this way, the controversy between the unions was political. Cathy developed CAIMAW fact sheets that explained hazards to workers. Cathy noticed that CAIMAW put OH&S “front and centre” in every way, where other unions would not. For example, when Verna Ledger retired, nobody replaced her, which Cathy calls a “shame”.

52:16 – 1:01:35

At the peak, CAIMAW had 10 000 members across the country, of which BC made up about 60%. When the union merged with CAW in January of 1992, there was a transition period for leadership. Bob White retired as head of the CAW, and Buzz Hargrove took over. There was an opening for Regional Director of Health & Safety, which Cathy accepted that summer. CAW had access to a larger budget and more resources, but health & safety was largely driven by rank-and-file actions, such as work refusals at aerospace plants in the late 1980s. CAW also ran joint workshops and other initiatives with the employers on site, which was different from CAIMAW. The structure of the CAW has a Council that acts almost like a Parliament, meeting every 4 months, along with various committees on topics like worker’s compensation or health & safety. Cathy worked with these committees to change the agenda of the Council. Cathy wrote a week-long Health & Safety course that members could attend as a paid educational leave, which was essentially “how to fight the boss”; a big change from previous CAW workshops. The election of the Harris Government in Ontario put a halt to many improvements and changes. The new focus became fighting back against attempts to rollback health and safety and other labour laws.

1:01:36 – 01:04:45

The first worker’s occupational health centre was created as a response to the mass work refusals by CAW workers in the late 1980’s, inspired in part by the student movement. This caused some tension between the centre and the union council of the time, who wanted to “keep a lid” on potential militancy from rank-and-file members. When the NDP came into power in Ontario, they opened 4-5 more of these centres, paid for by the Worker’s Compensation Board. By the time Cathy came along, a lot of this training was well established, and she could coordinate and utilize the information.

01:04:46 – 01:10:26

The union ran many successful “campaigns” during Cathy’s tenure, which was an effective way to build awareness around issues. Some campaigns included fighting to keep the right to refuse unsafe work, and reducing exposure to metalworking fluids, which evolved into a campaign to prevent workplace based carcinogens. This included campaigns for proper labelling, training, MSDS sheets, and more, which became bargaining demands. This is where the campaign against asbestos came from. There was discussion of “the

dirty dozen”, 12 carcinogens including asbestos, which were successfully banned in many collective agreements. Sadly, many workers died from exposure to these chemicals. The union successfully bargained for employers to provide funding for WH&S training and education. A big campaign, particularly among the “Big 3” auto employers, was the fight against “speed-up”; workers were encouraged to work faster and harder in order to maximise profits, at a high risk of injury for workers.

01:10:27 – 01:12:39

Cathy prioritized participation from rank-and-file members in her role at CAW, something that came from her time at CAIMAW. One of the first things she did was set up a newsletter to try and solicit good examples of local, successful fights by rank-and-file. Conferences were well attended, and workers seemed to be inspired.

01:12:40 – 01:24:10

In this section, Cathy discusses how she highlighted environmental issues during her time at CAW. At CAIMAW, health & safety and environmental issues were considered one in the same, while at CAW, the environment was considered an educational issue. Cathy always saw the link between these topics as crucial to making changes, because the same chemicals that made workers sick could impact citizens living near worksites and the surrounding environment, prompting the community to be invested in the issue. The entire time that Cathy was at CAW, the name of her department was never changed, but under her replacement it became known as the Department of Health, Safety & Environment. Cathy feels this may have been a response to legislation introduced by the NDP that taxed vehicles with higher gas consumption; the “Big 3” employers such as General Motors opposed this, and the term “environment” became a loaded word in the automobile industry. The Oshawa Local 222 demonstrated against this tax. However, there were many members that valued the environment and were active in campaigns to make it a central issue to the union council. Over time, the union took on more progressive opinions. Cathy credits a “breaking point” with this change; Environmentalist David Suzuki made a presentation to the CAW Council in the late 1990’s, and “you could have heard a pin drop”. Suddenly, the environment became a “legitimate issue”, and environmental committees and staff were created on worksites. Cathy noticed that there was a greater awareness of environmental issues among members from BC as opposed to other provinces. There were different environmental issues in different areas of Canada, such as asbestos in Sarnia.

01:24:11 – 01:26:40

After Cathy retired from CAW, she continued working on environmental issues as a Board Member of the Labour Environmental Society, which became Toxic Free Canada. She was naturally drawn to this type of work, but many in the labour movement opposed it. She had been living in Toronto while working for the CAW, but moved back to BC. The

organization provided education and campaigns on topics such as breast cancer's link to workplace carcinogens, or toxic cleaning chemicals.

01:26:41 – 01:38:50

More recently, Cathy has been involved in informal discussions with Chinese trade unionists. She had travelled to China in 1974, and again in 1991. She learned to speak the language to help on her travels. After another trip in 2001, she was prompted to expand her language skills even further. Around the same time, the international department of the CAW began receiving delegations visiting Canada from China. Cathy was put in charge since she had basic language skills, and developed presentations on trade unions, worker's representation, strikes, and more. China had just joined the World Trade Organization, and many workers realized that capitalism would only intensify. Cathy organized workplace visits for these delegations, and often received invitations to visit their sites in China. She decided in 2004 to take a Teaching English as a Second Language [TESL] course that she could use on her travels to see which plants she could gain access to. She visited Toyota, General Motors, Jeep and Hyundai plants in China. She could see the transition as the union in the workplace was changing from essentially a company union to a rank-and-file led trade union movement. Chinese workers were successful in organizing at Wal-Mart in 2006 largely due to rank-and-file members using tactics learned from the North American trade union movement. Cathy travelled with a delegation from the Vancouver and District Labour Council that year, and solidified these relationships. To this day, a good majority of job actions in China are led by rank-and-file members, in what would be called "wildcat" strikes. The CAW merged with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada [CEP] in 2013, forming a new union, Unifor. Unifor has maintained these international relationships with trade unionists in China. The BC Federation of Labour and the VDLC have sent delegations to China as recently as 2014.

01:38:51 – 01:43:45

In the final section, Cathy discusses being a woman in the workforce and labour movement. She was unpopular for raising women's issues early on in her career. Over the years, she has seen more women appointed as department heads. She has noticed and heard others acknowledge that the structure of the union itself does not allow for a balance between work and family, which negatively impacts women more so than men, forcing them to move onto different positions. Cathy wishes she had more time to spend with her family over the years, though her son respects the decisions she made to work hard over the years. She did not notice a difference in culture between CAIMAW and the CAW. Early on in CAIMAW, women were equal leaders to men, so at the time of the merge, nearly 50% of representatives were women although $\frac{3}{4}$ of union members were men. This was not the case at CAW, so the merger changed the staff culture in that way.

There is no requirement at the plant level in Unifor for women to be involved with committees or other forms of representation.

01:43:46 – 01:45:29

Cathy describes why labour history is valuable to her. Individual workers are very conscious of issues such as minimum wage, health and safety and others, but not aware that these rights came from the trade union movement. Women would not have had access to “men’s jobs” if they didn’t fight for them, and she feels it is important for everyone to remember that.