

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Jeffrey William Keighley

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Interviewers: Sean Griffin, Janet Nicol

Videographer: Ruby Best

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Key Subjects: Agreements; American unions; British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT); BC Federation of Labour; Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers (CAIMAW); Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW); Canadian autonomy; Certifications; Health and safety; International Development of Resources Association (IDRA); International unions; Jamaica; Labour history; Labour music; Miner's Memorial; Negotiating; Pay equity (gender); Political activism; Strikes; Socialism; Solidarity movement (1983); Trade union movement;

Jeffrey William Keighley was born in Vancouver, B.C. Jan. 1st, 1950.

00:00 – 07:45

In the first part of the interview, Jeff introduces himself and his biographical history. His father worked as a machinist at Vancouver Iron & Engineering Works in False Creek. His mother worked at Eaton's when Jeff was a teenager. His father's family were English immigrants who moved to North Vancouver in 1810. His mother was born into a Socialist family in Finland, who came initially to Thunder Bay and later to Vancouver. His Finnish grandfather was a master boat builder and fisherman. He was reputed to have been the first in Vancouver to build a plywood commercial fishing boat (prior to the War). They lived in a Finnish "squatter's community" near what is now Windermere Park. His grandparents were "Red, Swedish-speaking Fins" and this was a strong part of his family history, though they died before he was born. Jeff's father was a shop steward for the Machinists Union, but was fairly conservative in federal and provincial politics. His mother leaned more towards the CCF or NDP, and was a strong influence on Jeff.

07:46 – 16:30

In this section, Jeff describes his working life – he recalls his first paid day of work, Jan. 2 1967 (the day after his 17th birthday), working construction. He later worked at Eaton's Automotive, MacMillian-Bloedel, and the Canada Metal Lead Foundry. These were all union positions, though one (at the Lead Foundry) was an American-based union. He recalls a regulation of working with lead, in which they were supposed to have blood tests every 3 months – Jeff worked there for a year before receiving his first test, and felt helpless, as the union local office was located in Portland. He recalls the local residents

complaining about safety concerns over the fumes from the plant, which the workers were directly exposed to constantly. A common symptom of lead poisoning is tooth loss, and Jeff cannot recall anyone over 40 in the foundry who did not have false teeth. He was one of the youngest employees at the plant. He later noticed you could visibly identify people who worked with toxic chemicals, as it effected the appearance of their skin.

16:31 – 23:40

Jeff eventually found himself working in the construction industry. He didn't have an official apprenticeship, but was trained on the job under an Austrian journeyman. In small residential construction, there was little to no union representation. In this section, Jeff discusses a period in his life when he attended BCIT for Construction Engineering & Architecture. There was a technical recruiter there one day, looking for overseas workers. Jeff took the position (in 1972), and had no idea where in the world he was headed – ultimately, he ended up as a technical instructor in Jamaica, teaching land surveying and building construction for 2 years. He describes some of the changes that came with the election of a Social Democratic Party [The People's National Party] in the country, which had happened shortly before Jeff's arrival in Jamaica.

23:41 – 30:01

In this section, Jeff further describes his experiences in Jamaica, as well as his development of socially progressive ideologies. He witnessed a “transformation” occur in the country, and describes these changes.

30:02 – 41:57

In this section, Jeff discusses his various associations over the years, aside from his well-known association with CAIMAW. When he returned from Jamaica, he worked for two different architecture firms (Ron Howard, & Thompson-Burr and Pratt and Partners). By that time, Jeff had also become quite involved with the International Development of Resources Association (IDRA) as well as a number of other projects, providing what was essentially socialist education to various groups. He ultimately pursued this form of education over his involvement in architecture. He met many individuals from CAIMAW this way and he appreciated that the union emphasized a responsibility to the community. He also organized the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition. Jeff became involved in anti-apartheid work in the 1970s, as well as working with Chilean exiles after the Chilean coup. During that time, he found support from unions such as CAIMAW, the United Postalworkers, and others which demonstrated to him the “progressive” trade unions. Canadian unions were often at the forefront of support during these actions. While organizing an international conference, Jeff met John Bowman, who was then the editor of the *CAIMAW Review*, as well as various Reps with CAIMAW. Jeff had

associations with folks from various political parties, but saw the trade union movement as the ultimate vehicle for promoting change, because it had longevity. CAIMAW representatives recommended he take a job at a local truck plant in order to become involved in the Union, so he took the position as a tireman for 17 months.

41:58 – 52:47

In this section, Jeff describes CAIMAW's presence in the workforce. CAIMAW was doing both "fresh organizing", with unorganized plants, and "re-organizing" plants with American unions. Workers would choose to join CAIMAW because their American unions were not representing them well, and CAIMAW was democratic, militant, and Canadian based. CAIMAW would never target unionized worksites organized by other Canadian unions, regardless of the situation – their mission was strictly to remove all American unions from Canadian workplaces. CAIMAW began to set "landmark" agreements in every industry they were involved with. Jeff helped to negotiate many of these, such as the Metal Industries Association contract. This set a pattern of major gains for the workers in these industries. Even in workplaces where the certification barely passed vote, it didn't take very long for the union support to become so strong "you couldn't take us out with a nuclear bomb".

52:48 – 1:00:00

Jeff discusses his first position as shop steward in a CAIMAW certified plant. He recalls an incident where a preventable explosion happened on site, and it prompted Jeff to take a stand – which ultimately led to his position as shop steward. He won the election 7 to 6. He was then recommended as assistant chief steward within his second month.

1:00:01 – 1:02:05

In this section, Jeff describes the chief steward at the truck plant, Larry Provolo, who recommended him as assistant chief steward. Larry was a former member of the Italian Resistance and was "tough as nails"; Jeff becomes emotional describing Larry's difficult background, in which he witnessed his entire family shot down by German commanded soldiers. He was a great mentor to Jeff.

1:02:06 – 01:03:45

Jeff goes on to describe why CAIMAW was appealing to many individuals like Larry and others – it was democratic, militant, participatory, collaborative, and Canadian "through and through". If an issue didn't have the support of the rank-and-file members, it wasn't pursued. Jeff found "if you explain the facts in a non-rhetorical fashion", the "average working person" would tend towards a progressive position.

01:03:46 – 01:16:12

In this section, Jeff recalls a story from his time leading opposition both inside and outside of CAIMAW to Bill Bennett's budget (as part of the larger Solidarity movement in 1983). That is what led to the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition. Jeff was the Secretary. They planned a march and never expected the thousands of people that turned out. He recalls another rally held at Thornton Park (BC Place). Bill Clarke delivered the message that the rally should be cancelled, because it could trigger a call for provincial elections. Members NDP (New Democratic Party) did not want an election to occur. This discouraged the BC Federation of Labour from participating. They ultimately chose to participate, requesting a final say in the list of speakers. 25 000 people attended the rally, which was the precursor to Operation Solidarity. Jeff was the head of the Solidarity Coalition [community group] despite being also a Union member. Jeff feels that a general strike would have been "enormously successful". He also points to what he felt was an overrepresentation of the building trades (as they were smaller unions), which led to greater influence than that of the public sector. "The province was sold down the river".

01:16:13 – 01:23:30

In this section, Jeff goes back to explain his transition from assistant chief steward to full-time CAIMAW Representative. In 1979, the trucking industry was an indicator of the economy. Jeff was told in a meeting that trucking companies were cancelling their contracts with the factory in fear of the impending recession. He requested that if there were to be lay-offs, to inform the employees ASAP, as winter holidays were approaching. The plant manager assured him that everything was fine; the following Wednesday, he and 450 others were laid off (half the workforce). Peter Cameron, regional vice-president for CAIMAW [BC-Alberta], knew he was laid off, and asked if he would do some research for the union. CAIMAW was directly competing for certifications against Steelworkers, and were often losing them. It was Jeff's role to investigate ways to resolve this issue.

01:23:31 – 01:28:22

Jeffrey talks more about the research he did about the history of Steelworker certifications and disputes, on behalf of CAIMAW. Cathy Walker was the Health & Safety Representative of CAIMAW, and Jeff was asked to take her position temporarily when she was on maternity leave. Jeff jokes, "It was the longest 6 months of my life, because it took me 25 years to retire." After the temporary position was over, the union did not want to let him go, and he was offered another position. In his first ever round of bargaining, it went to a strike, and they ended up setting a "landmark agreement". CAIMAW was particularly strong in Manitoba and B.C. for setting patterns for contracts.

01:28:23 – 01:33:10

In this portion, militancy and organizing within independent Canadian unions [during the 1970s] is discussed. There was a "resurgence of rank-and-file militancy". CAIMAW was created in 1964 in Winnipeg. Jeff points to the Vietnam War as fuel for workers

organizing. He says Canadian public sector unions/trade unions of that time took the questions of social issues and social responsibility on par with workplace responsibilities. He gives BCTF, CUPE and others as examples. He contrasts this with American or International Unions which operated within Canada.

01:33:11 – 01:36:47

Jeff describes the differences between organizing “fresh” workplaces versus places with previous union certifications. With “fresh” certifications, there was emphasis on basic “worker’s rights” – they want some sort of dignity. For organized plants, CAIMAW was often asked by the workers to step in, as they were frustrated with their current (American-based) union’s lack of action and representation – less about wages, etc.

01:36:48 – 01:48:50

In this section, Jeff details an example of one organizing drive he led for CAIMAW – Canadian Car [later Copeland’s Car] Factory in 1981. Their initial certification vote was 50.7%. The main issue was representation. Another example was the Arbutus Club in Vancouver, which hadn’t been organized before (food service workers, etc.). The employer initially wouldn’t budge and it was a big fight to even get attention for grievances. 87% of employees were female.

01:48:51 – 01:52:42

Jeff recalls a strike he was involved in at work (did not organize) which was a response to seven female data processors who were given a different pay rate than the other 450 employees. The employer refused pay equity for these females. The workers requested that each male employees wage be docked \$0.01, and those funds be added to the female wages, so that it didn’t cost the employer a cent. The response was, “No. We don’t believe women should be paid equally.” This resulted in a nine month strike, and the workers “cleaned their clock” with the final agreement – it cost the employer much more than if they would have taken the initial offer.

01:52:43 – 01:58:49

In this section, Jeff further discusses the concept of Canadian autonomy. He feels this issue has mostly resolved itself, with the exception of a few unions. He feels that Canadian unions have forced international unions to bargain more fairly, or else lose certifications and contracts. He also recalls this issue presenting itself during Solidarity. During Solidarity, organizing campaigns were placed on hold, in order to focus on fighting against the Provincial Government. However, American-based unions did not make the same pledge, and were taking the opportunity to raid other unions. Jeff remembers meeting with Art Kube over this issue.

01:58:50 – 02:03:20

In this section, Jeff discusses the value of labour history. He was involved in organizing the Miner's Memorial Weekend in Cumberland. The leadership in CAIMAW all emphasized the value of understanding labour history – and recognized that they “were making history, and had a responsibility to make history”. Everyone who worked for the Union as representatives or staff made the same wage, which was based off of a formula which guaranteed at least 15% of membership made more than the national reps. He says prior to joining the CAW, this was the rule, and demonstrated that CAIMAW employees shared an ideological commitment rather than a desire to “get rich”.

02:03:21 – 02:15:45

Jeff returns to his time working in fabrication plants/foundries. These types of workplaces began to disappear around the recession of 1979 - 1983. A lot of these jobs were “outsourced” to other countries. A “social contract” came to an end along with the Vietnam War, as war production was no longer necessary. “Working people paid the price”. There were fewer workers and workplaces to organize. The service sector became a more important area for organizing. Jeff worked as a National Representative to organize White Spot workers under CAIMAW in the 1980's. He also organized Kentucky Fried Chicken workers – he said there were more serious burns among these workers than among foundry workers. These jobs weren't considered dangerous, because they were “just women” (around 70%) and “just fast-food positions”.

02:15:46 – 02:33:11

In this section, Jeff describes when CAIMAW joined CAW in 1992. The recession had reduced their numbers greatly; at the same time, CAW had grown, partially inspired by the ideologies of CAIMAW. It ultimately became the best decision for the two to join forces. This also made them members of the BC Federation of Labour. Jeff was placed as Vice President for CAW and represented them at the BC Fed. He went up against Ken Georgetti several times over certain issues, such as the gambling industry. However, he found that most people on the BC Fed Executive were “good people” who would listen to reasonable arguments.

02:33:12 – 02:48:50

Jeff discusses being a representative of CAW versus CAIMAW. The CAW was much more bureaucratic and “top-down” in structure. However, CAIMAW forced some change in how things operated, introducing their militancy and democratic structure. Jeff ultimately left his position over an arbitration process following a grievance he filed. He disputed the placement of an individual in a role which he felt they were underqualified for (issue of seniority), and was not pleased with the arbitration process. He chose to retire after it concluded (2005).

02:48:51 – 02:55:35

In the final section, Jeff discusses his involvement with music in the labour movement. His siblings are artists, which influenced him to learn guitar. His ideologies naturally lent themselves to labour music. He would often play at Miner's Memorial Weekend, and wrote many labour songs. Since his retirement from CAW, he went back into the construction industry for a time, and also worked on the International Peace Forum, while also pursuing music.