

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with Sharon Yandle

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Location: Subject's home

Interviewers: Janet Nicol, Dan Keeton

Videographer: Ruby Best

Running Time: 01:55:13

Key Subjects: Arbitration; Anti-War Movement; B.C. Federation of Labour; B.C. Teacher's Federation [BCTF]; Collective bargaining; Feminism; Hospital Employees Union [HEU]; Intersectionalism; Negotiating; New Democratic Party; Sexual Harassment; Simon Fraser University; Social Credit Party; Solidarity Movement (1983); Strikes; Women in the Labour Movement; Women's Issues; Women In Negotiations [WIN]; Women's Movement

Sharon Rose Heather Yandle, born Aug. 20, 1941 in Vancouver, B.C. Raised in the East Side of Vancouver, Sharon spent the majority of her career as a freelance negotiator for various unions, specializing in arbitration and "duty to accommodate". She also taught for labour relations and collective bargaining for a time at the University of Victoria.

00:00 – 09:38

In the first part of the interview, Sharon reviews her upbringing in Vancouver. She is a 3rd generation Vancouverite; her father worked as a plumber and identified as a socialist. He was a strong trade unionist. Sharon describes her mother as a more "positive force", though she was not a political person. Her first union job was as a cashier on Kingsway in Vancouver, working nights. She has 4 children of her own, born between 1963 and 1975, and 5 grandchildren at the time of interview. She was not encouraged to attend university after high school, so she worked, was married and had a child in New Zealand. She heard about a new school (Simon Fraser University) opening in 1965, which allowed entrance without math and science. Her interest in politics and the civil rights movement is what led her to university, and she became involved in the anti-war activities during this time. She wrote a column for SFU's newspaper and was the first female student on the Senate. After receiving a B.A. in Sociology, she moved on to graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, studying 19th century labour history.

09:39 – 15:14

In this part of the interview, Sharon describes her involvement in the women's movement and the NDP (New Democratic Party) around 1969-1971, when she had returned to Vancouver from Wisconsin. She worked as a TA while attending University, and later worked for the Inner City Community Service Project doing community organizing. This

project allowed community-oriented projects such as the Free University and legal aid clinics to have free rent in their building. Under the leadership of Rosemary Brown, the NDP held an inquiry on women in need. Sharon participated in hearings, and agreed with one in which a group of single mothers reported they simply needed more money. This inspired her to work in the labour movement, as she saw this as an area where women could achieve this goal of higher income.

15:15 – 19:09

In this section, Sharon elaborates on how the women's movement, rather than working experiences, was more of a driving force in her activism and involvement in the labour movement. She notes that she came to the women's movement reluctantly; she had come out of a working-class family, which was unusual for people "on the left" attending SFU at the time. She learned that "oppression comes in different forms". Solidarity was important among the working class. She recalls an occasion in which her brother-in-law worked for BC Tel during a strike, and her sister would say, "WE are on strike".

19:10 – 21:21

In this section, Sharon notes that most women were married and did not work in her neighbourhood when she was a child. She recalls seeing women working on the assembly line in the post-War period, in a venetian blind factory. Sharon attended Gladstone for high school.

21:22 – 26:46

In this section, Sharon discusses her first major union involvement, in the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), beginning around 1974. Her role was to organize the unorganized, which were private hospital workers at the time. It was similar to organizing in the private sector, where employers were looking at "the bottom line". The Barrett government had brought in changes to the Labour Code, which allowed a first contract to be arbitrated, and allowed essential service workers to opt for arbitration to settle a dispute. The union was around 85% female; private healthcare workers were nearly 98% female. There had been many unsuccessful attempts to organize the unorganized workers in the HEU, but they never ended in contracts or agreements, as these employees were seen as "replaceable" and "unskilled". She references a strike at a private hospital in Victoria. Sharon organized a number of private hospitals. Although labour laws were more favourable, sign-ups were done "by the headlights of cars in back alleys" and it was still "not safe to join a union". The first contract was a "disaster", but eventually, they received huge increases through arbitration and negotiation. It was understood that by opting for the right to arbitration, essential service workers were giving up the right to strike during that period. She says some employers requested this be reversed, as they felt they could "beat a strike" but couldn't fight arbitration.

26:47 – 30:57

In this section, Sharon describes how votes to strike occurred more often than actual strikes in her experience. Long-term care positions emerged in the HEU during this period, largely due to the work they were doing to uncover conditions in hospitals. She describes some of the working conditions at that time. Bill Vander-Zalm was the mayor of Surrey at the time, and was a very important person in making these changes. King George became the extended care unit of Surrey Memorial Hospital. Sharon's purpose was to bring the working conditions and wages to the level of the master agreement in healthcare. There was pressure from the union leadership to make a deal, with some internal conflict, to which Sharon conceded.

30:58 – 39:35

In this section, Sharon talks about Solidarity, the massive labour actions which took place in 1983. Sharon was on staff with the HEU, and later with the B.C. Teacher's Federation (BCTF). There was Operation Solidarity (organization of unions), and the Solidarity Coalition (community groups). Staff of unions were to go out to membership and get them on board with the strike – a difficult task, as it was a political movement, but it was accomplished. She was blown away to find that some of their strongest union members identified as SoCredits (Social Credit Party). There was counter-organization against Solidarity. Brian Palmer was one of the individuals involved with the Solidarity Coalition (he went on to write a book on the experience), and she counters his description of events. She feels that Jack Munro “wrongly carried the can” for signing the Kelowna Accord, as there had only been one small food service union that opposed it at the time. She says that, at least in the case of the HEU, public sector unions backed down as they worried membership would not support large-scale militant actions. It was a positive experience for the BCTF, as it provided language around a seniority severance clause. David Yorke, of the BCTF, drafted up this language. Collective bargaining rights did not come until 1987. “Strikes are teachable moments, and people learned a lot there” (38:58).

39:36 – 47:49

In this section, Sharon describes a strike by the HEU in 1981 in the Windermere Care Facility, which lasted 3-4 months. It was an opportunity where she could run the strike the way she felt necessary as a negotiator and organizer. The owner was a large international corporation. They didn't have the right to arbitrate at this time. Sharon chose to be “perfectly candid” with the membership. They would have meetings once a week. “Scabs” took over immediately. The membership was primarily immigrant women with limited English. Not one person got another job during that time. Ray Haynes was Sharon's counterpart in the BC Nurses' Union. When nurses were brought in from other hospitals, Sharon organized a picket line outside the hospital, and the BCNU agreed that any nurse who crossed the line would not be put to work in other hospitals in the city.

This solidarity helped them achieve their goals. Nurses were flown in from out of town for a time. She tells the story of one woman turning away food delivery trucks. The labour laws at the time also allowed them to take these actions.

47:50 – 50:47

In this section, Sharon talks about the unique dynamics of dealing with patient's families during strikes by healthcare workers. They would never try to prevent families from entering the building. A lot of families were very sympathetic. However, she says you cannot organize based on public support, or else many public sector industries would never act. There was conflict with strike-breakers – 8 members crossed the line. The union entered a claim for the wages earned during this time, which labour laws allowed. A core part of their settlement was that any workers brought in during the strike were removed.

50:48 – 55:15

In this portion of the interview, Sharon describes the issues raised most often by the members of the HEU during the time she worked there. The number one concern was condition of patient care – this was often the motivation for people to join the union. She recalls workers buying supplies for patients when hospitals didn't supply them. A staff of the GEU mentioned its' members had similar motivations. Workers were also concerned about labour issues such as time off, and hours. Wages were very individualized; as a general rule, white workers were paid slightly higher wages.

55:16 – 57:31

Sharon was with the HEU from 1974 – 1986. She did freelance contract work for the BCTF, as well as other unions, for several years. She then got a job teaching labour relations & collective bargaining at the University of Victoria in addition to freelancing. By that time, she had gained experience in arbitration, bargaining, and collective agreements. She was temporarily brought on as BCTF staff in 1987. She retired in the year 2000, and continued contract arbitration work, with a focus on “duty to accommodate” issues.

57:32 – 1:02:41

In this section, Sharon describes the changes she witnessed the BCTF experience, such as gaining the right to collective bargaining. Even when this right was given, each local was given an agreement, and membership was no longer mandatory. Sharon felt this was a transparent attempt to disband the BCTF. She describes the dealings between the BCTF and the Government as “the Roadrunner & Wil. E. Coyote”. Ray Haynes came on as a temporary staff person at this time, along with Sharon, to provide support to the locals.

1:02:42 – 1:08:35

In this section, Sharon describes specific BCTF strikes. She also describes the group Women in Negotiations (WIN), a committee of the BCTF in the 1970's and 1980's. She notes how women were often the individuals holding strikes together. She describes the gender difference in educational labour issues. She laughs that she once thought they would never get class sizes written into the language of agreements.

1:08:36 – 1:17:36

Sharon describes her proudest moment in the labour movement. The Windermere strike while she was in the HEU was very important to her. She was not afraid to stand up and make a statement, because she knew people were behind her. In the BCTF, she had several “seminal moments” which taught her a lot about strategy. She recalls the origin of the BCTF slogan, “A deal is a deal”.

1:17:37 – 1:21:14

In this section, Sharon describes how the BCTF approached political parties to pledge to honour their contracts if elected, around 1990-1991. The NDP initially refused to make this pledge, but eventually honoured them.

1:21:15 – 1:23:13

Sharon describes some of the difficulties she faced in her career, such as conflicts within the HEU.

1:23:14 – 1:30:28

In this section, Sharon describes the changes in the labour movement over time. She feels it has gotten weaker over time; she points to times of great militancy in the B.C. labour movement (1950's and 1960's) as times of economic prosperity as well. She says there were some losses to the labour movement due to “failure of nerve” and “complacency”. She notes how the building trade unions have lost weight over time. She notices a distance between union heads and membership. At the same time, she hesitates to be too critical, as labour laws in the 1970's provided ample room to achieve victories.

1:30:29 – 1:33:21

In this section, Sharon describes what she feels are the greatest issues facing workers today: “the precariat” or “gig economy”, working project to project, and lack of unions. She feels the “Fight for \$15” is a worthy cause. She laments the loss of “teach-in” style activism, and is critical of rallies as a political strategy.

1:33:22 – 1:37:16

In this section, Sharon explains why labour history and commemorating workers of the past matters. She hates the thought that this history could be lost. She personally recalls a

BC Federation of Labour Women's Committee poll on Sexual Harassment, which informed a lot of subsequent collective bargaining language. She points to this as an example of remembering the history, as it was "not that long ago that it didn't even have a name". She did a study for the BC Fed in the early 1990's on the status of women in union leadership. Women were very present in lower levels, but less so at higher levels, and leaders do not represent demographics of their representative unions.

1:37:17 – 1:38:18

In this section, Sharon discusses what she would like young workers to understand about labour history, particularly where their entitlements have come from. She likes the slogan, "Unions, the folks who gave you the weekend". She talks about how workers such as teachers fought for maternity leave.

01:38:19 – 01:46:18

In this section, Sharon elaborates on her self-description as a "feminist union activist". She points to the movement of "intersectionalism". She would have preferred this realm of thinking, as she never felt comfortable with the class politics of feminism at the time, but also recognizes there was a need to separate within feminism to achieve the victories they did. She talks about women in bargaining, and how they fit into the "union model". She has never felt uncomfortable with the adversarial model of trade union bargaining. She says that conflict is inherent in the system, as opposed to collaboration and cooperation.

01:46:19 – 01:52:22

In this section, Sharon explains that she doesn't agree with secrecy at the bargaining table. She did not think provincial bargaining was good for teachers, as they lost a lot of control. She remembers George North, a director of bargaining for the BCTF, and holding votes among members to form unions.

01:52:23 – 01:55:13

In the final section of the interview, Sharon talks about how memories can differ. She recalls a memory from her time at SFU. She laughs, "History is what you remember".