

## BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

### Interview with Jackie Ainsworth

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Interviewers: Janet Nicol, Robin Folvik

Videographer: Robin Folvik

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Jackie Ainsworth was born in Ontario, attending a year at the University of Carlton before joining the Anti-War Movement and moving out west to Vancouver. She is a founding member of the Association of University and College Employees [AUCE] as well as the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada [SORWUC].

00:00 – 05:28

In the first part of the interview, Jackie introduces herself and her personal history growing up in Ontario. Her parents were both working class people, and she recalls her father going on strike several times, but she never thought of him as a trade unionist. Her family was not particularly progressive or feminist. Jackie recalls her first exposure to activism. She worked part-time in the kitchen at the hospital during high school, around age 14. Ontario announced the abolition of the "student minimum wage" which was lower than the minimum for adult workers, and she recalls being so excited about the increase from 75 cents to a dollar. When she received her next paycheque, her rate was still 75 cents, so she called the Department of Labour to confirm. Jackie talked to another friend who worked alongside her, and they decided to speak to the administrator together, in case she was unaware of the increase. At the appointment, the administrator refused the increase, and Jackie reminded her of the \$500 per person fine that would be issued if she

didn't. They were thrown out of the office, but their next paychecks included the wage increase and back pay. Her next experience with labour activism came when she was 16, working part-time as a waitress after school. A fellow waitress' mother was the company's bookkeeper, and informed them that the owner was charging gratuity on banquet events, when the servers were told they could not collect tips from banquets. Jackie called the Department of Labour again, and they confirmed it was illegal. Once again, she took it upon herself to confront the boss, and he was extremely angry with her. Yet, she wasn't fired, and waitresses began to receive gratuity for events from then on. She attributes her activism to her personality, rather than her upbringing, though she recalls her mother being strong-willed and proactive as well.

05:29 – 09:36

Jackie attended the University of Carlton in Ottawa, Ontario. The school was a draw for draft-dodgers fleeing the US for Canada, and Jackie became involved in the Anti-War Movement. After a year, she left university, because she felt the most important thing she could be doing was working to stop the war. "Question Authority" was a mantra she recalls from the 1960's that informed her decision. Vancouver had one of the most active anti-war movements of any major city, and so Jackie and a friend spent the summer hitchhiking out west. She first worked as a waitress at Smitty's Pancake House, and though tips were good, she barely made enough money to make rent, and was treated poorly. "We were just so angry about everything; angry about the war, angry about work". She gathered a group of 5 coworkers to meet with the boss and demand higher wages. His response was, "Oh, that's easy; we can do two things. Take off your wedding rings, and shorten your skirts." The group dispersed in anger and headed home. She remembers walking by a payphone at the corner of Broadway and Fir, using the phonebook there to look up union listings, and found the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. They invited her to pick up union cards the next day, and she subsequently signed up most of the employees at Smitty's & applied for union certification. Jackie and Liz, the other union organizer, were fired; they filed an unfair labour practice complaint in response. This event, in September of 1973, was the start of Jackie's trade union activism.

09:37 – 14:05

In October 1973, Jackie met D.J. O'Donald, who was going to the founding convention of the Working Women's Association the next day. Since Jackie had just been fired for union organizing, she was intrigued. D.J. insisted that Jackie meet her friend, Jean Rands. It was Jean who advised Jackie to take her termination to the Labour Relations Board. The Union thought Jackie would not get her job back and did not provide any support after her termination. Jean introduced Jackie to Tommy McGrath, who was with the Seaman's

Union. Tommy went to the LRB with Jackie, but the LRB found she was fired because her hours had been reduced “as a business decision, not an anti-union decision”.

14:06 – 21:44

Jackie got a new job at Denny’s Restaurant, on Broadway. Jean encouraged her to attend meetings of the Working Women’s Association, where she met many supportive women involved in unions, and “never looked back”. She decided to be more strategic with organizing a union at Denny’s. The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada [SORWUC] had been formed by then, but only had one certification, and it was unclear what would happen at Denny’s. Organizing started slowly; at first, she was just talking to women about their working lives and getting their phone numbers. One day, she came to work for a swing shift, and the morning shift had walked off the job and started picketing outside the restaurant. The waitresses said they were “tired of being mauled by the day shift supervisor”. Jackie notes that the term “sexual harassment” did not exist then, instead described as “unwanted advances” or “being touched”. The day shift supervisor was particularly abusive and the women walked out, with many husbands and boyfriends showing up to join the picket outside. Jackie joined the picket and suggested starting a union, and called the swing and night shift waitresses to alert them of the strike. The site was shut down for 3 months. Jackie describes this as a big turning point for SORWUC and the Working Women’s Association. They began making trade union connections, and successfully shut down the “grand opening” of a new Denny’s on Burrard Street multiple times through mass pickets with this solidarity from other organizations. She recalls shutting down the construction site in Coquitlam where a Denny’s was to be built alongside the new mall, and all the construction workers respected their picket. The site supervisor was so angry that he called the union representative, and the rep insisted the workers cross the line, as it was an “illegal” non-union picket by the Denny’s waitresses. The workers refused. Denny’s had been successful in getting an injunction against the strikers. After another hour passed, representatives from Denny’s came to the construction site and passed out copies of the injunction, which the waitresses ripped up. This site was shut down for 3 days, until Denny’s brought contempt of court charges against the strikers it could identify. Jackie was informed of her charge by notable Vancouver lawyer Harry Rankin, who advised them to “get out of town” before the papers were served or else be sent to jail. The strike ended after 3 months, when the company offered the strikers money “to go away”; some accepted the payment, some didn’t.

21:45 – 28:54

Following the strike at Denny’s, Jackie decided to leave the restaurant industry, and got a job working at the University of British Columbia as an LA-1 (Library Assistant 1) in the Woodward Biomedical Library. The employees at UBC (primarily women) had a few failed union drives previous to this, once with OTEU and another with AUCE. Laurie Whitehat was one of the main organizers on these drives, and was a member of the

Working Women's Association. Jean and Jackie decided to come on as organizers for the second AUCE drive, as previous organizers were feeling discouraged. Jean worked as a typesetter in the Publications office. They secured an office in the Student Union Building to organize out of, and the Working Women's Association helped with staffing and leafleting. Melody Rudd was another woman who was heavily involved in Working Women, and worked as a secretary at SFU. The probation period for UBC employees was 6 months; they applied for union certification when Jackie had worked there for 3 months, at the end of the fall semester in December. They had connections to Press Gang, a feminist publication, which helped with the drive, along with around 30 activists from different organizations. She mentions that there were many active men in the Library & Clerical workers, not just women. She says this was part of the reason why SORWUC and the Working Women's Association existed at the same time; there was a need for a female-only organization to promote women's rights, but there also needed to be feminist-based unions that would organize both men and women on worksites. Unfortunately, the Working Women's Association faded over the years due to a lack of funds. It was around 80% females in their bargaining unit at UBC.

28:55 – 31:48

Jackie attributes the success of the organizing drive to research done with the Vancouver Women's Association. She also mentions the Vancouver Women's Caucus, and Working Women's Workshop, which were discussing women's needs and rights. She emphasizes the strength of the independent, Canadian trade union movement during the 1970's, which were called "breakaways"; there was a lot of grassroots organizing, and SORWUC/Working Women became allies with breakaway trade unions like CAIMAW [Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers] and PPWC [Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada], who provided advice on union contracts, constitutions, and safeguards. This independent movement was very inspiring to Jackie and her coworkers at UBC. One of the things they were adamant on was "as little legalise as possible... a contract that all workers could read".

31:49 – 34:05

There were two major issues that resonated with workers: equal pay, and equal wage increases. There were male workers on campus who had no experience and entry level janitorial positions that made 3 times what professional, private secretaries to the Dean made. There was also a concentration of men in the top job classifications, and any wage increase that was a percentage would benefit these men more. An "across the board increase" was in high demand. They also wanted to reduce and compact the number of "merit levels" that jobs were organized into, and replace them with "seniority levels". It was overall a drive for equal wages, but not just according to gender equity; equality for all.

34:06 – 38:17

A group of 13 made up the bargaining team, mostly women. Jackie believes that they received their wage increases because the administration feared a strike. Workers had already prepared a strike committee for several weeks prior and had a 90% vote to strike. Jackie recalls Al, Jean's partner, telling them when they approached an agreement: "Don't give in because you're tired. Tell them you need to take a break, and you'll come back tomorrow. This is – you've got so much leverage now. Don't let them wear you down." One of the first things they did following the agreement was hire a full-time union officer to work in the newly-established Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) local office. Jackie was elected to this position. They set a six-month term for elected positions, so that "no one would get too comfy in the union office". Employees at Simon Fraser University, Notre Dame University, Capilano College, and New Caledonia all joined AUCE, either during the organization period at UBC or in the months that followed. The local at Notre Dame was the first to be certified, before UBC. The contract at UBC was the first agreement. At this point, organizers felt confident in their abilities, and were ready to tackle a private sector employer.

38:18 – 45:22

To organize in the private sector, they had a strategic discussion, and several members of the Working Women's Association decided to get jobs in banks in Downtown Vancouver, including Jackie, Jean and Melody. SORWUC's offices were located on Kingsway, then moved into the Dominion Building downtown. Jackie was placed at the Victory Square branch of the Bank of Commerce to work as a ledger keeper. Jean got a job in what was then the Bank of BC, and Melody was at the Bank of Montreal. Jackie was approached after 3-4 weeks by a co-worker who was upset with working conditions and informed her that employees were all planning to take a sick day the next day. Jackie commented that there were better ways to protest, and suggested they organize over a beer after work. They went to the Railway Club and discussed the issue, and agreed that a sick day or a letter would be ineffective. Jackie suggested a union, and while many agreed, they thought it was "impossible". Jackie called up Jean and Melody later that night and made leaflets on why bank workers should join a union. Jean and Melody leafletted several bank branches along West Hastings the next day. Several women, including a head teller and another teller, became interested in the union and started attending SORWUC meetings. Unpaid overtime was a big issue, as well as arbitrary decision-making and favouritism among workers, and any of these may have been the initial spark – Jackie cannot recall. Unpaid overtime was common because bank workers fell under a federal regulation that allowed hours to be averaged out over a long period of days.

45:23 – 49:33

There was a question of whether SORWUC had the capacity to take on the multi-million-dollar banking industry, and they considered joining the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU). To organize an industry of this size, they felt they needed new organizing strategies, and to respond to the criticisms of existing unions from the women's liberation movement. They also had unique workplace issues to respond to, and felt they needed "a whole new kind of union". In the end, Jackie and the two tellers determined who to approach, and weren't sure if they had a majority. They also wanted to get their application for certification in before management found out. At the time, the Canadian Labour Code allowed an application for certification with 45% signed up. They signed up the minimum required to force a vote on August 6, 1976. Jackie hand-delivered the application to the Labour Board while Melody and Jean met with the branch manager to inform them of the impending unionization, and local media swarmed the branch shortly after for a press conference.

49:34 – 54:14

The workers formed the United Bank Workers [UBW] Local 2 of SORWUC. There had been previous organizing drives at banks, including a branch in Kitimat 20 years earlier with OTEU, but it had failed. The women announced at the press conference that this would be the first union of many, and they were planning to organize the bank industry across Canada. It made it to the national news that evening. The next morning, as the workers went to sort cheques from the bank's data centre, they found notes slipped inside that said, "Call us". The phone "rang off the hook" at SORWUC's office with other branches calling to organize, almost exclusively branches in Vancouver. Later, they received calls from the Sunshine Coast, Vancouver Island, and even Northern BC. The movement reached as far as Saskatchewan, where there was a Working Women's Association, and workers at a bank branch reached out.

54:15 – 58:05

The union made it to the bargaining table, but the Bank of Commerce refused to bargain collectively. The Labour Relations Board determined that they had to bargain one unit at a time, as opposed to bargaining on behalf of all branches collectively. The Bank of Montreal agreed to bargain collectively, but filed every single legal block they could think of. These demonstrated different strategies by the banks. The drive to organize and bargain was almost 2 years, with the first year spent arguing the issue of bargaining units, and raising funds for organizing. AUCE provided support, including finances. In the end, no agreement was signed. Jackie recalls using her vacation time to meet with the IWA in Kamloops and request funds, using a leaflet they had called "the budget", which demonstrated that a single woman and child required \$1100 per month to survive in Vancouver. The first speaker to respond to her stated, "No wife of mine is going to make \$1100"; most laughed in response, though some booed. They ultimately voted to send

around \$500 to support SORWUC, which infuriated the IWA Executive, who refused to write the cheque. This was an example of the hurdles Jackie faced.

58:06 – 01:01:52

The bank argued to the Labour Relations Board that the CIBC (Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce) bargaining unit should include all CIBC employees across Canada. However, the Local countered that this ruling was essentially denying the right to unionize. SORWUC argued that a bargaining unit had to be a branch or data centre – one physical workplace. The Board agreed. However, the union realized before this decision that it would be a “parrot victory” – the branches were too small and too easy to pick off. They were already discussing the need to organize a large workplace, such as a data centre, or a region such as a city or town. However, this was “a historic decision... previous to that, bank workers didn’t think they had the right to unionize”. The definition of the bargaining unit was another historic part of this decision. They later realized some of the flaws with this, as loan officers were organized into the same union as bank tellers; while loan officers should be unionized, Jackie feels that perhaps they should have had their own local. They saw this as a learning experience and had a good idea of what the next organizing drive should look like; “unfortunately, that was 40 years ago”.

01:01:53 – 01:03:00

In this section, Jackie discusses the reasons why there wasn’t a second drive. She talks about the backlash against the labour movement during the 1980’s, and feels that many unions were just trying to hold onto their existing members, rather than organizing.

01:03:01 – 01:07:04

All the women that were involved with organizing AUCE and SORWUC are still active in their communities and unions today. Jackie worked at the bank for around 15 years, until the branch closed. All the workers were reassigned to new locations, except Jackie; she laughs that this may have been their chance to finally get rid of her. She applied to the CIBC in North Van and did not get the job. She filed an unfair labour practice complaint with the LRB. She was also active in organizing drives in the years following, particularly with credit unions and trust companies, before having to take short-term disability due to illness. She filed a human rights complaint for discrimination against her sick leave. Jackie accepted a settlement from CIBC. In the meantime, she had met someone, and they decided to move to Seattle together. Jackie really enjoyed her job and coworkers at the bank. Some people were fired for their involvement in union organizing, including one high-profile termination of the main union organizer in Gibsons, on the Sunshine Coast. She never received her job back, despite protests and media coverage.

01:07:05 – 01:11:07

After moving to Seattle, Jackie applied to a bank, who were very impressed with her resume. She convinced them to call her branch manager for a reference, rather than CIBC's human resources, as she knew her union organizing would be a blot on the record. She rushed home and called the manager to request a reference; he agreed, but only if Jackie promised never to apply at a CIBC again. Jackie got the job and worked at the bank in Seattle for 23 years, until she retired. Prior to moving to Seattle, Jackie had applied at several banks and credit unions and was denied. Luckily, she got a job at CCEC Credit Union for about a year in between the transition from CIBC and her move to Seattle.

01:11:08 – 01:19:33

In the last part of the interview, Jackie reflects on the lessons from her personal history and how they apply today. "We all have to organize and do whatever we can, and resist in whatever ways we can". She sees the need for coalitions, particularly with marginalized working people, for any sort of productive change to go forward. She sees a lot of anger amongst today's working class, culminating in extremism, but sees potential and opportunity to organize. She thinks it will take "a new kind of organizing". Her experiences taught her that "it can start with a few people, and it happens so fast". Again, she credits the strength of the women's movement and the independent Canadian trade union movement of the 1970's with motivating and providing strength to their cause. The message of both movements was, "We can do it ourselves". She feels labour history is important to avoid making the same mistakes of the past.