

BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Project

Interview with John Shields

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Interviewers: Ken Novakowski, Bailey Garden

Videographer: Bailey Garden

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Key Subjects: American Federation of Labour [AFL]; American Nazi Party; Bargaining; BC Federation of Labour; BC Government Employees Union [BCGEU]; Bill Bennett [former BC Premier]; Bill Vander-Zalm [former BC Premier]; Brooklyn, New York; Capital Regional District [CRD]; Catholic Children's Aid; Catholic church; Children's Aid Society; Civil Rights Act [U.S., 1964]; Civil rights movement; Collective bargaining; Collective rights; Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]; Corbin Commission; Daycare Workers of Vancouver; Father Daniel Berrigan; Indigenous communities; Kelowna Accord; Labour movement; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Negotiations; New Democratic Party [NDP]; New York City [NYC]; Nisga'a First Nation; Operation Solidarity; Pay equity; Privatization; Public sector (industry); Religion; Social Credit Party [SoCredits]; Social justice movement; Social Service Employees Union [SSEU]; Social work (industry); Solidarity Coalition; Solidarity Movement [BC, 1983]; Southern Christian Leadership Group; Spirituality; Strikes; Vancouver; Victoria;

John Shields was born and raised in New York City, New York, raised by Irish Catholic parents. He was always drawn to helping people and pursued a career in the Catholic church clergy, but left after disagreement with the church's new revelations. He moved to Vancouver and became a social worker, and eventually served as President of the BCGEU from 1985- 1999, playing a major role in the fights for collective bargaining and pay equity, among others.

John passed away on March 24, 2017, at the age of 78.

00:00 – 02:20

In the first part of the interview, John introduces himself and his personal history. He grew up in New York City, a child of an Irish Catholic family. His father became involved in the Steamfitters Union during the Great Depression of the 1930s. His mother's brother was the Secretary-Treasurer for the New York local of the Steamfitters. He recalls debates around the dining room table over whether the AFL [American Federation of Labour] should merge with the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. His mother was a schoolteacher and an early enroller in the New York Teacher's Union. John describes it as a "double-barrel union household". This demonstrated to him the value of collective action and union membership early on in life.

02:21 – 06:37

In High School, John had a teacher who was a Jesuit Priest and anti-War activist, Daniel Berrigan. Father Berrigan was the moderator of a school club John belonged to. The Manager of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York was concerned about the level of vandalism in the projects, and invited students from the club to observe the projects and report on their findings. Berrigan taught the kids a model of “See, judge, act”. It turned out that a fair proportion of the so-called vandalism was the result of migrants from the Southern states, who were used to cooking and heating their homes with fire. Kids were sent out to scavenge for wood- “it was survival”, and the families hadn’t been coached on their new appliances. The report prepared by the students was transformative for the Projects, and it was John’s first introduction to social justice. He admired Father Berrigan and his brother [also a Jesuit priest] so much that he chose to take a year of seminary after high school, joining a group called the Paulist Fathers. John describes this as his “liberation from childhood”, as it was his first time leaving home as a young adult and pursuing his independence. He spent the next 10 years of his life preparing to become a Catholic Priest.

06:38 – 16:40

During the years John studied to become a Priest, the Pope of the Catholic Church, Pope John XXIII called together a Vatican Council to renew the Church from its roots. What followed were enormous reforms in theology, practice and other transformations. John was just entering the theology portion of his education, and his professors chose to teach him in the new style, which encouraged interpretation of the Bible rather than taking it literally. John was ordained in 1965. One of the results of this was the argument by many Bishops that Genesis and Exodus were metaphorical teaching stories rather than a historical recollection of events, and with that understanding, there could be no actual event of “original sin”. However, this was too radical for the Pope, and a new creed was issued which was “more archaic” than the original creed, and forced instructors (including John) to teach it. This went against John’s logic and beliefs, and ultimately forced his decision to leave the clergy. He was teaching at the University of Texas Catholic Parish with a Master’s in Theology, and felt he had “no employable skills”. John decided to return to Vancouver, British Columbia, which had been his first assignment as a Priest. He had taught a series of lectures about the Vatican Council at the Catholic Centre downtown years prior.

16:41 – 19:37

During his time at seminary, John chose to serve an inner-city parish in Washington, DC, and saw first-hand the negative effects of segregated and inadequate housing. He became more and more involved in the U.S. Civil rights movement. After John F. Kennedy was

assassinated, President Johnson introduced the Civil Rights Act, and John and colleagues organized an inter-faith silent candlelight vigil outside the Lincoln Memorial to observe the duration of debate over the Bill. The first night of the vigil, the American Nazi Party arrived on scene, placing themselves between the crowd and the Memorial. A media reporter was hoping for drama, and told John, “If you want your picture on the front cover, go confront those guys!”, but John refused. Later in the evening, Martin Luther King Jr. arrived at the vigil and asked to speak with the organizer. He told John, “I want you to know how important what you’re doing is, and how influential it is on the Southern Christian Leadership Group, because we need allies. When this is over, come work for me.” While he had been raised in a labour household, it was this social justice activism in the Civil Rights Movement that informed the chain of John’s future activism.

19:38 – 24:42

John moved to Victoria, BC in 1969 and became a social worker in a family & children’s service private agency. For some reason, the Capital Regional District (CRD) was going to take over the agency, and the staff wanted to maintain their working conditions. The staff chose to form a union, and John contacted the area representative for the BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU) for assistance with organizing. The Social Service Employees Union was created, and they achieved a collective agreement with the agency. The Catholic Children’s Aid, the Children’s Aid Society and the Daycare Workers of Vancouver all contacted the SSEU to organize them, and a man by the name of Joe D’Onofrio was asked to organize. Joe was a good friend of Norman Levy, who became the Minister for Social Services, and made the decision to bring the SSEU under the Provincial Government. This caused a dilemma, as the group had a collective agreement, while government workers still did not have bargaining rights. Levy invited John to his office and introduced him to John Fryer to make plans for the merger with BCGEU. John Shields was elected as the Representative of Social, Education and Health staff in government, and participated in the first round of collective bargaining for that group around 1974, under the newly elected NDP government. John served on the provincial executive until 1985, when he was elected President of the BCGEU. John always saw the union more as a “movement” than a bargaining agency, due to his activist roots.

24:43 – 41:40

In 1983, the Social Credit Government, led by Bill Bennett, introduced a series of 26 bills stripping away core structures and social and labour rights. John remembers a call from Cliff Anstein, where they spent the night brainstorming how the BCGEU would respond to this “onslaught”. Jack Adams, who was the senior staff person in the union, decided they couldn’t face it alone and needed the help of the BC Federation of Labour. Jack and John went to meet with Art Kube, President of the Fed, and called on the labour movement to mobilize and respond to the aggressive legislation. There was some reluctance; everyone could see that it would require the collective response of the labour

movement, but it appeared to be more of a public-sector attack than a private-sector issue, and Kube was worried that private unions would not come on board. Kube was well connected with local NGOs and community organizations, and contacted Father Jim Roberts and Renate Shearer if they would organize and coordinate the community sector's response, called the Solidarity Coalition. The BCGEU assigned John to be the liaison between community groups and labour (The Fed's Operation Solidarity). BCGEU went on strike and went into collective bargaining (the bills aimed to remove this right from government employees), and John was "up to his eyebrows" with community organizing and negotiations. "I was just having a wonderful, juicy time doing this organizing". At some point, John says the Fed decided they couldn't trust the community organizations, and so it was part of his job to get commitments from the various groups that they would all act in solidarity when the time came. Over the summer and into the fall, momentum built, and there were several of the largest rallies in BC history. John feels that the public response and support for community groups "swept up" the Fed and labour into supporting the Coalition, despite their initial hesitation. John recalls the march on the Legislature building, where 10 000 filled the lawn and spilled out onto the streets, and the demonstration at Vancouver's Empire Stadium where 50 000 people from various unions filled the stands. These rallies likely prompted the Government letter received by the BC Federation of Labour to negotiate the end of Operation Solidarity in November, when teachers and government employees were supporting strike actions and other industries were ready to escalate these actions. John was not present at the meetings where the decision was made by BC Fed officers to send Jack Munro to Bennett's home in Kelowna for negotiations. Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition were largely excluded from this decision, which John calls a "terrible mistake". Art Kube was under such pressure with this movement that he essentially collapsed and had to step aside to take time for his mental health, and this was partially why the Fed chose to send Jack instead. John feels the outcome was one of the "low points" for the labour movement, as the Kelowna Accord agreement provided "nothing for the Solidarity Coalition" and instead put a stop to the threat of a General Strike. John had to make the announcement to community groups that labour would be pulling out of Operation Solidarity and there would be no further support for the collective opposition. "It was a day of mourning, for me certainly, and for the other public-sector unions who felt that they'd been betrayed. There's no other way of saying that." The Operation wound down, though union negotiations continued. There were some gains made and the BCGEU maintained their right to bargain. John likens this to "survivors guilt", because the union had come out with some victories, but many other groups were betrayed. This showed John that for the BCGEU, all bargaining is political, rather than simple labour relations. This was the first union-wide strike for the BCGEU.

41:41 – 48:05

In this section, John describes the structure of the BCGEU. Members on the Executive recognized the flaw, as it is based on the British General Secretary Model, where the General Secretary is the true head of the union and unaccountable to members. When the Executive would order John Fryer (then General Secretary) to do something, he could simply ignore it with no form of repercussion. Following the 1983 strike, it became John and other's mission to change the structure of the BCGEU and introduce a Presidency to take charge, and at the same time, to strengthen the numbers of officers on the rank-and-file level. John Fryer introduced a constitutional reform package which created a full-time elected President role, and split the elected table officers from the senior staff. Norm Richards was the first full-time elected President, and John was First Vice-President under him. This structure created tension in the organization until the following convention, when the senior staff could nominate their own candidate for President. John was elected President in 1985 and cemented this new structure of governance. After about a year, he found he was quite isolated in this position, and proposed that the Secretary-Treasurer position would also be a full-time officer. Tom Kozar stepped aside so that Diane Woods could take on the role. Most of the senior staff left at that point, either retiring or moving on to other organizations, and there was a bit of internal struggle that followed. John had the opportunity to appoint senior staff members following bargaining that he took over in 1985.

48:06 – 0:59:26

Expo 1986 was on the horizon, and was being used by the Bennett government for their re-election campaign. Bennett made an announcement that there would be no benefit or wage increases for the BCGEU despite any gains they had made through bargaining. John felt this was an intentional attempt to provoke a strike pre-election. John called Dave Barrett (former Premier, BC NDP), who advised him to “use the government's force against them” like in karate, by stepping aside and halting negotiations, declaring Bennett unfit to negotiate with and the BCGEU would bargain with his successor. Bennett later announced his resignation and Bill Vander-Zalm was elected to replace him. Bill called him immediately and asked what needed to be done with the BCGEU, posing himself as “the great mediator” as he stepped into the Premiership – “like a white knight”. John was invited to be part of the BC delegation of the first Ministers meeting, which was catered by Bill's own Fantasy Gardens. Bill sent his Principal Secretary to the BCGEU following this meeting to share his legislative plans: to privatize the entire public sector, starting with privatization of roads. Banks were going to take over income assistance programs, bills would be introduced to remove all but managerial positions from the public sector, and more. John walked out of the meeting stunned, thinking to himself, “You're going to be known as the last President of the Government Employees Union, because there's going to be no government employees... and unless you stop it, I think they're going to destroy this province.” The BCGEU changed the name of their Defence Fund to the Defence of Public Services Fund, and John travelled cities across the province, meeting

with Chambers of Commerce and describing the value of the public payroll to private business owners and employees alike. Surprisingly, the business community responded positively. After a year of campaigning, the BCGEU went into bargaining, creating hurdles for the government's attempts at privatization. John says he became "compulsive; I felt like I had a mission to save the public sector", and if any Executive members showed a lack of commitment, he pushed them aside. The Union went on strike in 1987.

0:59:27 – 01:07:12

In this section, John describes the BCGEU strike in 1987. They had received a decent collective agreement from negotiations that made privatization difficult, but much of the privatization of the Ministry of Transport Highways Division had already gone forward. John recalls an early response at a BC Fed Convention where a caucus developed an agreement that the BCGEU would purchase the Highways department and set up a corporation that would hold highway maintenance in a trust. They had recruited a former Minister of Transport to lead this corporation, and met with Government to discuss the offer, which was refused. The Government later counter-offered to sell, but divided the highways into 26 separate divisions which would have been difficult to organize. Staff and executive brainstormed and came to the decision to follow members out into the private sector. They immediately ran into divisions with the Canadian Labour Congress, as the BCGEU only had the right to organize public sector employees. There had been a previous merger between the Bank Workers Union and the BCGEU, which was used as a wedge to argue that the union could represent private sector workers as well. John took a recommendation to a bi-annual convention that would restructure the union to be an organizing dynamic rather than exclusively a servicing organization that dealt with grievances. An organizing team was created, and each local office had a mandate to identify targets for organizing. John noticed very quickly that in any industry where women were the predominant workforce, that sector was paid significantly less than similar sectors dominated by men. He gives an example: CUPE Zookeepers, mostly men, were paid significantly more than CUPE daycare workers, mostly women, despite both providing care (and one industry being a cornerstone of modern childhood development). The Union grew from 36 000 to 72 000 during all this organizing. It also changed the character of the union, because as more female-dominated sectors were organized, the number of women in union leadership increased. The Women's Committee began leadership workshops and the BCGEU became "feminized" – John notes that today, most members identify as female because of that evolution, and Stephanie Smith is the President.

01:07:13 – 01:11:19

When Vander-Zalm stepped down, the interim Premier's labour minister mused publicly about the idea of pay equity legislation, and so John visited the Cabinet. He encouraged the Government that it was in both of their interests to do a joint, full classification re-

examination and work together to develop a gender-neutral lens through which to classify government positions. This project lasted 3 years, and was one of John's proudest contributions to the labour movement. The first budgetary change that introduced pay equity cost the government \$24 million for Phase 1 of what was to be a 4 Phase plan. Pay equity began to spread through all the industries that the BCGEU was associated with. John received a letter from a woman after this event, thanking him for changing the life of her family. She was a single parent working for a low wage in government, and couldn't afford to send her kids to school with new clothes, and she spent her first paycheque after pay equity buying them new wardrobes. John credits his respect and advocacy for the poor to his time in the seminary.

01:11:20 – 01:13:41

John discusses outreach to First Nations government workers, who are often the most poorly paid government workers of all. He recalls the Nisga'a workers voting to join the BCGEU. John visited members of the nation and they explained to him that unionization put workers in a difficult position. "In Indigenous communities, we are all one... unionizing the government staff... it will drive a wedge between the people and the leadership, and we're on the verge of signing our treaty. Can you delay the implementation of this?" John took this concern back to the union staff, and the workers agreed to suspend their application for certification indefinitely. In one way, it went against John's principles, but from a community and unity perspective, he thinks they made the right decision. Many other Indigenous workers joined the BCGEU following this.

01:13:42 – 01:15:31

In this section, John reflects on his time in the labour movement. "I can't think of anything that I could have done with my life that would have been more fruitful; it was so deeply satisfying to me to recognize the "good effect", and it's only the structure of collective action that makes that possible" ... "It's the fulfillment, or fruition, of everything I believe in about society, about community, about the fact that workers, when we act together, are unstoppable; I feel so privileged at having had that opportunity for the years, 25 years on the executive, 15 years, 14 years as President – it was a gift from the labour movement to me, which I gave back in whichever ways I could to our members".

01:15:32 – 01:21:00

John describes what he would say to convince a young person that unions are important. He quotes former BC Fed President Ken Georgetti: "Did you enjoy your weekend? Are you willing to go without a vacation?". John feels organizing is the only way for individuals to make progress. He refers to the "media myth" that unions are outdated, which neglects the fact that wage differentiation between the working class and the "1%" is only growing worse. John feels we cannot rely on political parties to be the champions of the working

class. “The only entity left in the world that are going to speak up for working people are unions and the trade union movement”. John imagines the possibilities for organizing in a globalized work force, perhaps targeting countries in the same way corporations are targeted. “The legislation is stacked against us, the money of the corporations that will break organizations is stacked against us – all of that’s true. But what it doesn’t take into account is that if people decide to stand together, and work together, they will be unstoppable, and have the smarts to outmanoeuvre those that would keep quiet and submissive.” He feels labour leaders should be standing with their communities and in solidarity with the disadvantaged. John believes the labour movement should be supporting the Standing Rock land occupation, as they are defending the water supply of the entire Dakota River Valley.

01:21:01 – 01:27:24

In the last section of the interview, John explains why labour history matters to him, and fills in the rest of his personal timeline. John likens it to knowing your community or family history. “History is essential to our self-understanding”. He also speaks to the fact that home support workers and community social services were organized during the early 1990’s, industries that hadn’t been unionized previously. A hurdle to organization was that different units in one location had to be organized separately. The BCGEU called on the Harcourt NDP government to put forward a group called the Corbin Commission, which created sectoral bargaining and made organization easier for the union.