

Interview: Arnie Nagy (AN)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
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Transcription: Jane Player

RM [00:00:04] How do you pronounce your last name?

AN [00:00:05] Nagy. N-a-g-y

RM [00:00:08] Yeah. And you're Haida right?

AN [00:00:09] Yeah. I'm a member of the Haida nations. My family is from Masset, from the descendant of Chief Wiiaa. We're the sgajuugahl clan. And my Haida name is Tlaatsgaa Chiin Kiljuu, which means strong salmon voice.

RM [00:00:27] Isn't that great. But isn't Nagy a Hungarian name.

AN [00:00:31] Yeah, my father's Hungarian. My mother's Haida.

RM [00:00:34] So how did a Hungarian guy marry your mom?

AN [00:00:37] My father came here in 1956 after the revolution because he was ordered out of the country by his mother because he was the only male in the family and she wanted the family name to continue. So she told him he had to leave. So he left and ended up in Canada, landed in Montreal is where they ended up and worked his way across because they heard there was jobs in Kitimat and then ended up in Prince Rupert where he met my mother.

RM [00:01:11] Oh, what a story.

AN [00:01:13] Yeah.

RM [00:01:14] They've passed I guess have they?

AN [00:01:15] Nope. My father still alive. My mom passed 14 years ago.

RM [00:01:21] Your father is still living in Haida Gwaii?

AN [00:01:24] No, my father is living in Comox right now.

RM [00:01:26] Oh.

AN [00:01:27] That's kind of interesting because the last name Nagy means eagle power. And that's my crest.

RM [00:01:31] Really?

AN [00:01:32] Yeah.

RM [00:01:33] Isn't that interesting?

AN [00:01:34] Yeah.

RM [00:01:34] Did he ever go back to Hungary?

AN [00:01:36] Yeah. My father went back--was it 1982 when they were finally allowed to go back to Hungary.

RM [00:01:42] Yup.

AN [00:01:43] And he took the two youngest because his mother was quite ill. So we felt it was more important for the younger, the youngest of the family to be able to meet my father's side of the family. And so my elder brother and I have gone back to Hungary and.

RM [00:01:59] He hasn't come back.

AN [00:02:00] I haven't gone back.

RM [00:02:01] Because he's still got a lot of relatives there I would assume.

AN [00:02:03] Yeah.

RM [00:02:04] Wow, isn't that interesting? No telling Canadians, right, everybody's got a story.

AN [00:02:09] You know, and the neat thing was, is many of the Hungarians that came over and married First Nations women, their kids ended up having to fight to regain their status.

RM [00:02:24] Right.

AN [00:02:25] My mother and my father never married for 28 years until that was changed. So we had always had status. And once the legislation was in place, my parents married.

RM [00:02:37] What a great story. And so where did you grow up?

AN [00:02:40] I grew up in Prince Rupert.

RM [00:02:41] Right. But and did you go back to Haida Gwaii?

AN [00:02:44] I go, I haven't been back in quite a while. I'm planning on, I want to be able to take my daughter and my granddaughter over so that they understand where I came from. And that my granddaughter is just in love with the sound of the drums and stuff. So. When there's a big feast or something going on, I want to be able to take them over and let them experience how things are done traditionally.

RM [00:03:09] Are you still in touch with people back in Haida Gwaii?

AN [00:03:11] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:03:12] Wow.

AN [00:03:14] Yeah. Well, we always stay in contact and lots of cousins and stuff like that. Yeah.

RM [00:03:20] Wow. That is interesting. Thank you for that. And. All right. So what's your work history in Prince Rupert?

RM [00:03:29] I was born into the fishing industry. The fishing industry and my family goes back 2000 years on the food fishing and stuff, traditional fishing. But commercially, my family has always been involved in the fishing industry. And my grandfather, or as we say in Haida, dii chan, had his own seine boat that was built in Masset that was called the Chief Wiiaa and when the banks and the companies and everybody ganged up and were able to eliminate a lot of the fishermen from the seine fleet, my grandfather was one of the very few that was able to maintain ownership of his boat. Because Masset used to have the biggest seine fleet in British Columbia.

RM [00:04:14] Really?

AN [00:04:15] Yeah. And all of the

RM [00:04:17] First Nations, they were big in seiners, you know. They had the seine boats, didn't they?

AN [00:04:20] Yeah. Yeah. But all of those boats were built in Masset.

RM [00:04:26] Oh, I didn't know that. And just to go back a bit. So did, was your dad in the fishing industry. What did he do?

AN [00:04:33] Nope, my father was when he came to Canada, he was actually a painter. A ticketed painter that when they were in school in Hungary, they were taught early a trade and something that he was interested in. So my father, when he came here, was already a qualified painter. So that's. And then he did that. He was also a cabinetmaker.

RM [00:04:57] One of those artisan guys. Craft guys.

AN [00:04:59] Yeah. And then he had his own painting company that I worked with him since I was ten. And then eventually he decided, he went to work at the pulp mill. So he was working there since 1970 and up until his retirement.

RM [00:05:19] And so what was your first job in the fishing industry?

RM [00:05:23] My first job actually was because my mother was a union organizer here with the UFAWU. I knew I was born into a union household, which I've always said I was truly blessed for that happening to me. I helped her on a project where eight of her cousins drowned in a boating accident and she was having a hard time to organize the claims and stuff because all the pictures of the boat and that. So my first job in the fishing industry was to help her. I think I was 13 or something at that time. So I organized the pictures on that claim.

RM [00:06:06] When was that?

RM [00:06:08] That was in the late seventies.

RM [00:06:10] That wasn't a herring boat or was it? Eight?

AN [00:06:14] Yeah. They never, I think they found one body.

RM [00:06:18] Was that one boat that went down with eight of them on it. Yeah.

RM [00:06:21] Wow.

AN [00:06:21] The herring shifted and the boat rolled and it was pretty quick.

AN [00:06:26] It was terrible. Some of the death toll in the herring, the early herring roe wasn't it?

AN [00:06:30] Yeah. Because the money was so big.

RM [00:06:32] Right, exactly.

AN [00:06:33] And there was never ever any real standards of boat safety under WCB and stuff.

RM [00:06:41] And it was only when the NDP got in, he came up to Prince Rupert didn't he, Terry Ison and the WCB?

AN [00:06:47] I heard that. I think so. I don't quite remember that.

AN [00:06:50] Right. That would have been in 75.

AN [00:06:52] Yeah. See, I was only 12 then.

RM [00:06:55] Well, you still should remember it. [laughter]

AN [00:06:57] But no, it's. But when I went to work in the fish plants, my first job was working in the freezers, working night shift.

RM [00:07:07] What, who was the company?

AN [00:07:08] It was BC Packers. Right. I worked at the Seal Cove plant, seven floors of freezers. So it was more than one year that we plugged that thing. Every little empty space. We had fish going into it eh.

RM [00:07:23] Salmon?

AN [00:07:24] Yeah. And halibut. And you'd get the occasional dragger and we would do the rock fish and.

RM [00:07:30] Yeah, and that was, those were union jobs.

AN [00:07:32] Always union. Yeah. Yeah.

RM [00:07:34] How many guys were working there then do you remember?

AN [00:07:38] We used to have.

RM [00:07:38] When I say guys, I mean, people.

AN [00:07:40] Yeah. Well, we had 40 in the freezer and there was the fresh fish and then there was also the filleting lines because they filleted the fish down there too. So I would say probably 300 in that plant.

RM [00:07:57] That was when the fishing was good, right?

AN [00:08:00] Yup, the fishing was good and the politics was out of the industry. Everybody made money. I mean, I used to go to school and, when the roe herring was in, I would work the roe herring on night shift. And same with the food herring. And then, I always remember that one year when the companies phoned the schools to see if we could actually do our exams early that year because there would be so much fish coming in, they needed everybody on board.

RM [00:08:33] This was high school?

AN [00:08:34] Yeah.

RM [00:08:35] How old were you?

AN [00:08:36] I started in the fish market when I was 15.

RM [00:08:38] Oh, my goodness. Were there no laws?

AN [00:08:41] Yeah, they were supposed to be 16. But, you know, if you asked 90% of the people that started back then, all you needed was your social insurance number, right? You were 16.

RM [00:08:54] Boy, that's pretty good money for a kid of 16.

AN [00:08:57] Yeah, but we had a big family, so everybody chipped in and we helped renovate my parents little house and stuff from working there. And it paid my way through college, I left college debt free.

RM [00:09:07] Wow.

AN [00:09:08] I can't say that nowadays.

RM [00:09:10] Boy, that's for sure. How many kids in the family?

AN [00:09:12] I got three brothers and sisters, so there were seven of us.

RM [00:09:15] Yeah. Were they all get in fishing?

AN [00:09:18] For the most part, everyone working in the fish plant for a little bit. But my brother, the oldest brother, went to work in the pulp mill. Yeah, but the majority of us, I spent the longest time in the fishing industry. I was there 37 years.

RM [00:09:34] Oh my God. And your mom, was she a full time organizer? Is that her job?

AN [00:09:39] She did the job front desk organizer, right. Yeah. And dealt with all of that stuff. Helping Florence Greenwood, who's a real legend.

RM [00:09:49] Oh, we've heard about her.

AN [00:09:50] Yeah, she worked with Florence here, but then decided that because there was so much work going on, it took her away from her kids. So she decided to go back into the plants and it gave her a little bit more time to spend with the children when we were growing up.

RM [00:10:06] So talk can you talk a bit about that incredible herring roe fishery? I mean, that was just unbelievable.

AN [00:10:12] It was, I mean, the prices hit somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$5,500 a ton that year. And it was crazy. I mean, it was a bonanza. Even if, you know, any little piece of roe that hit the floor had been cut and cleaned and then, you know, frozen, to preserve it because it was such a valuable fishery. And then a lot of the guys made a lot of money. But unfortunately, when people get a lot of money, they don't account for the income tax that has to be paid. And they got hit by taxes being owed.

RM [00:10:49] Really?

AN [00:10:50] Yeah.

RM [00:10:50] Did some of them lose their boats and stuff?

AN [00:10:52] Oh, lost boats, lost houses and cars.

RM [00:10:53] So when was this?

AN [00:10:54] This was in the late seventies when the big herring boom was going on.

RM [00:10:59] So Revenue Canada swooped in on these guys.

AN [00:11:02] Oh, yeah, because you got to declare your earnings. So fishermen don't pay taxes the same as somebody who is a shore worker. They pay at the end of the year. Right. So when they get their monies, they don't pay. When we get our paycheques, everything's taken off automatically.

RM [00:11:18] Wow.

AN [00:11:19] Yeah, it was 12-hour shift for us. Yeah. Working, working, working. And get them in the fleet freezers, freeze 'em. Take them into the freezer and stack them until they were ready to be popped.

RM [00:11:35] Did you have the Japanese buyers offshore buying stuff right off the boat? I know that happened down south.

AN [00:11:40] I don't recall that ever happening here, but as I said, I was quite young when all this was going on, so I never really paid attention to that stuff until I started becoming more active in the union. I think I was in the plant for

RM [00:11:57] Yeah, this is more like the mid-seventies, you'd hear about that, you know like, and, but it was like the Wild West out there and of course that's dangerous.

AN [00:12:05] Yup. And it wasn't a quota fishery. It was a lottery fishery. So whatever you caught, is what you got, right? None of the quotas.

RM [00:12:15] Or they could say, you know, one cast of your nets you could live on it for a year kind of a thing.

AN [00:12:20] Yeah. Well, a friend went out and he had a during the gillnet fishery he fished one night and made, what did he say, \$200,000.

RM [00:12:26] [Laughter] That's hard to believe.

AN [00:12:34] Yeah. They were just fishing nonstop. Why go to sleep if there's that kind of money? So they were fishing 24 hours a day, right.

RM [00:12:40] That's amazing. That must've been boom times for Prince Rupert, eh, because they had the pulp mill going and everything else.

AN [00:12:46] Yeah, the population, actually, during fishing season would almost double because everybody would come in, especially during salmon seasons, because the canneries needed all the work. And you had canneries in Port Ed, Rupert all up and down the waterfront here.

RM [00:13:02] So you were around when there was the co-op was still going eh?

AN [00:13:05] Yes.

RM [00:13:06] And relations between the co-op and the UFAWU weren't that good right?

AN [00:13:11] no, because of the strike in 1967. And even to this day, there's still some of those hard feelings over that amongst the really, well people, still older than me.

RM [00:13:23] The old timers.

AN [00:13:24] Yeah, there was splits in families over that or, one was on the picket line and another one would cross. And, but, you know out of that, what I always found was that was amazing is the leadership of the UFAWU when the courts told them to lift the strike and the officers of the union said the membership decides when we go on strike, the membership decides when we come off strike. And I don't have the authority, even as president of the union to make that call. And that's when all of our officers went to jail for it.

RM [00:14:04] Yeah, Homer went for a year.

AN [00:14:05] Yup.

RM [00:14:06] And served every single day.

AN [00:14:08] Yup. He was one of my mentors growing up.

RM [00:14:10] Well, what do you remember about Homer?

AN [00:14:12] Homer was a great guy, you know, and this is where I learnt a lot of my stuff from the trade union movement was from the old guard, I guess you could call it, because they were all really good friends with my mom. So when they would come in Mom and I would cook up a big dinner and everybody would gather at the house and you know, Bert Ogden and

RM [00:14:34] Bert Ogden, Good God, I remember that guy.

AN [00:14:35] Yeah. So we'd have dinner, and my dad would just sit back and my mom was all lit up with all her old friends and they would talk union late into the night, you know. It was great times because you got to hear the stories and the battles and stuff that happened to protect the workers and the fishermen and the tendermen in the union, and the sanctity of the fishing industry. And it was that's the one thing that I was always amazed and they always pounded into me, that when you become part of the leadership of a trade union, they said where do you place yourself as a leader. And the answer was three steps below your membership, because the membership must be able to approach you without feeling intimidated. And when you approach it like that, you humble yourself. Because even though you're part of the leadership, you're only the spokesperson for those members. The members guide you and you have to remember that. It's not a position of, I'm the president of a local, or what have you. I'm a representative of the membership, and I speak on their behalf. And that's how I was always raised growing up, is that you respect the worker because no matter how small an issue, to you it might be nothing. But for that person it could be huge and affecting them on a daily basis with the stress. Deal with it. Get it done, don't put it off. Once you start, you finish it.

RM [00:16:16] Homer sometimes went his own way didn't he?

AN [00:16:18] Yeah, but Homer was Homer.

RM [00:16:21] Exactly.

AN [00:16:22] But Homer didn't do it for ulterior reasons. Homer did it because he loved the industry, he loved the people, and he loved the communities that he would go to where he fished. Yeah, Homer was very outspoken. And you needed that.

RM [00:16:40] Yeah.

AN [00:16:41] Because Homer would call people to task if he was in their community and there was something that wasn't going right. You can't always wait for the leadership because then the issue is over. And you know, and the beautiful thing was that the UFAWU executive actually encouraged membership to stand up and speak out. Don't wait for us. If you see an injustice, speak on it. Whether it's an environmental issue, a political issue, get your voice out. Don't be afraid, we're here with you. We don't stand behind you or in front of you. We stand side by side with you.

RM [00:17:20] When you think about it, I mean, that was Homer's great achievement. And of course, he did it with the membership and then the leaders. But I mean, being able to unite the fishing industry with so many different gears and jobs and all up and down the coast, I mean, when you think about it, that's amazing.

AN [00:17:36] It really is. That's the amazing part about the UFAWU. We were an organization that represented the fishermen, the tender men and the shore workers, and there was always animosity amongst the fishermen and the shore workers, fishermen are getting paid and offshore workers are getting paid too much. But when it came to the collective bargaining. The only reason why that we were able to negotiate fish prices and collective agreements with the fishermen was because of the sheer strength of the union. And, one section would not sign until all three sections signed together. And it was an amazing thing to see the unity when we're in negotiations. One room over here would have fishermen negotiating with the company and the shore workers in negotiations here and then meet later to negotiate tender men issues. But the companies knew that the shore workers had the strength to shut down that plant. Back in those days, if you didn't have a clearance and part of the union, you never got unloaded until that clearance was signed.

RM [00:18:49] Do you think that's why so many fishermen signed up with the union, or do you think they really supported the union?

AN [00:18:54] I think back then they supported the union. I think they knew what was happening, and why you had to have a collective agreement with the companies, because "trust me" doesn't work. If you can trust the boss, we wouldn't need a collective agreement. Right. But, you know, later on as things changed, then I got an area quota, area licensing, quota fisheries and all of the leasing licenses. It became more and more difficult because the fishermen were, I wouldn't say duped, but they began to believe that they're independent ...they have still had that hard time recognizing that there's that master-slave relationship. You're still working for Canadian Fish.

RM [00:19:45] Well, I mean, that was the thing that always I thought was so amazing about the UFAWU in organizing fishermen. Not so much shore workers because you've got, you know, covered by the labour code, but the fishermen were not covered by any code. And so, you know, you had to go out and sign them up every single year.

AN [00:20:05] Yeah. And I used to do that as a shore worker. I was one of the very few in British Columbia that would actually go down on the boats and organize and sign them up into union, get the vouchers and talk about the issues in the shore plant and fisheries that are going on the Skeena and the political issues and the environmental issues that, they know, they understood that the union was always active in something, whether it be from Alcan's Kemano 2 Completion Project, to the spraying of pesticides along the Skeena, to working with our First Nations brothers and sisters on land claims issues and fishing rights and everything. It was pretty trying times and very difficult times dealing with a lot of a lot of those issues. But in the front...

RM [00:20:53] Did you ever go out with--was it the George North the organizing boat?

AN [00:20:57] No. That was done before...Executive board.

RM [00:21:03] But you went out and organized...What was it like organizing the fishermen?

AN [00:21:06] Well, you know, they were more surprised because all of the concepts that they had of issues in the shore plants. And when you explain to them exactly, they just went, whoa, I never understood that part. But I think what they appreciated was the fact that somebody on the shore plant was able to go onto their boat and carry on a proper

discussion about the fishing industry and have an understanding of the issues of escapement and, you know, the Alaska salmon treaties, and everything else that was going on, right? .

RM [00:21:42] And then they put up their... On the top of the mast there the UFAWU.

AN [00:21:47] Yeah. They have a flag. That showed that they were union members.

RM [00:21:51] Boy, those were the days.

AN [00:21:53] Yeah. And, you know, I mean, let's face it, the industry was based on racism, right? I mean, there was so much racism right from the start. The old canneries, you had the Japanese village, you had the Chinese village, you had where the First Nations stayed. But none of them were able to communicate with each other because they knew what would happen. They would get organized, and they would fight back. Well, the union was able to break down those barriers and get in there and represent the workers. Even when the Vietnamese fishermen first came in.

RM [00:22:28] Oh, I heard stories about it.

AN [00:22:30] And there was a lot of tension on the water. But myself, Joy and others and John Sutcliffe, I used to go with John because we would go work with the Vietnamese and explain to them and become friends. And once they understood that you don't cork, you don't set this close. Yeah. I mean, they were, you know.

RM [00:22:53] The Vietnamese were tough.

AN [00:22:54] Yeah. But they were also human and they were also very, very friendly.

RM [00:22:59] Once you talked to them. That was.

AN [00:23:01] Once they got through. See, they were always afraid of the union because there was so much tension. They thought you were down there arguing.

RM [00:23:09] Right, with their background. In Vietnam, you know, you don't trust anybody.

AN [00:23:13] But even a new person, whether, you know, gets into the industry, doesn't understand everything. Right? You're going to make mistakes. But working with them, it was great. I mean, every time I would go down on a weekend when John and them were busy I'd go down out to Port Ed and go down on the floats, Arnie, come on, lunchtime, you know, you'd sit there and break bread with them. Have a meal.

RM [00:23:36] Even Vietnamese? So some of them, quite a few came up to Rupert.

AN [00:23:40] Quite a few, big fleet.

RM [00:23:41] I never heard that.

AN [00:23:42] Even when I worked in the plant as a millwright, that was my job there. They would come up and they'd have a problem with a pump or something. That was a quick fix.

That's small just don't take it to the tool shop, I'll fix that on my lunch break. You fix the pump and there you go.

RM [00:24:00] You know, I heard one story early on when the Vietnamese were into the fishing industry. This was down in the mainland and they didn't really know what to make of the union. They just wanted to out go fishing and didn't want anyone to see [unclear]. And so the union boat approached them, or something like that, and they didn't know quite what was going on. And suddenly all these guns appeared, oh, it's fine!

AN [00:24:25] And look at where they came from.

RM [00:24:26] Oh, that's what I'm saying. Yeah. And it also goes to they were tough. They weren't going to back down on anything. It's a matter of communication.

AN [00:24:34] Yeah. And letting them know that you're here to help them, not to dissuade them or try to get them out of the industry. We're here to represent you and your rights. And because in trade unionism, colour, race, language, gender, none of that has a bearing. A worker, is a worker is a worker is a worker. And that's what Georgette Desautels always told us. A scab, is a scab is a scab, but a worker is a worker is a worker.

RM [00:25:06] Well, that was Homer's great thing, too. Is bringing in, is breaking down those barriers of race in the union.

AN [00:25:12] Yeah. Well, I mean, you look at it when the officers went to jail, who became president of the union. Buck Suzuki.

RM [00:25:19] Did you know Buck?

AN [00:25:20] I had never--he passed away before I had a chance to meet him. But I still serve on the board of directors for the T Buck Suzuki.

RM [00:25:28] What a great guy he was.

AN [00:25:29] Yeah. And I mean, he helped bring the Japanese fishermen back into the industry after World War Two. Right?

RM [00:25:35] Well, you read his memoirs and or, I don't know, an interview with him or somewhere, and he gives credit to Homer. Because they wanted to try to get back fishing with the few that came back and there was resistance. And Homer went out and said, that's it, that's it. You're part of it. They're part of us. You know, and he gave total credit to the. Because the, you know, the UFAWU did kind of support internment. I mean, it was the times, right? But post-war Homer was, I don't know what Homer even thought personally about it, but he said, break it down. They're us. And, you know, T Buck Suzuki always gave credit to Homer and the UFAWU.

AN [00:26:20] And that's why when the union formed their environmental wing, they named it after Buck Suzuki because of the fact that Tatsuro would always talk about the importance of preserving the environment and that long before there was ever an environmental movement. So that's why they named it the T Buck Suzuki Foundation.

RM [00:26:42] So, Arnie, what were relations like from where you sat with the Native Brotherhood?

AN [00:26:50] Well, it's family that was brotherhood. And I mean, there was always difficult times. You know, and I've always, along with others, tried to find some way to work together. But there was that alienation amongst some people that because it was a native only organization. And I said, yeah, what's the deal? I don't care. I mean, they have a right to have representation and if it's something that's based along cultural lines, that's fine. But they can still join the union and be Brotherhood members at the same time. But it was just the politics and the mistrust back in those days that really made things difficult. Right?

RM [00:27:37] Because Homer really believed in working with the Native Brotherhood, didn't he?

AN [00:27:40] Yeah. And so did my mother. And my grandfather was, dii chan, was a member of the Native Brotherhood, even though his daughter was an organizer for the UFAWU. But I mean, it's family ties that go back. I mean, it's a very long surviving organization. But they find themselves now in the same boat as our organization where times are very tough for the membership" . And now is more important now than ever that we work together for the common goal of maintaining the commercial fishery in the industry.

RM [00:28:21] The Brotherhood still exists?

AN [00:28:23] Yes, it does.

RM [00:28:25] So, what about strikes and labour disputes you remember?

AN [00:28:29] Oh, we been through a few. I think the most important strike that I was ever part of was in 1989, and that was the first free trade strike fought in Canada.

RM [00:28:40] Yeah, you're right.

AN [00:28:41] And it was just an incredibly tough time because the companies decided, we found out after, that they thought that was the year that they were going to be able to break the union. And they did everything in their power to break the union. And I mean, we had people going out fishing and then coming in and trying to get rid of their catch. And it was more than one boat that I went down and untied and said, time to leave, you scabbed. And then they get on their phone and the cop would come down and the cop would look at him and says, You know what, buddy? Everybody's got a choice in this life, and every choice has a consequence. You went out fishing, you scabbed.

RM [00:29:34] The cops said that?

AN [00:29:34] Yeah. And he says, and the consequence is, the people that are tied up want you to leave. "You're not going to do nothing?" And the cop, looks at him and he says, "I got to live in this town after this is over". He says, "I'd just do what they say, I'd leave town". He didn't tell him he had to. He just said you had a choice. You screwed up. And, that was I mean, I had a gun pulled on me that time because we were untying the boat to say that's it. You know, people were uniting about, you know, not serving people that went fishing because they know the importance of the fishing industry in town. But it was 18 days. That's the longest strike. I mean, we lost our season. But the young people in the industry, some of them had only been in there for three or four weeks, you know, when this all started, stood the line. That was one of the most memorable things is to see

all of these young people standing up, holding picket signs, defending the industry, because when you explain to them, this is about you. They're trying to take your rights away as probationary employees. They got the picture very quickly, but we always made sure we had experienced people on the picket lines with them that could deal with the situation, and we're always in contact with each other, right. But it was amazing. I mean, we got a pension plan out of it.

RM [00:31:09] You know, and yet you couldn't hold back the economic forces, could you?

AN [00:31:16] In which way?

RM [00:31:17] Well, I mean, free trade sort of came in at all and they started moving all the fish south. Even despite your heroic stand.

AN [00:31:25] Yeah. And, the fish was also, I mean, we've been in Ottawa countless times to try and get them to do something to protect the industry. But big business, had the ear of government, not the working people. And now look at what has turned into a complete monopolization of the industry by Jimmy Pattison, but the unions is still there fighting.

RM [00:31:48] So let's go back to the shore workers now because like, I just want to talk about this forever. So what can you talk say about the local shore workers, at least, I suppose during the good times? You were a millwright?

AN [00:32:02] Yeah, I started off as just as a labourer and then a posting came up for an apprenticeship. So I put my name in and I managed to land one of the positions.

RM [00:32:15] So were you in the same plant all the time or you drift around?

AN [00:32:18] Yeah, I. Well, I was a millwright. I was in the same plant, the big cannery plant for 30 years.

RM [00:32:25] Yeah. Is that the one that closed or?

AN [00:32:27] Yeah.

RM [00:32:28] There's still a bit of processing that goes on there?

AN [00:32:30] Yeah. But it's just basically landing, ship out, and then with any salmon, it's just being put in the totes and shipped off to China for processing.

RM [00:32:40] Yeah. My God. It's criminal.

AN [00:32:42] It's criminal. To think that there used to be 1,300 people in that plant working 24 hours a day, non-stop. And now, they got maybe a hundred people.

RM [00:32:53] When was that then when you were at peak?

AN [00:32:57] 1985, I think we did 540,000 cases of salmon that year. Yeah, it was incredible.

RM [00:33:09] And how much of the workforce would have been women?

AN [00:33:12] Oh, probably 70%, if not more.

RM [00:33:16] What were they like?

AN [00:33:18] Oh, they were great. We all had fun. You know, we'd joke around. I mean, people lost tempers and stuff because you're tired, right? Your goin' seven days a week. But yeah, it was a fun experience because people had fun. They were making good money. You know, and they understood that.

RM [00:33:40] Hard work, but.

AN [00:33:41] Yeah. And they were actually able to qualify for EI in the off seasons so that they were carried through to the winter. Yeah, it was, I mean people came from Vancouver to come work up here during the summers and you know, from the inland the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en territories would come here and people from Alberta and then all of the outlying

RM [00:34:06] Miss the old days, eh?

AN [00:34:06] Yeah, all of the outlying villages would come in and work. I mean, the fishing industry was the largest single employers of single mothers in the north coast here. I mean, that's amazing when you think about it.

RM [00:34:26] Yeah. You don't hear that very often.

AN [00:34:27] No. And, a lot of the women were the leadership in the plants. Like my Aunty Emily Brown. You know, she had the power to organize something in such a hurry. I remember everybody worked so, so long, and the carnival came into town. Nobody showed up to work because they hadn't been with their kids for a long time. So the boss said a lot were probationary employees and so the company said, you're fired. So me, the organizer and Emily went to meet with the company. And I always remember Emily because we were arguing with the company and she looks over at me and she says, Arnie, shut up. Jim, shut up. And she looked over and she pointed at the boss. And you listen. You better understand that every one of those kids that you fight are related to somebody on that plant floor. Do you really want to open that up? 120 kids got fired, 30 seconds after she said that, they all got reinstated.

RM [00:35:47] What a great story.

AN [00:35:49] Yup, she had the wisdom.

AN [00:35:53] That is fantastic.

AN [00:35:55] It's just like that year we were planning to shut down the plant with a full crew and every piece of machinery in that plant was running. But we were going to begin strike action. And nobody knew when. It was just a handful of us that knew what was going to happen. But nope, none of us knew when. It was when Aunty Emily decided it was gonna go. And when she decided, because there was no bosses on the floor, they were all upstairs having some kind of a meeting, she just walked out, and that was the signal. That's it. So you got thirteen-line cannery going, you got every line butcher going, you got the fish floor going, the warehouse all going. It's like a high-speed race car just

screaming along [sound like racing car] and then it's just, [quieter sound of car]. Within a minute and a half, two minutes that plant was empty.

RM [00:36:55] Yeah. And she wasn't full time, right? She worked union.

AN [00:36:58] Oh no, Emily was our chief shop steward.

RM [00:37:01] Yeah. She was First Nations right?

AN [00:37:05] Yup, Haida. And that was just that [unclear]. And the bosses come out and they seen everybody go on. What's going on? What's going on? It was, it was an amazing thing to be part of.

RM [00:37:16] When was that?

AN [00:37:17] I'm just trying to remember the year because we've done so many things in the plant, right? That all becomes just memories. Because you don't remember the dates anymore. And actually, if I was smart enough back then, I would have actually written down all of this stuff.

RM [00:37:37] Well, your memory's pretty good.

AN [00:37:39] But it was, yeah, it was amazing the strength that she had. That even when she battled cancer, she attributes her getting better and defeating cancer to the strength that she got from the union, right.

RM [00:37:55] Boy, I've never heard unions responsible for that.

AN [00:37:59] But it was just.

RM [00:38:00] Better keep that quiet. Everyone would want to join a union.

AN [00:38:02] Yeah, but it was just her beliefs because of the family that she developed, right?

RM [00:38:09] And, how much, what percentage would you say were First Nations?

AN [00:38:17] More than.

RM [00:38:18] Quite a few? Over 50?

AN [00:38:21] Well in the earlier days, yeah, more than 50. And then, I would say, probably in the early days 50%, and then maybe 30% later on.

RM [00:38:33] Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's good jobs, for good money.

AN [00:38:38] Yeah. I mean, you could feed your family for a year. And if you had the seniority you'd work the herring. I mean, pretty much back in those days, if you're in fresh fish, everybody worked the herring season, right. Freezing the herring and stuff along that line. So you had the food herring, in the fall, and the roe herring in the spring, and then you had the salmon season.

RM [00:39:04] And those would be processed differently is that?

AN [00:39:07] Yeah, but the roe herring and the food herring were all just frozen in blocks.

RM [00:39:12] Oh, I see. Yeah, so you didn't really process them?

AN [00:39:16] Yeah, but the roe herring would have been, would have stayed here. Then we pop the eggs.

RM [00:39:22] Right, right. Oh, you guys would do that?

AN [00:39:25] Yeah. But then they brought in machines that were doing it and cut down. But everything's about mechanization.

RM [00:39:30] Do you remember the days, though, when they had to manually pop the.

AN [00:39:33] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:39:34] What was that like? There's a skill to it, isn't there?

AN [00:39:37] Yeah, but what it did do is it created a lot of the repetitive motion injuries.

RM [00:39:44] Interesting.

AN [00:39:45] Yeah. And it took a long time before that was finally recognized by the WCB as a legitimate injury. But that was through the union and others that worked, and, I forget the lady's name, but they did a study and showed that, yes, this repetitive motion actually is an issue, and it has to be recognized.

RM [00:40:11] So when did it start to really slow down, you know?

AN [00:40:16] I mean you had it cyclical years where just nature of [unclear] things didn't come. But things really started to slow down once the quota fisheries were introduced because we used to work the roe herring and then it would be the halibut season.

RM [00:40:34] Yes.

AN [00:40:35] And it would be a lottery fishery. Everybody goes out until the quota is caught. Then when they started doing it in quotas, you know, there was 120 people at the Atlin fish plant that lost their season because you weren't getting that influx of halibut all in one shot. You were only getting a little bit here and a little bit here because they had a whole year to catch the quota. So a lot of the guys started banking on when the prices might increase and stuff like that. Right. And then the leasing was, proved to be a big problem.

RM [00:41:11] Did people leased their fish boats?

AN [00:41:13] No, they would lease the license.

RM [00:41:15] Oh, lease the license. Yes, yes, yes,

AN [00:41:16] So the license was leased, so a lot of the guys that needed to make a few extra dollars because maybe they had a poor season, had a boat capable of fishing the halibut, would lease the license. So the guy sitting at home in his ivory tower that had money to buy up quota would lease the quota to this guy for, say, five bucks a pound, but the fishermen might only be getting \$7 a pound. So he's actually out there fishing for \$2. And it led to a lot of boats not going out fishing because what they would do if somebody had quota, the skippers or whoever owned the license, would all go on one boat and stack the license.

RM [00:42:03] Really.

AN [00:42:04] So, you know, say if you had 50,000 pounds of the halibut quota and the other boat had ten. Well everybody went on the boats, stacked the license because it was the way that they could make the money, instead of going out there and fishing your 10,000 pound quota or whatever. And I noticed it right away.

RM [00:42:28] And the good days started to be less and less.

AN [00:42:31] Yeah. And then the politics got involved. And bad deals with America and the Kennedy U.S. salmon treaties in southeast Alaska. Whereas after week 26, they're not really restricted as the way they used to be, so they can fish. But it's all Skeena Nass River stocks, predominantly Skeena River fish that is caught off Tree Point and (unclear) Island. Right.

RM [00:43:01] And really, it's gotten to like UFAWU doesn't even negotiate anymore, does it?

AN [00:43:06] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:43:07] Still negotiate contracts? You've only got about 12 people left.

AN [00:43:11] No there's more than that. We just had a major victory, is that the UFAWU is certified to negotiate for seine crews.

RM [00:43:19] Yeah, I saw that.

AN [00:43:20] Yeah, that's huge.

AN [00:43:23] Oh, there's enough out there.

RM [00:43:27] Yeah, I noticed that.

AN [00:43:28] I mean people always tend to portray the fishing industry as a sunset industry, you know? I don't look at it like that. It's still a sunrise industry. There's still potential to rebuild the fishing industry here in British Columbia. The problem is, is that there's not the government will yet.

RM [00:43:46] But you can't force the salmon to come back.

AN [00:43:48] No, but you can change the licensing policy where the fishermen is licensed, but not the, you know, quotas that are owned by other people, to bring people back into the industry, to take the monopolization away from Jimmy Pattison, because he's

owner and everything. Owner-operator is an important principle. Right. Fleet separation. Get the fleet away from the ownership of the company. Then people can go out there and fish and make some money, not be totally subservient to Jimmy.

RM [00:44:25] But there's still a reality out there about the salmon.

AN [00:44:28] There's problems, but there's still fish out there that could be rebuilt. And, I look at it like this recent disaster that's going on, on the Fraser with that slide. They knew in June that this had happened. They'd done nothing for an entire year.

RM [00:44:48] I don't agree with you, but go ahead. I think they've been heroes.

AN [00:44:52] They had a month to start doing something to get it done. They waited and waited. Now they're coming, and they're making some gains on it. And I'm not mocking them. But the government had time to react a lot quicker than they did. They knew the situation. They understand what happened to the salmon after Hells Gate slide and the devastation that that call caused, right. There was time to react. They're reacting now and doing what they can. But how much farther ahead would we be in preserving and making sure that those salmon can make it up to spawn and complete the journey? If they would have acted right after they knew it, not.

RM [00:45:35] So you remember the last time? There's no fish price agreement now anymore, is there?

AN [00:45:41] I don't know how far the negotiations will come.

RM [00:45:44] You mean the UFAWU still sits down with.

AN [00:45:46] The companies and negotiates.

RM [00:45:49] Fish purchase agreements?

AN [00:45:50] That's what that's why we have the same fleet certification. That's what they've been doing.

RM [00:45:55] But not for the price of salmon?

RM [00:45:57] It's based on price of salmon because it.

RM [00:45:59] Has no, it doesn't have the support for collective action anymore does it?

AN [00:46:05] Well we're still a union and we still all work together. I'm not a pessimist really, I'm an optimist. There will be challenges. Yes. Will, we succeed. Yes. Why? Because it's an organization that has stood the front lines for since time immemorial. In my view, because there was always an organized position of fishermen and others, the UFAWU might not have been right from the very beginning. But, I mean, if you go back in history, 1937, the Fishermen newspaper almost 100 years ago was being printed to provide information to the fleet. Now the Fishermen newspaper because of the dynamics of the industry and the costs isn't being done no more. But that was a valuable tool that was.

RM [00:47:00] The company guys all read it.

AN [00:47:01] Yeah. Just so that they could figure out what the union was doing right.

RM [00:47:04] Well, it was full of information. I mean, it was terrific. That guy Geoff Meggs is pretty good editor.

AN [00:47:10] Yeah. And there's been a few since Geoff. But I mean, it always let the people tell the story. It's not somebody behind the desk telling the story.

RM [00:47:20] That's right.

AN [00:47:22] And that was the important thing.

RM [00:47:24] Do you want to talk about communism in the union?

AN [00:47:28] What about it?

RM [00:47:29] Well.

AN [00:47:30] The trade union movement in British Columbia, Canada, was founded by the Communists.

RM [00:47:35] Well, not entirely but I know what you're saying. Yeah, certainly. A lot of the ultra.

AN [00:47:38] Left wing.

RM [00:47:40] A lot of industrial organizing was done by the Communists absolutely right. Were you a communist?

AN [00:47:44] No, but I was always a friend of the party because I believed in a lot of what they said. And to help them keep the lights going I used to sell, or get subscriptions from the public, for Pacific Tribune.

RM [00:47:57] It was good newspaper.

AN [00:47:58] Yeah, I enjoyed it.

RM [00:47:59] Yeah. Same. I was a labour reporter. I got lots of information out of that.

AN [00:48:02] Yeah, I was never a member, but I was always a friend.

RM [00:48:05] What about your Mum?

AN [00:48:06] No, my Mum was never a member of it. But all her friends were members of it from the old days, it never bothered her.

RM [00:48:13] Yeah. And the fisherman weren't communist. But they all supported the union, right?

AN [00:48:17] Yeah. I mean, I still get called that. You're a communist. [unclear] or Commie Ernie or Red. Oh, better red than dead. You know, I mean how far do you want to push it?

RM [00:48:31] Did that hurt the union or help it, do you think?

AN [00:48:35] I think it was a tool that was used by those that were against the unions to red bait. Right. But if it hurt the union, we wouldn't be here.

RM [00:48:44] Exactly. Oh, my God. Can we keep going or what do you think?

DS [00:48:49] We've got someone coming at 11 so.

RM [00:48:52] Let's go [unclear].

RM [00:48:53] You don't care about him, right? So I got a couple more questions then. I mean, this is great. I could talk to you forever. Do you wanna say anything about the decision to join the CAW and now Unifor?

AN [00:49:04] I spoke in favour of it at the convention. I think it was important that we had a national organization that believed in the Canadian values to give us, stand with us in our fight. Because, you know, the UFAWU organized the east coast. That's why it's the Food Fishermen and Allied Workers Union.

RM [00:49:25] It didn't go very well out there though.

AN [00:49:27] No, but they're still there. And that was an organization that we did, but there were also members of the CAW, well Unifor now. They merged with the CAW because now we have a national voice Canada wide. And when I sat on the council, or shore workers council nationwide, we had people in Winnipeg that worked in the fishing industry and the Lakes Fisheries that remember the Great Lakes Food Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, Food Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, UFAWU. I mean, we had representation. Canada wide, the fight for many of the issues, because what we're fighting here in British Columbia about the export of fish unprocessed is the same fight that's going on in Lake Winnipeg.

RM [00:50:19] We got, how much longer can we go?

DS [00:50:22] I'd like to know about the Unemployed Action Centre.

RM [00:50:25] Yeah, I know, I was going. I know.

DS [00:50:27] Five, 10 minutes.

RM [00:50:28] All right. Because I've still got more questions but we want to make sure you get it on it. What's the history of the Unemployed Action Centre, Unemployment Action Centre?

AN [00:50:36] The Unemployed Action Centre was founded by the BC Federation of Labour back in the early eighties. It was a program to assist because the unemployment was so high and it was funded entirely by the BC Federation of Labour. When they started cancelling the funding, many of the action centres in British Columbia closed. This one

here is one of, I think, two, maybe three that are from the original days of the Unemployed Action Centre. And it's funded through trade union movements and now some funding through the Law Foundation.

RM [00:51:15] The Law Foundation? Really?

AN [00:51:17] Yeah.

RM [00:51:19] Are you full time?

AN [00:51:20] I'm full time here now. Yeah, my funding comes from the Aboriginal Homeless Program through the Prince Rupert Community Aboriginal Service Society, PRACSS. So yeah, mine is through that. But there was such a demand for more help here, which is why the second office, Paul and I work together. I mean, it suits Paul. Paul is the main co-ordinator for the Unemployed Action Centre. My, I was supposed to do last year 270 clients. I was 540. I was more than double what was expected. And already this year, I'm over 300.

RM [00:52:10] Why is that?

AN [00:52:11] The need for income assistance. We're finding a lot of work, we're at that age now where people are qualifying for CPP and OAS and we're helping them on that. With the housing issues going on, with the high rents and landlords thinking they can do a lot of.

RM [00:52:32] So it's a lot of social issues, not just the unemployed.

AN [00:52:34] Yeah, social issues. I've been dealing a lot with First Nations on the day school program, class action suit, but helping them get their registrations done. And actually, hopefully, things are a little slow for a couple of days that I can get out and go meet with somebody at the credit union because I want to plan, a financial advice course, for my clients that are going to be getting compensation.

RM [00:53:04] So the fact that you're so busy doesn't mean that unemployment is way up in Prince Rupert?.

AN [00:53:09] Unemployment's up. But I mean.

RM [00:53:11] Because people are working on the docks, we had that conversation. But it's still I mean, it's still employing people.

AN [00:53:16] But it's employing people. But a lot of them aren't getting the full time employment.

RM [00:53:21] And I understand that. But it wasn't that long ago where none of them were working there. So.

AN [00:53:24] No. The waterfront industry, longshoring, took a big hit for quite a few years. They were starting to move into Vancouver.

RM [00:53:33] And then the pulp mill.

AN [00:53:34] Yeah. With the pulp mill closure. With the fish plant closure. Now we're seeing, because it was such a disastrous fishing season, I've been dealing with a lot of fishermen that didn't make enough to qualify for EI. So to get them onto income assistance, so they have a little bit of help.

RM [00:53:58] You must not look back and still can't believe what's happened to the fishing industry?

AN [00:54:03] I, to be honest with you, I wanted to take a tour through the plant, take a look, and I could get the permission to do it. I don't have the heart to do it, you know, because you walk by all of these machines and it's they've turned it into a graveyard of parts. And when you look back and go, you know, this built my career. This sent me to school. This was what fed my family since I was a baby when my mom and others worked in here and now, it is nothing. You're just thrown off to the side. And, I mean, when you hear about all of the closures that are going on with the sawmills, I completely understand the devastation. I mean, when I got my phone call before the press release was out, the plant manager had the decency to phone us and say, this is what's going on. I want you guys to know before it is announced in an hour, the cannery's down. And it's just like, what, you know, you don't even know how to answer it because you're in such shock, right? I mean, I had been here 37 years. I was very, very fortunate because of my education and having a millwright ticket, I was able to get on at the hospital and work maintenance for two years until the arthritis in my knees just got so bad. When I picked up my granddaughter, I was having a hard time. I says, No, that's it. She's coming ahead of any of this stuff. I want to be able to spend quality time with her, not be a cripple grandpa, dii chan. And it's great.

RM [00:55:54] What was that last shift like?

AN [00:55:57] At the fish plant? Oh, it was always fun. I mean, everybody knows.

RM [00:56:02] No. When it when so much of it closed. I mean, there must have been a last kind of a shift when.

AN [00:56:07] No, they announced it in November.

AN [00:56:09] Oh, they did? Yes, of course they did. Yeah, that's right. That's right. People just didn't go back.

AN [00:56:16] Yeah. And you know, the stress that it caused on people. Like shortly after that, in February, I was diagnosed with diabetes. I mean, it's been genetic in my family, but they said you should have had this when you were in your thirties or late twenties because of your family history. How did you hold it off? I says, well, I eat traditional foods, right? And that's how I've always been. But it was that stress and the economic future that just kept riding in your brain, not sleep. And they figure it was the final push over the edge. And that was the doctor's words and I went, well, crying ain't gonna fix it, what are we going to do about it? Let's learn to live with it. I said, I want to make sure I'm around because I'm on a mission now, and I want to see Jimmy Pattison pay for what he did to Prince Rupert and the membership. I says, I want to make sure we get those licenses and that and when I die I can sleep easy. Right? I hate to have to come back and torment him from the grave.

RM [00:57:25] But he's going to live forever. He's 90.

AN [00:57:28] Well, you know, they always say it's not nice to speak bad of those that have passed, but when that (expletive) goes, they're going to build a special hell for those that believe in that, because he's just that to me, he's just that rotten of a person destroying communities, destroying livelihoods. You know, no respect for anybody except the almighty dollar. So that goes against every value I was raised.

RM [00:58:00] That's a quite a note to end on. Do you want to say something positive?

AN [00:58:04] The fishing industry is here, the union is here. We're optimistic that we're going to be here for another 50 years. And I think there will still be a salmon industry. I still think that we have the potential to build it to the point that it can start employing and providing the proper employment for coastal communities and a lot of the outlying areas. We just have to make sure that we stay united and that we make sure that we get those changes done and the change isn't going to be done on a political promise during election time. It's going to be done through the hard work. And I know that we have that commitment from the Unifor and other organizations across this country to make sure that that happens on the East Coast and on the West Coast because, as the old saying goes, an injury to one is an injury all.

RM [00:59:00] Well, that was great. Thank you. I could've talked to you for another hour. You're amazing Arnie.