

Interview: Ken Georgetti (KG)

Interviewer: Phil Legg (PL)

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Transcription: Marie Decaire

PL [00:00:11] OK Ken, start by telling a bit about your early years and about your family, and whether or not there was union or progressive interest in your family.

KG [00:00:22] Well, my father was active in the local union. He was a trustee. He was on the bargaining committee when they bargain the first pension program. The early stages of the pension program. Lynn Williams came and he was the National Director for Canada. And he negotiated the pension agreement. My father was on that committee. He was active in the local union. And also when the when the NDP formed. My father voted Liberal until the NDP formed and then he became immediately a member of the NDP.

PL [00:00:58] So, you were born in Trail?

KG [00:01:03] I was born in Trail.

PL [00:01:03] And so, your first job was there?

KG [00:01:08] First full-time job was actually at Fording Coal. I was hired by the same company that owned Fording Coal as the Trail operations. And I went up... up there stripping overburden. From the open pit site. And because of my connections the Steelworkers were organized there. My father the Staff Rep there was the same staff rep in Trail asked me to be the Recording Secretary of the first local union in Fording.

PL [00:01:42] And so, when did you start working for Cominco?

KG [00:01:55] I want to say, nineteen seventy-one, seventy- two, around there. I started off I worked in in the lead smelter. I worked my way up became a crane operator in the smelter plant. And then took an apprenticeship and then got into the apprenticeship program.

PL [00:02:10] OK so tell me a little bit about the apprenticeship, what was it in?.

KG [00:02:14] I took an apprenticeship in steam fitting and pipe fitting. And that's where I got re-engaged in the Union.

KG [00:02:21] Danny Bradford, who was active in the British Columbia Government Employees Union, and I Danny was a millwright apprentice...we weren't happy with the way our apprenticeships were being treated by the company. So we went down and met with the then President. He said come to the local union meeting and bring a bunch of apprentices with you. So we brought 100 apprentices down with us. We of course were in the bar before the meeting started and, at that meeting they happened to be nominating people to go to conventions and conferences for the local union. We realized we had the majority of the people there. So everybody that wanted to run for something ran and got elected to go to try. I went to Toronto for the Canadian Steelworkers conference, and people went to Las Vegas for the international convention and all the old activists got left out because we outvoted them they were all really pissed off.

PL [00:03:13] Okay so just in terms of issues that were front and centre in the early 70s at Cominco...

KG [00:03:20] That was where we were still using asbestos at the time, PCBs; they were just discovering the terrible effects of PCBs. One of my first jobs every Friday, you'd take the tradesman's tools down to the rectifier room and dunk them in this chemical that would melt all the grease off the off the wrenches - it was PCBs. And we were just starting to discover the effects, the health and safety program the Steelworkers were developing would just coming into place. And we started to ask a lot of questions that the company didn't like answering about the side effects of all of these chemicals and reagents and all these things that we were exposing ourselves to.

PL [00:04:02] And so that led to a difficult bargaining table issue did that become just a..

KG [00:04:08] It became a bargaining table issue to a certain extent, and then a number of fatalities happened, in the plants. And we walked off the job because guys were getting killed regularly. And at that point, because of the walk out, the company gave us two full time safety coordinators - working for the union full time but paid for by the company. That's when health and safety really took off because they had the power to shut an operation down if it was unsafe. Or restrict work if it was unsafe and it made the company behave in a way different manner.

PL [00:04:44] So how did that coincide with you becoming active in the local union?

KG [00:04:50] Well from our meeting from that membership meeting we went to Danny and I became co-chairs of the local apprenticeship committee. And we got active in that. When I finished my apprenticeship. I was still interested in being active in the local and I became a shop steward then a chief shop steward of my department which was construction. And then full-time grievance chair, at the local union.

KG [00:05:17] We went through a set of negotiations - a tough set of negotiations, it was... Inflation was running rampant. We got a, I think, a 33 percent wage and benefit increase over two years and it passed by 50.8 percent.

PL [00:05:35] This is what?

KG [00:05:37] That would've been about '82, and CAIMAW - the Canadian unions were sniffing around, they started a raid. The President at the time stepped down and they asked me to take over. The executive elected me as the President, to walk through or run the local union. During that first CAIMAW or the second CAIMAW raid, in Trail, which we won of course.

PL [00:06:04] So, you were elected President sort of, '81 or '82?

KG [00:06:07] Yeah. Somewhere around there.

PL [00:06:12] So let's talk a little bit about in the 1970s and 1980s the provincial Labour Code. As well as wage and price control which was going on at about the same time. So, you had the Labour Code came in under the Barrett administration 72 to 75. And then during the mid to late 70s you had wage and price controls. Any recollection of how those things affected you?

KG [00:06:54] Yeah. my recollection on the wage and price controls the CLC had a program under Dennis McDermott, that they would provide strike support to anyone that would try to break the wage and price control pattern. And we were in, and I remember we're in the middle of bargaining during then, and if it wasn't Dennis McDermott, it was someone from the Congress, came out to make a speech to the membership about the support they would get from the rest of the union movement, if we would stick and try to break the pattern on the restrictions on the wage settlements. I think we settled, I don't know if we broke the pattern or not, I wasn't acutely aware of what was going on I was in the periphery of that.

PL [00:07:37] And then how about the Labour Code during that Barrett years? How would that have, or would it have of, affected the local, your involvement in the local...

KG [00:07:52] Sort of, except remember that's we had a really pretty mature collective agreement, so most of the things in the Barrett code didn't have much effect on us at the COMINCO workplace. Our collective agreement was a pretty tight agreement and well negotiated.

PL [00:08:07] So let's jump ahead a bit to the early 1980s and now we've got the Social Credit government back in power, and you've got the restraint bills or the restraint packages from '82 and '83 and that, leading to some of the activism at the local level around Solidarity.

KG [00:08:34] Solidarity, yeah. Again, I was just becoming active at the Federation level as well working with the... I think Art Kube was the President then and Mike Kramer from CUPE, was the Secretary Treasurer. Mike came to Trail to talk to us about that and why it was important for us to pledge support for solidarity and the Solidarity Movement. He did such a good job that our executive said if we're asked we're going to, we're going to go out with Solidarity Movement. I remember going up to, as the President, going up to meet with the general manager and said look you know a Solidarity thing that's going on, if we get called we're shutting the smelter down. And his eyes got big like saucers. And he said you Ken, we have a collective agreement, you can't shut this. And I said Well I'm not gonna shut down and it'll just happen. And he said Oh yeah. And he says I suppose guys with ski masks will show up with leaflet as normal? I says yeah probably I hear they will. And he just stormed out of the meeting he was so angry with us. But I I put it to him that if they called on us the smelter would go down which is it takes three days to shut it down and takes five days to start it back up. So it would be an expensive proposition for them and us we didn't have to do it but I'm sure the message I gave him got to the powers that be in Victoria, that they weren't alone. We're just going to happen in Vancouver was going to start to happen across the province.

PL [00:10:01] So let's talk about the transition from that to you becoming active in the BC Fed. Describe for me the chronology some of your interest in doing so.

KG [00:10:16] Well again it's sort of happened that the District 3 Director for the Steelworkers didn't feel comfortable. He was from Winnipeg didn't feel comfortable.

PL [00:10:25] Can we just hold on a sec we got an airplane.

KG [00:10:33] Were part of the approach to the landing. The landing approach for Langley.

PL [00:10:41] Where's it coming from?

KG [00:10:42] Langley.

KG [00:10:46] Yeah, the District 3 Director for the Steelworkers was from Manitoba and didn't.. never sort of fit in with British Columbia, the labour movement and politics. Normally he would have had the seat, the Steelworkers seat, at the CLC executive but never felt comfortable taking it. So someone had to take it for the Steelworkers, and I and another guy named Buchinski from Kamloops had a runoff in our caucus; the Steelworkers, and I was successful. So I became the Vice President... at the B.C. Fed, Representing the Steelworkers. On the, we used to call them the Officers then.

PL [00:11:25] And so that was around when?

KG [00:11:28] It was about '84 I think. Yeah, '84.

PL [00:11:33] And then from there. When did you. move to become President of the Fed?

KG [00:11:39] '86. The leadership was not happy with the current leadership. Cliff Andstein had become the Secretary Treasurer after Mike Kramer left and. I was approached by John Shields, Tom Kozar, to consider running for President of the Federation. On the other side of it you'll recall Gerry Stoney, from IWA. had aspirations to be the President of the IWA, but there was someone he thought might get in his way named Roger Stanyer. So Gerry was trying to promote Roger Stanyer for President of the Federation. And Jack wouldn't, Jack wouldn't help him do that -. Jack Munro - and Jack said no, we should get Kenny to do it, and him and John were the two main prime movers to put me into office.

PL [00:12:37] So you become BC Fed President in '86. Describe the world in which you, and the labour. movement that you were now going to be heading.

KG [00:12:47] Well we just elected the Vander Zalm administration, just got elected ahead of that. And he had all made all these grandiose promises and his you know his slogans and and such and we knew what was coming. So we tried to, we tried to position ourselves that we could look more reasonable than he was. And we tried to really a reasonable approach to labour relations and how it should be more problem solving and fair and less confrontational and all those things, and we had the public on board and we even had the Labour Minister on board at the time. But after the smoke was settled Vander Zalm wrote the Code with some of his key staff and it came out in a very one sided Labour Code that basically premised itself on the notion that we're all benefactors or beneficiaries of a competitive market economy. And the Code had to promote a competitive market economy, not good labour relations. So we didn't like that very much we kept pushing back and pushing back and pushing back. And when it finally passed in early '87 or in the spring of '87, our reaction was to show our displeasure. We shut down the Province for a day.

PL [00:14:05] Talk a little bit about the process that you went through internally within the Fed in order to pull that off.

KG [00:14:12] It was transformative at the time... We used, we actually shot TV commercials. And were asking Vander Zalm on the air why he was being so confrontational, and we were trying to be so reasonable. We actually turned the table on him and made him look like the confrontational aggressor and we were very peaceful and looking for non-confrontational solutions. And we bested him in the court of public opinion.

We had the public on our side. We had rallies across the province, and we kept building momentum, and momentum towards trying to persuade the government not to pass the legislation as it stood, and to amend it in a way that was more reasonable and fair to working people. He wouldn't do it. And as a result, we had to show him our displeasure in some way. So we asked... well do you back up a bit, there was a lot of militants out there of course in our movement there's a strong militant faction in B.C. that wanted a general strike - not a one-day general strike - but a general strike. And we found some middle ground saying, OK we'll shut it down for a day and see what kind of a response we get from the government. In terms of their attitude going forward after that. So on June 1st we had a general strike it was kind of neat. Vancouver there was no rush hour that day, either in the morning or in the evening the traffic had just stopped. More people stopped working than we claim to have membership in the Federation. And it was quite interesting. It was quite interesting the reaction that day.

KG [00:15:49] The newspapers the next day called it a reasonable response from Labour. They didn't say we were out to lunch or too militant and aggressive. They actually said our response was measured and reasonable considering VanderZalm's approach. So we actually beat him using modern day techniques in the media. We beat him at his own game. Unfortunately he is the Premier, he had the power, and he just sort of walked through it and just walked out the other end. But we did damage him. From that point on we put a boycott on the Legislation, and we knew we'd succeeded in that, when the BCGEU with John Shields went into bargaining. They came to an impasse. And the government negotiators agreed with them to contract out mediation and not use the the Industrial Relations Council, then Labour Relations Board, to solve the dispute the government themselves agreed to go and abide by our boycott and not use the mediators from the from the labour board.

PL [00:16:53] Just roll that back a bit. The Labour Code as written by Vander Zalm set up, instead of a Labour Relations Board...what?.

KG [00:17:02] They called it the Industrial Relations Council. They didn't call it want to call it Labour Relations because they didn't believe in the term labour relations. So they called it an Industrial Relations Council. It was headed by a guy named Ed Peck, and a number of vice chairs and mediators were part of the Industrial Relations Council. We said we would boycott that. We would give exemptions for certification applications to the Industrial Relations Council, but anything else had to go through a screening committee at the Federation. If you need needed or sought an exemption from the boycott.

PL [00:17:39] So you have to justify...

KG [00:17:40] Justify it to the Fed and then you could go to the Board if it was urgent and there was no other recourse. And there was very few of those. But we spent the entire term of VanderZalm's government, from June 1st '87 on, not using the Labour Relations Board or the Mediation Branch at the time.

PL [00:18:00] We skipped over it, so June 1st of '87 was the walkout, in the days and weeks after that, I know it was a notable period.

KG [00:18:10] Oh well the day of, the date the day of June 1st I was downtown somewhere on one of the picket lines and someone walks up asks me my name and handed me a piece of paper which was a notice from the Attorney General, alleging that we were conspiring to overthrow the government. They charged us with sedition. Or they

tried to charge us with sedition; myself and several others. John Shields included, Cliff Andstein, Mike Dumler from CUPE, someone from the Teachers Federation, Jack Gerow from the Hospital Employees and several others. They charged us or wanted to go to court and charge us with seditious conspiracy.

KG [00:18:53] Now at the time I wasn't quite sure what that meant. When I phoned our lawyer John Baigent and read him what was on the summons, he said you're not reading that right. He said, they're charging you with sedition. I said well what does that mean? He says well, they're alleging you tried to overthrow the government. I said we're just trying to overthrow the Labour Code. But it was an interesting experience, to go through that process; the court process and all afterwards.

PL [00:19:25] I just don't want to spend too much time on it, but just walk us through a little bit of that moment when you're summoned and then you're on to the court.

KG [00:19:34] Well the next day the big headline in the newspaper - I mean big block letters - it was "sedition", on the front page of the Vancouver Sun and Province. And then they go through that, and they just were castigating Vander Zalm and his government for such an overreaction to what was clearly called a one-day dispute, a labour dispute on the Labour Code. To go to that extreme and to allege such a specious set of charges against labour leaders, for basically exercising our political rights to protest.

PL [00:20:08] And how did the courts react to that?

KG [00:20:11] The judge was so.. he pressed the Crown, the Counsel for the Crown.- Jack Giles was the Crown Counsel. He actually showed up in his - he has a Rolls-Royce - and he drives up, shows up to the courthouse in his Rolls-Royce, and tries to justify these charges. The judge was having none of it, and not only did he throw the charges out, but said to the government you have to actually pay the entire legal bill of all of the respondents to this case. Now I'm told normally the bill is taxed at a certain rate. The judge said no they just submit the bill, and they have to pay the entire bill for all your lawyers. So we had a great time at their expense fighting this, fighting this case.

PL [00:20:53] OK. So there was the one-day strike, the boycott of the IRC, that went on for the entire term so that would have been five years. At the end of that you had the Harper government come in.

KG [00:21:14] Well we had, but we had more than that... we had the entire labour movement who sometimes isn't as politically united as we should be, on federal and provincial politics. Without exception putting money and people into the Harcourt campaign to get rid of to get rid of Bill Vander Zalm and his government, and there was no hesitation on anybody's part on that campaign. Labour came through in spades with support, money and a commitment to get an NDP government in power.

PL [00:21:50] So during that period of time so this is the late 80s. You also had the Canada Free Trade Agreement that was in the offing. Describe a little bit how the labour movement was part of that.

KG [00:22:04] Well nationally the labour movement nationally that was of course it's a federal it's a federal issue. So it's at the Canadian Labour Congress, but we ran a really good campaign out here. In fact I remember there was newspaper stories that Mulroney was becoming very concerned about the campaign in British Columbia and spent a lot of

time with his federal ministers out here trying to counter our anti free trade campaign. We knew what the effects would be. We can still see the results of those, the effect of those... and despite Mulroney's assurances at meetings I was at with him about these transition programs, they never did happen. And they never really intended them to happen, and I think he gave 'just' transition... that was the start of giving those 'just' transition programs a really bad name, because when workers hear that name, at least when I hear "just transition", I think you're going to have a minimum wage job probably for the rest of your life.

PL [00:22:59] So there was a fightback campaign, and the Fed was to participate as part of a CLC effort?

KG [00:23:08] Yeah. as part of the CLC effort, but again we ran our own campaign, we had a good communications strategy and in British Columbia we used different tools I think, than most of the rest of the movement had at that time. We would fight with humour sometime, we would fight with aggressive campaigns we'd use television and commercials to get our message across. And we had a much higher profile I think in British Columbia; our labour movement, then again, most of the others did.

PL [00:23:41] So during the 80s certainly into the 90s there were a number of other issues that came up. There was the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that came in the early 80s, pay equity became an issue federally, talk about how you see those sorts of things affecting the lives of workers.

KG [00:24:11] Particularly pay equity. The model that we brought in B.C. with the change to, with the Harcourt government, that changed the Labour Relations Code... and the notion of having a - particularly in long term care homes and some of the broader public service sector - had a huge impact on the economic livelihoods of largely women, working in those sectors. We were able to organize them and bring their salaries and pay up to a livable wage. It had a profound and huge effect on working women and on the on the economy. I would argue of the province, because these working people became middle class consumers and drove a good strong economy in all of the regions of the province. Largely because of legislative changes brought forward by the Harcourt regime.

PL [00:25:06] The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, that many people would argue that has had a long-term beneficial impact... have you seen some overlap between that and worker's rights?

KG [00:25:25] I think looking and watching some court decisions start to unfold in the last two or three years I'm becoming more of a believer that the Charter has helped us in that regard. I was dubious at first and didn't think that it'd have much effect but some of the recent decisions out of the Supreme Court, the country with regards to our rights to collective agreement and our rights not to not have our collective agreement rights stripped away unilaterally by governments. As has been the profound decision in Saskatchewan and the recent teachers' decision in British Columbia have given me a little more confidence in the Charter. But I'm not a big fan of thinking that somehow our rights are going to be had through the Charter or through the courts. I think our rights are best protected through collective bargaining and collective agreements.

PL [00:26:18] So can we talked a little bit about your time, you were at the Fed through the '90s.

KG [00:26:26] Yep.

PL [00:26:26] And then you made the transition to the CLC. Can you talk about what interested you in making the move from BC Fed to CLC President?

KG [00:26:36] Well I've been at the Fed a long time and by then, by the time I left, it was 13 years since I'd been elected. I did accomplish the things that I set out to accomplish at the Federation, and I frankly wasn't thinking much about the Canadian Labour Congress. When Bob White, the President of the Canadian Labour Congress phoned me, and asked me if I'd come down to Toronto and meet with him. I flew down to Toronto to meet with him and he sat me down and said look... this was in in late '98, he said that the January meeting of the Canadian Council of the CLC he was going to announce his retirement, and he's canvassed around about succession, and I was the consensus pick of the majority of the affiliates of the CLC. He asked me if I would be interested. We talked about the job about the challenges. And I accepted. And then the convention came around and I was acclaimed.

PL [00:27:50] And going in, this is now 1999 or so, what did you see as some of the major challenges that you're going to face in your first term?

KG [00:27:59] Well first of all the movement nationally wasn't as unified as I was used to having in British Columbia, with the labour movement. There was some leftover hostility about the CAW fish raid in the East Coast, and we were on the cusp of a third term I guess, almost a third term, of the Chretien Liberals, who weren't doing much for labour at all, in their governance federally... And. the challenge was trying to put a better face, or a more human face, on the labour movement nationally.

PL [00:28:47] I want to drop back just a little bit and talk about some of the relationships that the labour movement, both here in BC and nationally, with other groups... and during your time at the Fed. How do you think the relationship between the labour movement and the environmental movement worked, or didn't?

KG [00:29:11] Well, when I got to the Federation and during a large part of my term, there wasn't a great relationship between some parts of the labour movement and the environmental movement. And looking back I regret that, I should have - I think I should have, worked harder at trying to bridge that relationship. But clearly the forest workers, the miners and stuff, viewed the environmental movement as a threat to their income and job security. And we shouldn't have characterized it that way. It was too easy for the other side, the right wing, to manifest and manufacturer that disagreement. And make us hostile towards a group of people who were sincerely interested in protecting the environment and protecting our jobs, if you will. And we made it an us or them argument and we shouldn't have.

PL [00:30:08] Right. I mean if you look at the example in let's say, the wood products industry, I know that, but. you're right to characterize the fight that went on internally as fear about job loss. But, if you. look over the decade of the...from. 2001 through 2016, on the wood product side of things, job loss. Was a result of changing the Forest Act and very little to do with environmental policy.

KG [00:30:39] Yeah, and free trade frankly, and we now instead of having the ability to farm our forest and properly manage it and maximize the value out of that resource... we now chop it down and ship it somewhere else to have it manufactured and chopped into

boards and finished products. But at that time our argument was, is that any environmental move, in the forest, in the resource sector, would cause you to lose your job, and working union members believed that. And I think we perpetuated that as a leadership, and in hindsight, we should have been more conciliatory and tried to find some common ground with that movement.

PL [00:31:30] That's a tough one. So, let's talk now a little bit about some of the challenges that you had to deal with over the three terms you were in as President of the CLC.

KG [00:31:49] Four.

PL [00:31:50] Four terms. Give me your sense of what were the toughest ones.

KG [00:31:55] Well again just like in B.C. I mean in my first eight months as the brand new young Fed President, I got faced with a general strike. The first six months of my tenure at the Congress, the Autoworkers decide to raid the SEIU. And of course, that just brought back all the memories from the international unions, with the fight they had on the East Coast with the fish unions - right into the lap, and my lap, at the CLC. The international unions all banded together and were offended by Buzz Hargrove. They say, Buzz Hargrove's raid of the SEIU. And it was tough to contain because, instead of leaving it to the Congress to try to resolve it, they - both sides - got active and they're starting to fight with one another, rather than leave it to us. And it took a long time to get that resolved.

PL [00:32:50] And when you see... so what you were trying to do is separate warring parties.

KG [00:32:56] Well it was, the SEIU issue was the leadership of the SEIU wanted to merge with, in Canada, wanted to merge with the Autoworkers, which they announced... and as soon as they did, the SEIU moved in and put a Trusteeship in and removed everybody from office, and took away their ability to finalize that merger. Hargrove, being the tough guy as he is, said I'm not going to let you be... I'm not gonna let you push these guys around and force you know, force Trusteeship, and decided he'd sign them up individually, as their collective agreements became open in the open period... and he did. And he left the Congress for eight months and went out and did what he had to do, but they didn't stop him, they just made the problem worse than we could have solved a lot easier. But, as we learned, sometimes it takes awhile to wear people out before the fight's over.

PL [00:33:48] Right. Right. So. I know that you were at the CLC during the 16 or so years that the BC Liberals were in power. Talk a little bit about what you saw from... what you saw as the most destructive elements of the BC Liberal regime from 2001 onward.

KG [00:34:11] When I left and after I left, Gordon Campbell was furious at the labour movement - he blamed us significantly for his loss, when Glen Clark beat him. All the polls and polling indicated that Campbell would win. But...

PL [00:34:33] This is in 1996.

KG [00:34:35] Yeah. But the machine we had was better and it beat him and he was he was angry at the Federation and frankly, particularly me. So when he got into power he was so, still so angry, and this shows the depth of his character, I guess. He would not appoint a person from labour to any board or agency in the province. To the extent that the

Apprenticeship Board of British Columbia had no union representation on it while Campbell was the Premier. Not one board or commission. If they were going to appoint anybody, and they were active in a union, they wouldn't be appointed by the Campbell government. I thought that was ridiculous in the extreme. But they treated the movement with anger, not animosity, not understanding... anger. And it was it was profound.

PL [00:35:33] So. It was more sort of revenge centered.

KG [00:35:35] It was vindictive and vengeful and it showed. And it was, I think, it was tougher for Jim Sinclair the President of the Federation. But it had a very hostile, hostile leadership in the provincial Liberals. And frankly it lasted. It lasted throughout and with Christy Clark being there; the way they treated the teachers in bargaining and stripping their rights away, I mean the Supreme Court - if you remember that decision - the court didn't even recess to consider the arguments they ruled from the Bench. Against that, which is unheard of, against the behaviour of this government towards the union members that were teachers.

PL [00:36:24] Did some of these events as they played out provincially, did they overlap into the CLC? Do they have an effect on national politics?

KG [00:36:36] Not really an effect on national politics. But we were... I mean being from B.C. you know, I was always interested in what was going on and made sure that whatever the Canadian Labour Congress could do, and in terms of support, physical and financial support for campaigns in British Columbia - we helped.

PL [00:36:59] Did you see any sort of crossover between the thinking that was behind the way the B.C. Liberals governed, and what you saw emerge out of the Harper government?

KG [00:37:12] Boy Harper. Harper you couldn't... it was palpable. You could feel his animosity when you were meeting with him and even one on one. He was disdainful of the work we did. He saw no value, or had no regard, for any of the efforts that we had. And I would point out to him, fruitlessly I guess, the contributions that we'd made to society as a union movement. He wouldn't buy not one of our arguments. In terms of the effect - any positive effect - we've had on society in Canada.

PL [00:37:53] Wow!

KG [00:37:53] Yeah, It was, I used to characterize it as arrogance. Our Research Director at the time, Andrew Jackson, he said it was just open hostility. He (Harper) viewed us as being an enemy of the Conservative Party, and anything he could do to try to weaken or diminish our capacity he would do. So he would make Gordon Campbell look almost tame by comparison. I would think.

PL [00:38:27] Wow, that's a tough row to hoe. So I know that in your time at the CLC, obviously national issues were front and centre for you, but you also had an interest in building alliances internationally. Can you talk a little bit about that?

KG [00:38:44] Well we played a significant role in the transformation of the International Trade Union Federation. We got them more active, in fact we funded and started the International Committee on Worker's Capital to try to get the unions internationally, who had influence or control of their pension funds; the Scandinavians, the Australians and others, to try to take a more activist approach with their voting power of their pension

holdings. To try to change corporate behaviour. Some of these international companies, the only way we could actually get their attention is at the corporate board level.

PL [00:39:30] So give us a specific example of how that activism might have played out.

KG [00:39:34] We had a campaign for the ship breaking industry in India. It was owned by three large companies, two of them publicly traded internationally. And we had significant enough shareholdings from pension, we could identify from pension funds and pension administrators, that we started to make noise at their annual general meetings, such that they started to change their safety practices inside of those industries.

PL [00:40:02] So these are the industries that would take...

KG [00:40:04] Take big cargo ships, run them up aground, and start burning 'till you burn them down with burning torches, with no regard for what was inside of those ships... and most of those ships were more laden with asbestos and other hazardous materials. And these workers in India would be working with sandals and not even glasses on their eyes, with these big burning torches, chopping down these huge cargo ships, burning through asbestos and plastics and all sorts of enzymes and reagents - that they knew nothing about. And then would now harm them and their families.

PL [00:40:43] And so part of the activism, you would target specific activities that the corporations were doing to try and...

KG [00:40:53] Yes, different industries. And we, I mean we had numbers of international campaigns on child labour, on sweatshops and factories in Bangladesh. We set up a clinic. The Canadian Labour Congress with the ITC; we set up a clinic in Shenzhen China. That hired a lawyer to help workers that were injured on the job in China. Young workers and try to find compensation for them. I don't know how the Chinese law worked but they did deport our lawyer out of that city. He couldn't live in and work in that city because he was becoming too effective on adjudicating compensation for injured workers.

PL [00:41:42] So, let's now look back over your time at the local level, the provincial level and the national level. Let's say... give me three or four different things that you are particularly proud of, in the time that you were involved in the labour movement that you think really made a difference.

KG [00:42:08] Well here in British Columbia, the changes that we made to the to the Labour Code with Harcourt, and Employment Standards and other things...were important and still are important. The anti-scab legislation that we passed in the Harcourt administration still stands. Lots of changes to worker's compensation regulations and such that were good. But the negotiating - our ability to negotiate good wages and pensions is probably something I'm the proudest of, because you can see the effect of it still today. That family supporting jobs are largely unionized jobs. The growth of the low wage sector is directly proportional to the shrinkage of union density, in this province and in this country. Nationally, the Westray Bill was something I'm very proud of.

PL [00:43:03] That was? <unclear>

KG [00:43:03] The Westray Bill is a bill that says corporations now can be charged criminally for negligence causing injury or death on the job. That in fact, the RCMP should be involved in investigating some of these deaths before the Workers Compensation

Board steps in, to see if there was negligence. And to try to change health and safety attitudes by employers by making the penalties more severe. And it's having an effect.

KG [00:43:30] The Canada Pension Plan changes that were just put in place was a campaign that we started at the Canadian Labour Congress, about 9 or 10 years ago. And we said that the motion that we developed and passed, that we wouldn't stop our campaign until we'd we saw a result that we wanted. It wasn't as big a result as we wanted, but as the first time that we've seen a change in Canada Pension Plan in decades. The growth... Is there something else you wanted me to focus on specifically?

PL [00:44:14] Keep going.

KG [00:44:15] Yeah well the pension, the pension program is important. I think starting the campaign we started I didn't get to finish it of course, and that should never stop. But to try to put a better face on the labour movement, I've argued throughout my career in the labour movement is that we can't let the other side brand us. We have to put our own brand on ourselves. We want people to see us as we are not as someone else believes we are. And the example I always use is that when you talk to people about unions they say, oh you're on strike all the time. When you look at the statistics about 2 percent of our collective bargaining ends up in a dispute that would put us on a strike or a lockout. Yet, the public believes we're on strike a lot more than that. Why? Because when we get ourselves in the media usually were protesting something. We're holding up signs that look like picket signs. And the public believes we're on strike. So I wanted to change that, I wanted to put a face on the union movement that says here's what we stand for. If you belong to a union you get five dollars an hour or more in wages. If you belong to a union. you'd likely have a pension plan, you have a dental plan, you have benefit programs, you have pay equity; things that come with the unionization that are good for you, and you should aspire to - rather than be afraid of. And I think we have to do more work on that. Belonging to a union is a good thing economically and socially and makes your life better and makes your children's lives better and makes society better. And we have to we have to work to make that brand stick. And I don't think we pay enough attention to it.

PL [00:45:59] OK. Let's finish up with. What you see. Some of the biggest challenges that the labour movement faces...

KG [00:46:06] I think the biggest challenge we face is density. Our density is going down. People aren't - despite the fact that they're earning lower wages - aren't turning to unionization as helping them solve that economic problem that they find themselves in. I think we have to work harder at that. We have to ensure, and press legislators and lawmakers, to pass laws that are favourable to allowing workers to achieve collective bargaining rights and find ways to make collective bargaining more efficient and more effective. I think that NDP governments are trying that. I see frankly, some positive steps happening in Ontario with a Liberal government. They're trying to curry favour with labour, which is great. And they're looking to pass legislation that would give the "union advantage" as we call it, to more people than just industrial working people, working in industrial jobs.

PL [00:47:05] So, the barriers that people currently face to forming or joining a union. lowering those as much as possible.

KG [00:47:14] Well taking those away and giving people the right to join a union and not having to go through a very, very difficult and cumbersome process to achieve

unionization. And then to achieve the most important thing, which is the first collective agreement. And I don't think any worker should have to go on strike to achieve a first collective agreement. There needs to be a process in place to establish that first collective agreement such that people can make a choice after that on whether or not the benefits of collective bargaining are good or bad for them.

PL [00:47:45] One last thing, and this really has to do with the history projects that the Labour Heritage Centre has been behind. Talk a little bit about the importance of labour history and why you think that's so critical to unions as organizations <unclear>.

KG [00:48:01] I remember when Jack Munro started talking about developing the Labour Heritage Centre and trying to promote the history and the evolution of the union movement and worker's rights in Canada. I think we have to document it, so that we can understand why things happen the way they do. And why it's important that our history becomes part of the mainstream history of this country. We don't tell our story often enough and broadly enough, for people to understand. People still have old, preconceived notions of the union movement and unions that we need to dispel. And the best way to do that, is to document our history and make it available to people to understand.

PL [00:48:54] Yeah and talk about the things that we want... and celebrate the fact that we are active and vital.

KG [00:49:02] But the fact again, the fact that I always say that the economic advantage of belonging to a union is over five dollars an hour. That's four hundred thousand dollars more in your lifetime. Benefits like pension programs and health benefits, pay equity, the right to refuse unsafe work, all of those things are part of collective bargaining. Yet we have resistance from people to find ways to access those rights. That means are our image and our message isn't getting out in the right and proper way. And we have to pay attention to doing that. The income of the trade union movement in Canada is in excess of four billion dollars a year in union dues. We need to use some of that money, to make sure that we brand ourselves. And the image and the things we believe in are properly communicated to the public.... if we want them to understand us better.