

Interview: Bernice Kirk (BK)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN) and Blair Redlin (BR)

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Transcription: Kelsey Reimer

KN [00:00:02] Okay. Good afternoon. We're here on Wednesday, September the 20th, 2017 to interview Bernice Kirk. She was the president of CUPE BC from 1991 to 1997. Doing the interview are myself, Ken Novakowski and Blair Redlin. And we have tech support from Bailey Garden. So good afternoon, Bernice.

BK [00:00:28] Good afternoon.

KN [00:00:29] So we have a number of questions we want to ask you, and we just go through them one at a time and you take as long as you like to respond and whatever. So we're going to start off by getting you to tell us a little bit about where and when you were born and what kind of family you grew up in, whether they were a union family or did they have progressive politics or were they a political family. Tell us a bit about your background.

BK [00:00:56] I was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, in the dirty thirties. My dad, my older brothers and sisters told me that our dad didn't work much at that time because it was in the Depression years and he didn't really have a steady job. But when the Second World War started, my dad was reading in the paper and he saw where the mills and logging camps and that were hiring older men because all the young men were going off to fight in the war. So my dad applied for a job and he got the job. So my dad and my mother and my older sister and I, we travelled to New Westminster, B.C. I grew up in New Westminster. I went a-l through school there. I graduated from Trapp Technical High School in 1950, and I worked at several different jobs. I worked for a men's clothing store. I worked for an insurance company. I worked for a finance company and I worked for a lawyer. But my very first job was I had a summer job and I worked at Delmar Frozen Foods. I worked there every summer for four years and I made \$0.40 an hour.

KN [00:02:34] Okay. So when did you get your first unionized job where you actually became a member of a union? You remember that?

BK [00:02:45] Well, yes, I do remember it. I was married in 1953 and we had a son in 1954. My husband sold his car and bought an unfinished house in Coquitlam let me see, we moved into the house, the three of us, and he worked on a tugboat, so he was away quite a bit. So I had a lot of time to think when he was away and I thought, I better find a job because we are never going to get this house finished and paid for on his salary alone. So I went to the unemployment office in New Westminster and they said they had a temporary job at the IWA Local 561, I think it was, in New Westminster and that it was a temporary job for three months. So I went for an interview there and they hired me right away. But I did not work for the IWA. I worked for it was called the United Good Neighbour Fund and the IWA and some other unions and other organizations were trying to get something like this started in our area. So I worked in the IWA office. They paid my salary and they supplied all the materials to have this work done. I worked there for the three months and when I was finished that job they

hired me to work full-time and that's where I first learnt about unions. And I knew my dad worked at the Alaska Pine in Westminster and I knew he belonged to the IWA, but I'd never heard him talk about it or anything. So I was really interested in this and I talked to everybody that I could, when shop stewards come in, or just met ordinary members, and I talked to the officers of the union and I went to the meetings and I took notes and I was getting pretty into this. And one of the people that worked there at the time was Rae Eddie. And he was a vice president and a business agent. And he talked to me all the time and told me all about the unions and why people do what they do and everything. So I had a pretty good background there. I stayed there... oh Rae Eddie he was, actually, he ran for the CCF, I guess it was, in New Westminster and he was the first CCF person ever elected in New Westminster. And I don't know how many years he stood there, but I know that there was one term I think that someone else got elected, but the very next time the election was it went back to the NDP, and that's where Judi Darcy is now, the MLA.

KN [00:06:08] So that was a nice experience to have someone like Rae Eddie teach you about unions and politics.

BK [00:06:16] Oh yeah, he was wonderful.

KN [00:06:18] And then so how did you move on from there to get involved in CUPE, how did that happen?

BK [00:06:25] Well, I quit working there after three years because I was having another baby and the baby girl was born. And I had these two little kids. And I think it was, I'm trying to think of the year, 1958! We lived across the street from Como Lake High School, and I saw in the Columbia newspaper that they were looking for a secretary. And so I went over to the school and talked to the principal and he hired me and one of the neighbours looked after our two kids. And so I went off to that job. And after I'd been working there for a little while, I saw this sign up saying that there was a union meeting and I thought, Oh, there must be a union. And I didn't realize, nobody ever talked to me about it. No one ever asked me if I wanted to join the union or anything. I thought, this is really strange. But then one of my friends got a job in one of the other high schools in Coquitlam and I said to her, You know what? I think there's a union there, but only the men seem to belong to the union. I said, nobody ever talked to me about it. She said, Well, why don't we go to a meeting? So we did, and when the next meeting came up, Bev and I set off to the meeting and we got there and there's all these men and two women. And I had been nervous about going there because I thought if it's saw these men and I show up, you know, I'm gonna be scared. So anyway, we went, we joined the union, we got initiated, we sat down and we listened to everything. So we were all right with that. And so when we left, she said to me, You know, I think we should come to the meetings and find out what's going on. And I said, okay. So we start going to meetings. We went to two meetings and we realized that there was nobody talking about women's issues or about the secretaries or the clerical workers. It was all these men and the tradesmen, the janitors, the groundsmen, all these people, all these men. And there was no women there except Bev and I and the other two women. So we figured it out. We thought, Well, we'd better find out about this and we'd better get some of the other clerical workers to start coming to the meetings. In the meantime, we got a copy of the contract and all the tradesmen, the groundsmen, janitors, everybody in that category, they all their wages. They got the wage for the job the day they started. But the clerical workers had to wait five years to get to the top of the wage scale. And we started out really low wages and then it went on for the five years. Well, that was, for Bev

and I, the start of equity problems that we were going to do something about it. So we did. What we planned to do, we phoned the other schools and we went out, we met people and that, and it took a while, but we eventually got to that there was as many women at the meetings as there was men, and that's when things really started to change because we knew about negotiating. When I worked at the IWA, I negotiated a raise for myself and the other clerical worker while I was there. So I knew about what to do about these things.

KN [00:10:55] That's a great story.

BK [00:10:56] Yeah, well. Well, you know, it really was when I started thinking about all these things and why we do what we do. So I went to my first CUPE BC Convention in 1977, and I'd never been at any kind of a convention before or anything, but I got elected to be one of the delegates, and I went and at that convention, there was a resolution on the floor that we form a political action committee. So I got up and I spoke on it and I said, Well, I thought we should have a committee and how important it was, and why it was important. And so before that convention was over one of the men that was going to chair this political action committee came and said to me, We think you should be on the committee because we don't have a woman and we think you should do it. So that was how I got active at that CUPE BC.

KN [00:12:11] And so you begin your activism in CUPE BC.

BK [00:12:15] Yeah.

KN [00:12:15] Great.

BK [00:12:16] And I uh, after - from there, that's when the next year the secretary didn't run again. And of course, my friends on the political action committee said, Bernice, why don't you do it? So I did it. I ran and I got elected. And it was it was a busy job to be the secretary. And I said I wouldn't have the office in my house and I, my own local union 561, they had an office in Coquitlam and an extra room, and I rented that room from them and I got all that CUPE BC stuff moved into that office there. Everything was fine, except it was a lot of work to do that. And the next year at the convention, well, a committee had been formed to look at the possibility of having a full-time officer. And Muriel Overgaard was the president then. And we all thought that they were going to recommend that we have a full-time president. And when the committee came to report back, they reported that, yes, we need a full-time officer, but that we should put the secretary's job and the Treasurer's job together and have a secretary treasurer. So a full-time officer. When it went to the convention floor, the resolution to do this, there was, it passed and there was the Treasurer, who was a man then, and I ran and I got elected and so that's when I started my first full-time job with CUPE where and I was that the secretary treasurer and I had that job for 13 years.

KN [00:14:21] And you beat a man to get it.

BK [00:14:26] (unclear) He was different. He was Italian.

KN [00:14:32] Now do you, once you were involved, obviously you had done some organizing with women in your local and then in CUPE BC. What did you see as the main impediments to women becoming involved in the union at that time? We're talking about the seventies here now, I guess.

BK [00:14:53] Well, it was - but I think about it like unions were formed by men and most of the unions were mostly men in them. And so it was like that they knew all about the unions and they knew how everything worked. And we were just, like, clerical workers or secretaries. And so how would we know anything about how things work in the workplace and things like that? It like they, they were, just they treated us more like, well, we were just there to be the typist and that. And that we didn't really know about how things worked ourselves.

KN [00:15:47] Did you organize women's committees and things like that in CUPE?

BK [00:15:50] Well, I was going to talk about that with Muriel Overgaard; she was the first woman president in CUPE BC, and she was really, I don't know how to express this, but I don't know about stern or, but she was really serious about women working in the union and being involved in the union. And I think it was the first year that I was the secretary that she formed a women's committee in CUPE BC. And we had conferences, we got women to come to and members to come to, and we would get guest speakers, like we had Grace Hartman, who was the first woman president in the Canadian Union of Public Employees. And we had Rosemary Brown and people like that. They came and talked to these women, so they understood that there is a place for women in all parts of life. And we did a pretty good job with that. But between Muriel and I, we were able to figure things out, and we always could figure out who we should get to do what and who we could convince to do things. And CUPE was the first union to have a women's committee. There wasn't, and I don't even think there was a women's committee at the BC Federation of Labour at that time, but it was ... Muriel was, she was really, really good. And she gave me lots of guidance, too. She was older than I was. And even after I got elected secretary treasurer to the full-time job, she was still so acceptable about everything. She didn't think that I was going to be bossy or anything, and I wasn't because I thought she was my boss.

KN [00:18:20] So did you, you know, you've alluded to some of the changes that began to happen in CUPE. Can you talk about all the change that you saw as you evolved in your role in terms of the political structure and thinking of CUPE BC because CUPE is a national union.

BK [00:18:42] Oh, yeah.

KN [00:18:43] So we're talking here about a provincial structure within the National Union.

BK [00:18:49] Well, right. But, I don't know if you know about the history of CUPE is before CUPE was formed there was two public sector unions. One was the National Union of Public Employees and I can't remember the...

KN [00:19:16] NUPSE? Was it public sector?

BK [00:19:19] Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's the union. Yeah. Public Sector Employees. Yes. And they, in 1964 I think it was, they merged, they had a big merger convention and they merged because they were both representing the same people but just in different areas and things like that. And they merged and so it became a pretty big union when they merged the two together. Then things did change quite a bit because when they merged, every local had to vote to go into this new union. And if your local voted against it, then you didn't go into this new union. And the local I belonged to, the Coquitlam School Board, they voted not to go into

this union. And so there was, one of the people that came from that, from one of the unions, Ray Mercer, he was from New Westminster and he had been a business agent at one of the other unions. And so he took on and worked for the unions that didn't join CUPE at the time. And so we were in that position in our local. And then finally, after, I guess about two or three years, they had another vote and we went back into CUPE. And they have most of the other locals that had not gone in did end up coming into CUPE too.

KN [00:21:24] And can you talk about any particular problems you encountered as a woman leader at the union when most unions were being led by men? And did you have any particular problems getting your point across and stuff like that because of it?

BK [00:21:44] Well I think that Muriel Overgaard had taken care of that for me because she was really strong and that I just followed her lead and when I became a full-time officer, I was the one that everybody talked to and everybody contacted and everything. And fortunately I had Muriel that gave me guidance and things like that. And I don't think I ran into as many problems as some of the other women leaders had. And I found that when I was president, that I was like an officer in the BC Federation of Labour and in my own union and I was general vice president of the CLC. And I found that most of the men that I had to work with and get along with treated me with respect. Sometimes in debates they didn't, but they did mostly treat me with respect. And so I didn't have such a big problem with them.

KN [00:23:03] Over to you Blair.

BR [00:23:05] Thanks. The Lower Mainland municipal strike in 1981 was a really important fight for pay equity. And so I wondered if you could reflect on your involvement in that strike and what the dispute meant for CUPE BC.

BK [00:23:21] Yeah, the strike of 1981. I remember that very well. It was one of the hardest parts of the job I ever had. There was 10,000 people on strike. They were all municipal locals except for Burnaby School Board local. And they enjoyed it, too. This is Colleen Jordan. She was vice president at the local at the time, and the president of the local had scheduled his vacation. So he went off on his vacation and he left Colleen there to look after the local. So that's why Colleen and I became pretty good friends. She came every day to talk to me. And like she says, we used to meet for lunch at the Green Cafe. And we didn't know if that was the name of it, but it was basically, we used to meet for lunch quite often and go over everything. And that strike, it was, it was a nasty strike and it was kind of like a dirty strike. There was a committee of the...strike committee made up of different people. And their job, one their jobs, or their big job was to have a meeting every day and decide what they were going to do, where they were going to picket, and who was going to do the picketing and what actions they were going to be doing and things like that. And they met every morning at the auditorium at the regional office. And I went to the meetings every morning. And David Rice from the BC Federation of Labour came to the meetings every morning too and we sat there and we listened to them and we made their plans. And we both had books we were making notes in and everything. And so they would tell us where they were going and what they were going to do and everything and when and where who was doing what. So then I go back to my office and later on in the day I might turn the radio on to see what was going on and what they said they were going to do that day was way different than what they did. They went, they found out who the officers of this organization that they were bargaining with, the municipal workers at that time. They all bargained together. And so they let the air out of tires on people's cars.

And they lined up and blocked people from going in or coming out. And oh, they did, I just can't remember everything they did. But every day it was really a big headache. And we had just, you know, the reps were Mike Kramer and Don Cott, and of course they would be at these meetings too. And then we would all get together and talk about it and say, "something is going to happen. We've got to get these to stop." And this one, there was a Paul (unclear) or something, and the guy was crossing the picket line. But this Paul that they saw, had a restaurant in Burnaby, wasn't the one that was crossing their picket line, but they went and picketed his restaurant. It was, it was, it was really bad. And it lasted so long. And the national union, the strike pay account, it just about went broke. And B.C. had their own strike fund as well. And we banked at the IWA Credit Union in New Westminster. And so we didn't go broke. And so one day the manager of the Credit Union phoned me and he said, "Bernice, I don't want to bother you, I don't want you to get upset. But, you know, you are overdrawn in your bank account by ten to fifteen thousand dollars." And I sat there and I said, "you know what? Just put half of that on my visa and the other half on my American Express." And that was the only laugh I had out of that whole strike. Not only that, it was my husband's American Express, but anyway, fortunately, the strike ended shortly after, and we did manage to pay it back right away.

BR [00:29:00] But the objective of the strike was about pay equity. That was one of the reasons it was such a long strike.

BK [00:29:06] It was. And people didn't understand what we were doing and why we needed this pay equity. And I know that I went on a TV show that Pia Shandel I think her name was, and she said to me, "well, why do you think that the women should get the same pay as the men?" She said, "after all, lots of them have to work outside in the storms and everything, you know. And why...why are you entitled to...why do you think the women are entitled to the same pay as them?" And I can't remember exactly what my answer was, but she was not happy with me because I kind of shot her down. And Dennis McGann said, "that's when you took over and became the boss of all things". (laughter) It was, but it was hard to explain to people because it's that attitude. But they were out there working, doing all this hard work, and you were sitting in this nice office all day, you know? But we had to be educated to do the jobs that we were doing in these offices all day. It wasn't like we just walked in there and learnt to type while we were going along or anything like that. And actually when that strike ended, it was Burnaby School District were the only ones, the only place where they actually got a start on pay equity and they actually got - they didn't get pay equity right there, but they got the employer to agree to set up a committee and that they were going to make a study on this. And the school board locals were far more successful in getting pay equity soon than the munis (note: municipalities), because the at that point in time, the school boards all negotiated separately.

BR [00:31:32] Right.

BK [00:31:33] And so it was easy because then started, one had to follow the other one along, whereas the munis all bargained together. And there were so many of them and so many of them employed. They were all together and it did take them a lot longer to get working towards pay equity.

BR [00:31:54] Very challenging to the GVRD.

BK [00:31:56] Yeah, right. Yeah. I couldn't think of it.

BR [00:32:01] So another also historic event was Operation Solidarity and which was during your time as secretary treasurer. And what did that mean for you? What did it mean for CUPE and the broader labour movement? Do you have some thoughts about Solidarity in retrospect?

BK [00:32:19] Oh yes! Operation Solidarity? That was Art Kube, president of the BC Federation of Labour. That was his idea and actually we were a very active part of it, we did everything that we were supposed to do. And our national president at the time, Jeff Rose, even came out here two or three times to go with us and do things, different things with us, picket lines and things like that. And that was when we had the big rally, I think it was at the PNE.

BR [00:33:01] At the Empire Stadium.

BK [00:33:02] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And what we did in CUPE, we took shop stewards and other people off the job and had them go and talk to members separately and go to local union leaders, and things like that and explain to them why we were doing this. And the day of the official strike, we had 1500 CUPE members there and we had the most people there of any union, and we had to borrow places for them to sit from the other unions. And so for us, that was - we were really proud of our members and that was a really great thing for us. And the other unions were kind of jealous of us because we had all these people out, but it was just that we had the foresight to think about how are we going to get our people, like especially people who work in schools, to walk off the job that day. But in most cases, the employers that just said, well, whoever wants to go can just go. We're not going to reprimand you or anything for doing that. So we were quite fortunate that way.

BR [00:34:25] If you're going to do something like that you got to be organized.

BK [00:34:27] Yeah.

BR [00:34:30] And you had a question here.

KN [00:34:31] Well, back in the early eighties, a colleague of mine recalls that you were involved in organizing CUPE pickets around the B.C. Teachers' Federation building. And do you remember what that was all about?

BK [00:34:52] Well, at that time, I don't think the teachers were striking teachers. They didn't do that. And I think when they crossed our picket lines, I forget which picket line it was, but our members were really upset. So they said we should go picket them. Because the teachers don't stop just coming in. And I said, all right. So we figured it out. We thought, well, we'll go and picket their office. And so we set out this morning and we went and we were on the picket line and Larry Kuehn was president at the time. And so we went and we picketed and we thought, we'll just stay here for a few hours and that, just, you know, walk around. So we did that. And the first thing I knew, Larry Kuehn was there and he said, "What are you doing?" So I said what we were doing, and he said, "Well, you know, it's our employees' payday today and their cheques are all in there and they expect to be paid. So could you let someone go in?" And I said, "all right", I said, "we'll just walk away and you can let someone

go in and get the cheques and bring them out, and then you can distribute them." But later on, when I retired and the teachers invited me to their convention and they asked me if I would speak and they honoured me and that. And I said, all right. So apparently when I spoke and I talked about that and I said, I guess I said that Larry Kuehn came out and it sounded like I meant that he was in the building across our picket line. And of course, I didn't think anything about it. You know, I was just talking. But they said that. And after that, they were taking me out to dinner. And Larry, he came over to me and said, "Bernice, you know, I'm getting in trouble because you said that I crossed the picket line". I said, "No I didn't! I didn't say that." But he was really upset. I know you're not going to put all this on, but it was funny.

KN [00:37:33] Yeah, it was. Because, as you know, after Solidarity, teachers did not cross picket lines anymore. And BCTF and CUPE BC developed a really close relationship, working relationship.

BK [00:37:49] Oh, that's right. Oh, really? Well, I know, I think I mentioned this to Blair about, we were all friends. Remember when that what did that group that we had, that was the teachers, the superintendents.

KN [00:38:09] Well, it was the five presidents.

BK [00:38:11] Yeah, the five presidents. I think that's what they called themselves, [laughing]. And that was good, liked them as superintendents and the...

KN [00:38:24] Secretary Treasurers?

BK [00:38:25] Yeah. And we we all we met and we discussed all the problems and that, that was really good. It was. Yeah.

BR [00:38:36] So you were secretary treasurer when the BC Federation of Labour called a general strike, a one-day general strike on June 1st, 1987. What do you remember about that strike, and CUPE's role in it.

BK [00:38:49] I thought that was the one we were talking about.

BR [00:38:52] No, well, there was Operation Solidarity. There was Bill 19 and 20.

BK [00:38:58] Yeah 19 and 20. And we had the three bad bills.

BR [00:39:01] That's it.

BK [00:39:02] Bill 19 and 20 and Bill Vander Zahm.

BR [00:39:05] That's right [laughing].

BK [00:39:06] [Laughing] That's right. Yeah. Dennis McGann did that. Yeah, right. Yeah.

BR [00:39:10] So I'm just wondering about how it was to get CUPE members out on a one-day general strike and if you remember it, recall much about that.

BK [00:39:24] I do recall that. And I remember that Shirley Carr, I believe, was the president of the Canadian Labour Congress then. And Shirley Carr came out and she actually stayed at our house. And because she couldn't go to a hotel, because she'd have to cross the picket line. Right. Yeah. Yeah. And so I do, yeah, I do. I try to think about it and I do remember that CUPE was well involved in that strike too. And we did have a lot of people out. And Francis Brown, who was from the Kootenays and she ended up becoming a rep for CUPE, she was on our executive board and she brought her knitting all the time, like no matter where the meetings were and she had her knitting. And when we were on this one-day strike and people came from across the province, they came down there and Colleen Jordan and I were walking along and Francis Brown was walking along in front of us and she was knitting while she was walking.

BK [00:40:56] On this picket line.

BR [00:41:02] Staying relaxed.

BK [00:41:03] Yeah.

BR [00:41:05] So you've mentioned Colleen. Colleen Jordan was secretary treasurer during the time that you were president. You've mentioned her earlier in this interview. Can you talk a bit about how you and Colleen worked together?

BK [00:41:17] We actually, Colleen Jordan and I, we we were good friends and we actually worked really well together and we became friends. The convention where we had voted for a full-time secretary treasurer, that was Colleen's first convention and her and her president, they got...they had had their own local meeting in the morning and they got to the convention just when this resolution was coming up. And so they arrived there on time. And the resolution passed by two votes and that was Colleen and her president's votes. So we became good friends after that, after she told me that we did become good friends. And we - when it came to the time when Geraldine got elected secretary treasurer of the national union, then there was a vacancy there. And Colleen said to me...why don't you? Because what happened is, if the, if there was a vacancy on the executive, on the union executive, in between conventions, the executive board would vote who should be the president or the secretary treasurer, whatever, until the next election. And so we knew that this would be at the next executive board meeting. We would be having an election for the new president. And so Colleen and I talked about it and she said, "well," she said, "you know, I'm going to run for one of the jobs". So she said, "you pick which job you want". And I said, "well, you know, while I've been secretary treasurer, I have trained four presidents". And I said, "I think that I am going to run for president this time and I won't have to train anybody else". And so that's what we did. She ran for secretary. And we were both elected. We got along fine and we had differences. But we always talked about them because that's the only way you're going to get along. And we did, we did lots of things that wouldn't have happened if it wasn't that we were good friends and had an agreement and could talk the same way to the same people and things like that. So I didn't have any problem with her at all. And when I was retiring and I said to her, "Colleen, why don't you run for president?" And she said, "No, I like being secretary treasurer", she said, "so Barry O'Neill is going to have to run for president". (laughter)

BR [00:44:45] And so he did, yeah. So you've just referred to you were secretary treasurer for quite a while from 79 to 91, and then you were president 91 to 97, so you were a long time in

both roles. What would do you what would you say is the difference between the two roles? And was it a lot different becoming president?

BK [00:45:07] Well, it wasn't for me. And I think the reason it wasn't was because when I was the secretary treasurer for so long before we had a full-time president is I was making most of the decisions, you know, about day-to-day things and things like that. Then, you know, then it wouldn't be that much different for me to be president because I was used to kind of figuring things out and doing things that had to be done when I didn't have anybody else to consult. But it was after we got a full-time president, my job as secretary treasurer was easier than it had ever been, because I had someone that could be the spokesperson at all times, if someone phoned and wanted some advice or something, I can just refer them to the president. So that was the difference.

BK [00:46:13] for me.

BR [00:46:14] It made a lot more sense to have two full-time officers. What was the first challenge you faced when you became president and how did you handle it?

BK [00:46:25] Well, the first challenge I had when I became president?

BR [00:46:30] Yeah. Oh.

BK [00:46:31] Well, my first big challenge was when I was elected secretary.

BR [00:46:37] Okay.

BR [00:46:38] And I was the secretary for a couple of months. And Muriel Overgaard was president. She was away in Ottawa at a National Executive Board meeting. And Ray Mercer, who was a regional director for the National Union, he had something that he had to go to. And there we had a strike; all the Kootenay school districts were on strike. And so the TV station phoned the union and the regional director's office and said that they wanted someone, that they wanted to talk to someone and they wanted to send the camera out and everything to talk to someone about this strike and what was going on. And Ray Mercer said to the people in his office, "well, tell them to phone Bernice Kirk". So I got this phone call from the television station, I'm at work at Centennial School. And they say, "can we come and interview you at your job?" And I said, "oh, well, just a minute. I'll have to check with the principal". So Bill Melville was a principal at the time. And I went in and I said, "the TV people want to come and interview me about the school strike in the Kootenays. Is it all right if they come here?" And he said, "well, sure, they can come in. They can do it in my office here", he said. He starts tidying up his office. And so they came and they talked to me and everything was going fine. And then they were ready to wrap it up. And he said, "you know, the government is threatening to order your members back to work". He said, "now, if they pass that, it's the law and say your members have to go back to work. Are they going to go back to work or will they be fined a lot and stay on strike?" I said, "oh, they'll go back to work". I said, "we're not law breakers". I said, "they'll all be back at work as soon as that, if that happens". And so they thanked me and everything. I went home that night. I turned on the news and I go to see myself on TV and they go all through this interview with me. And then they say, "we have talked to the business agent for the local Kootenays school boards that are on strike, and he said if the law is passed to send them back to work, they will defy the law. They'll

never go back to work until they get a settlement." I could not believe it. I just I thought, oh, how could this happen to me? But everybody, nobody chastised me or anything. They were all good about it, realized what had happened to me. And this guy was known for doing, their business rep, he was known for being way out of line on a lot of stuff. So as far as our own union was concerned, they didn't they didn't give me heck.

BR [00:50:20] In general, is there anything else you'd like to share about your time as a leader of BC's labour movement? Just asking a general question if there's anything that you want to reflect on those years.

BK [00:50:43] I worked full-time for the union for 20 years. It was a big part of my life, but I really liked what I was doing. I liked helping people. I liked working with different people. I appreciated the work that everyone did. I talked to people, I asked people questions. I didn't usually make decisions just off the top of my head. I discussed it with someone else if I needed help. I wasn't shy about asking other people to help me, and I worked really hard, but I enjoyed it. I really did enjoy it. And if I had it to do all over again, I sure would do it.

KN [00:51:38] That's great. So Bernice, I have one last question. I'm sure that you'll agree that it's important for young people and people who are active in the union to know something about their union history and the history of the union movement generally. Can you talk a bit about why you think that's important? Why is it important for them to know something about their past?

BK [00:52:04] Well, I can speak from my own children, from knowing my own children, that they grew up in a house where I was a union person, that I'd always belonged to the union wherever I worked. And they were brought up that way. And they realized that that many of the things they had, they had, because I was making wages that were bargained for me by a union, and that the way we live our lives was so much better. My daughter, she worked for BCTel and she belonged to the union there and she was active there. And my son is a chef. And he worked for White Spot restaurants. And the one he worked for when he was manager of the one in Abbotsford, in Langley. He was manager of the restaurant there, and it was a unionized restaurant. And he got all of the benefits that the union people got, the holidays and everything. And so my own children know what it meant for when my husband worked before, he was a Snap-on tool dealer. He worked at Scott Paper in New Westminster and he belonged to the union there and he was active there and they realized that they had a lot of things that they wouldn't have had if we didn't have union jobs and were able to give them the educations they wanted. Our son, he graduated from BCIT. Our daughter Karen, she worked at Telus. She was active in the union, but they had a big strike a few years ago. And she, after the strike the whole thing was changed and she quit that job. And she now works at Simon Fraser University. She works in the Indigenous Studies and she is going to university and she is taking her second to last course before she's going to get her degree.

KN [00:54:46] Wonderful. Very nice. Well, thank you very much for the interview.

BK [00:54:51] I hope it was okay.

KN [00:54:52] Yeah, it's very good. Yeah.

BK [00:54:54] It was so nice seeing you both again. Thank you.

