

Interview: Art Kube (AK)

Interviewer: Jim Sinclair (JS) and Darryl Walker (DW)

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Transcription: Donna Sacuta and Jane Player

JS [00:00:02] Okay. In 1983, you were the newly elected president of the BC Federation of Labour, and on July the seventh, Premier Bennett brought in 27 bills that were very dramatic, perhaps the biggest assault on workers' rights and human rights that we've seen in the province in a single time. Do you remember what your thoughts are when you actually saw that happening that day or the next day?

AK [00:00:29] Well, let me tell you, it was overwhelming. The thing which is happening, I mean, a newly elected president. Standing out there, trying to do three things. In front of me, the attack against the labour movement by the very conservative forces in that community. A labour movement, largely divided. The question then was, where do you start? I felt that the thing, which was necessary to be done, is to bring about some sort of unity in the fight against the Bennett government—and that's what we did.

JS [00:01:27] At that point, you created Operation Solidarity.

AK [00:01:30] That's right.

JS [00:01:31] That brought the different unions all under the same—affiliates, non affiliates. People didn't like each other. The whole works in the one room.

AK [00:01:38] Yeah.

JS [00:01:39] What inspired you to do that? Unity— you thought that was a precondition to winning, right?

AK [00:01:43] Well, I think it was a precondition to unity and that everyone had just had to pull together. The other thing, which was necessary, is some finances. You know, you can't take on a provincial government and hope that through wishes, things will come together. Basically, what we did, to a great extent myself, because I was the only one who could talk to all camps. I was sort of the neutral of the no shows. I got the labour movement to start gettin' together. The other thing is that we laid down the rules for Operation Solidarity.

JS [00:02:38] Right.

AK [00:02:40] First thing was that there would be no raiding.

JS [00:02:43] Right. During this period.

AK [00:02:44] During that period. Number one.

JS [00:02:47] Yup.

AK [00:02:48] Number two was that they raised some funds and that every member belonging to Operation Solidarity would be paying a dollar per member into a fund which would be used to fight the government.

JS [00:03:07] Did most of the unions pay the money?

AK [00:03:09] Yes, surprisingly enough. Most of the unions did. There were some unions which were just broke and didn't have the dollar; but, you know, you sort of push them pretty hard.

JS [00:03:21] Yeah. Was it a dollar a month or a dollar just to start off with.

AK [00:03:25] The one-shot deal.

JS [00:03:26] One shot deal of a dollar. Right.

AK [00:03:27] A one shot deal and some unions gave more than one dollar.

AK [00:03:33] I think, if I remember correctly, we raised in one shot there about one quarter million dollars, which was unheard—

JS [00:03:44] In those days.

AK [00:03:45] Even in those days. Then we sort of start to lay out a program. We laid out one simple, one- page program. This program had certain facets to it, which basically guaranteed that we would have labour unity during that period, and that we would have the raising of funds for the purpose of fighting back, and also trying to take advantage of certain situations. Like, for instance, during that period of time, you know, you had the situation in Poland where Solidarity was formed and fought a fairly decent fight against the established government. They don't know. [unclear] Good thing. That was part of the name, Operation Solidarity or Solidarity period. The other thing, which we did in the same period of time there, was the fight in Central America.

JS [00:05:11] Mm hmm.

AK [00:05:12] The Canadian labour movement played a very large role in that. That was Solidarity, called Solidarity.

JS [00:05:24] You were in good company.

AK [00:05:25] We were in very good company.

JS [00:05:27] Take us to the first meeting. The first meeting had all these characters in the room. You know them all?

AK [00:05:32] Yeah.

JS [00:05:32] Some of them haven't talked to each other for 25 years. Some of them had been raiding each other mercilessly for the last 15 years. What was that first meeting like?

AK [00:05:40] Well, this meeting was fine.

JS [00:05:44] Yeah?

AK [00:05:50] It was little bit touchy, to say the least, because not only did we have the question of the labour movement, but the community groups wanted to get in too, in the act, because they sort of felt that it was their fight too. Because if you recall, there were X number of bills which affected the overall community. Not all the bills were directed directly against the labour movement.

JS [00:06:28] Yes. The majority of them were against—.

AK [00:06:31] The majority were but there were a lot of the legislation which really adversely affected the community groups, tenants' groups.

JS [00:06:43] Yeah. Actually, I think the majority of the bills were probably against the community. There was two or three against the labour movement.

AK [00:06:48] Yeah.

JS [00:06:49] Of the 27 bills, probably the majority affected working people in the community.

AK [00:06:53] Yeah. Yeah, you're right.

JS [00:06:55] How did you come up with the Solidarity Coalition as a way of getting those people involved?

AK [00:07:04] We knew that if we would just willy-nilly put that thing together and through wishful thinking, have that thing work in a real good balance. We knew that the differences were fairly large and that it would try to, sort of, keep the thing together. At the same time, don't look for trouble if there is none. Surprisingly, there was a considerable amount of division. It's one thing to say, well, you know, in a labour movement, we have these people, these things who don't work together because of differences and so and so forth. If you look at the Muslim organizations in the Lower Mainland, who were very much opposed to the legislation because they were very adversely affected, you then found out that it might not be the best thing to have Jack Munro on one side and the gay organizations on the other side. I mean, talking about fire.

JS [00:08:50] Right.

AK [00:08:51] It was rough going. You know, we just talked to what you might call the more the most sort of liberal forces in community organizations. We got to work together, but let me tell you, there were really very touchy situations, you know.

JS [00:09:27] Not just between labour and the community, but within the community itself.

AK [00:09:30] Within the community itself. That's right.

JS [00:09:32] There were different strategies, they thought they would do?

AK [00:09:35] Yeah. There I played a very good role because they didn't talk to each other, but they talked to me because I'm just sort of neutral.

JS [00:09:51] Right.

AK [00:09:52] Things started to get together and to a certain extent, it sprouted.

JS [00:10:01] Right.

AK [00:10:08] Like some sort of thing that sprouted out of the earth all at once.

JS [00:10:11] Yes.

AK [00:10:11] You had that organization, Operation Solidarity, who overnight could organize thousands of people.

JS [00:10:25] On July 23rd and on July 27th, you did have thousands of people in the streets, right? Two times in Victoria and Vancouver. In Empire Stadium, too, right? Yeah, that was a huge day we all remember that were there. At this point, you're ending the fight and it's the summer. You create Operation Solidarity. Are you thinking public opposition can actually push the government back on these bills? Is that what's going on? People are thinking, have we got to build a movement here to do that?

AK [00:10:57] You didn't have too much experience in that particular area.

JS [00:11:01] Yes.

AK [00:11:05] The question was, how do you [unclear]—for instance, the initial demonstrations in different parts of the province, you know, got groups of 25 to 30,000 people. Some people say, oh, yeah, you know, these things happen overnight. Let me tell you that these things don't happen overnight. They happen because you work on them. You have people who are organizing, people who take advantage of certain situations. For instance, in British Columbia, we had approximately 1,000 people who worked for trade unions. Let me tell you, they were put at our disposal.

JS [00:11:58] Right.

AK [00:12:00] Right away. You know, there was no problem and all the fulltime staff of trade unions we needed. Naturally there were a lot of people who were just anxious to get involved and did so. It was really what you might call a thing which sort of fed itself and was able to wipe out any differences, you know, whatsoever.

JS [00:12:47] A lot of that was leadership that did that. I mean, you had the Solidarity Coalition here and Operation Solidarity, and you had a foot in each camp. Clearly, the president of the Federation of Labour and Operation Solidarity, but how much crossover was there between those groups as they were going forward and how much coordination between those groups?

AK [00:13:11] We had a steering committee.

JS [00:13:13] Okay.

AK [00:13:14] Okay. Which basically, had most of the clout, you know, finances came very largely from Operation Solidarity.

JS [00:13:31] Right.

AK [00:13:37] Also, the organizational expertise came from the labour movement side of the operation. The great thing was that they worked together in these difficult situations.

JS [00:14:00] How important for that movement was it to have the community there and organized with the labour movement? If you hadn't done that and it was just a labour movement, how much would that have weakened the movement?

AK [00:14:22] It's it's hard to say because we don't know for sure.

JS [00:14:37] Right.

AK [00:14:38] Really, you know, we were in uncharted waters.

JS [00:14:43] Yup.

AK [00:14:48] The important thing and the thing which really overcame what you might call the divisions was the overall thing of fighting the government and the legislation. I mean, it was so outrageous. You just didn't have any other choice but to stick together, you know?

JS [00:15:19] Yeah.

AK [00:15:21] So we did.

JS [00:15:26] The steering committee was Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition together, was it?

AK [00:15:30] Yeah.

JS [00:15:30] Okay. That's where a lot of the decisions were made?

AK [00:15:33] Yeah.

JS [00:15:34] That's how it worked together?

AK [00:15:35] Yeah. As I said, the great thing was that you tried to keep them together with the least division.

JS [00:15:56] Yes.

AK [00:16:03] It was a situation where certain people just didn't sit together, you know. You made sure that they sat apart. In retrospect, I really had to laugh because Jack Munro was basically— when it came to intolerance, you just make absolutely sure that we didn't have too many resolutions dealing with lifestyles and other things.

JS [00:16:59] Spotted owls and environment and —

AK [00:17:02] Oh, you're not kidding.

JS [00:17:05] Yup.

AK [00:17:06] You know, they said that they all [unclear]. Nevertheless, it did come together. The question is you get into that set up—the general strike mood.

JS [00:17:28] Right.

AK [00:17:29] How do you get out of it? You know? I mean, that was that was a very, very tough decision. What I was able to do, I was able to start talking to people to see what we could do to find some sort of exit strategy to lead us to some sort of retreat on the part of the government. That's what we started to do. Just so you know, sometimes memory lapses.

JS [00:18:23] For all of it Art. For all of it.

AK [00:18:24] Create something.

JS [00:18:26] Let me take you to October. Okay. You've been all through the summer. Momentum is growing. The government's not backing down. Between the two groups, you organize a demonstration of over 60,000 people. When the Premier shows up for his party meeting. Sixty thousand people walk the streets and Bennett walks out and says, 'We're not moving.' At this point, Operation Solidarity gets an action plan together because clearly you're starting to think about where does this go. What was the thinking around the action plan? How did that relate to the Solidarity Coalition?

AK [00:19:08] Well, what you have to understand is that, you know, these gatherings of thousands of people took a toll on the resources of the labour movement. We were running out of steam. It's much easier for the government to control their people than us because, you know, a rank and file member can tell you to go and get stuffed.

JS [00:19:51] And they have.

AK [00:19:53] I know and not using the nice language I'm using. The thing was, it was that situation where we started running out of steam. The courts got into play. I mean, there was something like 70 or 75—

JS [00:20:25] Injunctions.

AK [00:20:26] Injunctions. Against me. For a while, I thought I could run the operation solely on the eight dollars you collected every time they gave you that. You're filing part.

JS [00:20:56] Yes.

AK [00:20:58] They have to give you eight dollars.

JS [00:21:01] You can run the whole show.

AK [00:21:05] You know, we knew that we had to jack things up. As I said, it was becoming difficult. It was becoming difficult because here you had a situation where the teachers—just about every school board had an injunction against any sort of action. What sort of helped us was that Operation Solidarity and Solidarity Coalition were entities which had no legal status. You know, we weren't in an organization.

JS [00:22:03] That meant they couldn't get you legally then?

AK [00:22:06] Well, it took him—.

JS [00:22:08] Quite awhile.

AK [00:22:13] They had that situation. But would we followed with [unclear], you know, so what they did the filed it against the school boards and so and so for them. Then the next thing came is that they're running out of funds. One major issue. Secondly, is there somebody who could sort of try to mediate that situation. For me, there are all kinds of people on both sides, to a certain extent, who wanted to settle that thing. The Employers' Council didn't want that thing to go on because it could spread.

JS [00:23:23] Yes, to the private sector. It's starting to affect their bottom line.

AK [00:23:27] That's right. It was becoming an eyesore to them. The other thing was that there were some— for instance, there was one thing which was an offer from the Employers' Council to settle the whole thing on the basis that they would back off and we would dissolve Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition. Okay.

JS [00:24:18] The offer was that the—what would they back off, the legislation?

AK [00:24:22] The legislation—and vaguely, vaguely, do something about the community. There's no way I could even—

JS [00:24:38] Right.

AK [00:24:40] I just refused to take that thing and bring that to even the steering committee. Just acknowledging it would be just madness because it didn't address any of the things.

JS [00:25:01] Right.

AK [00:25:02] So, on we went.

JS [00:25:06] At some point, the BCGEU is unable to get a bill through exemption. They were looking for an exemption and they didn't get it. Then there was a successful exemption for teachers in North Van on November the seventh. At this point, the action plan was beginning to launch. Also at this point, you were also ordered to bed. The doctors said, you know, it's time for you to take care of yourself. You've obviously been through this [unclear] this events.

AK [00:25:42] Yeah, well, it didn't happen overnight. There was a certain time span.

JS [00:25:46] Yes.

AK [00:25:46] Yeah. Which we worked on. I think that these time spans, you know, are fairly important.

JS [00:26:05] Yes.

AK [00:26:08] The thing which sort of strengthened our hand was that it was also in the Social Credit riding where there was an awful lot of support for us.

JS [00:26:19] Right.

AK [00:26:21] That most likely did more than anything else to at least get the government to give it a second term [unclear].

JS [00:26:32] Right.

AK [00:26:37] Here I was going from one rally to another. When you go from rally to rally it takes a personal toll on you, too.

JS [00:27:01] Well, the tension you were dealing with, even in your own labour movement, and the labour movement was ape shit.

AK [00:27:06] Yeah, sure.

JS [00:27:08] Not everybody agreed in the labour movement with what you were doing.

AK [00:27:10] Oh, no. You had the labour movement people say it's not really our fight.

JS [00:27:31] Right.

AK [00:27:36] Go and negotiate the settlement. Well, go and negotiate the settlement—what's the settlement composed of? You know. Again, it wasn't between the steering committee and the government. It was between the government, on the one side, and what that meant was Spector, who was the Deputy Minister to the Premier. You had Jack Munro on the other side because what has happened by then was I was out of the picture. You know, I was out cold.

JS [00:28:58] Right.

AK [00:29:04] The thing was, the negotiations were going on at the Labour Relations Board.

JS [00:29:09] Yes. Was that the BCGEU was there?

AK [00:29:15] No. The BCGEU was never—a number of concurrent things going on.

JS [00:29:22] Right. A lot of moving pieces.

AK [00:29:23] Yeah, well, what we were trying to do is make a breakthrough in the bargaining units who weren't directly covered by the legislation. Okay. Directly. You had the teachers where we could do that. They wanted the supplement, you know, the school, but the North Vancouver School Board won the settlement. You know, and they were quite happy. So they had—I'm trying to remember it accurately. We had terms of settlement. One in North Vancouver. One in Richmond. I'm trying to remember, but I think there was one more. What happened was that the Deputy Minister of Education, guy by the name of Carter basically squashed them, went to the boards and put on the heavy. If you don't toe the line and null and void these agreements, let me tell you that you're no longer going to be a school board. You're gonna be under the auspices of— It was really, really comical to a way because the guy who was being the heavy, Carter, who was then also the Deputy Minister of Education, was at one time also the president of the teachers union.

JS [00:32:22] At some point, as I remember, there were a series of discussions with the labour movement, particularly with the BCTF, with BCGEU and others, and they came to some agreements around settling the dispute. These unions felt they did win things in this dispute. They got exemptions from three, teachers got some seniority rights, as I understand it. There were things that were accomplished. At this point, you're out of commission and Munro goes to Kelowna with Gerry Scott. The view in the community—and we were talking about this the other day—the view in the community groups was they were left out of this, that basically Munro was not really a legitimate representative of their interests for all the reasons you've described earlier in this interview. So they were mad. Do you think they had a right to be mad? The community organizations.

AK [00:33:24] You know, sometimes things get a little bit—because the teachers weren't at any bargaining table.

JS [00:33:37] Right.

AK [00:33:38] You know, they weren't a force of a whole. The sort of discussions which took place were largely with people who sort of got a few pieces together and thought that maybe they could hammer something together.

JS [00:34:07] Right.

AK [00:34:07] Okay.

JS [00:34:09] Was this taking place at the Labour Board? A lot of it with?

AK [00:34:15] Yeah. I mean, just about all of it took place at the Labour Relations Board. On one side, you know, could maybe sorta say the left. We sort of held together and then, on the other side, you had the government people very largely controlled by Spector. Then you had the inter [unclear] with Munro playing a role. You know, if things got held up then the heavies were there. Then you had, for instance, also at the Labour Relations Board, you had the bargaining committee of the BCGEU going on at the same time. You had Larry Kuehn on behalf of teachers and Larry and me worked very, very closely together. We know that the government would be prepared to do something to reduce the impact on the labour movement, but one thing they were absolutely opposed to is to do anything for the community. That was just taboo. That was the difficulty.

JS [00:36:38] At this point, you know, in those kind of backroom discussions and discussions, you're there for part of that, I guess?

AK [00:36:47] I was there for most of it.

JS [00:36:48] Most of it. Okay. You're at this point trying to move the two agendas forward, but what you're saying is the government on the labour side, they could move somewhere there, but they dug in their heels on the community side. They weren't moving on that community side at this point is what you're, you know, in a moving [unclear] which puts you in a difficult spot, doesn't it?

AK [00:37:10] Well, look, it did and it didn't because I had to if I didn't like it or not. I had to tell the community partners that certain decisions are the prerogative of the labour movement and I have not received the authority to come to you people and say the labour

movement will give you a seat on a table. I said, look, for instance, at the whole question of a general strike and so on and so forth. It's the prerogative of the labour movement; it's not the prerogative of community organizations. I said, 'I hate to tell you that but if I would tell you that, that would be an outright lie and it would just hurt more than it and hinder more than it would help.' I remember there was a meeting of the coalition at Community College in Vancouver and I got supremely booed for stating the trade union position. I said, 'Sorry. That's the way it is.' That's the way it works, unfortunately. Then, you know, we slowly as I said, you know, one big demonstration. When you had that demonstration, for instance in Kamloops and that demonstration in Kamloops setting at about 7000 people, which was—

JS [00:39:32] Huge for Kamloops.

AK [00:39:33] Huge for Kamloops. What do you do for an encore? I mean the newspapers played a real nasty game. Well, how many people do you expect at the demonstration? You know, that was their famous line. Every time.

JS [00:40:06] They kept moving the bar up.

AK [00:40:08] That's right. Then, naturally, what do we do next? We said, well, what we're going to have to do we're going to have to have one other mass demonstration. We went out there and we really cranked it up. We had that October 14 demonstration at the Socred convention at the Hotel Vancouver. I tell you, I was shaking to make sure that thing turned out and it turned out.

JS [00:41:13] When the labour movement sent Jack back to Kelowna was that the Federation of Labour executive—that was Operation Solidarity? Was that everybody in the room that night, do you know, do you remember Arthur?

AK [00:41:27] Oh yeah, everyone's in that room, everyone. You know, there's some people who disavow their attendance.

JS [00:41:37] Yes, there were.

AK [00:41:39] Yeah. You know, you were there. I wasn't there.

JS [00:41:43] No, I know.

AK [00:41:44] I wasn't there. The other thing was that I knew the outlines of the settlement. Okay. You know, if you're not on the table, you're not gonna have much saying as to the contents.

JS [00:42:17] Right.

AK [00:42:28] I know the general outlines of the thing and I know there were a couple hang ups. Really. Like there should be no—

JS [00:42:50] Retribution.

AK [00:42:51] Retribution. There should be no retribution and that had to be somethin' in for the coalitions.

JS [00:43:13] They didn't think there was. In the end, what happened?

AK [00:43:22] I doubt there was.

JS [00:43:24] Fair enough.

AK [00:43:26] I doubt there was. Well, there wasn't, unfortunately.

JS [00:43:37] You thought there was, but in the end there wasn't. Right? Or, you thought what was there was.

AK [00:43:45] You know what I thought was consultation, meaningful consultation with the community groups, community groups' involvement in the process to me was—you know, there was some possibilities there. To a certain extent, I think that in, retrospect, if you looked at the agreement in the initial stages, you could have said that you got the government to back off. Okay. There was supposed to be meaningful consultation, you know, discussions on all of the issues, both trade union and the community group. Unfortunately, what should have happened is that we should have declared victory. Gone to the press and declared the big victory of the labour movement over the Socred government. You know. Instead they stole our victory and bought into that whole proposition. I think everything is okay here and so on and so forth, but I can't tell you that I agreed to that because I've been gettin' all calls from my MLAs. You know, there's already a revolt on. I have to go to talk to my caucus. Therefore, yes, I agree with principle to that thing but—

JS [00:46:14] Which MLAs were these? NDP MLAs or Socred?

AK [00:46:18] No, Socred MLAs.

JS [00:46:18] They were feeling the heat.

AK [00:46:19] Yeah.

JS [00:46:20] Not to support the deal?

AK [00:46:22] Not to support the deal.

JS [00:46:24] Because?

AK [00:46:26] Because it wasn't what.

JS [00:46:29] Oh, interesting. Because it wasn't what they expected? Was it too good or too bad?

AK [00:46:37] Well, it was, how dare a rump group out there in the community telling the duly-elected government what it can do and can't do.

JS [00:46:56] Right. Okay. If you look back 35 years—a long time—a lot of water under that bridge. Is there a couple of things you'd say to people today about Solidarity in terms of, you know, would you've done anything differently? As you said earlier, endings are always more difficult than the beginnings of these things. Would you have done anything differently at the end, or in general, would you have done something differently? Which is

not to say you didn't do an amazing job, just that were there things, upon reflection, you would handle differently?

AK [00:47:37] Well, you would had the experience of Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition. Okay. The experience could be helpful. Somewhat helpful.

JS [00:47:53] Yup.

AK [00:48:08] I think that it's doubtful that the labour movement could mobilize to the same extent as we did then.

JS [00:48:20] You never know, Arthur.

AK [00:48:21] Yup.

JS [00:48:23] It was doubtful then.

AK [00:48:25] Yeah, more doubtful now.

JS [00:48:28] Quite possibly.

AK [00:48:30] It's hard. Let me say, you know, that we did positive things during that period of time and some of them will stick. Okay. There were a couple of things which they should have done since. For instance, when the government disavowed collective agreements and cut wages in a major way in a number of instances, I think that would have been the thing to call on the strike because doing that sort of thing was more draconian than what they did then. You know. People, you know, not even the union, which was affected by it, was prepared to hit the bricks on that particular issue and so it was just difficult.

JS [00:50:10] Mm hmm. Any other lessons of the experience Arthur?

AK [00:50:17] No. I think that what is missing, or was missing subsequently to, was the question of no discussion on the lessons learned. Okay. I think that there's some lessons we learned and the other lessons we really completely ignored. I wanted, for instance, to run because we didn't have any what you might call examples here in Canada. I looked at the Paris in the spring situation. Okay. Where basically there was a general strike. What happened in that general strike is that the public generally was not adversely affected by it. Okay. Services to people were maintained. Vital services were maintained fully, matched by the unions.

JS [00:52:28] Right.

AK [00:52:28] Okay. To a certain extent, we did the whole thing and it never got too much play. We ran a seniors' residence in Kamloops maintained the operation of Tranquille.

JS [00:53:06] Right.

AK [00:53:07] Without supervision.

JS [00:53:09] Yes. An occupation.

AK [00:53:11] Which was the closest thing, I think, to the Paris situation. It's something they should have thought about and discussed about for any future sort of thing. The only thing we knew was to basically damn us [unclear] for not winning.

JS [00:53:51] Let me ask a question Arthur. At the Empire Stadium that day a friend of mine came up to me and he said, 'Jesus Christ, Sinclair, where is this whole thing going? This is amazing. Who's bargaining?' I looked at him and I didn't really know what he was talking about. I said, 'What do you mean, who's bargaining?' He said, 'You know, there's probably a victory here. But you've got to have the right bargaining committee. So everybody is part of it and gets it, because if they're not, they won't accept it.' As I watched it develop up to Munro going to Kelowna, those words stayed in my head. Okay. Do you think if there was anything we could have done differently, we could have had a different bargaining committee? Or, was that even a possibility?

AK [00:54:40] There was no bargaining committee.

JS [00:54:42] Right. At all?

AK [00:54:43] There wasn't. It was, you know, we had a few rooms in the Labour Relations Board, which we could use.

JS [00:55:00] There was no bargaining committee, you're right.

AK [00:55:01] There was no bargaining committee. As a matter of fact, in most instances, it wasn't even, what's his name from the government side—Spector—meeting with me, or, it went via Jack Munro.

JS [00:55:25] Even back then? Interesting.

DW [00:55:27] Arthur, from my perspective, for the first time perhaps ever, but in a long time, the labour movement and community organizations came together in common cause. Would that be a fair assessment of what happened through Operation Solidarity?

AK [00:55:44] Well. I wish it would so, but didn't. It was—because the difficulty was that you had Operation Solidarity, you know, which had the troops. Had the troops, had the money, had the organizing skills, and was able to basically call the shots, everything else. The government, unfortunately, sort of knew that the community organizations were extremely weak. They don't have any organized—they didn't have an organization as such. Name me five community organizations. The community organizations sort of grew overnight. Unfortunately there wasn't anything to sort of keep them together. It was very, very difficult. I mean, I relied, for instance, when it came to community organization, I relied on people who I did through my community work with the Canadian Labour Congress. You know. That's I know Father Jim from, that's where I know Renate Shearer from, you know, because in regards to Renate I know her work in human rights. Unfortunately, you know, I'm trying to remember—how did Napoleon, when Napoleon and the Pope talked to each other, the Pope apparently said to Napoleon, how he can call on God and his disciples, and so and so forth. Napoleon came back and said, 'Well, that's fine, but how many battalions does that represent?'

DW [00:59:21] Exactly. Yes. So would it be fair, Arthur, to say that the labour movement missed an opportunity to build a broader coalition with community and environmental and other organizations?

AK [00:59:33] As a matter of fact it felt that I pushed them way too far.

DW [00:59:37] You did? In what way, Arthur?

AK [00:59:40] Well, in terms that we pushed without any major mandate to do so. That was one of the—

JS [00:59:59] You're talking about the labour movement now? You pushed the labour movement, right?

AK [01:00:02] Yeah.

JS [01:00:04] Yeah, I don't get that statement.

AK [01:00:05] We know that—because, I mean, it happened when I stepped down there. The resolutions out on the floor in convention basically saying, hey, folks, back off.

DW [01:00:28] Would it be fair to say that Munro had a mandate when he went to Kelowna, or—

AK [01:00:35] No. Maybe we should spend just a minute on the Kelowna deal because many, many false issues in regards to Kelowna. What happened is when the settlement was sort of achieved, right away people wanted to celebrate. There was a celebration taking place in the office, in the union's office building. They're celebrating there and the press is there and the television is there. All at once somebody says—and I don't know to this day who exactly came up with the idea—but Jesus, so we got an agreement, but can you trust what's his face?

JS [01:02:08] Spector.

AK [01:02:09] Yeah. Spector. Well, I know the next one. The name was Mike. Mike Kramer. Mike Kramer comes out without debating, 'well, you know, what we should do is fly down to Kelowna and get it from the—'

JS [01:02:37] The Premier

AK [01:02:39] Premier directly. Oh, great idea. Bullshit, the worst bloody idea. (laughs)

JS [01:02:51] Interesting.

AK [01:02:54] The ability to negotiate anything, there was nothing negotiated at that particular time. There was a deal and all [unclear] by going down there to Kelowna, it was basically able to get the government out of the spot, allowed them to.

JS [01:03:31] You weren't in favour of going to Kelowna?

AK [01:03:33] No, no, I was sick.

JS [01:03:35] I know.

AK [01:03:36] I was sick, but you have to sort of understand that there were a lot of people who thought that I was going way too far.

JS [01:03:52] Oh I know, I know the feeling.

AK [01:03:59] To a certain extent I didn't know either because I read enough of the literature, which sort of tells me that if a government after X number of days of strike, it's able to come out of the situation with your skin intact, that's a victory in itself. The unfortunate situation is that was not enough. That was not enough. The question basically that arose that there wasn't—you know, to a certain extent, if you look at the question of the community groups, I mean, that's really the backbone. Look right now who were the community groups. They weren't, you know—the groups were there, but they were to a great extent, not visible. They weren't visible in the sense that they could come to the table with the labour movement and say, look (claps) because the labour movement then comes back and saying, well, who the hell do you represent? You know.

DW [01:06:01] Arthur, it might be a difficult question to ask or to ascertain, but going into it, did you have an idea of what the community groups may have wanted or may have needed? Or was that even a thought as you started putting Operation Solidarity together?

AK [01:06:24] Look, the thing happened overnight. The thing happened overnight and I sort of felt like building a motor car on the run. You just didn't have the tools, the skills to really take advantage, full advantage of a situation. You just, you know, I mean, how do you bring 45,000 people together? You know, like we did for the rally at the PNE. Let me say yes, but the question is if you wanted to have the perfect situation, then that would have required a number of other things. It's these other things which we didn't have. You know, we had for instance, if you recall, we had a newspaper, Solidarity. Solidarity the newspaper.

JS [01:08:27] Tom Hawthorn and Keith Baldrey and Deb Wilson and all those people. I remember that.

AK [01:08:34] Having that, you know, created a fight, too, because for a while there we didn't know what side they were on. (laughs) By that time, you know, we tried to sort of steam it up and—we had the BC Fed convention and we invited Solidarity and it was a pretty motley crew, you know. They fought amongst themselves of who represents whom. It's, you know, what most likely it would have required about a year of organization to set up half-decent organizations in a community because we didn't have them. You know, the environmental groups were or half-decently organized, but there were our people too who played key roles in it.

JS [01:10:05] Was there much opposition? I mean it was a pretty, and hasn't been done since really. There's been coalitions, many of them, but not in the same moment that you did it. When you set up the Solidarity Coalition did people like Munro and others say, what the hell are you doing, Kube? Like, you're going to make a mess for us here. Or was it, unanimous that we said—

AK [01:10:26] Oh, no, listen the thing is that Munro was in on the beginning, you know. He sort of talked about we'll negotiate our deal out of it and, you know, we'll—

JS [01:10:42] We'll do the traditional thing.

AK [01:10:43] Yeah, that's right, you know, I mean, that a nickel will do that and it just wasn't. It just wasn't. To a certain extent, we wanted something because, if you really look at it, labour movements were slowly getting hammered around the world. It was the first group here in British Columbia which sort of said, 'hey, stop it.' As weak as the response was, it was still the first major response to it.

JS [01:11:36] To austerity.

AK [01:11:37] You know, and let me say this, that there were voices on the employers' side who said, 'hey, listen, if you lose that one, you know, then we really can be in trouble.' These things, you know, were quoted and so it's important. In these situations you sort of just try to find out who your friends are or will be and where you can find them. The only thing I know, for instance, about general strikes is that the government usually supports in these disputes peace and order as their responsibility, even though that is a provincial responsibility. The federal governments usually undertake that responsibility to make sure that the jails are—prisoners are maintained in jails and so on and so forth. We found out, because it was close to a federal election coming up, we came up and, you know, we wondered what the federal government would do in that situation. You know, and I knew the Senator here and also a couple of the Senators because you didn't have any Liberal MPs. The only word we got back from them and says, 'Look, don't count on the federal government. The most we'll do for you is like it was done in other places. That is, you know, we'll make sure that the jails are properly manned, but that's all the help you're going to get from us.' There was, from that side, there was nothing coming. When you march downtown and you see these thousands of faces marching through there and it gives you a real sense of power. When the cold reality dawns and you're left to pick up the pieces, then the cold reality Jesus what's going to happen here. To a certain extent we did keep our nose too much [unclear] Well we weren't too badly bloodied but we didn't win and that was the problem. People wanted to win. And unfortunately—

DW [01:16:08] Within a large coalition like that, everybody has their own idea of what a win is as well, Arthur.

AK [01:16:14] Well, see, the thing is that we tried to sort of see what would bring about a settlement. I mean, that, and I tried to get the Solidarity Coalition to come up with what would be an agenda. Well, let me tell you, it just couldn't be done.

DW [01:16:49] Right.

AK [01:16:58] Here on the other side, Munro, 'Well, what do they want? They want our blood?' You know. To a certain extent, I mean, Munro's organization had taken a lot of beating during, you know, large layoffs in the forest industry and everything else. It was okay, to a certain extent you see public employees, you know, doing relatively well and not having to pay the real whole price. No layoffs. They came later.

JS [01:18:01] Yes. After Solidarity.

AK [01:18:06] It was difficult and—

JS [01:18:16] Well, it's also that it wasn't long after Solidarity ended that the other shoe dropped, which was Solidarity, the 27 bills, didn't have the Labour Code changes in it. Then fairly shortly after that, the Labour Code changes came down and they were terrible

too. Like they were outrageous as well. In a way, they didn't put them all on the table at once, they tried to divide them.

AK [01:18:43] They learned them—the government learned a lesson. Look, in no way are we going to put all these things into one basket. From now on we're going to take it piece by piece, nice and slowly.

JS [01:18:57] Yeah, that's right.

AK [01:18:57] Oh, no, I mean there is no question about it. I met—oh what's his name? The Deputy Minister. Pardon me?

JS [01:19:26] Spector.

AK [01:19:27] Spector. I met Spector in Toronto.

JS [01:19:30] Right.

AK [01:19:31] At the Royal York. I was there for some conference and he was there. He came over, you know. He just about kissed me there, you know, and tried to tell me how he would have run it. (laughter)

DW [01:19:54] That's right.

JS [01:19:56] Lots of arrogance, that boy.

DW [01:20:01] In 20-20 hindsight, everybody's got the right answers.

JS [01:20:06] Well, Arthur, I believe, you know, I think we've come to the end here, but I just want to say that I think without your leadership, Solidarity would have been a very different operation, and you wouldn't have seen what happened. You know, I'm not saying the labour movement was key to it, the community was key to it. The fact that you were there meant that whatever possibilities did happen, and again, we can always look back and say eh-eh-eh and learn, and we should—absolutely. I certainly learnt from it when I was Fed president about how to do some of these things and or not. I will say that I think your idea that the labour movement had to be united and that the community had to be with us. You see, I think the thing about the community was that it was powerful. It represented what—when we were at Empire Stadium, I was sitting there watching it going, wow, look who we are. Right? People with disabilities are up there talking, that people from the poverty groups are up there talking, people from women's organizations are there. They're all there with the labour movement at Empire Stadium. That certainly gave a very strong impression, which was one we wanted, I think, or you wanted, which was this is about our communities. I think you were very successful in doing that, Arthur. I think, you know, you contributed something profound. The reason why we're revisiting and celebrating it 35 years later is because it was profound for all of the things and all the problems that you faced during that period and that we faced. Now you can't take away from the fact, it was profound in its own way. As you say, one of the first real responses of significance against austerity, you know, and a message that we weren't going quietly into the night. Thanks for all that.

AK [01:21:53] Well, listen to me. In retrospect it wasn't all bad.

JS [01:22:02] No, not at all. That's what I'm saying to you Arthur. You know, smile about it a little bit because you pulled off almost the impossible.

AK [01:22:10] Oh, yeah. (laughs).

JS [01:22:11] Okay.

DW [01:22:12] Exactly.

JS [01:22:13] You know, as I say, there are things we all got our insights in now. At the end of the day, you created a movement to push back the government. There were victories that were won there and there were ones that were lost, as you say. For some people, you couldn't have won. I think that was difficult, but again, I just wanted to say that to you. I've said it to you before, but I want to say it again.

AK [01:22:36] Yeah, well, listen. The people who really sort of made the largest noises against me were the people that didn't make much of a contribution, unfortunately. To them, it was a time and a place to shout off their own political priorities. I mean, if you lose, then you will find that people are going to be there cheering them on because it helps their cause. The interesting thing is that in that situation, the left, and I mean more left than left, took a beating too, because today look at the left. Just about nonexistent. You know. That's sad. I say sad because, you know, if you look at the labour movement and you look at their organizations, it just about all lost. The Trib was certainly torn in half as an effective group. You know, right now you go into a Fed convention, I don't think that there are more than about three or four people who really represent the CP.

JS [01:24:58] Yeah a handful, Arthur.

AK [01:24:59] Yeah, a handful but at one time, there used to be, you know—

JS [01:25:04] At least ten handfuls and they used to do something.

AK [01:25:05] That's right. And, you know, let me tell you, you go into any union office and you'll find in these union offices the Trib, a copy of the Trib. Even if they weren't CPers or anything, but they listened to what CP has to say.

JS [01:25:28] Well, it's another conversation, really, but—

BG [01:25:32] Is there anything else we want to say on the Solidarity movement before I shut this down or—

AK [01:25:39] Well, I really don't— no, I mean, I said too much already.

BG [01:25:58] And we could talk for days about it, I'm sure.

BG [01:26:01] Well, we want to thank you so much on behalf of the BC Labour Heritage Centre for talking with us about it Art, because like Jim said, you were a really integral part of what is still the largest political protest in B.C.'s history. That's a big deal and it's something that we want to talk about and learn the lessons from and commemorate. So thank you for talking to us today.

AK [01:26:22] You're welcome.