Interview: Cathy Walker (CW)
Interviewer: Sean Griffin (SG) & Bailey Garden (BG)
Date: March 28, 2016
Location: BC Labour Heritage Centre
Transcription: Bailey Garden

SG [00:00:00] Hear your full name just for the documentary record.

CW [00:00:02] Sure. Now, is it best I look at you? Yeah, I would think so.

BG [00:00:05] You can look at it, yeah. Just at Sean as he is speaking, or wherever you feel comfortable, yeah.

CW [00:00:10] Okay. My full name?

SG [00:00:12] Your full name.

CW [00:00:12] Catherine Elizabeth Walker.

SG [00:00:14] Okay. I never knew the about the middle before. There you go. You're born where? When?

CW [00:00:20] I was born in Vancouver in 1949 and grew up in Burnaby.

SG [00:00:27] What date in 1949?

CW [00:00:29] Oh, December 7th, 1949. Yes.

SG [00:00:32] Now, you'd mentioned to me before that growing up, your parents were kind of progressive minded, but weren't particularly active politically or anything. Were they in unions? What kind of work did they do?

CW [00:00:44] My dad was a mechanic as I was growing up, and so he was in the Machinists Union, and every month we'd get the Machinists Union newspaper. The Machinist, called very creatively, and of course, it came from the States. So, it was interesting as I was growing up to think about my dad being in this union. The interesting thing about my dad is he was active in the union and of course, there'd been the odd strike, and I remember it being a tough time because, of course, there wasn't much in the way of strike benefits; but I was so young that I just remember it just being a little bit dicey. Then later on, he'd been working for a company where he was, he knew, at 10 years he was going to be fired, and the reason was because of vesting for pensions. He took it all in good stride. Before the end of the day, he had two more job offers, three actually, but he took one. It was a non-union operation. It was Clarkdale Motors -- because he was a Volkswagen mechanic -- and the deal was he would get the union rate no matter what, but he had to work non-union then. So, every month, or periodically, he would go down to the Machinists' office and pay his dues; and as years went on, the Machinists would say, 'You know, you're the only guy who does this. You know, what do we do with the dues?' He says, 'I don't care, you know, I'm getting the union rate. I owe it to the union.' In spite of the fact that they'd done nothing about the fact that everybody got fired there before 10 years so that the company could avoid vesting. That was the kind of guy my dad was, very principled. He wouldn't put his money in a savings account, and the reason is he didn't

think it was right that banks should take advantage of people in loans and mortgages and such. He didn't want to contribute to that whole exploitation as he saw it -- although he wouldn't have used the word -- of people who needed money from the banks. He always just had it in a chequing account and that was just the sort of guy he was. Just a working-class principled guy.

CW [00:03:17] My mom was equally principled in other ways, making sure that I understood what a progressive perspective was, although she probably would not have used that term. Certainly, on social issues, whether it was support of the CCF or whether it was sticking up for people who were being oppressed. They certainly were actively opposed to the Vietnam War. They had -- after I moved away from home -- they had a couple of deserters living in my bedroom. I remember finding that rather odd at the time, you know. What are they doing in my bedroom? Even though I was absolutely as opposed to the Vietnam War as them. My mom joined the Voice of Women and was active in peace work and that sort of thing. So I was lucky. I grew up with a couple of very decent people.

SG [00:04:19] Did you have siblings?

CW [00:04:20] No, no. I was an only child, yeah.

SG [00:04:24] You went to school in elementary and high school in Burnaby as well?

CW [00:04:29] That's right, yeah. Douglas Road Elementary School and Burnaby Central High School.

SG [00:04:34] It's an old school.

CW [00:04:35] Yeah, well, it was brand new then. Yeah, and then went to Simon Fraser University after that.

SG [00:04:42] That would have been right at the time of all of the big political ferment.

CW [00:04:45] Absolutely. Couldn't have a better time to go to university.

SG [00:04:50] Where did that take you?

CW [00:04:51] Well, at first, I was diligently studying sciences -- physics and chemistry -- and then I got involved in politics up there because, of course, there had been people in the New Democratic Youth that I joined in '65 when I was 15 who were also involved at Simon Fraser. I knew them, and then of course, they were also involved in the student movement, Students for a Democratic University. Within that, of course, there was the Women's Caucus, which was part of SDU (Students for a Democratic University). I started going to mall meetings. Oh, and then there were a couple of elections, federal and provincial, in that time period. I just became more and more involved in the student movement and the women's movement and finally decided that probably I would rather do more in the political area than in science.

CW [00:05:52] I had a good opportunity in the summer of '69 to participate in a delegation of the Canadian Union of Students to Cuba. That was great. It was a great eyeopener to see a socialist country and participated in a number of national conferences that were put on by the student movement.

SG [00:06:15] This is by the Canadian University Students.

CW [00:06:18] Yeah, CUS (Canadian University Students).

SG [00:06:19] What was that? Oh, it was CUS.

CW [00:06:20] CUS. It was CUS, yeah.

SG [00:06:21] It's gone through a number of different names throughout the years.

CW [00:06:22] Yeah, and remember you probably would have been involved more in CUP, I guess.

SG [00:06:26] That's right, in CUP. Yeah.

CW [00:06:27] Yeah, yeah. Yeah, during that period it was great. I mean, meeting people from all across the country who were involved in the fight against the Vietnam War and more progressive political thought. I mean, certainly Marxism, although we certainly would have not talked about Leninism at the time because it was very much a new left movement. Did all kinds of reading and met all sorts of people and it was just a fantastic time to be involved. Yeah.

SG [00:07:01] This must have really kind of opened up all sorts of doors for you at this time as well too, in terms that you had not probably encountered before.

CW [00:07:08] Absolutely, yeah. I mean, being a working-class kid in Burnaby, you would have a fairly limited opportunity to meet people with different ideas. Other than through, New Democratic Youth and the U.N. Association and that sort of thing. That was about the only outlet for sure.

SG [00:07:28] Well, these are all things that largely don't exist anymore, like New Democratic Youth and so on. What was the sense at the time that there was so much involvement in formations like the New Democratic Youth? There was the Young Communist League existed at that time and all kinds of left formations. What do you think the -- what attracted you to it?

CW [00:07:51] Well, I think seeing it as being an organization that would be progressive. I mean, everything from the simple stuff at elections -- I remember going around and tearing down Social Credit campaign posters from telephone poles and thinking that was sort of a radical idea -- to the NDY (New Democratic Youth) was very much more than just an electoral organization. I mean, we were -- I remember sponsoring a conference on Indochina and that sort of thing, so that it was very much an organization that wanted to sort of broaden their perspective well beyond the simple narrowness of electoral politics. There were all sorts of issues then, I mean, I remember having screaming matches in high school with a fellow who was the son of a doctor who was defending the lack of Medicare and, of course, I was arguing for Medicare. It's hard to believe now that we had a society where Medicare wasn't the law.

SG [00:09:00] Yeah, that's true.

CW [00:09:00] You know, and there we were arguing away. I never persuaded him. He certainly never persuaded me, but those were the issues of the day. So within NDY there

was those kind of issues, other issues of abortion rights were on the agenda and so it was a lot of social issues then that we'd talk about at conventions and such. As well as, of course, trying to get rid of the Trots in the organization. I mean, there's all kinds of internecine battles that you look back now at, sort of in horror and jest.

SG [00:09:37] There was a real sense of social intellectual ferment taking place.

CW [00:09:41] Very much so, very much different from the rather staid senior party that most of us didn't really have any interest in having much to do with.

SG [00:09:51] Right. Now, I was looking at a previous interview that someone did with you, and you were involved in something called the Corrective Collective.

CW [00:09:59] Oh, yeah.

SG [00:10:00] Kind of an intriguing thing that wanted to sort of rewrite Canadian history from a different perspective. Can you tell me a bit about that?

CW [00:10:06] Sure. People involved in women's caucus, which of course, had then moved off the university into the community and had an office downtown. Very much sort of, part of the women's liberation movement. There were a number of us who were involved in an initiative to try and have an Indochinese women's conference together with Americans who were going to come up and we wanted people -- women -- to come over from Indochina. We thought, if we're going to have not just the people from Indochina needing to know a little bit about women in Canadian history, but the Americans basically knew nothing.

CW [00:10:51] We thought, 'Well, we should try and write something, and it should be accessible.' People said, 'Well, why don't we do that?' Also, obviously, from a left perspective, but it was in the form of a graphic novel or comic. We would have called it comics back then. We had a lot of fun writing it. I certainly can't take credit for doing very much of it, but we each took various parts of it. I think mine was the Depression -- but we had some people who are great writers, and very funny, and we had a great cartoonist. We produced something called She Named it Canada. Because that's what it was called, and of course, that was what Queen Victoria said in 1867. Appropriate this year, given its the 150th anniversary. So that was fun to do, and it's gone through a number of reprints and people have sort of resurrected it. Yeah.

SG [00:11:51] It's still kicking around then, eh?

CW [00:11:53] Amazingly so. Now it's posted on the Internet and needless to say, things have happened since 1970 or '71, whenever we did it. Anyway, it was fun to do, and it's still got some useful history there.

SG [00:12:09] So the name Corrective Collective was to correct Canadian history? That was the idea.

CW [00:12:13] That was the idea, yeah. Yeah.

SG [00:12:15] It's got a great ring to it. The name, I'll say.

CW [00:12:18] Yeah, I mean, there wasn't a lot of history around that was written from the left perspective in terms of Canadian history. I mean, there was Ryerson and such, but most of it was pretty staid, and it was books full of dense type. We thought we need something that's more popular.

SG [00:12:34] Mainly about men, too.

CW [00:12:36] Exactly. Yes.

SG [00:12:38] That's interesting.

BG [00:12:40] I wonder if we might hold on just one second here because we've got a truck that might be backing up.

SG [00:12:44] Okay, sure.

BG [00:12:44] Just pause for a second.

SG [00:12:46] Yeah, that's a good point to pick up from because I understand that you left university without finishing a degree after a couple of years because you wanted to get out into the world and work.

CW [00:12:55] Yes. Yeah, I think at that stage, a number of us who were involved in the student movement and the women's movement felt if we were really going to change society and serve the working class, we ought to be part of it.

CW [00:13:09] We decided -- a bunch of people, I think, at university decided -- yeah, we should go and find ordinary working-class jobs and see what it's like. I knew people then in the Progressive Workers Movement, which was by then a tiny fraction of its former self. They were very much Canadian union activists and Canadian nationalists. They knew people in the Canadian Electrical Workers Union which had been formed out of the Lenkirk strike in '66, which was a big strike of women workers mostly. They had just organized a plant in Port Moody called Cascade Electronics. I remember phoning up the union and saying, 'What kind of qualifications would I need to get a job there?' and they sort of, basically said, 'As long as you've got a couple of hands, you should be fine.'

CW [00:14:09] I went out there and applied for a job and got a job just like that. I did electronics assembly at that stage, and I'd never really done that before, but it was an interesting plant. Cablevision started in Vancouver and that was a plant that made parts for Cablevision.

SG [00:14:27] Oh, I see.

CW [00:14:29] Yeah. As a result of that, was able to get involved in the union. It was, well, partly it was a conscious decision, but partly, when you spent years -- whether as a member of NDY or a member of the various groups at university -- going to meetings, you just get used to going to meetings. Of course, I showed up at my first union meeting and said, 'Yeah, sure, I want to get involved.' Everybody looked at me and said, 'Well, you better finish your probation period first.' So, I did.

SG [00:15:04] Which was how long? Thirty days?

CW [00:15:06] Yeah, somewhere between 30 and 90 days. I cannot quite remember because I worked at two plants in the union. I just kept coming to meetings and as soon as I had finished my probation period, they said, 'Well, you're the only one who shows up from this plant.' It was unfortunate because it was mostly women workers who, of course, had commitments in the evening. Most of them lived down in Port Moody. The meetings were in Burnaby, and of course, for them it was a long drive. For me, it was easy. I was living in either Burnaby or Vancouver at the time, so it was easy for me to get to meetings, and they said, 'We need your plant representative.' I thought, 'Well, okay but, sort of like, who am I? You know, I've just sort of started.' But I said, 'Sure, I'm quite willing to be a member-at-large,' and then became a trustee at a local. As the union continued to grow, because this was a time of people leaving US-based unions, whether it was Machinists or Steelworkers or Moulders Union or IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers), they were coming in droves over to what was, by then, the Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical and Allied Workers. The union just kept growing, so I was able to become vice-president of the local and eventually president of the local through, as I mentioned before, some real serendipity.

SG [00:16:37] Just to back up a minute. Was that sentiment reflected amongst the people you worked with to a great extent? Of actually beginning to think that way?

CW [00:16:45] Very, very much so. I mean, people -- it was a time, I think, of a lot of Canadian nationalism. Almost a legacy of 1967 and 100th anniversary and people saying -- and opposition to the war in Vietnam and what was going on in the States and saying 'We're a different country. You know, we don't invade other countries.'

CW [00:17:07] With respect to unions, I think people said the same thing. 'Well, why should we have a head office in another country? We should have our own organization and we should be running it.' I think people on the shop floor reflected that. It was very much a given and the second plant, of course, had been a non-union situation and people just wanted a union. The early seventies, of course, was a time of incredible militancy. You look all across the country. I mean, the wildcat strikes everywhere. A lot of people felt -- particularly in response to the escalating period of inflation, which was higher and higher, getting up to, I think 16-17%. People said, 'Listen, we've got to have a union so we can stay ahead of the game.' For people who'd been in U.S. unions, they felt they weren't taking on the boss enough, and they weren't. Yeah. They wanted an organization that would fight the boss and they joined us. It was both non-union and people who had been in U.S.-based unions.

SG [00:18:17] So you go back to the people that you're working at and say, by the way, I'm your plant representative.

CW [00:18:23] Yeah, people thought that was that was fine. You know, it was no big deal. Again, they weren't interested in coming to meetings. So, the in-plant leadership was fine with that.

SG [00:18:33] They probably had confidence that you were going to actually represent them at the union meeting too.

CW [00:18:39] Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think I got along fairly well with people. Again, I was sort of seen as a bit of a young rabble rouser, but people thought that was okay.

SG [00:18:50] What was the demographic of the people working there at that time? Was it kind of right across the spectrum, or were they predominantly younger workers?

CW [00:18:57] No, they were a mix, you know, quite a number of middle-aged women, quite glad to have an opportunity for a factory job. There wasn't a lot out in Port Moody. Then, of course there was a lot of demand, so -- in terms of labour demand -- the boss was quite interested in getting as many people there as possible. Mostly people who were, I would say in their twenties, thirties, maybe forties at most.

SG [00:19:31] Was it racially mixed?

CW [00:19:34] Oh, pretty well all white. Yeah, because that's who lived in the Port Moody area at that time. Yeah.

SG [00:19:40] Was that predominantly the case in the early years of organizing in CAW (Canadian Auto Workers union), that it was predominantly a white workforce?

CW [00:19:48] Oh, certainly in the early days, yeah. Certainly that would be the case, but by about the middle of the seventies to later seventies, a fair number of Indo-Canadians. Particularly in jobs that white workers had decided they weren't interested anymore, like foundries. So you get a lot more Indo-Canadians working there.

SG [00:20:18] What did you what did you see as your role at that point? It's sort of emerging that you're beginning to take on plant leadership and then a place in the union. Did you see yourself as becoming sort of a trade unionist and active leader in the trade union movement? Or was this just, we're just following the course?

CW [00:20:37] I think I was just following the course. I must say, when people talk about planning their lives and such, I mean, things just happen. I mean, I just happened to get a job at Cascade Electronics. You know, the union just happened to continue to grow.

CW [00:20:52] I mean, did I play a role in that? Sure. You know, I mean, we're out at 5:00 in the morning, leafleting plants and after work and engaging in picket line activity at other plants and doing all sorts of active work. I think that by being really active, it was recognized as somebody who deserves to be in positions, but it was never a conscious thought on my regard. My part, it really just happened.

SG [00:21:23] Yeah. You were mentioning the serendipity of having kind of fell into that. Can you just explain what you meant by that?

CW [00:21:28] Yeah, well, it was it was funny. Well, by then I was vice-president of the local. The one thing I made sure I never did in in the union, I never -- before that time -- ever let people know that I could type, because I knew then I would be the secretary of the local, I'd be there forever. I went from trustee to vice-president and again, I would always come to the meetings. I was quite used to coming to the meetings. The fellow who was an English trade unionist from the old school, so obviously he was a good president, got elected but he was terrified of chairing meetings. He never showed up to another meeting.

CW [00:22:12] Automatically, I had to chair the meetings and no big deal; but again, you've got people there from a wide variety of plants. Pretty well all men, not all, but almost all. I did a fairly competent job of chairing the meetings because I'd been president of my NDY club and chaired meetings at SFU (Simon Fraser University), and that sort of thing. I

didn't think too much about it, but under our local union bylaws, three meetings -- if you miss, you're out. The guy was pitched out, and it was a bit controversial because people then realized now I would be the president -- because again, there wouldn't be an opportunity for an election for a while. I became president of the local and that's just sort of what happened.

SG [00:23:02] You never did have to admit that you knew how to type.

CW [00:23:05] Well, not for quite a while. Not for quite a while, but we did start putting out -- well, we had been putting out a newsletter which initially was quite conservative because it had been put out by one of the English trade unionists from Philips Cables, which was their very first plant in the union. The one that I'd eventually start working in and was there for about three years. He had a fairly conservative bent. I mean, an okay trade unionist, but not very politically progressive. At any rate, I sort of wrenched that away from him and then wound up wanting to put in something from every plant in the local. Which meant, of course, you had to get out to each local, talk to people, go out there for lunchtime meetings. Really got to know the local very well. At that stage we probably had about 40 different plants, some fairly large like Kenworth and Freightliner -- which had I think at their peak, maybe 500 people in them -- and then some are quite small, you know, 10, a dozen.

SG [00:24:17] You're talking at this point that you're in CAIMAW (Canadian Association of Industrial Mechanical and Allied Workers) by this point.

CW [00:24:20] Yup, yes, yeah. CEW (Canadian Electrical Workers) actually merged with CAIMAW in 1969, but we certainly sort of still kept the CEW name for a while, with brackets CAIMAW. Then as the union continued to grow, of course people in truck building and such, they wanted a more general name. We then really switched to CAIMAW Local 1 (B.C.). So, this period was really an exciting one.

SG [00:24:49] Well, there must have been a lot of organizing going on at this time too.

CW [00:24:51] Tons, tons. I mean, we were leafleting non-union plants. We were organizing all kinds of plants that had been in U.S. unions that wanted to leave. I mean we were really, really active at that time, it was it was a lot of fun.

SG [00:25:07] This is being directed right out of the local office.

CW [00:25:11] Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and we had then, the Secretary-Treasurer of the union was Jess Succamore of the national union, and the Regional Vice-President was George Brown, and they were both originally out of the Lenkirk strike. They'd been two of the founders of the Canadian Electrical Workers, and they were the only two guys we had on full-time. Boy, I'll tell you, I mean, we really didn't have a pot to pee in at the time. We had this little, tiny office above the bicycle shop on Jubilee and it was a very weird little building. It came to a V. Eventually, I had an office sort of here, and my office was like the edge of a table. And so, at any rate, it was just big enough to be able to have a union meeting there. That was not -- as long as it wasn't too large, in which case we had to rent a legion or something. Yeah.

BG [00:26:13] What year was it that you became president of the local?

CW [00:26:16] I guess it would have been around '73, '74. Yeah, '74 or something like that, yeah.

SG [00:26:22] This was CAIMAW Local 1 at this point.

CW [00:26:24] CAIMAW Local 1 (BC). Yeah, of course we had a CAIMAW Local 1 in Manitoba, because of course they had founded, actually, the CAIMAW organization.

SG [00:26:35] Okay. One of the things that CAIMAW I think has gained a reputation for was its changed attitude towards not only other racial groups within the trade union movement, but women in particular. Was that your sense of it working there?

CW [00:26:53] Yeah, we really had to battle some, a lot of male prejudice. For example, when I came on as a shop steward, I was selected as a shop steward. One of the things that I did was to bid into one of the male jobs, and that was being an inspector. That was a telephone cable manufacturing plant, so there had to be all kinds of tests taken on the telephone cable. I was the only qualified applicant because I've been at SFU. I have my grade 12. I had all kinds of background in physics and chemistry and electricity and such. However, I was a woman.

CW [00:27:35] At that time we were unfortunately faced with the legacy of an Order in Council that had been passed at the end of the Second World War, the purpose of which, of course, was to get women out of the shipyards and out of the mills. What it said, it was "protecting women", and the purpose of course, was to get rid of us, but it was allegedly to protect women's health so that we wouldn't have to lift anything heavier than 35 pounds. That law was still on the book, and in spite of the fact that I'd posted for this job, occasionally, I might have to rarely lift something that was more than 35 pounds. The company used that to deny me the job. The union, to its credit, took it to the Ministry of Labour, the equivalent of employment standards, and they said, 'Well, there's nothing we can do, you know, it's the law.'

CW [00:28:35] So, we're stymied. You know, it's quite clear that's the law, even though it was a complete ruse, a complete sham -- and then we got lucky. The NDP (New Democratic Party) got elected, and so one of the first things they did is they established a committee to go around the province and ask women. 'What are your issues?' We went to the meeting, and I remember Colin Gabelmann and Rosemary Brown were part of that committee, and there were other other trade union people who were women who had similar concerns. I said, 'Look, you've got to get rid of this Order in Council, the only purpose of which is to deny women jobs.' I explained in detail the nature of the Order in Council and they engaged in some questions and such, and as I recall -- now, maybe it's the optimism or my faulty memory -- but as I recall, it was like the next day that the Order in Council was rescinded because of course the government could do that simply by taking it out of legislation. It was a regulation passed by Cabinet. They have the power to rescind it and they did.

SG [00:29:48] Was this is a federal regulation or a provincial?

CW [00:29:49] No, provincial. Provincial, yeah. Yeah, provincial labour law, yeah. After that, we had access to all sorts of women's jobs, or men's jobs rather, that we didn't before. Before we'd been ghettoized in one area of the plant. Those are the so-called women's jobs. Now, we had an opportunity to bid elsewhere.

SG [00:30:13] Did that change come about? Were there a lot more bidding than previous?

CW [00:30:18] Well yeah, and one of the critical things was we had been laid off as women, and we'd had -- at one stage I had, I think maybe three years seniority. I was laid off. They were hiring guys off the street, and so it was absolutely outrageous. Then in the future, we had the opportunity to bump into other jobs in the plant. So, we did. If there was a shortage of work, we could bump into other jobs and we did as well as bidding into other jobs as well. I never did get the inspectors job, unfortunately, but I got some other machine jobs and enjoyed them very much.

SG [00:30:59] You enjoyed the work apart from everything else you were doing.

CW [00:31:01] Yeah, yeah. No, I actually, I quite liked it. Oh, it's quite neat to be able to work on a machine and have something finished at the end of the day. I think I quite like production work. It was, yeah, it was actually a lot of fun.

SG [00:31:18] Yeah. I think a lot of people forget that. I mean I remember working in industry and really enjoying working in doing exactly that -- producing, and it was semi-skilled work, and on the machine, but producing something at the end of the day. Yeah, and it is, it's a feeling of satisfaction when you've done something. We forget about that often. This was also the time of another sort of ferment that people felt with the election of the first NDP government in the province's history. Did that open new doors apart from this particular regulation that got changed quickly?

CW [00:31:50] Well, a number of things happened in the area of worker's compensation and occupational health and safety, because I had just come on as a full-time local president. My job actually was to service local unions, and service plants, and negotiate contracts and engage in grievances and such. Of course, the first thing that was really important during that period was the Labour Code was changed, made much more progressive from a union point of view. The Labour Relations Board was changed, much more people there. Much more union-oriented than in the past. Paul Weiler was appointed head of the Labour Relations Board, and Peter Cameron, who was our first regional vice-president after George Brown passed away unfortunately, took on that as his responsibility. He looked after the area of labour relations.

CW [00:32:50] George Brown, when he passed, one of the reasons he did was incredible overwork. At that stage it was decided to hire another rep. He was out of the Kitimat local, which was an affiliate. This was CASAW (Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers) in Alcan. Then I came on after that. I came on initially as president of the local, but doing all of these service kinds of jobs. I also just again, as one of the duties, started to represent people with worker's compensation appeals; because of course, the NDP had brought in an appeal system and had appointed as head of the Workers Compensation Board Terry Eison, who was a very progressive, very thoughtful academic who completely transformed the system.

CW [00:33:51] I wound up winning a couple of these appeals. I didn't really know what I was doing. I just went to the hearing and stuck up for the guy, basically, and we won. As things got bigger in the union and the union continued to grow in size, it was decided that other people should take on other policy areas. The first guy who got hired, Klaus Herre -- after Peter -- he knew the lay of the land.

CW [00:34:22] He said, 'Oh, I'll take unemployment insurance.' and that sort of left health and safety for me, and workers' compensation, and I said, 'Well, I don't really know much about this.' and they said, 'Oh, sure you do. You know. You've just won a couple of

appeals and you were sort of involved in work refusals at Phillips Cables, you wouldn't do unsafe work.' So, I said okay. Well, Klaus, of course, knew the difference in the workload. I had no idea, but I thought, 'Okay, if I'm going to get involved, I better learn everything I can.' By then the NDP had been defeated, so this was December of '75. Terry Eison was fired, one of the first things the Social Credit did as a result of the Employers' Council demand. Bill Hamilton was head of the Employers' Council at that time. His first demand was get rid of Terry Eison, and they did. I mean, they left Paul Weiler there, remember? They knew how important he was to workers' rights. They get rid of Terry Eison, and Terry Eison, very much to his credit, says, 'Well, if I've gone, I really want to establish some opportunity for the labour movement to sort of, learn things.'

CW [00:35:43] Found out who I was, sat down and started to -- I won't say teach me everything he knew -- but gave me all kinds of insight into what he'd done at the Workers' Compensation Board, what I needed to learn. Of course, he published policy. He published decisions. He used other sources in the States and such, and I just sat down and read this stuff and devoured it because it was fascinating for somebody with sort of, a science background. I mean, I loved the opportunity to learn about the physics and the chemistry and the biology and the engineering. All of this aspect to prevention efforts, and all the legal stuff, which was arcane and intricate, all the medical stuff. Boy, I mean, at the end of all of that, I knew all kinds of interesting stuff and I just found it fascinating. It gave me the tools to be able to fight workers' compensation appeals -- and successfully -- and to participate in the drive to reform and improve the occupational health and safety regulations.

CW [00:37:00] I was able to go to public hearings and present. I mean, our submission must have been this thick of changes that we felt were important to the occupational health and safety regulations. Of course, there was a legacy of people who were either still involved or had been involved at the Board, people like Craig Patterson and Connie Munro, who was then Connie Sun, and people like Ed Chester, the Minister of Labour, and they would feed me stuff. I had all kinds of great material, whether it was on hazards of lead or hazards of asbestos or machine guarding or whatever it was. I was able to feed all that into the process.

SG [00:37:46] So Terry Eison's role in the Board at that time really opened a lot of doors for other people to become involved.

CW [00:37:53] Absolutely phenomenal. I mean, he did more in his two and a half years than I would have to say almost any bureaucrat in world history. I mean, it was amazing what he did personally in terms of writing decisions, and how he actively sought and attracted and hired really bright people to the board. It was phenomenal, the amount that he did.

SG [00:38:20] Why did the Employer's Council -- why did they target him particularly?

CW [00:38:22] Well, you know, any number of reasons, but I think the real killer for them was the COMINCO penalty assessment. He decided, how do you compel employers to change? You do it at the prevention area through penalty assessments. He said, 'Look, the amount of exposures of people to lead, and styrene, and arsenic, etcetera -- excessive at the Trail smelter -- and if you continue to have this, we're going to not just impose a penalty, but we're going to increase it every month until you bring it down. It was absolutely brilliant and infuriated the employers, infuriated COMINCO. That was, of course, one of the biggest employers in the province, and they were both opposed to it ideologically, they

were opposed to it financially. By the end of Terry's tenure, it was up to a million bucks, and that was big money back then. I know he was number one enemy in the employer's purview, and of course, Bill Hamilton had been the Postmaster General in the Diefenbaker government. He had a very conservative bent and he was just out to get rid of all of this history.

SG [00:39:46] There was also at this time, a lot of movement beginning towards trying to clean up industry and so on, and I'm sure that the plants in which CAIMAW was involved in -- solvents and asbestos -- all kinds of hazardous exposures. How did you kind of begin to tackle that and others?

CW [00:40:06] Well, both through direct interventions in the plants, going in and arguing with the boss. We also had, every year, a health and safety seminar. We would have maybe 40 or 50 people from the various plants, and we bargained that the boss would have to pay for their lost time. We would provide the education and training, and we would get people in from the Board, lots of progressive inspectors, occupational hygienists and such, and they would run sessions, whether it was noise or whether it was asbestos or whether it was industrial ventilation. A lot of good opportunities for people to learn, and then get people to go back in the plants and argue for change. Depending on the individuals and depending on the issue, would have varying degrees of success, but certainly did a lot in terms of cleaning up plants. A lot of barefoot epidemiology, going around plants and finding out, do people have asthmatic problems or coughing? What might be the problems, and what might be the causes, and tackling that. Asbestos certainly being one of the main issues that people were prepared to tackle.

SG [00:41:27] You must have been doing your homework on a daily basis here in terms of having to deal with a whole range of new almost medical issues in many cases.

CW [00:41:36] Absolutely, and they were medical, too. You had people who had exposures to isocyanates, for example. We had to learn all about isocyanates that were -- this was a time of a lot of experimentation in factories, so they started adding new chemicals to the sand. You need sand around the mould in a foundry to produce the mould that you would eventually pour in the molten metal. What they used to do is just bake it, but it took time. Then they started experimenting, adding all these various chemicals that were making workers sick, and you realized that workers had died in other countries, in the States and such from the addition of this. We were able to work with progressive researchers at the University of British Columbia and get them to come in and start measuring people's lung function and use that as a way to to force these chemicals to change and much better ventilation and such. We had a lot of issues like that. It was also fascinating, because this is sort of cutting-edge of research at this time, too. Yeah, we're reading medical journal articles and such, and remember was no internet then. It was harder to put your hands on these things, so I'd write away to oh, I remember, one time we were changing the list of occupational diseases that were appended to the Workers Compensation Act. I wrote away to Geneva, to the ILO and said, 'What's the standard in some other countries?' We got all kinds of information. I remember putting this forward to the board at the time, and I remember that the guy was the head of this, a physician in an occupational health position at the board saying, 'Where did you get all this?' and I said, 'Well, I wrote away, and they sent me all this stuff. You know, here it is. This is what you should be adding to our Workers Compensation Act.' Very appreciative of this, but I remember thinking, 'This is your full-time job.' I spent half my time negotiating contracts, fighting grievances and such, the other half dealing with you guys on the board who won't give people justice and worker's compensation, and doing all this health and safety stuff. I

remember thinking, 'Can't you pick up your pen and send a letter?' Oh, but anyway, it was fascinating. It was just great to be involved.

SG [00:44:24] I know at that time, my sense of it as an observer, as a journalist at the time, was that you were really breaking new ground in CAIMAW with doing a lot of this work. A lot of people would say, 'Look what Cathy is doing over there, it's kind of really raised the profile.' Did you have that sense of it, or again, were you just kind of plowing ahead doing your job?

CW [00:44:43] I was plowing ahead, but as you go to public hearings -- for example, even in '76 -- there were other people from the labour movement who were there. I think a number of them -- well, several of them were sort of full-time health and safety people, and they were very good at being supportive, and being there; but perhaps they weren't doing quite as much sort of cutting-edge stuff. Again, a part of that, if you're a working-class kid, you didn't necessarily have that kind of background, and a number of them had come through their unions and had been really good fighting battles on the shop floor and had worked their way up, but they didn't necessarily have the reading and writing skills that came a lot easier to me. That was, again, serendipity. I was lucky enough to be able to have an education.

SG [00:45:43] Was this also a time when you developed a relationship with occupational hygiene at UBC and sort of brought some of their science into the mix?

CW [00:45:51] Oh, well, they didn't have any occupational hygiene at that time at UBC.

SG [00:45:56] Oh, I thought it came about at that time. It was later.

CW [00:45:57] It was a bit later. Yeah, and the interesting thing is that two of the main people involved in that were Susan Kennedy -- who had been a CAIMAW member at Freightliner and a good health and safety activist -- and Kay Teschke, who had been a CAIMAW member who organized McGill Industries for us. They were both part of CAIMAW Local One and were good health and safety people as well as trade unionists, and eventually went back to university and got their PhDs and helped to set up occupational hygiene and were basically the first people to set it up out there.

SG [00:46:35] So had a direct connection with the work that was being done, with the emergence of that [unclear]. That's really something.

CW [00:46:40] Yeah.

SG [00:46:43] That's really something. I didn't realize that. At what point did you become a full-time Health and Safety Director for CAIMAW?

CW [00:46:49] Actually, I never was. No, because we were never big enough. In spite of the fact that eventually it became an elected position, so I was Vice-President of Health, Safety & Environment for CAIMAW, and that meant that I was both on the national executive board in that capacity, and also looked after health and safety for people on the prairies, predominantly in Winnipeg. I was never full-time. I was always also doing servicing work, including the mines, which in the early eighties were very, very time consuming. A lot of out-of-town work and such. It wasn't until we merged with the Autoworkers in 1992 that I came on full-time for the first time in health and safety.

SG [00:47:42] Mm hmm. Just to back up for a second at this time too, I mean, CAIMAW is controversial in the labour movement because of particularly the raid at Steel and so on. Somehow it didn't seem to get in the way of doing a lot of the health and safety work. You had a lot of broad relationships with other unionists in doing this work. How did you manage that in the midst of friction and conflict?

CW [00:48:07] Well, I think we made a fairly early agreement in terms of the people who were involved in health and safety -- and I'm thinking of people like Verna Ledger and Bruce Elphinstone from the IWA, for example -- and any number of other people who showed up at the hearings, for example in '76, that we would meet as a labour caucus. Our position was health and safety is too important to play politics with, and so we did. We made sure that we caucused. We knew what our common position was -- whether it was arguing for lowering of noise exposure or asbestos bans or whatever the issue was -- that we would take common positions, and we did, and it worked basically just fine.

SG [00:48:59] It never got in the way.

CW [00:49:01] No, no. I mean, certainly people from elsewhere might try and turn it into that, but BC is a bit isolated from the rest of the world in a lot of respects. If health and safety was being looked after, for example, in the Steelworkers Union out of Toronto or out of the States, how often was anybody going to show up here? I remember -- speaking of raids, for example -- going into the Steelworkers local in Trail and realizing there was -- talking to people -- there was not a single leaflet on lead, for example. Nothing. Let alone styrene or arsenic or anything else that the membership had. I started our CAIMAW health and safety fact sheet and doing two page or three page leaflets on what are the hazards, what are the means of control. Can we substitute in the case of some substances? To that degree, we could sort of say, what's the point in being in an American union that doesn't provide you even the basic kinds of information? To that degree it was a political issue, but again, an important way of showing people the difference between unions that were doing something for the membership and unions that were doing far less.

SG [00:50:37] Right. Well, a lot of people have said that there are two things that are important to workers -- one of the first ones is wage bargaining, and the second one is health and safety. They're almost equally important, and if you don't do the health and safety work, then you're going to lose your membership in many cases. It seems to me that's one of the things that you -- by the sounds of it -- that you were able to do was always keep that health and safety very much front and centre along with wage bargaining.

CW [00:51:01] Yeah, very much so and I think in our union it probably had a higher profile than many others. Where -- when you look at cutbacks in other organizations, for example -- somebody will retire as a health and safety director, for example, for Verna Ledger retired. Replace her? Now why would we bother to do that? That was the IWA's response, and what a shame. She did a fantastic job.

SG [00:51:31] She was never replaced, eh?

CW [00:51:34] There was Neil [Menard]. Sorry, his last name escapes me right now, the mayor of Merritt. Great guy, but had other duties and not just health and safety. So would combine jobs rather than seeing health and safety as being the most important issue. Whereas, within CAIMAW -- in spite of the fact we have limited resources. I mean, we're a tiny union compared to so many. We just made it a priority.

SG [00:52:14] How many members would there have been at the time you were doing this work?

CW [00:52:18] Well, the peak, I think we had 10,000 members in the whole country.

SG [00:52:22] Right, and of those, British Columbia would have been 60% or something.

CW [00:52:26] Approximately, yeah. Yeah.

SG [00:52:29] I presume you brought this same sort of sense of importance to health and safety work when you went into CAW when you merged in 1992.

CW [00:52:38] Yes.

SG [00:52:40] Were you appointed immediately into that position?

CW [00:52:43] No, there was a transition period. We merged in January of '92. I took that position in the summer. One of the reasons is there was a transition in leadership within the CAW. Bob White retired as head of the CAW and Buzz Hargrove took over, and when he took over, he decided he wanted as one of his assistants Bob Chernecki, who'd been head of the Health and Safety Department. That created the opening, and then he decided to take a chance on me.

SG [00:53:23] Jess Succamore became the regional director that year as well. That must have been a vote of confidence by CAW in the CAIMAW leadership then.

CW [00:53:31] Oh, very much so, yeah, and in fact, Buzz said he would have appointed Buzz as assistant to the president, which we saw in CAIMAW -- not really quite understanding the CAW structure -- as being, 'My gosh, I don't think Jess could manage being assistant to anybody.' Within the CAW structure, of course, it reflected the UAW structure in which the assistant actually was a very powerful position, but we didn't understand that at the time. That's why he became the area director here.

SG [00:54:07] Probably for the better in any event?

CW [00:54:09] I think so. Yes, I think so. Yes.

SG [00:54:12] There's certainly an opportunity to do more on his own basis.

CW [00:54:16] Very much so, yes.

SG [00:54:17] Were you given the resources and all that you needed in CAW to do the kind of work? Obviously, there's a bigger budget now and all kinds of opportunities. How did that work out?

CW [00:54:27] Well, initially it was -- the history of health and safety in the UAW and CAW was that it really wasn't, from the organization's central body point of view, a very important issue. It was really driven by rank-and-file fightbacks, particularly in the '86, '87, '88 period with the mass work refusal of the aerospace plants, McDonnell Douglas and de Havilland, which were all about chemical exposure and fighting back. It really was rank-and-file, and of course this of all happens subsequent to leaving the UAW where all of a

sudden I think the -- repression is far too strong a word, but any rate, sort of holding the lid on things -- all of a sudden people thought we can really do things now, which was great. Certainly, a reaction on the part of the CAW leadership too, 'Holy cow, what Pandora's box have we opened here?' That sort of going back to, 'I think we better put the lid back on this.' I came along basically not knowing really any of this history, right. Not realizing that health and safety within the Big Three was sort of where you put Joe Blow who'd lost the last plant leader election, and what are we going to do with him? We'll give him the health and safety job, and these were appointed positions.

SG [00:56:09] Sort of a consolation prize.

CW [00:56:09] Absolutely. He sort of thought, 'Great, I could sit here until my retirement. I don't have to do too much, and the boss isn't too bad. You know, we can do a lot of these joint things. They'd have joint meetings and joint educationals and all this stuff with the boss, which I found horrifying. We had never done that in CAIMAW. It never occurred to me to do something with the boss in CAIMAW. It was always, this is our issue. We run the educationals, it's our agenda, and we teach people how to fight the boss at health and safety. I realized I was going to take a while to change things. The interesting thing about the CAW structure, of course. The CAW Council is like this parliament of the union that meets every four months, and they have committees -- a health and safety committee, a workers compensation committee, an environment committee -- and I quickly, fortunately, realized this was the way to change things. I started working with people there about trying to change the agenda, and there were good people on staff with the CAW that I could work with in the Education Department. There was Sam Gindin who was Assistant to the President, really progressive guy, lots of other progressive people that felt we should start to change things.

CW [00:57:41] I basically wrote eventually a health and safety course -- one week course for a paid education leave program that was, 'How do you fight the boss?' Started to change things and work with rank-and-file people who were -- a lot of them -- had started to be elected in the plants. The health and safety people were generally -- you want to do a good job and certainly, if you're going to get elected, you better do a good job or you're not going to get elected next time. Unlike the old fossils who are appointed, and not all of them were hopeless. Some of them wanted to do a good job, but they were not in any risk of anything happening to them until they retire. Started to change things and because I'd had lots of bargaining experience, of course, started to put forward demands at the bargaining table.

CW [00:58:40] Then, of course, as all this is starting to happen, the Harris government gets elected in Ontario. We'd been hopeful when the NDP was in power of doing things. I went to 10 million meetings and not really accomplished a hell of a lot, although there certainly were new requirements for health and safety education and training, which was an accomplishment. Then Harris comes to power, and of course, they want to gut everything. Then developed all kinds of fight backs around health and safety issues of keeping the right to refuse unsafe work and keeping our education and training that have been put forward through policy - -- although not regulation, unfortunately, and doing all kinds of fight backs in that regard and in workers compensation as well. It really became an important part of the political issue in terms of fight back. That was really great and being able to put forward health and safety demands at the bargaining table. In the Big Three, for example, metalworking fluids -- which was a huge issue in a number of the parts plants, the transmission plants, the engine plants where people were exposed to these metalworking fluids that are used to cool and lubricate metalworking processes. People

had these huge exposures to these substances that would really harm their lungs and were carcinogens as well. We had these big fights to clean up General Motors plants and all kinds of parts plant, and then at the same time, introduced it at the bargaining table where it had never been before, and we wound up making progress. The UAW had to follow suit in the States, bring in some measures and we had good relations with the health and safety people in the UAW. We'd talk lots about what we were doing in bargaining, what they were doing in bargaining. And so were able to make progressive change through this time period. I had a chance to --

SG [01:01:00] It must have meant you're breaking new ground here.

CW [01:01:02] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Nobody had ever done this before in Big Three bargaining. We had all kinds of other demands over the years and had a great chance to work with my colleagues George Brown and Nick DiCarlo in the Health and Safety Department, both who were active in the work refusals at de Havilland and McDonnell Douglas. They really understood the importance of organizing the rank-and-file at the plant floor to fight the boss on health and safety.

SG [01:01:34] Did the Workers Occupational Health Centres exist at that time or were they in their development?

CW [01:01:39] They had just -- the first one was as a consequence of the mass work refusals in de Havilland and McDonnell Douglas.

SG [01:01:51] This is late eighties, eh?

CW [01:01:52] Late eighties, yeah. Stan Gray was the head at that time, and of course he'd come out of the student movement at McGill [University]. There was all kinds of tension between what they were doing in these clinics and the leadership of what was then the CAW, early leadership wanting to hold the lid on the militancy, but this had been formed and then there was an interest in how do we sort of keep the lid on this. There was an occupational health clinic formal system set up sort of over here, a sort of a parallel stream. It was quite interesting politics in the early days there, but by the time the NDP got to power, one thing about Ontario, there is a lot of money. Much more so than in B.C. They were able to get money for occupational health clinics. There were, I think, four or maybe five by the time I came along. The Workers Health and Safety Centre to provide the education and training.

CW [01:03:05] Again, all of this coming out of the fights of de Havilland and McDonnell Douglas because one of the demands were, 'We don't know what we're working with. We want to learn about hazards of all these new chemicals, new composite materials. Why are we getting sick?' The union took over the education and training, and then through this arm's length Workers Health and Safety Centre, paid for by the Workers Compensation Board for both the clinics and the Centre, were able to provide all kinds of education and training really run by the union movement. You had people like Linda Jolley in the early days, Gary Cwitco, people from other organizations -- whether it was working for Stephen Lewis in the NDP or working for other unions like the CEP -- writing a lot of the early material, which was great. Jim Gill, who was my predecessor twice removed in the UAW, very much a part of this movement. So, I was lucky. By the time I'd come along, a lot of this stuff is in place, and we can use it to build health and safety in our union.

SG [01:04:28] This gave you a much wider opportunity to be sort of a coordinator in bringing these pieces together.

CW [01:04:34] Yes. Yes.

SG [01:04:35] There's been a lot of successful work done in your tenure there. For example, on the issue of asbestos, these couple of brochures that you produced that were nationally publicized.

CW [01:04:46] Yeah.

SG [01:04:46] Tell me a bit about that asbestos campaign?

CW [01:04:48] Sure. Well -- what we did -- we had a number of campaigns, and I think the idea of campaigning was very much the left in the union seeing this as the way to build issues. We had campaigns around keeping the legislation around the right to refuse unsafe work. Then we had campaigns around metalworking fluids. How do we get the exposure limit reduced? We start a big campaign around that and of course, because it's a carcinogen, we sort of change that into a prevent cancer campaign. That was a very important one to take back down into the workplace. We had campaigns around how do we really make sure that the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, which was both federal and provincial all across the country, it becomes real in the workplace. How do you make sure that labelling is up to par? How do you make sure that there's education or training that workers can understand? How do you make sure that the Material Safety Data Sheets are accurate and up to date?

CW [01:06:02] We sort of had the Prevent Cancer Campaign in this area feeding into the WHMIS issue and including this as bargaining demands as well -- at the Big Three and elsewhere in the union -- to try and ban carcinogens. Asbestos being a very important part of that, because there's no excuse for any asbestos to be in any workplaces. We were able to negotiate bans and we talked about the Dirty Dozen, and we were able to to ban asbestos and to ban a number of other carcinogens in Big Three bargaining. Not able to completely ban metalworking fluids, but to greatly reduce exposures. Those were important campaigns, and of course, we had -- unfortunately -- lots of workers who died as a consequence of their workplace.

SG [01:06:57] Exposures that must have put health and safety much more front and centre in bargaining and the political agenda than it had been before.

CW [01:07:05] Yeah, very, very much so, and again, got lucky. A lot of this, again, is serendipity. What you had is an expansion in in the economy, so that when I first joined the CAW in '92, of course things were really bad. The auto plants had laid off, all kinds of concerns about are plants going to continue. Then you get this slow increase, because of course, one thing about auto is it has traditionally been cyclical. Then you get this increase in demand, and you get the plants thriving. Tons of work. Tons of money for the Big Three employers and tons of opportunity for us. Particularly reflecting the Harris agenda, which was authored in large part by the Big Three, wanting to get rid of Right to Refuse, because every work refusal in a Big Three plant meant production was shut down and they lost money. All kinds of other demands they had on the Harris government. We said, 'Look. You guys want to cut this back, you're going to provide it in our plants.' We were able to bargain health and safety, education, and training money that we could control and use to our good effect. We had the education and training and a lot more representation in the

plants and at the national level. We had national health and safety coordinators that were Ford, GM, [unclear] Chrysler, and Air Canada, Canadian Airlines CN, CP Rail, Jazz, a number of people. These were people we were able to bargain who were then able to do all kinds of work -- not just education and training within their own purview, within their own employer -- but also going into workplaces, representing the members at the bargaining table and also nationally. We're able to put people on committees to negotiate health and safety regulations through Labour Canada and the Regulatory Review Committee. Put people on committees to change ergonomics regulations or introduce ergonomics regulations, carry on the the Fight Speed Up Campaign at the workplace level. Fighting speed up which was really horrible in Big Three plants in particular, where every tiny fraction of a second was timed and people were working faster and faster and harder and harder as speed up was introduced. We needed people to be able to fight back against that. Those kinds of campaigns were really important as well, and we worked with other people at the national level in our work organization and training department on those kinds of campaigns.

SG [01:10:25] There also seems to be a lot more rank-and-file participation in doing that. Do you think that your experience in CAIMAW and before had sort of brought more of the influence of that into CAW work?

CW [01:10:37] I think so. For example, we realized we needed a newsletter and what I did with the newsletter is try to solicit good examples of fights that people had had in workplaces and done good things. it could be anything from, 'Gee, we got rid of metalworking fluids in this particular operation and what we replaced it with was basically the equivalent of a big dishwasher using the equivalent of soap and water to clean metal, where in the past we used harmful chemicals.' To be able to popularize that sort of stuff. I remember Buzz Hargrove at that stage said, 'Well, that's not how it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be --" and what he meant was, we're supposed to be telling people what they should be doing and providing information. I just never saw it that way. We provided lots of information too, but to me, if it didn't reflect what was going on in the workplace, what's the point? I think it inspired a lot of people and our conferences were well-attended, and people would share their experiences. I think it was terrific. No, it wasn't just me. I mean, as soon as you encouraged people, they come forward and we have lots of, again, that legacy of those shutdowns in the '87 period. I think just really unleashed a lot of rank-and-file interest and enthusiasm and activism that we were able to harness.

SG [01:12:28] You give them an outlet for it.

CW [01:12:30] Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SG [01:12:32] For sure. Do we want to take a break for a couple of minutes, just --

BG [01:12:35] Definitely. Break is a good suggestion.

CW [01:12:37] Yeah.

BG [01:12:38] It's okay. So, whenever you're ready.

CW [01:12:42] Sure.

SG [01:12:44] We talked earlier, you mentioned to me that when you came to work for CAW as the Health and Safety Director, there really wasn't sort of much focus on the

environment and whatnot. That's one of the things that you were hoping to and seem to be able to bring to them. Tell me a bit about that.

CW [01:13:01] Yes, I was actually quite surprised because right from the get-go within CAIMAW, we always thought of the environment and health and safety as the same issue. That if you had hazardous chemicals coming out of a plant, if they were inside, they were going to be more concentrated. If they were outside, they're going to be less concentrated, whether it goes into the air or the water systems or land. Why wouldn't you treat this as the same issue? It would both provide an opportunity for people to understand the issue outside and support from people on the outside who might actually care what was happening on the inside. It never dawned on me that they wouldn't be considered the same thing. I show up at the CAW and there's somebody in the Education Department who's looking after the environment, and I thought that was so odd. She was interested in the environment. It wasn't like this was, it made no sense at all. I very early days, you know, argued this should be in our department. At first there was some resistance to that, but eventually Buzz and Jim O'Neill, who was our Secretary-Treasurer, said okay.

CW [01:14:28] They never did change the name of the department. The whole time I was there for 14 years, we never formally changed the name of the department, but that person has taken over for me now calls it Health Safety & Environment Department. So good for her. I think the main reason for that was -- unfortunately -- when the NDP was in power, they brought in a gas guzzler tax. Well, that part wasn't the unfortunate part. It was the reaction. So, of course, General Motors opposed it, as did the other two Big Three employers.

SG [01:15:04] This was a tax on high consuming vehicles, was it?

CW [01:15:05] That's right. Yeah. Yeah. How do you how do you improve the overall air from transportation? You can make sure that there are smaller vehicles and produce fewer emissions. Very logical thing, but General Motors and the other Big Three employers, of course, they make money from bigger vehicles. The bigger it is, the more money they make. They're not going to be in favour of that. They were able to effectively capture our Local 222, which was our Oshawa General Motors local, and get people in the plants to actually have letters and demonstrations opposing the gas guzzler tax as though this was somehow going to affect their jobs. Buzz never forgot that, and Local 222 being the biggest local in the union was one that normally would be listened to. Rather than putting forward a different point of view, basically just collapsed on the issue and said the NDP was out to lunch, and he opposed the gas guzzler tax, too. Somehow, any time we got very far on the environmental issue, he just sort of snapped back to that, which was a real shame. It was quite a battle in environmental issues all the way along, if we got anywhere beyond recycling pop cans in the cafeteria.

CW [01:16:45] We had a large number of people who are health and safety, people who saw the environment as important, and a large number of other people who were good environmentalists just from being good people and good citizens. Were involved in wilderness issues or clean up river issues or reducing harm to the environment in general. Once again, working with the CAW council committee we started to build the issue. We would deliberately make sure that people from the Environment Committee of Council got up and spoke on the issues. We had resolutions and -- very begrudgingly, initially -- got the issue raised so that we were taking much more progressive positions. I think the key event in that history was getting David Suzuki to speak to CAW Council, and that was sort of the breaking point in terms of the hostility of the leadership.

SG [01:17:58] When was this, roughly?

CW [01:18:00] You know, I'm very poor on dates. I would have to say it was in the late nineties. Yeah, and you could have heard a pin drop at the CAW council meeting. This was normally 800 people from all across the country, all the union leadership, and normally there is a buzz in the room. People are yakking. People are not paying attention to who is speaking at the mic. You could have heard a pin drop. I mean, David Suzuki just gave one of the seminal fantastic speeches of his life, and it just meant that all of a sudden, the environment indeed was a completely legitimate issue. We were able to start negotiating things like environment committees in the plants. Some people full-time, chosen by the union, paid for by the boss to do environmental work and that was great. Our environmental conferences continued on, and we were able to -- through one conference, we did, for example, on clean energy. A lot of focus, of course, on wind power. Very much to the credit of the administration, they decided they were going to put a wind turbine up in Port Elgin, which is our CAW Family Education Centre. It's on the shores of Lake Huron and despite all kinds of community opposition, persevered. It took years with hearings and meetings and finally they did it, and now there is a wind turbine that provides basically all the energy to our Family Education Centre, which is great, putting money where your mouth is.

SG [01:19:54] What was the community opposition based on, noise and things like that?

CW [01:19:57] Yeah. Yeah. Basically nonsense, to be perfectly frank, all of it I think is nonsense. If I had to say, if you scratched any of this issue up there, it was opposition from the nuclear industry because the Family Education Centre is just down the lake from Bruce Nuclear Power Facility and a lot of people in that community, in fact, work for the nuclear power. It's ironic because Ontario Hydro has wind turbines in the same area and you really would think that they could have seen that as being something that was compatible, but no, I think really, it's nuclear energy really worrying about somehow this is eventually going to affect our jobs.

SG [01:20:48] Oh, I see. Was there also a sense that you coming from British Columbia -- that you put a higher level of importance in the environment than maybe many down there?

CW [01:20:58] Oh, again, very, very much so -- because again, we had always -- I think at every meeting of the B.C Council of the Confederation of Canadian Unions, which CAIMAW was part of, I would say every meeting, and we generally had them twice a year. We would have some speaker on the environment, and we just saw it as a broad issue, one that unified the organization, because of course, we had people from lots of different industries. We'd have Colleen McCrory from the Valhalla Wilderness Society, people like that, who would talk about wilderness issues and people on the Stein Valley. All kinds of people on all sorts of issues and thought this was important. I sort of was assuming that the CAW being a progressive organization would have a similar perspective, but no. We really had to build the issue in the organization.

SG [01:22:01] But you feel you did make a lot of progress on this.

CW [01:22:02] Oh huge, huge progress. Yes, I'm very, very happy with the progress we did and again, very much to the credit of people like Nick DiCarlo who took on the issue and ran with it. Very much the issue of people from B.C. who were on CAW council --

people like Loretta Woodcock, who was out of our Canadian Pacific local in Air Canada, who was on CAW council -- and would speak repeatedly on the issue and strongly. Of course, she was on the Vancouver Parks Board and such. Great people like that.

SG [01:22:38] Was there a sense that you were able to bring some of the workplace issues and the environment together there as well, that what you were producing here might pollute down the road?

CW [01:22:48] Oh. Yeah, very, very much so. Certainly. Whether it was issues of asbestos where we'd had, for example, a plant where there was a huge amount of asbestos produced in Sarnia. The plant had since closed down, but people would talk about asbestos blowing over into the bleachers of the baseball diamond right near the plant being a huge problem there. Of course, we had the example of the smelter in Kitimat, where not only were we concerned about what was going on inside the smelter but were concerned about what was going out on the smokestack and the incredible amount of pollution that was creating. We had that legacy of the work that we'd done with CASAW at that time in in B.C., and of course, then when they merged with the CAW, we had that as another really good example. What was happening outside plants in the waterways too, what is being discharged out of plants. It's not good enough to simply get rid of it out of the factory. You want to make sure it's treated properly and not just dumped in some so-called hazardous waste facility.

SG [01:24:11] After your retirement from CAW, this kind of work continues as you became a board member for the Labour Environmental Alliance, which became Toxic-Free Canada. Did all of your works sort of draw you naturally to that?

CW [01:24:24] Oh yeah, yeah. Certainly, because I think during when the Labour Environment Alliance Society was founded, we certainly found it very upsetting that there were some people in the labour movement who were on the wrong side of the War in the Woods. Let's cut all the trees down and cut all the environmentalists while we're at it, which was terrible. I mean, I remember the founding meeting, Sven Robinson chaired it. We had some great people there from the environment and certainly from our union, and I just thought it was a very important issue. Again, when you're when you're living in Toronto, you can't really participate very much. When I moved back here, I thought, 'Yeah, what a great and important organization bringing environmentalists and trade unions together.' and just developed a great respect for people like Andrea Reimer and such, who are just -- such a thoughtful person, just very impressed. Then Toxic-Free Canada. I mean, that's absolutely the link between the workplace and the environment. I mean, if we can prevent carcinogens in the workplace, we can prevent them from leaking out of the workplace, whether it's water systems or air or land. I think what Toxic Free Canada did was great. I mean, terrific stuff -- whether it was on breast cancer, or carcinogens, or toxic cleaners. I think it was terrific, and the work that you -- Sean -- did and Mae Burrows was wonderful. It was great to be part of that.

SG [01:26:14] So this was kind of a logical extension of what you'd been doing.

CW [01:26:16] Would be very, very much so, yeah. Yeah, except now you guys did all the work and I just got to come to the odd meeting.

SG [01:26:24] I think you did more than that. I think that was a big part of both organizations -- it was the board discussions that took place around the issue of where we go from here, what kinds of things we talk about from here. More recently you've been

involved in -- something that most people probably aren't aware of -- is kind of informal and more formal discussions that you've had with Chinese trade unions and delegations and that kind of thing. How did you get started in that?

CW [01:26:57] Well, again, all these things seem to be sort of by accident. I'd been to China the first time in '74, very different organization than it is today. It was still a socialist country. Then I didn't have much to do with China after their change in perspective in 1978. I went there in '91 with my son because I wanted him -- he was 11 then -- just to see a developing country, see that not everybody is as wealthy as we are in North America. At that time, I took a little bit of Chinese because I knew for us, the two of us to get around, I was going to have to learn a little bit of the language. I didn't want to go on a tour because he was 11. I thought he'd be bored to tears going to museums and such with a bunch of old fogeys. At any rate -- and then didn't do anything until 2000 and my girlfriend decided she wanted to adopt a child in China and so I said, 'Sure, I'll, I'll go with you.' and she said, 'Oh, you speak Chinese.' I said, 'I don't remember any of this.' Anyway, we went over to China, had a great trip. Adopted a wonderful little girl who is doing really well in school and now 17. She convinced me, I think that maybe I should start to learn a little bit of Chinese again. I decided, what the heck? Something that's not health and safety. I've been doing nothing else for eight years. I thought I just need a little change of perspective.

CW [01:28:38] I took a Saturday morning class at Seneca College, and then the International Department started to get -- in around 2001 -- a number of Chinese delegations coming through. This is the International Department of the CAW. They said, 'Well, you speak some Chinese, you look after them.' I said, 'Well I don't speak any Chinese.' 'It doesn't matter. You look after them.' You know, they have every country in the world to look after. I said, okay. I would give them a presentation and I'd talk a little bit about -- with my extremely limited Chinese, and they felt very comfortable -- but just basically talk about the union. What do we do here? How do we organize? How do you fight the boss? How do you represent workers at the workplace? How do you bargain contracts? How do you go on strike? All of this. They're very interested, and of course, in 2001, they had just joined the WTO (World Trade Organization). I think people in China realized that -- in spite of the fact things have been going down the capitalist road for a while -- it was going to really intensify, and they were going to have to do something a bit different for working-class people in China.

CW [01:29:54] So we started to have a lot of delegations come through, and I was always the point person. I was quite happy to do that, and we'd set up -- depending on the delegation -- a daylong program for them with people from various departments. We set up workplace visits, whether it was factories, or we had one coal mining delegation come through for health and safety and did a whole series of visits for them and they got to go into the Sudbury mine Falconbridge that we had. It did a lot of that, and of course they would always invite people back. I decided, 'Well, how can I do this in a way that would make sense?' so I decided I'd take a teaching English as a Second Language class and go over and just spend a bit of time there on my holidays and then see what plants I might be able to visit. I did that around 2004 or so and had a chance to get into a Toyota plant, General Motors plant and a Hyundai plant. It was very interesting because I had a chance to talk with people, and you can see the transition. Oh, the other one, I should say, was Beijing Jeep, which had been the first joint venture in Beijing -- in the whole of China, actually, in auto.

CW [01:31:29] Just had a chance to see the transition as the union in the workplace was changing from being, what we would call over here, probably more like a company union --

they'd organize the ping pong tours -- ping pong tournaments and visits to sick people and a general rah-rah for production and such that there would be normally in the socialist society -- to how do you represent people when the boss actually isn't interested in doing the right thing for the workers. I got a sense of that and realized that it was quite important, actually, to talk to people in the unions, whether at the workplace or at the city or national or provincial level about what we were doing here and see the issues they were struggling with. You know, how do you represent people in these workplaces? What is our role? We used to be simply an organization that basically got along fine with the boss, and now the boss is quite different. How do we grapple with this? I think it's important to engage in this dialogue. I've seen a lot of people in China change and learn about organizing from the base. For example, when Wal-Mart was organized in 2006 -- there successfully, unlike here -- they said, 'Look, we would go in and talk to Wal-Mart about [how] they have to recognize the union, and they wouldn't, and we'd not faced that before. We did what you guys were doing, what you're talking about. We'd talk to people at 4:30 in the morning before they went on shift. We talked to people after midnight, after they came off shift, and lots of different shifts. We talked to people in secret, and we'd sign up the workers and convince them to join the union, and then we went to Wal-Mart and forced them to recognize us.'

CW [01:33:45] It was a whole different idea for them, but they said, 'We wouldn't have had that had we not had a chance to talk to you guys.' We learned that when we went over as a delegation of the Vancouver and District Labour Council in 2006, meeting with the Beijing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions, and had some very frank discussions. They said, 'Look, it's really important that we know what you guys are doing.' I think it's important to continue this. The same thing with collective bargaining as well. They have a mandate from the Central All-China Federation of Trade Unions. They must collectively bargain, but how do you do that? You know, lots of questions as we're making presentations to them in talks here. Well, what do you do when the boss says no? I mean it's a real dilemma for them and, of course, we'd talk about some of our techniques. We may be slowing down on the work. You know, all of a sudden, there's these production bottlenecks in the Big Three plants. All of a sudden there'll be a real problem and things just can't get going. The workers are pretty creative with how these bottlenecks may be created. We could have work refusals -- which of course drives the Big Three nuts -- but these are legitimate work refusals for health and safety purposes, and all of a sudden, the production doesn't get going. Or in some workplaces there maybe refusals to work overtime, various things to put pressure on the boss. Of course, over here we can talk about going on strike and how we use this.

CW [01:35:35] Now, we are very complacent about what we do with strikes. You know, we think, 'Oh, we have this great procedure, and we go on strike and have explicit in your law the right to strike.' It used to be in the Chinese constitution until they took it out in '82. Well, gee, we've never had that in the Canadian constitution. In practice, however, there are strikes all the time in China. Oh, far more than here -- but we would call them wildcats -- and they're organized by people out on the shop floor and they're thoughtful. I mean, they think, 'Okay, how are we going to screw up production?' They'll wait until it's a busy period and then they'll all walk off, and the boss usually has no idea that something's gone on. What's the role of the official trade union? Well, in practice, lots of them are quite happy to see this go on because that gives them the leverage to be able to bargain improvements; but a lot of them are still in the mode of company trade unionism, and some of them have been appointed by the boss, or they've been some party hack that just gets appointed to the head of the union position, and they actually try and undermine the workers.

CW [01:36:57] The All-China Federation of Trade Unions is the biggest in the world. They've got 180 million members. This is as big as the rest of the union movement in the world put together, and they're very different. Some of them are just company hacks, Communist Party hacks, government hacks, and a lot of others are absolutely on the side of the workers and want to see change happen. I think, if you're meeting with a group of a dozen people, you don't necessarily know who they are. My Chinese is way too limited to engage in very in-depth conversations, but if you keep putting forward the ideas of how to represent workers individually and collectively, then I think I think things will change.

SG [01:37:47] You've seen some of that change already.

CW [01:37:48] Absolutely. Absolutely.

SG [01:37:50] This is something that's being taken up officially. I mean, you did it sort of by chance in the CAW. Is Unifor continuing that? Do you know, in their international department?

CW [01:38:01] Yeah, they are, which I think is great. They're both hosting delegations that come through. They're thinking of sending a delegation this fall. The BC Federation of Labour and the VDLC sent a delegation in 2014, and that was great. They've hosted lots of people coming back, as have individual unions, whether it's B.C. Government Employees Union or Unifor or other organizations setting up educationals for them. The Building Trades, the same thing, which has really been great.

SG [01:38:40] You're going to continue yourself doing this?

CW [01:38:42] Yes.

SG [01:38:43] Whenever the opportunity comes up again.

CW [01:38:44] For sure, because you've got to do something with your retirement that might be productive. Hopefully, this is.

SG [01:38:50] Yeah, you know, it certainly sounds like it is. Just to wrap up, I want to come back to the question of being a woman in the workforce, because you've raised a son. He's been there and you've had a family throughout all of these big changes that have been in your life. How -- what changes have you seen that have enabled you to better work as a union activist in the labour movement, or have there been changes?

CW [01:39:17] Well, I think some things as a woman in the labour movement were certainly very tough. I mean, there certainly was -- I was not very popular amongst men in my plant, for example, for raising women's issues. When I was first appointed as head of health and safety in the CAW, I thought, 'Gee, this is great.' and then I realized it was sort of because nobody else wanted the job, and they'd even give it to a woman; but since then, there have been a lot more women appointed as heads of departments in the union. It was interesting, though, we certainly have had at least a couple of women as full-time people or department heads that basically said, 'Listen, the amount of work in this union and the amount of time that is required is impossible for me. I can't have a family and be able to function.' and they've gone on to other things, whether it's been as part of the Labour Relations Board or various other jobs. I think, certainly within the CAW, there was no -- I mean, you were not cut any slack to spend time with your family.

CW [01:40:33] I think, the usual cliché, if you will, is oh if I had to do it over again, I would spend more time with my family -- but I think that's true. You know, my son never blamed me for being active, and the wife he's chosen is very much a very strong woman, which I think sort of reflects. My husband always says, 'You marry your parents.' I think he respects people who are active and involved and strong, but yeah, I think if you had your life to live over again, it would certainly be spending more time with him. By the time we moved, he was already 12. He might have not thought at that time that was necessarily something that he would have been keen on, given he was just getting into teen years, but it would have been nicer. We spent some very nice holidays together. That part was great. I think he's turned out really well and really progressive, and he continues to say, 'Well, if Bernie Sanders had been running for the Democrats, it would have been way different in the States.' That part's great. He's raising three terrifically active and progressive children. My eldest granddaughter's a great feminist. Boy is she ever going to stand up for women's rights during her whole life.

SG [01:42:06] That's great. Yeah, but was there -- first of all, was there a difference between the culture towards women in CAIMAW as opposed to CAW later, as far as your workload was concerned and accommodations that might need to be made for families?

CW [01:42:21] Not really.

SG [01:42:23] Pretty much the same, eh?

CW [01:42:23] Pretty much the same, but the good thing was very early on within CAIMAW, women were seen as being able to be just as effective leaders as men. At the time of the merger, I think we had either 50% or maybe a majority of national reps were women. In spite of the fact that at least three quarters of the people who are members in the union were men, and that was quite the opposite of the CAW. There were very, very few women who were on full-time, and it was only after the merger that really the culture of the organization changed, and you had a lot more women on staff, which is great.

SG [01:43:11] Mm hmm.

CW [01:43:13] We're still not there yet, even in Unifor, where you don't have a requirement at the plant level for there to be women on, for example, the bargaining committee or the shop committee. You still have, in the Big Three, majority of men, and you should have more women in those positions of leadership at the at the shopfloor level.

SG [01:43:38] So a frontier yet to be won.

CW [01:43:40] It is, yeah, although generally Unifor has been very good on women's issues.

BG [01:43:46] I have a final question, if I could.

SG [01:43:47] Yeah, go ahead, please do.

BG [01:43:48] Something that we usually ask people at the end of these interviews is just kind of looking back on your history. Why do you think it's important for young workers either in a union or just generally to understand the history of the labour movement in B.C. and in general? What value does it serve?

CW [01:44:08] I think a very important value. There's hardly a workplace that you go into today where if you talk to an individual worker about issues -- whether it may be a social issue like Medicare, or whether it's an issue of the minimum wage, or whether it's an issue of weekends or vacations or health and safety laws -- that people will spontaneously say, we got it because of a union. They don't know that, and you really have to sit down and explain. You know, people didn't have this in the past, it was as a result of fighting on the shop floor, fighting for legislation, fighting for change that we got these things. Women wouldn't have had access to so-called men's jobs if the union movement hadn't fought for it and I think it's important for everyone to understand that -- certainly young workers, women workers, young people in general.

SG [01:45:16] Okay, great.

BG [01:45:17] All right. So just to wrap it up, the date today is March 28, and this is an interview with Cathy Walker here at the BC Labour Heritage Centre with Sean Griffin and Bailey Garden. So, thank you so much.