

Interview: Rod Hiebert (RH)

Interviewer: Johanna den Hertog (RDH)

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Transcription: Marie Decaire and Jane Player

JDH [00:00:05] Okay. We're starting an interview with Rod Hiebert, who was formerly President of the Telecommunication Workers Union. It is November 27th, 2018, and I am Johanna den Hertog. Rod, can you tell me a little bit about your family background? When and where were you born? Did your family have a union or progressive bent? How did it all start?

RH [00:00:30] Well, I was born in Kelowna, B.C., and that was in 1945. I grew up there, went to school, George Pringle High School, and I started working while I was still going to school, originally picking grapes and apples and cherries. Then I went to work in a sawmill up in Vavenby and became an IBEW member when I was about 19 years old. No, it was about 18 years old and making big wages—a buck eighty-one an hour. Then, when I went back to school and then worked at Gorman Sawmill, and I worked at Gorman Sawmill right after I got out of school. Then shortly after that, I applied and got on with the Okanagan Telephone Company where I worked for many years until I was elected into the union office. My family was—my dad worked at the packing house and he looked after all the mechanical equipment and cold storage equipment. He worked very hard, about lots of times 14 hours a day or so and he's called on, on the weekends and all that sort of stuff. They did have a bit of a pension plan there, but it was so poor that when dad finally couldn't work anymore and because of heart attacks and had to retire, the pension wasn't enough. So mum in her fifties had to go back to work and try and help the family out. Then when I got on with the family, pensions became a big issue to me.

JDH [00:02:27] Tell me about those first jobs in the Okanagan that you clearly were a union member. Did that have any impact on your perspective on trade unions?

RH [00:02:37] Oh, yes, it did. It was a tough job up in Vavenby; you had to work very hard. It was right on the main line, rail line, and there'd be times where a whole crew would quit one night and they'd have another crew in in the morning. The drinking water was a garbage can that they filled down at the river every morning. About 40 people drank out of this rusted tobacco tin. Some mornings you'd go there to work, there was a blue film on the water. It had gone stale, but you had to drink. It was a summer, it was hot. There was this metal roof on the one side that just reflected the heat down on you, and you drank horrendous amounts of water.

JDH [00:03:33] Was this the IWA or the IBEW?

RH [00:03:35] It was the IWA.

JDH [00:03:37] Right. And did you experience any union activity at that time?

RH [00:03:42] Well, there weren't—I don't remember any grievances. I just worked there for the summer, but I knew it was great money for those days, and we all survived it and worked hard, but it was rewarding.

JDH [00:04:02] Then you became actively involved when you worked with the Okanagan Telephone Company. What was your job? What did it entail?

RH [00:04:12] Well, I started out digging post holes with a shovel, a spoon and a bar. Again, pretty tough work and I really wanted to climb. So a couple of the linemen helped me learn how to climb. Within about three months I was an apprentice lineman. In those days, there wasn't really any training other than just some of the senior lineman showing you what to do. After that you started climbing your share of the poles, and gosh, after about three years of that, I was doing some of the more complicated work. I remember one time we gin pulled an aerial up on top of a 60-foot pole on Knox Mountain. That required that when you got up about 45 feet, there were down guys that were placed around the pole. You didn't have much room for your feet to move, so you had to take off your belt and step way up and grab the pole and pull yourself up. Of course, it was the same on the way down. Now, one slip and it's over. Then you climb up and rig up the top of the pole so you can gin pull the aerial up and then you've got to stand on top of the pole and start taking everything down and then eventually climb down and you've finished your job.

JDH [00:05:45] That's tough work. What was the union that was at the OK Tel Company?

RH [00:05:51] That was the Federation of Telephone Workers. The same as the one at BC Tel.

JDH [00:05:56] Right, but it was a separate company.

RH [00:05:58] Yeah, it was a separate company and a separate certification. Yes.

JDH [00:06:03] Then you became somewhat involved, I understand, in the Federation of Telephone Workers, in the Okanagan in the early 1970s, and I understand that one of the issues in that early dispute was pensions. Can you describe the issue and why that was important?

RH [00:06:19] Yes, well, what had happened was that we had an old company plan, one of those bad ones. Bill Clark had hired Bruce Rollick, an actuary, a young actuary, to help us through this battle to get control. We found out that the company had not been putting their share of the money into the plan. Out of what we figured should have been \$1.3 million in there for the 500 employees at OK Tel, the company was saying there was only \$318,000, I believe the figures were. The company managers were in the same plan and the company was doing things like granting past service for management employees. In fact, one of the issues was Ernest Richardson, who was the CEO of BC Tel, had been granted service in our OK Tel pension plan back to 1946. You know when operators, gosh, they their pension would be \$150 a month. When they turn 65, it would go down to about \$3 and something a month, which was incredible, like who can survive on that? We knew we had to do something with pensions and we knew we couldn't trust the company.

JDH [00:07:53] What did you do? What did the union decide to do at that point? How did you frame the issue or what was the objective of the union?

RH [00:08:02] Well, the objective of the union was to take control of the pension plan or to get joint trusteeship of the plan, because up to that point, we couldn't even get any information on the plan. When we did look into it with Bruce Rollick, we found out that the pension trustees hadn't even had a meeting with the pensions. We made it a major, major issue at bargaining. That was the thing we had to get. The other basic thing was that we

wanted wage parity with BC Tel workers because of course it was the same jobs that we were doing.

JDH [00:08:41] What happened? Was it a dispute and what were the results?

RH [00:08:45] Well, we had a four and a half month dispute over that. It started out when the company, when we were in bargaining, the company started putting management people trying to work with our construction workers. Of course, they dropped tools and left the job. There was a walkout in Kelowna. Then when they returned the next day, they gave the workers a three-day suspension. Then Penticton, Vernon, Revelstoke and the other in Salmon Arm, they dropped their tools as well. It continued along that bitter thing until we ended up into a full strike, which lasted four and a half months, and it was terrible. I mean, people were really suffering. The one thing that really helped us was BC Tel workers had put so much money into a fund to help the workers that were out on strike. That ended up into, I think it was about \$75 every two weeks or so, which was really helpful to the picketers who were out on strike. We got, you know, support from other labour groups, too.

JDH [00:10:11] At the end, what was the result?

RH [00:10:14] Well, the result in the end was that we did get joint control of the pension plan and we did get parity with the workers at BC Tel. We got Harry Winichak, was our first trustee on the board and we were able to really move things ahead with the pension. There was—we got more money into the pension, I believe at that time too. One of the most important things was that now that we had joint control, we could move that into the contract with BC Tel as well, which happened over the next agreement. It was quite interesting what happened after that. The company actually started working with us on the pension because I guess they knew they had to and they put some people on there that were fairly good and we were able to advance the pension and build it in an incredible way. Pretty soon they were talking about it being good for the company to have the pension plan because when they wanted to downsize, they were restricted fairly well through the collective agreement. The pension plan could be used in a way that they could grant employees early retirement and pay the amount that it would cost to bring them up to full pension. Then, of course, you would let the older people retire earlier and the younger people would retain their jobs. It worked well, I think, for everybody involved.

JDH [00:11:57] That's an incredible story and a very difficult dispute that ended up having a large amount of success. I know over the years you have continued to be, for a long time, a trustee on the TWU or the joint pension plan. Tell me about the sort of later history of that pension plan and how it was able to make decisions about investment and things like that that ended up being very helpful for TWU members.

RH [00:12:25] Well, one of the biggest things happened in—I believe it was 1998, before the big crash in the stock markets. We were one of the plans that was 60/40 in bonds and equities. Led by Bruce Rallick, who kept telling us, 'Look, there's a problem when the long term interest rates go down. It's a sign of a weak economy. When the long term rates and interest rates and bond rates goes down, it means you need so much more to put in the plan, to make it fully funded'. We worked through that. It was a hard process because everybody was being told stocks alone would outperform bonds, but it's not true. We worked through that and found out that—and I personally found out after spending some time with Rollick and doing some research—that if those rates kept going down, then we would be into an unfunded liability situation very quickly. We decided—I decided to push

the union trustees and the company trustees to take our fund right off the market and put it into all long term bonds. After some huge pressure on the company, they agreed to go with us. Within two years, our actuary had announced that we were in about a \$400 million better position because we had made that decision to go into the bonds. Meanwhile, the stock market crashed in, I think it was 1998, just months after we had taken most of our money out of the stock market. It was a tough, tough thing to do and to go out and tell members, you're doing that when you were out of step with the rest of the world. It's one of those things. It's the right decision to make. You just have to do it and push it and make it happen. It's so easy for people to follow the herd mentality and do what everybody else is. It's safe politically and all of that because you say it happened to everybody else too. I guess that's the test of leadership, isn't it?

JDH [00:15:00] You also—I think the TWU also began to be involved in investment in properties. Did it in the sense of building properties that would be union run?

RH [00:15:16] Yes. Bill Clark in—I guess it was the late eighties—had done a bunch of research. Pension plans are always invested some in the real estate market. Well, when you do that, you have other companies taking out a whole bunch of money. So him, and with the authorization of a lot of executive council, we decided that, well, we're going to do some of those projects. We're going to cut out the middlemen who are taking most of the money. You know, we're going to lower the risk so it works for pensions. We did a few of these and we learned, with private companies doing the development, that we were still subject to these companies wanting to make a big profit for themselves. We decided that we were going to build our own company and we created Vancouver Land Corporation, which is now Concert Properties. We worked with a bunch of other unions and with the City of Vancouver. One of our first big projects was the Collingwood Village down by Joyce Street. We made rules that we would build everything high quality. We didn't want leaky condos. We did it all union because we wanted our pension money to go into other workers' pockets, so it would build pension funds and create employment. It worked very well. We created millions of hours of work for the building trades and telephone workers and we have made good profits. Part of that was that we knew that in Vancouver, the prices always go up. Yes, you have times where the market goes down, but the next time it raises higher. We decided we're going to not just be land flippers, we're going to build projects and we're going to hold on to a bunch of them and collect grants and from businesses and from workers. We were able to do a component that was affordable housing, and it has just been a great project. We've got now it's a \$3 billion corporation and we've done infrastructure programmes and we've done work for government buildings and seniors complexes. It's been a great success and it's had great returns for the pension fund, and because we were in control, we could make sure that the risks were acceptable to pension funds, which of course have to operate on low risk, when you invest.

JDH [00:18:39] That's a great story, Rod, and it continues to make a huge contribution in the Lower Mainland. Okay. I'm going to switch gears now a little bit and talk a little bit about technological change. We're going to go back a little bit in time. I know you were elected shop steward for the plant workers in Vernon, I believe, in the early 1970s, as that was your first union role. I understand that technological change already was beginning to be an issue there in Vernon. Tell me about the issues, for example, for operators that started happening around technological change.

RH [00:19:19] Well, one of the big things was where operators were shifting from cord boards to the automatic systems, and there was a lot less work. When they brought in, for instance, a TSPS system, it required 40 percent less workers. It also gave the company

the ability to centralize operators throughout the province. It gave us a big issue. The company took the position that well, these people were offered jobs in the new place; well there wasn't enough jobs for them there. They knew that people moving from places like Cranbrook and these other places that at an operator's wages, you could not afford to move. They were offering jobs that didn't exist, knowing that very few people would go to them. Of course, it was technological change. With respect to that particular thing, we started out with letters of agreement without prejudice to the collective agreement, to try and hold jobs in plant and clerical open, in those areas that they were closing the office. The operators, if they could qualify, they could take those jobs and they wouldn't be posted company wide. That worked to a certain extent, but later on we found that it just wasn't quite enough. I negotiated the one in Vernon, which was the first one for operator services in the province of British Columbia. Our Business Agent Gordie Stoltenberg came in to just close it off. I had to first of all get the clerical and plant divisions to agree that we would open those jobs for the operators and then went with the operators. We formed a committee and went in to negotiate the agreement, which at that time worked well. By the time we got to Cranbrook, it just wouldn't work anymore. I had done a lot of research on arbitrations, and I found a way that we could go to arbitration and possibly win, where this was not an offer of another job, it was actually a layoff, constructive layoff. We took this to arbitration, and Alex Craigan was the arbitrator. The arbitrator found that it was, in fact, a lay off and that the company could not lay off people in just those areas because the seniority clause was province wide or company wide, Okanagan Tel wide. Well, it would have been company wide because that was 1986 that happened. That effectively stopped the centralization of places like Prince George and the other places that were still open.

RH [00:22:46] Along with that, we started a real public campaign and we went to the different areas where they were closing down offices like the phone marts and the operator services office. We set up meetings, local meetings, and we invited politicians, city officials, everybody, the public to come. We laid it out what was happening. In the meeting in Cranbrook, I remember quite well, we laid it out that the police had downsized, the CNCP rail yards were downsizing, all these different downsizing. We put them together and laid it out on the economics scope for the City of Cranbrook. We advised them that really that when you move jobs out of the community like that, it has an effect that is 1.6 times as much because these people go and spend their wages in all these different stores and they hire local contractors and builders and everybody is affected. We got tremendous community support. One of the most interesting things was that Corky Evans, Lyle Kristiansen, Sid Parker, the NDP MLAs and people who were running for the NDP in elections, they came out and supported us strongly. In the next election, they were all elected and it was a thing that worked very well for us and the NDP. It just shows when politicians are on the side of the workers in the communities, they're going to do better. If you just support the large corporation, it's not going to work.

JDH [00:24:45] Those were amazing campaigns. You say that one of the things for people listening to this interview, when you say operators and plant and clerical, maybe explain a little bit how in the past those also had gender connections, like there were men and women in all of these divisions or how did how did that start?

RH [00:25:07] Yes, and that is very important because it was very discriminatory. We have battled for many years to clear that all up, and we've gone with across the board increases and everything. Clerical is the majority women, there are sales and it used to be salesmen and they were paid higher. There were some women in sales, but most of the clerical were women workers. When you went to apply for a job, you didn't get into plant, you got into clerical when they hired you and that's where they wanted you to stay. Same with the

operator services, it was a huge majority female workers and again, the wages were way lower. They worked under atrocious conditions. At one point when I first started, operators, when they had to use the washroom, they had to put up their hand ask the supervisor if they could go to the bathroom. They worked that out and then they had flags that they had to raise. It was just horrible on those workers, and eventually we got rid of all that. Still, the wages today are low. The company has fought everything to bring these people up in wages so that they have a good working wage. The other thing is they've gone—pushed so hard to get rid of their jobs and downsize those groups with the new technology.

JDH [00:26:54] I think what you pointed out earlier is that the technological changes first affected those female workers. You were able, in the union, to help give some other benefits or some other rights in the collective agreement.

RH [00:27:09] Right.

JDH [00:27:11] Okay. I'm going to move now a little bit more in detail to the service quality issues that you raised a little bit about community involvement. I think the union was also unique in raising service quality. The public is not always on the side of workers in labour management issues. How did the TWU become involved in issues of service quality?

RH [00:27:36] Well, first of all, we know that to provide good service, you need the people to provide the service. The company kept cutting people in these areas and downsizing. That had a tremendous effect on the public service that we were allowed to give. They would try to save money by not doing maintenance and all these different things. We knew that provided jobs and we knew that the community was suffering from this lack of service. We put those two things together and we started to get really proactive in that area. For instance, in 1979–80, we knew the company was going to try and lock us out. We knew we were in to a big dispute and the service quality was just really getting bad. We had a super service campaign on—that we were making sure that every customer was looked after, but we were fighting the company all the way. The company had applied for a rate increase. We decided to intervene in that rate increase— and very proactively— and we called for hearings in the regional areas.

RH [00:29:06] I was one of the people that went to those hearings and presented the case to the CRTC. One of the big things was that instead of looking to provide the best service, BC Tel—because it's parent company GTE sold equipment—they would work to buy this equipment from GT&E at an overinflated price. Some of the equipment they'd buy it even before there was one working in one of the major offices. We raised this thing—this issue with respect to the new technology. One of the things was, with the new technology, you'd have offices that would go completely off line, where nobody couldn't even get local service. All long distance was out, the hospitals and fire stations and all that were right out of business—because the computer had gone down, because you get into one single part, can shut the whole thing down. The company on diversity of trunking was one of the things. Certain areas would be out of long distance service because one section would go down—it wasn't duplicated—whereas in the past all of that was done. This was millions and millions of dollars that the company was saving and transferring to GT&E. The other thing was the outside plant. We even did a video to take to the CRTC. It went to the central hearings which were after the—and I'll talk a bit about that after—but when we did the local hearings in Vernon, it was quite a show. Stu Leggatt from the NDP came to help us through it. He was a lawyer, I believe. What happened was it was all set up so that the company was on a raised podium at the front and then the CRTC person, the people that were handling it, and we would go up and testify and be sworn in and everything. The

company would just answer questions from the back or make comments. Finally somebody said, 'Well gee, all these union people have been sworn in, but here's the company spreading their stuff and they haven't been sworn in.' There was a whole bunch of questions that the company could not answer, because we had our presentations put together and we had worked hard on them. It was quite a show. There was other people from the community showed up and that was positive for our members and it was positive for us bringing those issues to light within the community. Then when we hit the central hearings, the important ones, I would also testify there and we had things like the video. We had a lineman that had been around for a long time. I remember the part in the video; they showed this pole along the King George Highway that was very badly broken and just hanging there. The cables were leaning across this lamp standard. This lineman was talking, Bill Mitchell was talking about the situation. He said, "This is a very dangerous situation, the way the pole is hanging.' He said, 'If that lamp standard lets go, you will have poles all over the King George Highway.' He says, 'There's been a pole put there to replace it as you can see, and it's been there a long time because the grass is growing right over top of it and the grass doesn't grow very well in November.' Well, there's a lot of people smiling and laughing, but the company managers had their head in their hands, quite a number of them.

RH [00:33:16] Then we had Jim Gordon, who Peter Bottler, the company lawyer, built up that, you know, he was good at his job and the company was good to him. They gave him these test meters and all this sort of stuff. He said, 'Mr. Gordon, the company put in this cable into this area to give the customers better service, wouldn't you agree with that?' 'Well', he said, 'That may have been why they did it, but by the time they sent a cable splicer out there to work on it, when he cut the end of the cable, water ran out at the end of the cable in a very area that they'd been drilling dry-hole wells for 20 years.' We had a different approach when we went to the CRTC hearings. We're the people that built the system; we're the people that knew what was going on; and we knew more about it than the management people did. Those hearings were the longest set of hearings in the history of the CRTC. At the end of it, the company got their rate increase, but they were told that they had to improve service and they were going to set some standards for them.

JDH [00:34:42] What was the impact in general for the union? What was the benefit for the union as well as the communities, obviously, but the union too, to have participated as workers and as a union in this regulatory process?

RH [00:34:56] Well, we believe that the extra jobs that would come out of it and because we really built our profile with the communities, that people wouldn't see it as these workers just out on strike or wanting this and that. They saw us as part of the community and building the community. We were the ones that contributed to the economy of those local communities. Of course, if we were gone, then they would lose a good section of their economies.

JDH [00:35:30] Yes, I'm sure that the telephone company or the BC Tel or Telus later, had to become much more conscious of their public image as a result of that.

RH [00:35:41] Oh, yes, and we kept their feet to the fire on that issue. There were a number of issues where the company wanted to get out from under the regulation. There was the hearings for Inter Exchange Competition, and we were really against that. CNC was going to be able to get in there and compete against the phone company. Of course, this was going to break apart the agreement where everybody would have a phone at an affordable rate because you'd lose the long distance subsidy for the local users. Seniors

and people who had problems wouldn't be able to get a telephone for emergency services or anything. We took that very seriously and we went with our own presentation into the CRTC hearings, and we were very successful. We were one of the only unions in communications to really take a strong position like that. In the end, we were successful in holding the long distance competition off. The way things go, it was quite interesting.

RH [00:36:59] Peat Marwick and Associates did a study and they found out that competition would be good for the community, it would be good for Canada. We found out that Peat Marwick and Associates had done extensive work for both CNCP and BC Rail, the applicants to the Inter Exchange Competition. We raised that with Andrew Elek, the author of the study, and he says, 'Oh, that was all work done in the past and that didn't make a difference. It wouldn't be considered a conflict of interest.' We said, 'Well, would it be a conflict if you were currently doing that type of work for CNCP or BC rail?' 'Well, they'd fail to be objective.' Then we were able to pass out an advertisement in the Globe and Mail from that morning that was Peat Marwick advertising for CNCP for communications consultants for this vast new area that was opening up for them in communications. We were able to catch them in a whole bunch of these things that we're not really right. You know, we had a bit of fun because we had a different approach, but we were also very serious in making our points and in the end we did win.

RH [00:38:37] Another issue was voice over Internet protocol technology, where the company wanted that deregulated. Some months before that I knew that things were going to happen with this VoIP, and I wanted to find out just exactly how it worked. I went to our technicians and they'd been on courses and they said that, 'well, it just sort of goes into this cloud after it leaves the office.' Who gets the circuits to the other end? Well, anybody can do it. I figured it out that they were using the telephone circuits that had been paid for by local customers, and they were just using those for the voice over Internet protocol technology. Now, they wanted it deregulated. Of course that would take away from the cross-subsidy to the local service. We decided to take it on and I wrote an article on it and I published it. We and we took basically the article in legal language and took it to the CRTC, and the CRTC was very interested. We were really the only ones that seriously took on that approach. In the end, the company was denied the deregulation of VoIP.

JDH [00:40:04] Wow! This also maintained, you know, benefits for B.C. residents throughout the province.

RH [00:40:12] Oh, certainly.

JDH [00:40:13] Most citizens don't see how that works behind the scenes, that their own access to telecommunications has been affected by these struggles.

RH [00:40:23] That's correct. We've even taken appeals to the Supreme Court of Canada and won them where the company was trying to forbear from regulating parts of the telephone system, and we won those as well. I think we've provided a good service to the community, the province and Canada.

JDH [00:40:47] Okay. Now I'm going to move back to the union itself as a union a bit. You mentioned it briefly, there used to be the Federation of Telephone Workers. I think there were three certifications, but over time that became one union, the Telecommunication Workers Union. Why was it important to have a single certification? What was the significance of that change? What were the benefits? What were the challenges inside the union or outside?

RH [00:41:20] Well, one of the challenges won was one that people in these different divisions didn't want anybody else deciding what happened in their area or having any part of it. It used to be that we had three councils that met completely separate, and it was on the same day. Finally, we got so that there was one day that all three divisions would meet together. One of the big issues was when the company was taking us on the way they were, all they had to do was take on one division, and it could create huge divisions. We didn't want that to happen. Or, what happens when you have one division that's going to vote against a strike and another one for. We called it the three-headed monster. We finally got a new constitution and we worked hard to get that together. It was also very important that plant workers understood clerical problems and traffic, and traffic understood clerical and plant problems, and that when people work together and they see that somebody is being hard done by, they'll work together to try and fix those problems. We've seen it work very, very well. We wanted to extend that right into the locals, as well as the convention. A lot of areas like the one I came from, we put all three locals together. Some areas they still had the local areas apart. Part of that was because they could get more voice at convention and whatever, but it was good to get those all three divisions together and one certification, one union.

JDH [00:43:17] What were some of the major benefits for union members that once it won became one collective agreement, one certification in terms of things like lay offs or job postings or training? Or, were there changes that that one certification helped to bring?

RH [00:43:39] Well, there were some. We still had, you know, the plant division and the clerical and operator services in the collective agreement. We had a much bigger master section that applied to everybody. Really, it was when we went into bargaining, we were all together. Like when I went into bargaining, I was chief spokesperson. You know, I would help out each division. The rest of us were there. We were absolutely solid on the each division's requests. It really did work well after that.

JDH [00:44:26] All right. We talked a little bit earlier about pay equity, part time work and temporary workers. Were these big issues within the telecommunications world and for the union?

RH [00:44:39] Oh, yes, they were huge issues. I was one of the ones that put my counsellor's job on the line by supporting across the board increases to try and bring clerical and operator services wages more in line with ours. I remember as when I got elected president in 1991, it was the biggest single issue on the bargaining table. The difficulty was that the plant workers, some on the bargaining team, thought that it shouldn't even be on the table. It should be, you know, it's a law and we should take it on with the courts or arbitration or whatever. Of course, clerical and traffic thought that that was the biggest issue for them at bargaining. It got very vicious, apparently. Larry Armstrong, who was the president before me and put the package together and everything, but they couldn't come together on what we should do with pay equity. The first meeting I laid it out that, you know, there was going to be no abuse of language or anything like that when I was heading up the bargaining team or somebody was going to get suspended. So that stopped. I listened to the arguments for a day and, you know, so-and-so and wait til so-and-so and so on had spoke and then they'd speak. It was just a circle debate that was going nowhere. The next day I came back and said, 'Look, we're going nowhere. We're with the committee this size. We're not going to be able to come up with a pay equity model. So what I've decided to do is I'm going to start at this side of the room and go around the whole room, everybody in succession.' I want them to speak their complete

minds on pay equity. I'm going to take notes, and I said, 'When you come around to me, I'm going to give my views on it. Then we're going to take a short break and I'm going to pick a committee and not just traditional pay equity people. I'm going to pick a broad based group that is going to be responsible for coming up with a model.' I looked for people that had some sway in their groups, a plant, clerical and traffic, and people that could think a bit more innovatively. The committee was formed and within a month they came back with a pay equity model that was unanimously accepted by the bargaining committee. We moved ahead and we did make some fairly good pay equity gains. That was an interesting bargaining team because after the convention where I was elected, I had one person on the bargaining team that supported me as president. I had the person that ran against me, the secretary treasurer, that was firmly on the other side, a number of business agents and I had one supporter. We managed to get through that. I think the thing is you have to treat people with respect. You have to be innovative and you have to really work hard at it, and you can make these things happen.

JDH [00:48:21] Right. Well, that was a— it's a huge part of the TWU history, that whole attempt to move forward on pay equity.

RH [00:48:28] Yes.

JDH [00:48:29] Yeah. Anything further on temporary workers or part time workers? Was that also an issue for the union—

RH [00:48:36] Yes, the temporary workers was always an issue. Well, it was an issue where they tried it in plant and especially it was a big issue in operator services. In fact, I forget exactly which collective agreement it was, but the company had been able to have 20 percent part time operators. I remember the agreement that we moved it down to 15 percent instead of 20. Then there was a big issue of whether it was office seniority or whether it was province-wide seniority. That was when I was vice-president and Larry was on vacation. It dropped into my lap and both sides of the—both political camps in the union were locked in to either one or the other. I sat back and looked at the thing rationally and figured that neither one of those systems would work well at all, and that you had to change it. What happened was we had office seniority. People in Vancouver who had three months seniority would be moved up to a full time position because there was so much turnover. In a place like Kelowna where everybody wanted to be, you had operators were 15 years that couldn't get a full time job. If you let regulars bid on those jobs, then you'd have somebody with three months seniority regular and they'd bump somebody with 15 years. The other way wasn't fair either because people wanted to move and transfer to the better places. I came up with—I get well, it happened that the operators were so upset with the decision, I can't remember which one won, but they were so upset with the decision that they were in crisis all over the place. Don Bremner came to me and he says, 'Rod,' he said, 'It's getting ugly out there. Is there anything that you can see that we can do about it?' I said, 'Yes, Don, I thought about it. I have an idea that I think'll work. If you call—if you get the votes for a motion to reconsider, then I'll lay it out to executive council.' We had our executive council meeting and I laid it out that we'd have sort of a combination where, yes, a person in Vancouver could bid to a job in Kelowna, but they couldn't bump a temporary that had more seniority. So you had a combination that really worked for the operators. When we negotiated that with the company, the operators were so happy with the results. It's a thing where you don't get locked into these past issues and dug in ideas. Just do what works for the workers.

JDH [00:51:47] Right, and as you say, being innovative and really looking at new solutions, obviously has worked. I'm going to switch gears now and talk a little bit about contracting out and technological change, but more about the jurisdiction side and contracting out. Okay. Tell me about why contracting out and also jurisdiction of work became so important to TWU members. What was the company trying to do and what was the union's aim?

RH [00:52:17] Well, the company was trying to completely destroy the bargaining unit. Most of the contracting out came in the plant area where they would try and contract out all sorts of things. Like one of the ones that I remember specifically was our people used to get computers brought in and we would initialize them and we would set them up so they worked properly and everything. We had a group that did that and was very good at it and they added all the new equipment and that. The company wanted to go to Dell Computers and have this all done outside. Now you'd have them brought in, and they were all customized for BC Tel. We made the case in front of the contracting out chairperson that it was no different. They weren't buying a product. They were getting these people at the factory to do our work and we were successful in winning that. They would try and contract out taking down poles after they were obsolete and rolling up the wire. That led to big walkouts and all sorts of things. Anything that they could contract out, they wanted to contract out. It became a huge issue for the TWU members when, you know, you can get a whole line crew in to put up lines. You can, if we didn't have a contracting out clause, so it was a constant fight.

JDH [00:53:59] The contracting out committee you referred to. How did that come to be? Was that something that the company decided to have or did the union have to win that?

RH [00:54:10] Well, that was in the mid to late seventies, and it was a strike issue. With the settlement was that we would have a committee set up with a neutral chairperson, which ended up to be Paul Fraser, who was a good, fair chairperson. If we had a list of items that could be contracted out and then there was a criteria for how the chairperson would decide these issues. If we had an issue, we'd go to the—set up a hearing, and it was just like an arbitration hearing. We would state our case and he would decide whether it could or couldn't be contracted out. It worked well for, oh, many, many, many years.

JDH [00:55:06] Okay. Now jurisdiction is similar to that, but somewhat differently, I think it may be. Explain it, how within the company, what was the company doing to decide what work was within and outside of the bargaining unit?

RH [00:55:21] Well, our original certification and bargaining unit was set in 1949, and there was one manager for every 19 people in the bargaining unit. Over the years the company would apply to the Canada Labour Relations Board to have exclusions, and the Canada Board gave them whatever they wanted. It turned out that it wasn't just management. They'd keep adding these functions on that had been bargaining unit. In 1979, there was one exclusion to the bargaining unit for every 3.5 employees. It was a mess and it was a constant fight. The Canada Board, we'd ask for a review and try to get some of that straightened out. Every time they'd give the company everything that they'd taken and they'd give them everything they wanted and they'd tell us, well take it to arbitration. The union took one of the cases to arbitration, communications consulting data, and we won the arbitration. It was inside the bargaining unit. Instead of putting it there, the company just cancelled the classification and moved on, so arbitration wouldn't work. It went on and on so they told us, put it in the collective agreement. We took it to bargaining and that was in 1980, a huge issue. We came out of that with an agreement that we would rate job

descriptions for all classifications in the plant appendix. I was actually on that committee and it took us a year and a half to two years to write all the job descriptions. You think you can move ahead? No. The company said they contested the job descriptions first, especially the technicians' one. Then they said there's no criteria to apply these job descriptions. Into bargaining, again, we came out with a thing where we take it to a binding arbitrator to decide the criteria. Well, we took it to Joe Weiler, and he came out with a system. He said the union had exclusive jurisdiction over the core functions, but it was up to the standing arbitrator to decide the peripheral functions, whether they should be in the union or not in the union's certification. We tried that for a lot of years; it was frustrating. We did save a lot of jobs in our jurisdiction. The Canada Board was never any help. They were just an excuse department as we were concerned, for the company.

JDH [00:58:37] Okay. Maybe we'll take a break for a second.

RH [00:58:40] Okay.

JDH [00:58:43] All right. Okay, Rod. Sometimes there've been also some disputes within the labour movement about jurisdiction. Tell me about how the federal government's deregulation of telecommunications resulted in a dispute with the IBEW. What was it about and how was it resolved?

RH [00:59:01] Well, when the CRTC deregulated the installation of phones and wiring and that sort of thing, we had the building trades sites in British Columbia. The IBEW took the position that we weren't mandated to do that work anymore. Now they felt they could take it over because they had in their collective agreement that any wire that carried a current was their jurisdiction. They started to try and kick us off job sites and threaten employers that they were going to shut the job down, picket it if we remained on the site. Of course, this was especially obnoxious to the TWU because after all, we had made sure that all the electrical jobs, other than the telephone work on Concert Property sites, was done by IBEW members. Now they're trying to kick us off all their sites. We decided to take them on over this issue. I went out and interviewed all the people and ended up testifying in court and stuff. The IBEW was found guilty of the torts, of intimidation and conspiracy, and we registered that in court. So any further instance of that, they would be found in contempt. I was successful in telling the company, 'Look, you think it's funny that we're having a dispute with the IBEW, but you're losing a lot of revenue too off this and this is what you're going to lose in the future.' So they enjoined us on the lawsuit against the IBEW and it saved a lot of work for our members on the construction site.

JDH [01:01:07] So you were successful. Then what was the relationship in the long-term with the IBEW after?

RH [01:01:14] We were able to work with them on regular union stuff, although they weren't happy. When they were taking us on that way, we also relieved them of their bargaining unit at a Microtel, as well, because it was a union scrap that they had started. We had to let them know that you just couldn't take on the TWU without having some repercussions.

JDH [01:01:40] Right. Interesting little sidebar on trade union disputes as well. I understand that something similar might have happened, or could have happened, at the provincial level when BC Rail and BC Systems Corporation tried to enter the telecommunications business. How did the TWU resist this? How was the TWU involved? Also, in what I understand was the BC information Highway. Tell me about that.

RH [01:02:06] Yes. What happened was that the B.C. government, when Glen Clark was a Minister of Communications. BC Rail and BC Systems Corporation had decided through the BC Rail lines and BC Systems they were going to compete with the telephone company. Because we had been in the system so long, and we knew what was going on, it wouldn't have worked for the provincial government, and that there was a better way of doing it. I got into a kind of a set-to with Glen Clark over this issue, because he'd been down at the CRTC hearings and he had made a certain presentation. I can remember, I said, 'What do you think you were doing down there, the hearings?' He said, 'Well, B.C. government has been intervening in those hearings for 30 some odd years. Why would you complain now?' I said, 'That's right, Glen. The Socreds have been and it looks like you gave the same submission again this time.' He says, 'Okay, look, what do we have to do to fix this?' I got him to come out to our executive council and we laid out all the problems that we were having. Things like the BC System would put out a request for proposals. They wanted detailed drawings and designs and they wanted to know what equipment we were going to use and everything. Our technicians that put these things together and submit them. They'd get a call back from BC Systems Corporation. 'Well, we've decided we're going to do it ourselves.' We'd find out they use the same equipment, tied the same way together and it was a mess. It was what we thought it was bordering on fraud. We laid out a number of these things that were happening and that he wasn't aware of. He arranged a grant for \$85,000 from the Science Council of B.C. for us to do a study into how the B.C. government should handle their telecommunications needs. We got Elaine Bernard from Harvard to help on this study. Dan Schiller from Temple University down in the States. He's a professor of communications written many books on communications. Andy Reddick, Public Interest Advocacy Centre, and Vincent Mosco, Professor of Communications from Queen's University and Sid Shniad from our office. I was in part involved in that as well. We came out with a thick study and basically what it said was the B.C. Government wasn't getting the best they could by things like asking for competition in the calls between Victoria in Vancouver because the resellers would get those because they got a cut from the CRTC. It was the phone companies lines that they would buy and they would sell them to the government on margins. They did nothing to build the communications system in B.C. We told them basically what you should do is get larger contracts. Because you're the largest user of communications in the province of British Columbia, you can drive the information highway. You want high speed communications up to Prince George, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Cranbrook. That's not going to happen through the completely competitive model. You have to drive that by saying, okay, if you put these circuits up there, these high speed circuits, we will give you this and that and you negotiate those things. In the end, the B.C. Government called it the B.C. Information Highway, and they made a big splash in the news, and they adopted quite a number of our recommendations in the report. There was no fightback from the other competitors because we went to all of them and we talked to them about what they saw happening. It was a fair system; it worked great. When I talk to Glen Clark now, he still says that it worked great for the province of British Columbia, all the communities, and it worked good for everybody. It was a tremendous success story. It kept a lot of our people working in areas like Dawson Creek where they were facing possible layoffs and stuff and it built the system in the best way possible.

JDH [01:07:15] Oh, wow. In this whole process, you've already talked about these community activities and other things that you were involved in since when you were elected president of the union. When you started in 1991, there were a number of collective agreements concluded with gains and without any strikes. What can you tell me about those bargaining sessions and what was significant about them?

RH [01:07:40] On the ones after the '81? Well, I think the company had found out that after that 1981 dispute that they had to change the way they operated because we were—we knew what we were doing and we can take them on publicly and that they weren't going to push us around as much. They found it was better to negotiate and work with us than it was to take an all out battering ram against us, like they had in the past. Of course, in areas like jurisdiction, they kept baiting, eating away at our our jurisdiction and stuff. We were able to hold that at bay and get some pretty good agreements along the way.

JDH [01:08:32] All right. Let's transition then to some of those early disputes and some of those very interesting and creative strategies that the TWU had. The union has had some very significant bitter disputes over the years, particularly in the eighties, and you referred to that. It also became very creative in un-strikes in very unusual ways of trying to win in disputes. Do you want to tell us about one or more of those.

RH [01:09:03] Yes. Well, Bill Clark was a strategic person, and I learnt a lot from him over the years. Back to the 1969 strike, there were strategies that were started out and through '73 and '78. In all those disputes, we had been building these strategies and we knew that it's hard to picket dial tone. These offices would pretty well run themselves for three or four months. The company had so many management people to scab the job, and that it was really difficult to maintain a long strike. What we did—and all of this sort of culminated in the 1981 dispute—we decided to stay on the job as much as we could and on the job strategies. We did a super service campaign where the operators and clerical people would talk to the customer on the line. It would take longer, but they would make sure that the customer was satisfied before they hung up. The plant people would go out and make sure everything was working perfectly, that there was no noise on the line. Forget about the stats and the supervisors saying you're not working, you're not getting enough done in a day. This worked really well. The other thing the union did was pull off about 450, (I think it was) of the people that worked in the area that really made the company money—the people that worked in the computer end of things and fixed the switchboards in downtown Vancouver and the key places. We got them to work, to go to work, but refused to do anything except emergency work. We wouldn't get in trouble with the public because we'd look after all the emergency work. Then the company sent the managers out to the places and we'd send pickets out to follow them. We were grinding them down and then they got an injunction that they could kick our people out of the office. It just went on and on like that. We would pull certain sections and our strategy was to keep on the job and the company was harassing people at every turn. We refused to walk off and that went on for months and months. We had a thing called bulletin board warfare where we turned up the heat on the management people with, you know, things that managers did and stuff that may be a bit embarrassing, that would go up on the bulletin board. Just staying on the job and just frustrating them and providing good service, which was difficult for the company to handle.

RH [01:12:30] Then the company started getting rid of certain—pushing certain groups out on the street. It all culminated with a situation where they suspended people for—Laila Wing for wearing a t-shirt. We'd been through conciliation and the Peck Report got handed down, and the union accepted it, but the company wouldn't. This showed one of the cartoon characters holding this Peck Report and BC Tel management with a hand around their neck. They suspended this person. It started to come apart because everybody was so frustrated. We had a plan that we wouldn't leave the offices; we would stay in there. It started out in Nanaimo where they took over the office there—the craft and operators and the clerical people. they took over the office and managers were out and we would run the

phone company. Then after Nanaimo, about two days later, we pulled the whole province down to take over the offices. I remember going into the office in Vernon. They had asked me specifically to take out the operator services office because they were quite nervous about that, the chief operators and that there, and they were so strict. I remember going up there and announcing—just walking right in like I owned the place—and announcing, 'There seems to be some confusion here as to who's running this operation and I'm here to end that confusion. The TWU is now in charge of this office and running it. We're asking you to stay and work the cord boards and you, the managers, you can remain here as long as you stay in your offices and don't interfere.' An operator came up to me and she said, 'Well, what about that machine over there that records every move we make and the stats and everything? They'll still have that.' I said, 'Has that machine got a plug on it? Pull it out.' They were so happy to be able to work and be able to talk to the person beside them, to be able to not worry about every second that they were on. They were monitored and they'd get a reprimand if they looked sideways or anything. We had people planned, that some that had some operator services experience and some of even us plant guys. I did my turn at the switchboards as well. We ran the company for five days, and you know, we didn't get really bad press over it. I mean they saw it at that point as something that we had to do and five days later the company took us to court over the issue. I will never forget the judge's word. He said, 'A more contemptuous affront of this court, the law and the principles of a well-ordered society, would be hard to imagine.' We got fined \$60,000, which was, you know, three bucks apiece or so. It wasn't a huge amount. I mean, we had to leave the offices at that point and then we were out on the street. We had so much support within the labour movement that Jim Kinnaird, who was a previous IBEW person, and he was the head of the BC Federation of Labour—he and Jack Munro announced that they were going to support us and take BC Tel on. They shut down Nanaimo for a day, including the ferries and everything. They had a plan where they were going to shut down certain areas in the province where all unionized workers would drop their tools. The point was we had to put on some heat on some of these other corporations and governments to put heat on BC Tel to settle the thing. We finally got the thing where we agreed, and then it was a big fight over the back to work agreement. The company had fired 24 workers who were out on strike. Through assistance from, again, the NDP and others we were able to get an arbitrator from Prince George to arbitrate the back to work people. In the end, all of them were brought back to work and it was a success story. But the company was adamant; it was everything was a tremendous fight. It was very, very stressful on the on the workers. In fact, in the OK Tel strike, it was so, so stressful that Bill Clark, who was really leading the union at that time, had a heart attack on the way to a Labour Relations Board thing on illegal strikes or a court case, something like that. Tremendously stressful for all the members and the union officers. It was so necessary and you know, like the issues of pensions and jurisdiction and the future. I mean, we believe that everybody, when you work 30 or 40 years for a company, you should be able to retire with a good pension so you don't have to struggle or eat dog food to survive.

JDH [01:18:53] This dispute, if I recall, was very significant in stopping the company from destroying some of those things. Saving those rights. Is that right in the TWU for technological change and pensions?

RH [01:19:09] That's right. Oh, yes. It was very, very critical.

JDH [01:19:13] Yup, and the solidarity of the labour movement was unusually important.

RH [01:19:15] It was and this is so important today because, you know like—it's so important with the way people vote because all through the process, people like in the

NDP there, have been able to assist us. Of course, it's only in a fair way. We didn't get anything extra, but they believed in the labour movement and they believed that there should be some rules. Nowadays, that the Liberals and Conservatives have got it down to that less than 15 percent of the workforce is organized. Well, that affects everybody. If you're retired, if you're non-union, whatever, it has a tremendous effect on those people. This is why the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. I firmly believe that voting for these right wing parties is like the chickens voting for Colonel Sanders.

JDH [01:20:23] Yeah, that's right. You explain how the union was active in communicating with the NDP, with parties and political processes. Also, what did the union do inside for political education and political action?

RH [01:20:41] Yes, we had a special political action program. We were adamant going out and telling people the scope of what these governments were doing, whether they were NDP or Liberal or Conservative. It just becomes so blatant that the NDP helps working people and these others, they're just strictly for the corporation. They're never any help.

JDH [01:21:15] Right. The engagement, I guess, of their local membership is also really important. I know the union has been pretty active, I think, with ensuring strong involvement at the membership level on issues. Do you want to explain a little bit about how the union worked to make sure that there was strong communication with the membership?

RH [01:21:40] Well, we had the Transmitter, which was a union newspaper, which we published every month, I believe it was. That went out to all members and we kept up—one of the things was the political things that were going on, and what governments were doing, and oh meetings, lots of meetings. I remember one meeting in the Okanagan, that one of our past presidents, Bob Donnelly, was up to when I was just a regular member. He brought up the issue of the NDP and to support the workers, we should support the NDP. This great big guy stood up and he says, 'You know, there's no room for politics in the union, and you fuzzy, fuzzy up at the front.' He points to this other guy. Harry Winichuk, who is half his size got up and whack! You know, big guy pushed him and whack, right in the nose, and his glasses spun down the hallway. It was not always a foregone conclusion. Then when we started out, it could get quite rough. I remember a number of years ago going over to North Vancouver where they were going to go after us and they were really going to beat up on us because we had supported the NDP with a political donation. I went to the meeting and boy, they were all livid and raring to go, and I just simply explained about all the times the NDP has been there to help us and this is why. You know what? The anger went down and people understood. They invited me for a beer after the meeting. People don't think, you know, like they'll get involved on an issue. Like right now, I expect to see immigrants in the States, 'Oh these people are going to take our jobs, are going to do this or that.' That's not the issue of concern. Those people aren't going to take anybody's job. They're not going to hurt anybody. It allows the right wing politicians to beat you in another way because you're focused on something that you really shouldn't be focused on.

JDH [01:24:14] Oh, okay. Very interesting. I'm going to move now to later in the time that you were president, there was a big change organizationally with the merger of BC Tel with Alberta.

RH [01:24:26] Yes.

JDH [01:24:28] The issue of, you know, what kind of structure was there going to be for the company and then also for the union? Tell us what that change was and how the union coped with this completely new environment.

RH [01:24:43] Yes, it was a very difficult situation for the union because, of course, when they completed the merger you had in Alberta, you had the IBEW, which had two different bargaining units, the clerical and the—or was it the operator services, I guess, and the plant group. In the Civic Services Union had the clerical, I believe it was, and the Communications, Energy and Paper Workers had the cellular workers. So you've got all those different bargaining units. In B.C., we had one unit that covered everybody. The company, meanwhile, they wanted four different bargaining units divided along lines of business. The difficulty was, is if you've got two different provinces with two different unions, your contracting out clause is gone, because they can move work back and forth and because it's not contracting out because it's the same company. There's a lot of issues like that. When we had to go through mediation, we had to go through a bunch of steps. First of all, I called all the unions into our office because we were the biggest group and said, "Look, you know, this isn't something we have caused; it's something that—we're thrown like big sharks into a tank together. We have to decide what's best for our membership. It's our belief that it should be one bargaining unit because you have the most strength that way." We talked about it. We even offered that we would start a new Canadian union from scratch. We've got all our members, and we could start out as a people who were elected. The IBEW took the position that if it was one bargaining unit, it had to be IBEW, so it wasn't going to work. But the CEP and Civic Service Union backed us on the one bargaining unit. If we weren't successful, they wanted to keep their workers. So first stage was mediation; so we went into that. The arbitrator—the mediator who had been a vice chair of the Canada Labour Relations Board, really told us first morning that we had lost. He said that he just reading in the paper that Bell Canada was competing against BC Tel in their own backyard. Poor Telus was trying to compete back east, and went on and on about this article in the paper, and we know how that happens. The company knew this was coming, so they put that out there on purpose. What do you do when he's told you, you lost? I looked at our lawyer and said, we're out of here! I said it in different terms, but I was angry and I said, we're out of here because a third party is not supposed to make us go into hearings with their mind made up. They're supposed to listen to submissions to the party. Well, he came up and he talked to us and we finally agreed that we would continue on the condition that if we weren't successful in coming to an agreement, that he couldn't make any recommendations back to the Board. We sort of gave him a back door, but we made sure we were protected. The next stage was back to the hearings and we had prepared our case well. They put BC Systems up first, which weren't that well prepared. We were quite successful in breaking apart their submissions, so they wanted to go back to mediation again. First of all, our answer was no, we've tried that. You have to make sure that you get something out of it, right, if they're in this mine. We finally agreed that after they gave us a letter that said the company had something to offer that would change the very nature of the process. We said, okay, don't cancel any more than two days, because if it's not going anywhere in two days, we're out of there. We went to mediation and Stephen Kelleher was the mediator and he comes in and he smiles, said, 'Well, the company is sort of wondering where you think things have to go to get an agreement.' I said, 'Well, you know, we've got this letter that says that they've got something to offer that would change the very nature of the process. We kind of like to see what that is,' He smiles, 'Oh, I don't think they have to show you this.' Knowing about mediators, where they can't be compelled to testify, their job is to get your name on the bottom of a piece of paper and they'll lie, they'll cheat, they'll do anything to get it there. I said, 'Okay, the only thing that'll change the nature of these hearings is one bargaining

unit. Because if you come back with three instead of four or two instead of one, then we're still in the same process. So how do we get there?' The company had to drop the one bargaining unit and try and scramble to get something for it. What we gave them was something that we wanted them to have. We were big enough that we may have got the bargaining unit—to be the ones representing the bargaining unit without a vote. The IBEW was worried about that. The company wanted the vote. I went to our executive council and told them, 'Look, the law is clear on this. You don't have a lot of safety if you go and have the bargaining unit awarded to you without a vote. If you don't have a vote, one person can go to the board and say, look, I'm very unhappy. Everybody's unhappy. I didn't have a vote. That can lead to a process where you end up with a vote when you don't want one and at a dangerous time. We want to have the vote.' We reluctantly gave it up to them in mediation and we ended up getting everything we really wanted, and it was because we had to have it. Then we were able to extend that. Even though the company fought us on it—very hard—we were able to extend that right across the country into Quebec. We've got one bargaining unit right across the country and we even got the cellular across the country. What we were concerned about was that our cellular workers wasn't as large a unit as the old Clearnet, and the Alberta all put together, and the Alberta was CEP. Because we worked and presented our case and everything, we were able to get the whole thing. It was one of those things that in the beginning it looked almost impossible to do, but you had to get a good strategy, and you had to take every opportunity where if somebody made a mistake, you had to grab it—and right now.

JDH [01:32:51] Wow, that was quite a process. Did you go throughout the country in that process of the vote and was that a long process?

RH [01:33:01] Yes, it was. We went right through Alberta, which is in the middle of enemy territory, really, and through B.C. and we hired Valdy to come along with us. We added some entertainment, and it was our 50th anniversary as a union. We made it into a sort of a real lively affair, celebrating the 50th and joining with these other people. We told them that, really, we wanted to give them their part. We wanted to include them, and we wanted them to have the same agreement we had, and upgrade them. We were successful in making some real headway in Alberta, and we were getting close to 100 percent support in B.C.

JDH [01:33:58] Wow. Another amazing story. Later, the TWU joined the Steelworkers Union.

RH [01:34:08] Yes, that was after I retired.

JDH [01:34:10] Right. How do you feel about that? Was that an appropriate—why was that an appropriate step, do you think, for the union?

RH [01:34:19] Well, throughout the last years, and especially with the merger, there was a lot of political infighting within the union, with Entwistle and Telus taking on a very vicious approach. Some people would find it politically good to join—to blame the union instead of the company. It became very, very vicious, the internal battle. I actually retired shortly after we got the certification and everything in 2005 because I had health issues and I was put in a position where I couldn't really lead any anymore.

JDH [01:35:14] So all the <unclear> so Rod, I know later the telecommunication workers decided to join with the Steelworkers Union. I know that. I think this was after you were

President, but do you have any reflections on that? What led up to that and any viewpoints on that?

RH [01:35:37] Yeah. Steelworkers are a very good union and I wish them well with the membership of the TWU and I think they'll do good. They've offered lots of support and that's good. The problem was the union had to look for a big union to help them out because what had happened before that, there was a vicious battle raging within the TWU. It was because of our structure. We had all elected business agents and seeing that everybody was elected and we'd gone from a major convention every six months to one annually, and they were very, very political. It got to the point where the people that had been doing the job all along got thrown out. You had new people that had been most of the complaining department, but did not have a lot of experience running the day-to-day or the major issues of the union. They didn't have anybody that was really proficient in bargaining. I think it turned out quite a mess. They got to the point with the anger from members, and all of this, that they had to look for another union, and the Steelworkers are a good union. I have many friends within the Steelworkers. Leo Gerard and the local people here and Kenny Neuman I've known for many years. I just wish them well. If there's ever anything that I can do to help, I'm there to do what I can.

JDH [01:37:39] It seems that larger unions seemed to be more the norm nowadays than it was maybe 30 years ago. I think also potentially a dynamic for trade unions.

RH [01:37:49] Yes. I think the problem is that we used to have the labour boards and now they've turned into like the Canadian Industrial Relations Board. Through decisions that they've made it where picketing is just about now outlawed. They put in these rules that you can only have two pickets per entrance. When you go out with flying squads, super management people, the scabs will pull up to a stoplight when it's green and they'll stop and as soon as it turns red, they'll take off. They can't be followed and the police do nothing about it. It's made it so it's really difficult and maybe even impossible for smaller unions to survive. I mean even bigger unions, they're losing membership like the way that the organization has gone. We've gone from 45 percent unionized in the province of British Columbia and I think it's less than 15 percent now. That's a direct result of governments and interpretation by judges of the Labour Code that were probably were from the corporate sector. It's very difficult for workers nowadays and you need a big union to take those initiatives to make things happen politically and to collectively work together.

JDH [01:39:34] Well, Rod, even though there are concerning situations now that TWU has had a very long and positive, even though difficult history. Looking back over all those years that you were involved, what would you say are some of the highlight or the proudest things, the things that you were proudest of, and also the biggest challenges?

RH [01:39:57] Well, collective agreements and getting those settled are always a challenge. You have to be happy for the members when you get it resolved without a dispute. The B.C. Government Information Highway was a highlight. The CRTC hearings where you could actually make a change that was good for not only your members, but the public. When you challenge cases right to Supreme Court of Canada and you win for the people of Canada, it makes you feel really good. Things like—I was on the world executive of Union Network International for quite a number of years, a tremendous learning experience, and happy to work with these great leaders from other countries and to hear their problems and work with them. It was a great experience.

JDH [01:40:58] What can you say about what are some of the most important factors you experienced leading to success? Success for the TWU, but also success for yourself. What are some of the leadership factors that were important?

RH [01:41:13] Well, I think the biggest thing in leadership that people should understand is leadership is not looking over your shoulder, counting votes before you can decide what's right and wrong. It's taking a firm position on what you believe in. If the majority is against you, they will understand because you stand up for what you believe in. Usually you can get the members around, if you're right and you know you're right, they will support you. Leadership is about taking risk. It's about when you're in negotiations, in the heat of it, you get called out into the hallway and you get served with papers. Illegal strike declaration. You look and remedy says consent to prosecute the TWU, Rod Hiebert and Neil Morrison. You have to have the strength and the ability to go back into bargaining and turn up the heat. You've got to let them know it isn't about you and they can't get to you by intimidation or anything else. You're working for 15,000 people. It's doing your homework. Some people think it's power and prestige, but it's about hard work and responsibility.

JDH [01:42:37] What would you say to young people today about why unions are important?

RH [01:42:42] I would say that it's a future, and if you don't fight for what you believe in, you're going to lose it all. It is possible to rebuild. If we can elect governments who work for workers and try and get rid of the big gap between the rich and poor, which keeps increasing every year. We just have to do that if we're going to survive the next 50 years. I think they can look back to some of the struggles that we and other unions had to build that strength and know that you're gonna be into difficult fights, but you gotta do it if you're going to move ahead and create a fair situation for your family and for your kids and for yourself.

JDH [01:43:38] You mentioned the history of unions. Do you think that union history is important for today in helping us understand what can be achieved?

RH [01:43:54] Absolutely. It's the old thing—if you can't learn from history, you're bound to repeat it. So, I mean, you've got to get in there, become a shop steward and start working for the good of the people of the country. Don't just accept what the company gives you or tells you. Sure, trust them, believe them, but check carefully. It's important because you can make changes in the future that benefit people.

JDH [01:44:30] Rod Hiebert, thank you so much for this afternoon's interview. Thank you very much.

RH [01:44:35] Thank you.