

Interview: John Jensen (JJ)

Interviewer: unknown

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Transcription: Donna Sacuta

Interviewer [00:00:05] What we're here to do is talk about labour history in the northwest. And your experience of many, many years being here and involved in many struggles and how that converged with the whole plan of the Government of British Columbia to exploit the resources of northwest British Columbia and basically waste them by selling them at bargain basement prices to Asia. And as you've been here for a very long time, and maybe you want to talk about your experience here and what you've done.

JJ [00:00:55] Okay, well, maybe go back a little further than that yet. I was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, and I was a teenager when the fascists were in Copenhagen. So my mother, being Jewish, I learned a lot about how the world was and how I didn't want it to be. So I decided early on that I would be changing whatever I could change. And anyway, so my father, and my grandfather being carpenters, I became a carpenter. And after I finished my, became a journeyman and I served my time in the Navy, like everybody does. Compulsory at that time. And I did several different things. And then I ended up in in Vancouver in 1962, '63, no, '62. And I tried to make a living there for a while building cabinets and this, and then I decided to come to Kitimat because they were needing a cabinetmaker. And I arrived and there was no need for cabinetmakers, but I started in construction. And that's where I started to really get involved in the union movement. It was a small local, I got elected president and then a little down the road we established what was called the Northwest District Council, which was a Council that covered all the territory from the Yukon border to Bella Coola and from Haida Gwaii to Burns Lake. So there was a huge territory. Yeah. And, then I got myself elected president of District Council and consequently the first vice president of the Provincial Council. And at the very time, almost as soon as I came to Kitimat I became involved with the Labour Council. And the Labour Council then was very different then it is now, it was totally blue collar. And as I recall, there was no women on it. And so I was a delegate to that Council like 50 years. I only stopped participating two years ago. And so in the early on I was President of the Council for, I don't know, 10 years, 12 years. I held every position after that at least one time, some of them several times. And in the end, I was Sergeant at Arms, not that I was the strongest guy there, but they needed me on the executive for they figured I was some kind of wise old guy that could give advice. So I stayed until I was 80. I retired from the trade when I was 65, but then I served another 15 years on the Appeals Board, looking after people that were being mistreated by the EI, which was a whole, whole field of action anyway that's all my story. As far as in the meantime, I spent seven years at the Community College on a Labour Studies program. We can maybe talk about that. But so I became a lifetime member—an honorary member—of two unions, namely thee Carpenters and the Academic Workers Union, which is a CUPE local. So that's my sort of background.

Interviewer [00:04:44] While you were in Kitimat, something else happened, you said you noticed, there was black snow.

JJ [00:04:49] Yeah.

Interviewer [00:04:50] What came out of that?

JJ [00:04:53] Well, I was not used to seeing black snow. And we started to investigate and we obviously came out of Alcan at the time and then we started investigating Alcan for environmental pollution and stuff like that. We did tests of the ocean. It turned out it was biologically banned for a mile from Alcan. We started doing fluoride tests on different plants and animals. And on the average, there are 600 parts per million more than they're supposed to have. And then we said, Well, we can't just complain, but you got to do something about it. So a group of us established what was called VOICE which stood for Victims of Change in the Environment. And that was a predecessor to SPEC and Greenpeace and all those, we were ahead of the game to some degree. And I managed to make myself unpopular enough to get blacklisted. I set up, I happened to be chairing that for all those years, and we had to start a conference in 1975. And that was the first time anyway, that I had heard of that whole communities, in this instance, with the whole district sat down and come to some conclusion. There was some problems of input between the commercial fishermen as sport fishermen and all that. But we it all got ironed out and we came up with a number of resolutions that we took to government and started pressing for change.

Interviewer [00:06:32] What I remember about that time, 1975, I was in the Lower Mainland and an attorney by the name of Carolyn Gibbons at the time, though, she reverted to her maiden name of Askew, now I understand, was working for the BC Fed and the Fed was really interested in what you guys were doing and even supportive, which was like amazing, because at that time, the idea that labour would be positively interested in supporting an environmental or any kind of environmental issue was strange, and you were extremely well known as a maverick for doing that. But nevertheless, the Fed wanted, they wanted to sort of further your efforts. And Carolyn basically asked me, I am supposing on behalf of the Fed, to come up and help with that effort, you know, but there were sort of surprises and struggles, as I remember, within the group. And one of the things was, as I recollect it, we were, the American affiliated unions were willing to cooperate with the Canadian breakaway unions. And this caused some consternation. And in the Fed, do you remember that?

JJ [00:08:02] Well, it actually, the consternation in the Fed was not that much, but the CLC was very, very unhappy with it and tried to do all kinds of things of (unclear), and that. But on the side economy, one more thing is that you said that the government was interested and they sure was. They gave us \$10,000 to help to support the study conference. The church, the—what the heck?

Interviewer [00:08:43] Was it the Anglican Church?

JJ [00:08:44] Yeah, the Anglican Church gave us \$5,000. BC Fed gave us \$5,000. And it sounds like a lot of money at the time, but, you know, you have to recognize we brought people in from, from everywhere and put them up and all that. So that was a fact you could actually get money from the government.

Interviewer [00:09:05] And did.

JJ [00:09:06] And did, and we did. And what was the other question?

Interviewer [00:09:11] Well, I was just talking about the infighting or the feeling that—

JJ [00:09:17] Well the Steelworkers was representing Alcan from early on, and they were unhappy with the American connection and the American business manager I guess you would call them. And so I was in the middle of that, actually because I had my little office in the Steelworkers hall. So any stuff that went on under the blankets, so to speak, was in my office because that was the only sanctuary for those guys I wanted to split away. And so eventually they did. And of course the CLC got very annoyed about the fact that we still kept having connections with what would now become CASAW. We had them sit in the Labour Council meetings without vote, but with voice. We had them participate in the labour studies and in demonstrations and whatever. We came to the conclusion that one-third of organized labour worked for Alcan, they couldn't ignore them and say they don't exist. So we did all this and the Fed was on track. For example, when CASAW had their wildcat strike at Alcan, the BC Fed George Johnson, and Len Guy was on the plane to come here, when it was settled, so they were certainly not upset about it, but the CLC definitely was.

Interviewer [00:10:50] Yeah, but in the end, what happened then? What was really remarkable was the diverse nature of the coalition basically against this plan. And what we had, as I recollect, feminists, community activists, environmentalists, workers, union members, and more.

JJ [00:11:12] Farmers.

Interviewer [00:11:13] Farmers.

JJ [00:11:15] The Sierra Club.

Interviewer [00:11:16] And First Nations, all in the same room at the same time, all cooperating to do this job to get some justice, to make something happen that would not ordinarily have happened.

JJ [00:11:29] That is, I'm totally sure that had never happened anywhere else. And maybe even not so much today, but certainly not in those days. And that by the way, during I study conference is where we broke away for a period of time with seven First Nations and trade unionists and we essentially came up with a treaty that we live by up to this day. And it basically said this, that to quote it exactly I think it says that unions and Native Indians, which was the term that was used at the time, unions and Native Indians will stand shoulder to shoulder against corporations and government that destroys them. And that was (unclear) on behalf of the seven nations and myself and on behalf of the three Labour Councils. And that was some special day which was also never seen before. The rest of the movement, the trade union movement, you know, in all fairness, only came on to the connection between us and have something in common with First Nations was like 15, 20 years later.

Interviewer [00:12:49] But it was reciprocal. That is the Nishga'a as I recollect, the First Nations said they will also observe union picket lines.

JJ [00:12:57] Right.

[00:12:58] So it was you guys would support the land claim, they would support you.

JJ [00:13:03] That was what shoulder to shoulder means.

Interviewer [00:13:06] That's right. But needs to be— just needed—that was extraordinary. I was there. You know, I thought that was an amazing, it was an amazing moment. But in the middle of this, the NDP government, which had bought into this terrible plan, decided that they were going to build community colleges in the interior to give working-class families access to higher education that they hadn't had before because it was too expensive to send their kids the Lower Mainland and so were going to build five community colleges. And one of them was going to be located, headquartered in Terrace. And you were there and you were part of how this got started. So why don't you tell about what happened?

JJ [00:14:01] Well, you have to recognize that there was very little chance for education in the Northwest. We had a lot of people that wanted, in the worst way, education, but that was not available. And at the time and even now it's expensive to travel to the lower mainland to get educated. So early on we decided and, with some help from Leonard Minsky by the way, that we ought to start, you know, pushing to get programs here that we wanted, first of all, academic programs of a number of things so that you could take first and second year. But more important to us as a trade movement at that time was that we wanted three specific programs and one was a women's program, the second one was aboriginal program. And last but not least, the workers' program. And we pushed along and pushed along and in fact the process we ended up with a short time after— We had a problem with finding somebody that could be a coordinator for the Labour Studies program, because we had the problem with the Canadian unions and the American unions and nobody trusted anybody on the other side. So if we first hired somebody, it didn't work out. And then they decided that I was trustworthy enough so I could be the co-ordinator. So that's what I ended up doing. And I stayed in that position for seven years, or we added up the numbers not long ago. We had more than 2,000 students going through that, you know, seven years.

Interviewer [00:15:42] What kinds of things did the Labour Studies—I want to go back over one part of it in a minute, but how long did the Labour Studies program last?

JJ [00:15:54] Seven.

Interviewer [00:15:54] Seven years. So what did you do during that seven years.

JJ [00:15:57] We had, two distinct—twofold way to do it. We had what were called the tool courses which meant that I would assist people in finding and learning how to be a shop steward, or how to do a parliamentary procedure, or how to deal with a pension plan and how to deal with unemployment and all. They were all tools that people needed to survive in the real world and you have to recognize at that time there was very few actual union offices here. There were union members, but the offices were in Vancouver, so it was hard to do. So we did a lot of—Labour Council did— Labour Council did what everybody included, not only the pizza place and all of that, but so that was a one part of it. It was trade tool courses. And then we also did academic courses. We did Sociology 101, Sociology on Multinationals, for example. We did things, at one point we did Eyewitness Report and that was a 17-weeks course. We come different people with some experiences. The lights are on. Jonathan from BC Federation of Labour and Ben Swankey from big labour and so forth. And so we've had lots of people come into that. And in general we did academic transferable courses that could be used for a B.A. program. Yeah. It was regular college courses plus the tool side.

Interviewer [00:17:36] The thing that I want to go back to because I think it resonated forward to the present, was that there had been a lot of organizing around the resistance to this exploitative plan and all of these different people and all of these different groups had been involved. And what happened was the College was established in the middle of this and the board that was finally selected by the government really became representative of all of these different groups, all of these groups that had been active. And this was in a sense a first, because the result of that was that the College in some important way became responsive to the community almost directly for the kinds of programs that it would offer. You know, and this meant that the College wouldn't be an elite organization or organized towards elite in academic studies, as it were, but was very much rooted in a community that needed services and that helped identify them.

JJ [00:18:50] The first College Board consisted of people from, there was a teacher on there, there was a fisheries worker, there was an Alcan worker and there was people that were not particularly union of different branches, there were First Nations on it.

[00:19:10] Feminists.

JJ [00:19:11] And there was there was a feminist. Yes. And it was like, you say it truly represented the population here.

Interviewer [00:19:20] And the thing that what resonates forward is the way I'm putting it, is that the relationships that were established at that time, the cooperative relationships between groups that wouldn't have otherwise cooperated with another, continued to exist in the fact that the Northwest Study Conference and the grassroots efforts of the unions and this led by labour in effect established connections and networks that lasted to this day. And in my view, even though I haven't been here over that interim period, fed the resistance to the pipelines.

JJ [00:20:02] Oh, for sure. That was a sparkplug to what's going on today, I feel, because even if a lot of the people that were there now are quite old but—

Part Two

JJ [00:00:01] The people started getting an understanding that, you know, all of us are into this and you know that whether you're an Alcan worker or you're a farmer, you need some air you can breathe, you need this and that. And that was certainly, and like I said, it goes on to this day, you know, I can go to a First Nations village and it goes to the Band Council, and one or two or three of the Band Council took that Labour Studies course. And they took all this stuff in and they loved it, and that's why they progressed because they understood what was going on in the world.

Interviewer [00:00:39] And Larisa Tarwick was employed by the College to go to the bands and to help them with their education efforts. And I remember at the time, coincidentally, the federal government was deciding to allow the bands, the First Nations, to have their own school system, so that they were reversing the years when they stole the kids away and put them in these schools and tried to steal the language and culture from them. And this was precisely at the time. And Larisa was travelling through very dangerous territory and—

JJ [00:01:23] She totaled two cars as a matter of fact.

Interviewer [00:01:23] Is that right? To go to the to the Nass to give these mothers who had not had the opportunity to raise their own children, skills that had been lost over time. And, you know, so, you know, the college has had, in my view, an amazing influence on the quality of life. It's given people a perspective on issues that they would not have been able to access before. And I have to say, I'm sorry to say for the camera and the people who are watching this that you had a large part to play in this.

JJ [00:02:07] Yeah. Well, it all harks back to the thing that you have to recall that the rate of literacy was extremely low here in those days. I don't remember the numbers anymore, but it was very, very low and not because of the people are stupid or lazy or anything else, but there was no chance for them to experience their stuff. And so, like I say, that I enjoyed the my teaching at the College. Extremely high regard for it because people really wanted to learn because never had a chance before. And there was (unclear) we went to each and every day to a different town, you know like a circus travelling around. But it was so good for you to hear and feel the way that people, you know, really loved the thing. Of all crazy things, I ended up teaching English as a Second Language at one time, and my old friend Bill Zander said, "Well, it's Jensen's School of Broken English," and stuff like that was really good.

Interviewer [00:03:25] Yeah, I just, this community, I've been absent, as you know, for many years from this community, and it's changed remarkably over the years. But, you know, I see the imprint of the work that the College did and that the Northwest Study Conference did you know, and I'm amazed. My experience, and I've now had a considerable amount of experience with communities that attempt to plan around fate. I can't think of one instance in North America of cooperation between such diverse groups, groups that would normally, or used to, be at each other's throats, in effect, Canadian and U.S. worker unions, Caucasians versus First Nations people, male chauvinists against women and—

JJ [00:04:24] Not to mention commercial fishermen and sport fishermen, they were the biggest enemies at one time.

Interviewer [00:04:29] Yeah, I mean, it was amazing that these hatreds or disputes were resolved and able, and this was all I, you know, and all a result of the activism, the unique activism in this part of the world.

JJ [00:04:48] So part of what is too, I think, part of the reason it worked was that there was really no facilities to speak of, not facilities but help for people, for the individual cases. Like I said, there was only three union offices there for just for example, and there was very little social help or anything like that. So people have to do a lot to look after themselves in a lot of ways. So to turn around, they were much more so than anywhere else that I have ever been. Yeah, and that was part of why this worked so well, because they recognized that, you know, united we stand, you know, and that was part— Because I got to say this, a lot of people did a lot of bloody work to make this all happen. It didn't just come in the door, but a lot of people travelled around and talk to people and this and that. So did I, but so many others and it wasn't extremely difficult, but it was very time consuming.

Interviewer [00:05:58] You know, and in all of this, you know, to top it off, the government was really hostile to what was going on. The government was didn't embrace the effort, repudiated it wherever they could, gotten away wherever they could. And a key to that opposition, as I recollect and think, was that basically the government wanted to operate

on behalf of big corporations and multinational corporations. They didn't really give a damn about what happened to the communities or to the individuals, certainly not for working people or First Nations people.

JJ [00:06:39] The government, they haven't changed any for that matter, and corporations and as far as I'm concerned, they're pretty much one of the same. But they were never interested in educating people, beyond and about having enough educated to run different equipment and doing a different task they wanted them to do. It was actually from their point of view, it was dangerous to have educated workers because they're going to say, "Why, why is this happening?" And, you know, "Can we do something different?" So they were never in support of it. They may pay some lip service to it, but they tried everything they could to stop it. Of course, as soon as they got the chance, they cancelled the special programs, including mine, took them seven years (unclear) mind you. But they did it. And that's because that's what they want.

Interviewer [00:07:29] I want to—we may have to go over and add to this in this piece. They may decide to edit out. But what I wanted to bring up was one illustration of government intervention on behalf of corporations. And vis a vis the college? And that was the fact that, as you may remember, Alcan hired a lot of welders and Alcan trained the welders just to do a simple job of welding and not far enough to get a ticket or certificate, you know, and the reason for that was they wanted to keep the workers in this isolated community, almost as slaves. The workers couldn't leave because their experience didn't enable them to get another job. So that came up because representative of the workers was on the College Council, and asked the college whether or not the college could put on a course for the welders such that they could receive their certificates and we agreed to do that. Now, I don't think I was there long enough to know whether or not that course actually was implemented.

JJ [00:08:41] It never happened. And, you know, you're quite right Alcan flipped right out when we start raising it, because Alcan was, in those days particularly, was not a nice place to work. And like you say, they trained welders enough that they could do whatever they're supposed to do, but they could never achieve a ticket. And not until what you call red seal. That was like I said, that was the way they were there as slaves, in a sense. While they weren't slaves exactly. They got paid and that, but they couldn't move anywhere and they couldn't go and take a welding job outside. And they got extremely upset when we started pushing for that.

Interviewer [00:09:26] Yeah. And then the last piece is that Alcan complained about this to the newly elected Socred government because the NDP lost. And the very next day, the college developer was fired. The college then within a week, I think all members of the council that had represented the grassroots of the region are fired and replaced. And the idea was to return the college to the norm for education, which is education to be subordinate to the corporate state.

JJ [00:10:01] And you're right. It was probably one of the first thing this new government, the Socred government, did when it came back, certainly within the first week they were all gone. And they got the usual whatever the usual—

Interviewer [00:10:16] But you guys were there. You had. You were employed by the college. You had a union?

JJ [00:10:22] Yes.

Interviewer [00:10:24] And they had to dig you out. Right. And it took them years to dig you out. And then in time, lots of good things were done. You know, so this was a grassroots, participatory, truly democratic effort.

JJ [00:10:39] For sure.

Interviewer [00:10:40] That succeeded. What a story.

JJ [00:10:42] Yeah. It was a good story. Yeah. And to boot, it was, I have never enjoyed myself as much as in those times. And I had a lot of funny things happen like that. But that was a topic. You just consider this. I came out of Grade 10 in the old country in Denmark. I had not gone to school in any kind of English language, a single hour in my life. I ended up being a college teacher for Pete's Sake you know, and I had a hell of a good time. And I did a good job, I must say. Because my evaluation was very fair, because I happened to be teaching before. But I realized afterwards I'd been teaching my whole life because being a any kind of —