

Interview: John Shields (JS)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN) and Bailey Garden (BG)

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Transcription: Cathy Walker

KN: [00:00:06] You ready? Okay. It's November 23rd, 2016, and Ken Novakowski and Bailey Garden are here to interview John Shields, who was the president of the B.C. Government Employees' Union from 1985 to 1999. Welcome, John, and thank you for coming.

JS: [00:00:25] Thank you.

KN: [00:00:27] We'd like to start by asking you to talk a bit about your family background, where you grew up, when you were born, something about your family, whether you had a union or a progressive background, what sort of was that your roots there that made you become this prominent figure here in B.C.?

JS: [00:00:45] Well, going right back, I grew up in New York City. My parents were Irish descent, both Catholics. My dad, during the Depression, got involved with the Steamfitters' Union. My mother's brother was the secretary-treasurer of the New York local of the Steamfitters. In that period of time, there was these great debates about whether to merge the AFL and the CIO and my dining room table was the centre of a lot of those debates and discussion. My mother was a public school teacher and she was an early enroller in the New York Teachers' Union. I had a full double-barrelled union household and it was always a lively discussion.

JS: [00:01:57] Before I knew that it was anything special, it was like I was being inundated with collective action and how important it was to be involved in your union and to make part decisions. That was my family influence and involvement was very much union. Then when I went to high school, my high school English teacher was a Jesuit by the name of, it's just left me for a second. Anti-war activist.

KN: [00:02:53] A prominent figure?

JS: [00:02:57] You'll know the name as soon as I bring it back to memory. I was thinking about it earlier to share that.

KN: [00:03:05] We'll move on and then when it comes to you can—

JS: [00:03:11] In high school I was a member of a club in the school. One of the things that became a kind of a shaping experience was Daniel Berrigan.

KN: [00:03:26] Daniel Berrigan, I was going to say was it a Berrigan, but there were two brothers.

JS: [00:03:29] Daniel Berrigan was the moderator of this club.

KN: [00:03:35] Wow.

JS: [00:03:35] They had received a request from the management of the Bedford-Stuyvesant housing project in Brooklyn. They were concerned about the level of vandalism that was taking place in the project. They were inviting the kids from the school to go in and observe and see if they could figure out what was going on and make recommendations. Berrigan taught us a model of 'seeing, judge, act.' Our first task was to go and observe. We met the kids, talked, hung out in the project.

JS: [00:04:22] Make a long story short, it turns out that a number of the people who are involved in the activity that was of concern were new migrants from the southern United States. They came to New York and they went into the projects without anybody giving them life skills. The mothers were used to cooking with fire and heating their house with fire. There were no heating or heat burners or anything. The kids were sent out to scavenge wood and they would bring the wood home and mothers would cook their meals and heat their houses. When we discovered that it was not vandalism, it was survival because they hadn't been coached how to turn the thermostats on. The report back came back and it was transformative for Bedford-Stuyvesant, I was there. It was my first introduction to social justice action and how effective it was, small group working together could make a huge impact. That has stayed with me over the years.

JS: [00:05:37] Part of the result of that is I so admired Berrigan and the Jesuits, I thought, I'd like to be like those guys. In my last year of high school, I decided I would go into the seminary for a year just to try it out. I joined a group called Paul's Fathers and they are a minor seminary, the first two years of university and for me, the last year of high school was in Baltimore, Maryland. Leaving home and going away and all that kind of break from family was like my liberation from childhood was going into the seminary. It turned out I really quite enjoyed it. The next ten years of my life were involved with preparation to becoming a Catholic priest.

JS: [00:06:41] In the middle of those years, the pope of the day, John the 23rd called an ecumenical council. All the bishops of the world were to gather. Pope John wanted to renew the church from its roots. It was to be a reform of theology or a reform of practice. His intent was that it would be radical transformation. I entered the theology study phase of my training the year that the Vatican Council assembled. My teachers, had all been trained in Europe and had worked with the theologians who would be advising the bishops of how to implement this radical transformation. The first day of theology school the faculty came in and they said, there's no point in us training you in the old ways. We're going to put all of the old Catholic training manuals, the textbooks, we're going to put them in the closet. We're going to use the tear sheets from the daily events at the Vatican Council. We'll train you in the theology of the Vatican Council.

JS: [00:08:17] For the next four years, I got steeped in the (unclear) understanding because the faculty understood why the church needed reform. A lot of it was post-World War Two disintegration of the Church in Europe and the growing awareness among progressive Catholics that the church had become irrelevant. This was an effort to renew that. To everybody's surprise, they tackled things like explaining to Catholics why you couldn't interpret the scriptures literally. You had to understand what the authors were saying. Seems very simple but it led to some profound changes in thinking.

JS: [00:09:17] One of the wonderful things that came out of that is the description scholars said to the Pope, 'Holy Father, the story in Genesis about the Garden of Eden isn't history. It was never intended by the authors to be an account of what happened at the beginning of the world. It really is a teaching story to persuade the Israelites who were in captivity in

Babylon that they needed to understand a way of talking about Zoroastrianism. The Persians had just conquered the Babylonians. If they were that powerful, maybe their religion was that good. It was a kind of revolt of the Israelites to embrace the Persian religion. Genesis was a story of why the Israelites should leave Babylon, which was the most affluent city of the ancient world, and go back to Jerusalem, which had been levelled before being taken away. This teaching story, when you think about it in that context, both Genesis for the followers of Abraham and Exodus were inventive, persuasive stories to get people to act.

JS: [00:10:48] When the scholars went to the pope, they said, you know, it wasn't a real Garden of Eden and it wasn't a real Adam and Eve. These are figures that are in a literary style and form. If that's the case, there could not have been an original sin. There was nobody, no original people, to commit a sin. St. Augustine got it wrong. He misinterpreted the Bible. Since the Sixth Century, the church has had its emphasis on sin and corruption and the fall of humanity. He said that's not the history. That's not the way it should be. We had the opportunity to really re-feature the message of Jesus about Solomon and compassion and serving your fellow human beings. Forget this original sin stuff. It was too much for the pope to swallow. He just could not accept that the bishops had just said, you have to interpret it based on what the authors were telling. You can't just take it literally. The pope issued a new creed that was more arcane than the original of the Nicene Creed, and then forced theologians and teachers to teach the new creed rather than what they understood about the reality of interpreting the Bible.

KN: [00:12:33] This was John the 23rd.

JS: [00:12:37] It started with John the 23rd, and then Paul the 6th came after him and was there for most of the council years. Paul did not want this new interpretation to get out. He started silencing theology teachers, including me. I was faced with teaching something I knew not to be true or being forcibly removed from my teaching role. I was at the University of Texas Catholic Parish at the time, and so I came to the conclusion that the pope was wrong. I in all conscience, couldn't subscribe to what he was directing the bishops to have us do. My decision was to leave the clergy. When it came to where do I go now? I had a masters degree in theology and no teachable, no employable skills. I said, we'll work that out. I made the decision to come back to British Columbia, which had been my first assignment as a priest.

KN: [00:14:03] That's the connection. You had been here before, as a priest.

JS: [00:14:09] Just after ordination, I was assigned to Vancouver to teach at the Catholic Centre in downtown Vancouver. Because people were really hungry to understand something about the Vatican Council and I had all this fresh information, I put together a ten-week series of lectures which we moved around from parish to parish and they were oversubscribed. People were really hungry to understand what was going on. Because I was new as a priest, I was also quite naive about my fellow clergy. When people took my classes and were getting information about what was the backstory to the council, they would go back to their parish priest and say, Father Shields just told us such and such. Confession as we know it now, is a relatively new invention of the early manifestation of that sacrament was a community act where people actually went out and forgave one another. Unless you did that publicly you were kind of an outsider. 'I never heard of that. Where did you come up with that cockamamie idea?' The Vancouver clergy with the exception of a couple of people like Jim Roberts, were totally offside. They just kept lobbying the bishop to get me out of town, so they did.

JS: [00:15:51] The Paul's moved me from Vancouver to Texas and I was only there a couple of years before this blowup over original sin took place. My revolutionary history with the church was short and sharp but really formative and because of my Berrigan experience when I was in the seminary. The Catholic Church had a whole document on the training of priests. One of them was to get people involved pastorally to be out actually in the world doing things.

JS: [00:16:40] I opted to work in an inner city, a black parish in Washington, D.C., and saw firsthand the problems of segregated housing because all of the surrounding states were segregated. People coming into Washington to work for the government, couldn't find housing if they were black. They certainly couldn't live in Maryland or Virginia. The acute affect of inadequate housing was something I got engaged in. Little by little, I got more and more involved in the civil rights movement as a seminarian. After Kennedy was assassinated, Johnson introduced the civil rights bill.

JS: [00:17:39] Together a number of my colleagues, we organized a interfaith silent vigil in front of the Lincoln Memorial, which we proposed to maintain for the duration of the debated bill in the Congress. The first night we were gathered in silence. Lo and behold, who should show up but the American Nazi Party. They lined themselves up between us and the Lincoln statue and so the media expecting this big blow-up showed up. There's a reporter from Look magazine saying if you want your picture on the cover of Look, go confront those guys. You just walk over. I said, no, this is non-violent. We're just here as silent witnesses. They were disappointed. My first experience in media manipulation.

JS: [00:18:44] That night, who should show up at the demonstration, the vigil but Martin Luther King. King came up and wanted to know who was the spokesperson for our group. It was me. He said, I want you to know how important what you're doing is and how influential it is on the Southern Christian Leadership Group, because we need allies. He said, when this is over, come work for me, come work for the Southern Christian Leadership because we need both. My chain of activist involvement was down that social action line. Even though the union household was in the background, my young adult experience was activism in the civil rights movement. When I came back to Victoria, I settled in Victoria and I found a job as a social worker in the Family and Children's Service private agency. For some reason the CRD was going to take it over and the staff—

KN: [00:20:05] The CRD?

JS: [00:20:06] The Capital Regional District. The social workers and the staff of the agency wanted to protect their working conditions so I made some enquiries about how to do that. Everybody that we talked to said there's only one way, you've got to unionize so I reported that back. As the new social worker on staff, I was head of the staff association so they said, well, you're the head so you find out how you become a unionist. I went and interviewed people and among the people were very helpful, the area rep for the BCGEU was quite helpful in getting the documents and telling me who I had to talk to about this stuff. I reported all that back then the staff decided they would unionize. The Social Service Employees Union was created. We sat down with the management of the agency. We got a collective agreement. When it was announced, there was a little thing in the paper, in the Vancouver Sun and the Catholic Children's Aid, the Children's Aid Society and the day-care workers in Vancouver all contacted this Social Service Employees Union to come organize them.

JS: [00:21:41] There was no way I could get to Vancouver to do all that so I hired a guy by the name of Joe Denofreo who was very active in NDP politics and organizing. Joe was a good friend of Norman Levi. Levi became the Minister of Social Services who made the decision to bring this organization of the union into the government. They were faced with the fact that they were ingesting an organization that had a collective agreement when government workers did not yet have bargaining rights. How would they treat us? Levi invited me to come to his office and meet John Fryer. I really didn't know who John Fryer was at the time. He was making plans for us to merge our organization with the BCGEU. I said, Well, what's the purpose of that when you don't have bargaining rights yet? He said, Well, we're going to get it. We're going to get a government that's going to pass legislation. That was like early days stepping into the emergence of bargaining for the BCGEU.

JS: [00:23:08] I was eventually elected as the representative of social, educational and health staff in government and participated in the first round of collective bargaining for the component group, then subsequently was elected head of the component. There was a series of bargainings to do for the BCGEU so I was hardly ever at work. I was almost always in book-off. They were elected in '72, so this would probably be '74. I was on the provincial executive from then right up to 1985 when I was elected president, and then 14 years as president. My formation of how I thought about what I bring to the labour movement is this very activist role in the civil rights movement. I thought about what we were doing more as a movement than as a bargaining agency. It really showed up in the early eighties when the Bennett government decided it would strip away all of the progressive social structures, including the labour movement. In the 1982 budget or '83 budget, I'm not sure which year that was, there was this package of 23.

KN: [00:25:20] It was '83.

BG: [00:25:20] '83.

JS: [00:25:20] 23, 26 bills, all of which did away with human rights protection, affected universities, affected collective bargaining. There was this massive onslaught against the progressive structure of our society. I remember getting a call from Cliff Andstein saying, 'You've got to get in here right away. We've got a crisis on our hands. We've got to figure out how we're going to respond to this.' We spent a night brainstorming, how is the BCGEU going to respond to this onslaught? Jack Adams, who was the senior staff person in the GEU said, 'We can't do it on our own. We have to talk to the Fed.'

JS: [00:26:17] I went with Jack to meet with Art Kube, who was the president of the federation. Jack was wanting the labour movement to mobilize, to respond to Bennett, oppressive package of the legislation. I think there was some reluctance because I think everybody could see that in order to respond it would need the collective response of the whole labour movement. There was a perception that it was a public sector attack rather than a private sector attack so Kube was unsure about whether or not he would get the private sector of the Fed onside for a collective response. He was really plugged into the NGO community organization. I'm trying to remember the details but the details are less important than the outcome being that Kube contacted two people that he knew, one was Father Jim Roberts and the other was Renate Shearer. He asked them if they would organize the community sector and coordinate their response to the bills.

JS: [00:28:03] The GEU assigned me to be the liaison between the community groups and the labour movement and the Fed, and so I was booked off. I came and lived with my friend Tom Kozar for a couple months. We had this ongoing major discussion and BCGEU

went into collective bargaining. The response to two of the bills, Bill Two and Bill Three, which were taking away collective bargaining rights from the GEU were on the table in bargaining. Between bargaining and organizing in the community sector, I was up to my eyebrows, but all of my community organizing experience came to the fore. I was just having a wonderful, juicy time doing this organizing and got to know Renate and Jim and Kube and was regularly reporting back how enthusiastic the community sector was to liaison with the labour movement. At some point the Fed decided that they couldn't trust the community organizations because they weren't under the discipline of union structure and they might go off on their own. Part of my job was to kind of see if we could make sure that we would get commitments that we would all act together and there would be no (unclear) a very significant time. You can imagine that when the Fed had an invitation from the Bennett government to negotiate an end to Operation Solidarity—

KN: [00:30:15] Before we go there, can we just maybe talk a bit, you talked a bit about the origins of Solidarity, what became the Solidarity Coalition, and then Operation Solidarity, the union organization. Over the summer and into the fall of 1983, it built up a lot of momentum. Maybe you can talk a bit about the protests and the way they were able to mobilize people.

JS: [00:30:45] Sure. It was a unique event, I think, and certainly for the labour movement who were not all that persuaded that aligning themselves with the community organization was a good thing. But I think the momentum of the public response swept the labour movement up into supporting the Coalition and there were a series of public demonstrations. One was a march on the Legislature which had probably 10,000 people, more people than could fit in front of the lawn spilling out onto Government Street. There was a parallel rally at the stadium.

KN: [00:31:40] Empire Stadium.

JS: [00:31:40] Empire Stadium in Vancouver, and union after union, group after group marched into the stadium. This unending flow of people who are committing to respond to the government as a political show of determination. It was overwhelming. I think that probably and to some degree was prompting Bill Bennett to get ahead of this and see if he could put a stop to it. BCGEU is in collective bargaining trying to save its right to bargain. There were pension issues affected by that. This all kind of culminated into this decision to take the province out on strike. As soon as that started, Bennett wanted to put an end to it.

KN: [00:32:51] That was basically in November when teachers and others working in education.

JS: [00:33:02] The teachers coming on side in the strength that they did and a commitment to support strike action, which was kind of new for the teachers too. A number of the public sector unions just had the bit in their teeth and wanted these bills taken off the order paper. That became kind of a demand of both labour and the coalition really came together around a political agenda as opposed to a strictly a labour agenda.

KN: [00:33:45] Bennett put out the call to meet.

JS: [00:33:46] Yes. The Fed officers, I was still vice president of the union at the time, so I wasn't at the meetings at the Fed where the decisions were made. The officers decided to send Jack Munro to meet with Bennett at his home in Kelowna.

KN: [00:34:13] This was the officers of the BC Fed rather than Operation Solidarity.

JS: [00:34:17] At this at this stage Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition were largely excluded from these decisions which was a terrible mistake. It had been so effective as a coalition that for the Fed to have just changed course and changed style—Art Kube, who was the president of the Fed, was under such pressure that he virtually had a collapse and just couldn't function and took a leave from the presidency of the Fed. Because I wasn't there I can't remember all the details of how it came to be that they had a temporary replacement. I don't know if it was Jim Kinnaid or not. I just don't remember.

JS: [00:35:23] The labour movement, the Federation endorsed sending Munro to meet with Bennett and find out how, to see if he would be willing to take—at least I think—the agenda was to see if he could agree to take the bills off of the legislative agenda. The outcome, I think, was one of the low points of the labour movement's history because essentially Jack capitulated to the government and came back with nothing for Operation Solidarity, nothing for the coalition, nothing for bargaining. It was just, there was just an agreement to stop the advance of a general strike.

JS: [00:36:30] Then my liaison role with the coalition I had to break the news to them that this decision was being made, that labour was pulling out of Operation Solidarity and there would be no further support for the collective opposition. It was whatever the black day of the week it was, it was a day of mourning for me, certainly, and for the other public sector unions who felt that they'd been betrayed. There's no other way of saying that Jack had given his word on behalf of the Federation. There was no Federation president to counter it. The operation just wound down. The only thing that was continuing was bargaining.

JS: [00:37:55] The government put one of the senior bureaucrats into bargaining as the premier's direct representative. There were meetings at the bargaining table and meetings of the officers of the GEU with Norm Spector. He was taking demands to Bennett, so the labour relations model certainly had shifted into a political discussion of what was acceptable to the government and what was acceptable to the union. We came out of it really seeing the bills that affected the BCGEU, the government agreed to take them off the legislative agenda.

KN: [00:38:54] So the GEU ended up quite okay after this.

JS: [00:39:00] The sense of relief that we were actually going to live to bargain again. Then not only that, but we actually made some gains at the bargaining table. My ambivalence about that, having just lived through betraying the community organizations and seeing the collective aspirations for social justice in the province being trashed, then on the other side, coming away from the bargaining table with a good agreement and one that met core objectives for the GEU, it was hard to handle, like survivor's guilt in some way. We had done OK.

JS: [00:40:03] It was my introduction to the key awareness that for the BCGEU, all bargaining is political and it's not ever just simply about collective bargaining and labour relations. There's always a government agenda and an interest in what we were doing.

JS: [00:40:26] We came through two successive strikes and it was a real test for the BCGEU because they had never done a union-wide strike before. It was unclear to the general secretary whether or not the leadership, the elected leadership would have the

influence to mobilize its membership. While the provincial executive was all working on their local elected people all over the province and getting a sense that there was good support, John Fryer, who was the general secretary, was so nervous about whether or not it would be forthcoming that he was doing quite erratic things, going on Jack Webster's show and making commitments to the government that the government hadn't even asked for, trying to put a control on where the non-strike was going. In that, members of the executive recognized a flaw in the structure of the BCGEU. It was organized on the British general secretary model, where the general secretary was really the head of the union, unaccountable to the members. When the executive passed motions that Fryer was to do such and such, he just simply ignored them, and did the opposite. There was no formal way of holding him to account on that stuff.

JS: [00:42:37] Coming out of that strike, it became my mission and the mission of the executive to change the constitutional structure of the GEU and create a presidency that would be in charge of the union. At the same time that we would engage in a concerted effort to strengthen the powers of stewards and local officers so that the union actually went down to the grassroots. For the next year or so, this was the debate. It made the staff leadership very nervous because they could see themselves losing the level of control and influence that they had had. They weren't really willing to look at the fact that the structure, as it is, was at the time, wasn't working for us.

JS: [00:43:41] Eventually, John Fryer introduced a constitutional reform package which created a full time elected presidency. In Fryer's package, he split the table officers, the elected table officers from the senior staff and created a kind of a parallel structure where the staff still had dominance and control. At least it was like the government taking a private member's bill over and putting it forward. We could live with that.

JS: [00:44:34] The next convention, the constitutional change, Norm Richards who had been a book-off president, a volunteer from the work force. He was the first full-time elected president and I was the first vice-president and president-in-waiting. That structure created enormous tension in the organization until the convention where a decision was made who the next elected president was going to be. The senior staff did everything they could. They had their own candidate, they had people who they wanted to see elected. Of course, that fed into the provincial executive's recognition that they were still trying to control the union. I won really handily on first ballot for the presidency.

KN: [00:45:37] Your election in 1985, established once and for all, that the political leadership of the organization was going to run the organization.

JS: [00:45:45] Yes, absolutely. In the following year I realized that as the president I was pretty isolated. We proposed that the secretary-treasurer would also be a full-time officer, and Tom Kozar, who was the treasurer, decided he would step aside. The consensus was Diane Wood would be named secretary-treasurer. We had two full time officers and most of the senior staff left at that point. Cliff went to the Fed. Jack retired. Maureen Headley stayed on for a while. Unfortunately, I don't know whether it was competence or deliberateness, but she— We were going into bargaining with the government. I had no role in preparing the bargaining agenda. I was now president to implement it. Maureen was difficult. We had to have a discussion about her future role. There was a lot of senior staff leadership turmoil and so very—

KN: [00:47:20] Bit of an internal struggle.

JS: [00:47:21] Yeah, the internal struggle out of which came a pretty concerted agreement on the elected side that they would support the direction we were going. The staff, because I had the opportunity now of appointing senior staff management and wanted people who believed in elected leadership responsibility. There was a significant reorganization and change on that score. This will end up with, again, the political intervention.

JS: [00:48:09] The bargaining was taking place in late '85 and Expo 86 was on the horizon as the big event in the province. The Bennett administration was using Expo 86 as a springboard for their re-election campaign. Bargaining had proceeded in kind of a normal fashion until it got closer to both the Expo and the crunch of bargaining. Bennett and the Minister of Finance, Hugh Curtis, announced that there would be no wage increases, no benefit increases, no gains for the BCGEU despite having agreed to a whole series of things. They were all put aside. The realization was this is about provoking us into a strike, on the eve of Expo. It was the political agenda to be the springboard for Bennett's re-election. I didn't know what to do. I could see how easy it would have been for Bennett to resurrect his removal of bargaining rights for government workers and we would be offering him the occasion to do it.

JS: [00:50:10] I needed political advice so I called Dave Barrett and I said Dave, this is the situation. It feels to me like it's a lose-lose circumstance that one false move, we'll lose bargaining. He said 'John, you've been a streetfighter.' I said, yeah. He said, 'You know karate.' I said, yeah. He said, 'Well, my recommendation to you is to use the government's force against them. I suggest that you step aside. Suspend bargaining and declare Bennett a lame duck, that he has no mandate to bargain, and that you would bargain with his successor.' Brilliant. Good advice. I took that back to the executive. We hashed it out. They agreed that we would make a statement to the public and to government that we did not think that Bill Bennett had the authority to negotiate a collective agreement. All he is is a troublemaker. He's acting like a bully. We're just not going to play that game. End of bargaining. That was a great firestorm in the province. It preserved the Expo piece starting. Eventually Bennett gave his announcement about his resignation that he was not going to run again.

JS: [00:51:57] The convention, the Sacred Convention at Whistler elected Bill Vander Zalm. Vander Zalm, the night of his election called me and said, 'What do we need to do to solve our problem?' I laid out what we had agreed to, what we thought was a reasonable wage increase and that if they agreed to those terms we would meet them. Within two days we were back at the bargaining table, the deputy minister to the premier was sitting there in the bargaining chair and we got a collective agreement. Vander Zalm posed himself as the great mediator, the great problem solver, the person that can deal with labour and got himself elected. He stepped into the premiership like a white knight. I wasn't feeling very good. There was a first ministers' meeting, and Vander Zalm invited me to be his guest as part of the B.C. delegation to the first ministers' meeting. I got to see a little bit of how Vander Zalm worked because everything that was part of the catering and servicing of the first ministers' meeting was done through Fantasy Gardens. He was larding his own wellbeing at the expense. I got a glimpse of this guy. He was not really what he was posing himself to be.

JS: [00:53:51] What happened in the result was after the first ministers' meeting, he sent his principal secretary to tell us what his legislative agenda was going to be. He said his plan was to privatize the entire public sector. He said, 'we're going to make every public sector activity a private sector profit centre, hospitals, schools, you name it.' He was going

to privatize and he was going to start with the public service. There would be legislation introduced to remove all but the managers of the public sector and all of the operational activities were going to be private. The banks were going to take over administering social/income assistance, and on and on and on. The first target was going to be the privatization of the roads, highway maintenance, and that was going to be done. There were a couple of other smaller things. I walked out of that meeting and I was just stunned. I thought to myself, 'you're going to be known as the last president of the Government Employees' Union because there's going to be no more government employees. Unless you stop it, they're going to just destroy this province.'

JS: [00:55:54] I went back to the executive, after I kind of regained my sense of maybe I should take a breath and actually do something about this. We took our defence fund and put it into a defence of public services fund. I evolved a travelling campaign that would go from city to city in the province. What we would do is we would meet with the Chambers of Commerce and describe to the business community the nature of the value of the public payroll in the economy of their cities. For many of them, they had no idea. The connection between the liquor clerk gets a pay increase, it goes into the grocery store or the appliance store or the car dealership. That money gets circulated right back into the business community. If you take that public payroll away, you're actually going to cripple the economy of Kelowna, or wherever. To my surprise, the business community was very amenable to me. It was clear that they didn't trust Vander Zalm and thought he was a loose cannon, so they didn't marshal behind his plan.

JS: [00:57:28] After this year of campaign on the soft 'p' political side undermining the premier's support, we went into bargaining and privatization, stopping the privatization that was already ongoing and creating enough hurdles that it would be next to impossible for the government to privatize anything. They would have final clout because they called the legislation, we would make everything as difficult as possible. I know I'm going on long on this, but this is really an interesting experience. I became really compulsive. I felt like I had a mission to save the public sector. If any of my executive members weren't as fully committed to this, I just pushed them aside. This was the end-all and be-all of my presidency up till that point which was only a year, a year and a half on. It turned out we got a good agreement in principle, except for wages. Then they didn't want to give us recompense for all that was being suffered and put them through, so we went on strike.

KN: [00:59:16] This would have been in 1986. Seven.

JS: [00:59:20] 1987. Yeah.

KN: [00:59:34] You want to take a little break?

JS: [00:59:35] Yeah, sure.

KN: [00:59:36] Why don't we take a break.

BG: [00:59:37] Sure.

KN: [00:59:37] Have some water.

JS: [00:59:41] Okay.

KN: [00:59:42] So then the Vander Zalm years were a real challenge for your organization in lots of ways. Could you talk a bit about how your organization adapted to and adjusted in terms of the reality that was being brought upon you.

JS: [01:00:02] Even though we had come out with a good collective agreement that made privatizing difficult, the government had already progressed far enough with the privatization of the Ministry of Transport, Highways Division that it was going forward. I remember very early that an initial response at a Fed convention. We had a caucus and out of the caucus came an agreement that we would announce that the BCGEU would purchase the Highways Ministry, or the Highways Department, and that we would set up a corporation that would hold highway maintenance in trust. We recruited one of the former deputy ministers of highways to be the head of the company. At the Federation, we had the media there. It was kind of a big step. We went to meet with the government with our offer to purchase the highways. They just held us off and then they came back. Instead of keeping it as one entity, they broke it up into 26 regions and made it really difficult to organize all of them. The highways privatization was going forward.

JS: [01:01:43] Our awareness I think, for every dark cloud there's always a silver lining. The decision on the part of the government to move government workers out into the private sector, faced the issue that either we did nothing and we would be eroded, chunk by chunk by chunk, and before very long, there would be no public service at all. We did some brainstorming, staff and the executive team, how can we respond to this? What we came up with was a decision to follow our members out into the private sector. In implementing that, we immediately ran into jurisdictional lines in the Congress. We were only certified to represent people in the provincial government, not in the private sector. We had to do a lot of negotiation with the Congress who never really were on side with us breaking out of the government. We had had a merger with the bank workers. The Bank Workers' Union came into the GEU and we used it as a wedge. Said this is a private sector organization. We're representing them. We had your blessing to do the merger. We're just going to expand that principle. What came of that was the realization even if you had a group of workers in construction, most of the companies that were bidding on highway maintenance were construction companies, some internal organization. They would be isolated unless we organized around them, unless we expanded our presence in those sectors.

JS: [01:04:15] I took a recommendation to a biennial convention that we would restructure the union to be an organizing dynamic instead of exclusively a servicing organization, handling grievances and that kind of thing. The idea was really well received at the convention. People liked the idea that we were going to exercise our muscle and do some organizing. We created an organizing team. Each of our local area offices had a mandate to identify potential targets for organizing.

JS: [01:05:07] One of the things I had become aware of in reading about the state of the economy was that wherever women were the predominant people in a sector, that sector was less well paid than similar work sectors that were predominantly men. The classic example was that the zookeepers in CUPE were paid more than daycare workers. Women, men. It was a matter of justice that we target places where women were the predominant employees. The union grew from 36,000 when we started this exercise to 72,000 in the course of organizing. It also changed the character of the union because as we started to organize more and more female-dominated sectors, the proportion of women in the organization went up. The Women's Committee started to work on empowering women to take elected office. There was this whole steamroller of a consciousness

change, not just organizing, but a feminization of the membership of the GEU and the leadership. Stephanie Smith is now the president of the organization. It's the natural result of evolution. I consider one of the things that most pleases me in the things that I've contributed to the organization, but to the society. There had been a lot of talk about the dis-equality within the government service between women and men workers.

JS: [01:07:17] At the tail end of the Vander Zalm administration, Vander Zalm had stepped down, Rita Johnson had become interim premier. Her Minister of Equality was musing out loud about bringing in legislation to introduce pay equity into government. I went and visited the Cabinet. I said, 'it's in both of our interests that instead of you introducing something top down, that we do a joint project to do a full classification re-examination.' We would work together to develop a gender-neutral lens to look at every classification in government from the point of view of gender neutrality. That project lasted about three years. I think the first change, first budgetary change that introduced pay equity cost the government \$24 million for phase one of what was to be a four-phase stage in equalization. It started with clerks and moved into other areas.

JS: [01:08:43] The provincial public service set a template. They were used at BCIT and anywhere else there were job evaluation plans that we could affect and we negotiated with every non-government agency. We spread pay equity out across all of the areas where we already had influence and it really was a social revolution.

JS: [01:09:17] I don't have it anymore, darn it, but I got a letter from a woman who was writing to thank me for changing the life of her family. Reading along, she said she was a single parent, a clerk in government with a low wage. She said she couldn't afford to send her kids to school with brand name sneakers. Her kids were constantly being teased because their clothes were not in style. She said, "When I got my first cheque, first thing I did is I bought new wardrobes for my children and it transformed their life in school." She said, "I can only thank you for doing that for my family." It's one of those immediate feedbacks and it was all I had hoped would have been the outcome of that transformation.

JS: [01:10:29] It calls back to something that I learned in the seminary and coming out of the Vatican Council. The church was urging its leaders to take a preferential option for the poor and structure the church to think about outreach to the less well-off. I thought, 'I'm not even a member of the church anymore. I don't consider myself a Christian. I have moved into spirituality,' but it's something that stuck with me as true.

JS: [01:11:13] In my motivation as a union leader, I've held that preferential option for the poor so that we made outreach to Indigenous governments who are the poorest of the poor government workers. There's a whole story about Joe Gosnell, in the Nisga'a and the Nisga'a workers going to join the BCGEU. We had gone up to meet with them. Gosnell said, "You put us in an awful dilemma. In Indigenous communities we are all one. What unionizing the government staff will do will drive a wedge between the people and the leadership. We're on the verge of signing our treaty." He said, "Could you delay the implementation of this organizing, certifying the workers?" I said, 'I can't do that by myself, Joe, but I'll take your concern back to the staff and see. If they say, yes, I'll agree to that.' I met with the Nisga'a workers. It turned out there was a couple of really strong advocates for unionization, but the general membership of the Nisga'a workers understood and agreed with the chief's position. They agreed to suspend indefinitely their application for certification. Hard decision. It was kind of against my general principles. Yet, from a community perspective and a unity perspective and a greater good perspective, I think they made the right decision. Nonetheless, the fact that they had decided to unionize,

other Indigenous organizations and groups didn't have the same issue. We increased our membership of Indigenous workers.

JS: [01:13:48] It's been a series of small transformations and big transformations. I can't think of anything that I could have done with my life that would have been more fruitful. It was so deeply satisfying to me to recognize the good effect. It's only the structure of collective action that makes that possible. What Gosnell said about the Nisga'a community, is true of the labour movement. When we recognize that our strength is in our oneness, and that when we act as a single entity, there's no stopping us, you know, the old song. It's the fulfilment or fruition of everything I believe about society, about community, about the fact that workers when we act together, are unstoppable. I feel so privileged at having had that opportunity for the years, 25 years on the executive, 15 years as president, 14 years president. It was a gift from the labour movement to me, which I gave back in whatever way I could to our members. I think this is probably a good place for me to stop.

KN: [01:15:35] We just have a couple more questions.

JS: [01:15:38] Sure. That's fine.

BG: [01:15:38] Wonderful. Well said.

KN: [01:15:41] Very well said. What would you say to young people today about why unions are important? This is a question that we—

JS: [01:15:55] Yeah. Well, I think what Ken Georgetti used to say very often is did you enjoy your weekend? Are you willing to go without a vacation? Left to just the feeble strength of one, dealing with employers who have all the cards, it's no match. If you want to make progress in your own lifestyle, well-being, the only way to do that is by organizing, joining the union, bargaining collectively and standing together against all the onslaught that's going to come to kind of break you up.

JS: [01:16:54] The media myth that the days of the unions are past, neglect the fact that as we move into a globalized world, that the entire world is separating workers from the one percent. The reality is that workers haven't had the opportunity to take on some really important global international issues. The growing wage differentiation between the one percent and the rest of us is only getting worse. We know we can't rely on the political parties in Canada or the United States. I don't know about Europe because I think they may be different. The politicians are not going to be the champions of the working people. There's too much money coming to them from the one percent to the corporations that they don't allow their mind to go there. The only entity that's left in the world that's going to speak up for working people are unions. The trade union movement has a worldwide reach. We can identify industries, we can identify sectors, we can identify countries.

JS: [01:18:38] We could use strategic decision-making to take on countries just as we take on— When the CAW goes into bargaining, they pick a company, negotiate with that company and then pattern that out. The labour movement could do that in this day and age and see remarkable change to the wage gap. The legislation is stacked against us. The money of the corporations that will break organizations is stacked against us. All of that's true, but what it doesn't take into account is that if people decide to stand together and work together, they will be unstoppable, and have the smarts to out-manoeuvre those that would keep labour quiet and submissive.

JS: [01:19:43] I think it takes today's leadership just to stand up and identify with their members, to identify with their communities, to represent the disadvantaged. I think the labour movement should be at Standing Rock, where the water keepers in North Dakota are not only protecting their water supply from pipeline spills, but it's the water supply for the whole Dakota Valley. They're standing up for the people. Yes, the Indigenous nations of North America are rallying, but the labour movement should be there, like Operation Solidarity. The labour movement owes it to social justice and to what we stand for, to stand in solidarity with people. We would get nothing but credit from them, from the poor and loathing from the one percent. That's what we need to do.

KN: [01:21:00] And more.

BG: [01:21:02] I have a couple of questions as well.

KN: [01:21:07] This question is about labour history. Why is it important for someone who's active in the union to know something about the history of their union and in fact, the history of the union movement as a whole?

JS: [01:21:30] When you say that, I just think about my family. Is it important to me to know my family story? Absolutely. It's who I am. If I if I don't know where I've come from, I'm lost in the world and all of the energy that has created the context. I believe that each of us are at this time in this place, because there's always something we can contribute to the unfolding of the universe. Unless we understand the dynamic of that evolutionary creation of this moment, we miss our ability to actually respond to it. Whether it's the labour movement, family history, community, history is essential to our self-understanding and without self-understanding, we've got no arms.

BG: [01:22:33] Fantastic. I just wanted to clarify for your timeline. You would have been working in the clergy in the '50s? is that correct?

JS: [01:22:41] No, I was in high school in the '50s. I went into the seminary in the late '50s. I was ordained a priest in 1965. I came to B.C., then to Texas, left the clergy in Texas, came back to B.C. in '69.

BG: [01:23:01] Perfect.

KN: [01:23:02] Since then, you've been in B.C.?

JS: [01:23:04] Yes.

BG: [01:23:05] Great. My other question was, during that period, you were talking about where the BCGEU was doing a lot of organizing, do you recall if there were any industries that became unionized under the BCGEU that weren't previously unionized at all, just off the top of your head?

JS: [01:23:27] I would say health care, community health care is certainly one sector of the workforce that had no organization. When we organized the home support workers, the comparable work that was done in hospitals was done by janitors, and the janitor made \$15 an hour, back in the time when we started, the early '90's. The home support workers made \$5 an hour, a \$10 an hour gap between people who did essentially the same work. I think the home support workers were actually doing more direct patient care in the homes.

There was a case for that organization, the community care, community health care, community social services.

JS: [01:24:34] Grace McCarthy, who was Bill Bennett's Minister of Social Justice took big segments of the social service workforce, moved them out, contracted the work to non-profit organizations, and then defunded those organizations and used the successorship issue to break the pattern of unionization. Keeping community social services strong and organized could only be done by an organization like us or like the HEU who had the resources to organize when there was a change of contractor to go back in and organize the staff. There was a constant turnover.

JS: [01:25:31] The other thing isn't directly your question, but it is something I think that is germane, is in Mike Harcourt's era we were doing the organizing pretty heavy duty. We were going broke because each collective agreement required that we sit down and negotiate it separately. If you organize a place with 15 units, they were organized one at a time to have that done. We got the Harcourt government to put forward a group called the Corbin Commission. Judy Corbin looked at the structure of public sector bargaining and created sectoral bargaining largely at our urging. It made it so much easier to go do college bargaining in a sector, to do health care bargaining in a sector, to do a public service as one organizational group. It gave us the economic freedom to go full bore into organizing. There may have been sectors that had a little bit of organization, unionization, but now there is a blank carpet out there.

BG: [01:27:04] You had the freedom to go in and organize.

JS: [01:27:08] I remind people of that contribution of the NDP to do something that they don't even see on a daily basis, but is actually—

KN: [01:27:18] Takes for granted.

JS: [01:27:19] Part of the capacity that we've had to grow.

BG: [01:27:23] That's great. Perfect. That answers all my questions.

JS: [01:27:24] Good.

BG: [01:27:26] Thanks very much.

KN: [01:27:27] Thank you very much.

JS: [01:27:27] You're very welcome.