

Interview: David Gellately (DG)

Interviewer: Patricia Wejr (PW) and Donna Sacuta (DS)

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Transcription: Donna Sacuta

PW [00:00:03] Today is April 28th, 2022, actually the Day of Mourning. And we're in Victoria. I'm a volunteer for the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre, and today I'm speaking with David Gellately. So first a little bit of background information, David. When and where were you born?

DG [00:00:22] Born in 1950, in Newfoundland and St John's. St John's.

PW [00:00:27] And a bit about your—we're always interested about how you become activists. Was there something in your family that led to your future union activism?

DG [00:00:36] Not really. I don't think I got involved in or even really aware of unions until my first job. After I graduated from high school, I went to work at the Evening Telegram as a compositor and about two years into my apprenticeship, photo engraving came in and about 120 compositors and linotype operators got notice they were getting laid off because of technological change, although they didn't really say it was a layoff because of tech change. But literally overnight, about 150 total lost their jobs. I left before I got laid off because, I mean, I knew there was no future there. I became part of the '60s kind of hitchhiking across North America. And I ended up in California for a year. And then I think it was Joey Smallwood introduced cheap post-secondary education. So I went back to Newfoundland and studied economics for four years.

PW [00:01:51] Now, just to return to the first job for a minute, because people might not know what a compositor does or what it is. Could you just briefly describe what that is?

DG [00:02:00] Well, it was the old technology in print shops in news. It is the technology they used in printing prior to photo engraving. And basically it was using melted lead to produce the slugs that were used for, you know, making a print of the original newspaper. But a compositor would do all aspects of it sometimes, and you would either end up as a linotype printer, typewriter typist, or you'd be doing, which is mostly the job of a compositor is laying out the pages and where you would put it on a slug and distribute the articles and then you'd make an ink copy of it and bring it to the proofreader. They would make corrections in the articles and make it fit into the page. So a compositor could be doing any aspect of that work. It was a four-year trade and it was quite a, you know, interesting trade.

PW [00:03:05] So then tech change happened and you said that you left just before that, so then you headed out on your travels.

DG [00:03:15] I was just, you know, I had a few bucks in my pocket. I ended up taking a train and hitchhiking across Canada, worked up in Houston, B.C. at Buck River Timber and saved a few bucks, got an old car licensed, and drifted down to California for a year. But, you know, when I think it was the Smallwood government brought in, if I recall correctly, free university education. So I go back to Newfoundland and study economics for four years at Memorial University. And that's really where I got interested in the labour movement, because I worked with and became a close friend to a guy, Andy Wells, who at the time was a half radical lefty who eventually evolved into a right-wing conservative. But

he did actually work for CUPE as a rep in Newfoundland, and he ended up being a very controversial mayor in St John's. But it was he who really generated an interest and an awareness of the labour movement for me, and that would have been in '71 to '75 and he ran a couple of times for the NDP. I organized for him and campaigned for him. So after that, but I left. In '75, I left Newfoundland and came to B.C. and I was really keen on the labour movement by that time. It was '75 I arrived. Living in Vancouver and had difficulty finding work, couldn't collect E.I. because the letter carriers were on strike at the time and the provincial government under Dave Barrett called an election and I obviously immediately went in to volunteer and they had a Gestetner in the organizing room and they noticed I knew a lot, you know, I knew how to run a Gestetner. And they were big, inky dirty machines at the time. Nobody wanted to do it. And consequently, Gary Lauk and Emery Barnes were the candidates and they used to give me about, I don't know, 100 bucks every few weeks. So that was really the first job I had in British Columbia. And I think the election was on December 13th, 1975. And it was the first time ever that the candidates who got elected in Van Centre didn't form part of the government. Both Emery and Gary got elected, but as you know, Dave Barrett lost that election. So the election ended. I was out of work. And what's interesting is someone gave me a lead on a government job in Smithers, a seasonal youth works employment program. And I got interviewed and they said they're interested in hiring me. I said, 'Good.' But they said, "We can't hire you because you haven't lived in B.C. for a year." So I couldn't believe it. You know, they flew me over to Victoria and Bob Plecas interviewed me and that's how I—and he overruled the rules at the time.

PW [00:06:58] Okay. So I think we're where we left off. You were just explaining about the jobs, what it entailed. So how long did you stay at that job?

DG [00:07:09] I stayed with what was Aid to the Handicapped then it changed names, changed Ministries. But I stayed with them for six or seven years until I got a job actually in the labour movement. But while I was there, I ran and got elected on municipal council in Terrace. And so I was working on this job, a full-time job with the provincial government. I was on City Council and I was an active participant in the labour movement in Terrace. And it's a relatively minor example, but during my time I think I was investigated, I think two or three times by the ombudsperson at the time, because people in the community would allege that I was not doing my government job or inappropriately using my government vehicle or, you know, taking advantage of things one way or another, like double-billing. And each time, I mean, the ombudsperson investigated me I was proven not to be doing anything inappropriate, but it represents Terrace was a mean community in terms of politics. Cyril Shelford was the member of the legislature when I arrived. Iona Campagnolo was Member of Parliament, the Mayor Terrace was Socred. The Mayor of Kitimat was Socred and the mayor of Rupert was Socred. So it was a nasty atmosphere for New Democrats or labour activists.

PW [00:08:55] Now in the jobs that you were just describing, was that where the union, had GEU organized those positions.

DG [00:09:03] I was always in the BCGEU, and I always worked for the government and I was always a BCGEU member.

PW [00:09:10] Okay, So then you mentioned that you went to work for the labour movement. So what was your first position?

DG [00:09:17] In 1996 I got hired by the BCGEU initially to cover offer staff member in Kamloops, Dave MacPherson. And so I made a six-month contract. I moved down to Kamloops and my wife stayed in Terrace because at that time we had a business in Terrace, Boutique Encore, was basically second-hand clothing, but very lucrative because it was right across the street from a funeral service. And honestly, it was a joke. I mean, people would pass away and we would end up with all the (laughter) but, you know, people benefitted from it. Often it was on consignment. So the people who were alive, you know, made some money on things.

PW [00:10:20] So your wife stayed in Terrace running that business while you went to Kamloops? For six months?

DG [00:10:25] Yeah. And while there, then the union made my position a full-time regular, and they were reorganizing the administrative structure of the BCGEU. And I was then at that point made the regional coordinator for the interior. I think I was the first regional coordinator in the BCGEU. First one appointed, and I was in Kamloops. They originally wanted to have the regional coordinator in Kelowna, but later they did. But I was there.

PW [00:11:12] Did you then make that your home base?

DG [00:11:15] For a while. What happened was my wife was pregnant and so we rented out the house, liquidated the business, and she moved to Kamloops. She was having some problems. So she was spending a lot of time in Vancouver because of the pregnancy. And we had a little half a townhouse in Kamloops. And I would go back and forth and she would go back and forth. And then she had our daughter Caitlin. And at the time, this is a kind of funny story, but at the time the women's movement in Kamloops were very concerned because in '86, '87, access to choice was under extreme attack. And so the women asked me, they were looking for someone to run, so I ran for the hospital board at Royal Inland Hospital. It's an awful joke, but there's a joke I used to tell at the time. I was negotiating the Cariboo Thompson Nicola Library service at the time contract and they were into cutbacks. And so the library bookmobile was a big issue in bargaining. So as a result of bargaining, I started joking around with converting the bookmobile to an abort mobile and home delivery, taking on a new aspect. It was an awful joke. I thought it would destroy any chances I had of getting elected, but I ended up getting elected to the hospital board in Kamloops. My wife has our daughter and she's got a Coarctation in her heart and that caused a complication. So, six or eight months after I'm on the hospital board and the pro-choice group won in the community and things cooled down a bit. Well, then the union, the president, John Shields, at the time phoned me personally to ask me if I would move to Victoria for reasons that he had. And, you know, I discussed it with my wife and she thought the access to services for Caitlin would be better in Victoria. So, you know, eight months after I got elected to the hospital board, I take a transfer to Victoria reluctantly because I really liked Kamloops at the time and so we end up in Victoria and then sadly, when Caitlin was nine, ten months old, she died and so we didn't need to move there anyway. But you know, I ended up, I think we ended up from then, I ended up moving to, or getting transferred to Prince George with the BCGEU a year or so later.

PW [00:14:48] Now I'm just trying to figure out the timing of that. I just wanted to ask you if you remember any of the events during Solidarity.

DG [00:14:56] That would have been in the early '80s, '82-'83 Yeah, I was involved in. I was actually the Regional Vice President of the BCGEU. In the early '80s they brought in Regional Vice Presidents, four in the province. I got elected in the northwest. So in the

early '80s I was on city council, on the BCGEU provincial executive and a regular full-time job. And then, my wife and I had a business going as well. But you got lots of energy when you're young. And yes, I was participating in it, actually I was in the master bargaining when Solidarity was set up, you know, OpSol, and I was part of the negotiating committee with the BCGEU provincial executive at the time that resulted in the Kelowna Accord. But we would be at the table and then we would go back to our respective areas and kind of motivate the membership, hold meetings, that kind of thing, and participate in taking votes and things. And in the Northwest at that time, it was I think was Dave MacKinnon was the staff rep. So, I would go back from master bargaining, he and I would set up a schedule to do things. And a funny story that comes to mind about that was I think it was '83. George Heyman was on the provincial executive as well. And his job at the time was a tree scaler, a lumber scaler. And he used to work once in a blue moon down in the Douglas Channel. And he and I and Mike Corbeil, one day picketed off Eurocan because George, we considered that George's worksite going through Eurocan down. And I think we closed down half of Kitimat and I think it lasted about nine or ten hours before the injunctions started coming out. Mike Corbeil later on went down to become the Deputy Minister of Health and brought in generic prescription requirements. And then he ended up going to somewhere in Asia, playing a significant role in that great tsunami there in the '80s, I think.

PW [00:17:57] So when you were out for nine, 10 hours, that was that was a Solidarity—

DG [00:18:04] Yes, That was a picket for OpSol. My memory is it gets a bit blurred because, I mean, there was pickets for everything in those days, you know, it was a lot of striking going on. I mean, one issue was the pension issue where I think it was Evan Wolfe was the minister, and we were picketing to 'Keep the Wolfe Away from our Pensions' because that's how we ended up with representation on the on the pension board. Actually flowed from that action. But there was the federal, around the same time or a bit earlier, was the federal wage program. I mean it was always non-labour strike pickets. So it was the evolution of the public protest I think.

PW [00:19:07] That was 1975 there was that National Day of Action.

DG [00:19:10] And there was that and yeah, yes, that's right. And so I mean we were always, I was always back in the Northwest holding meetings. I remember one time in Smithers, Dave MacKinnon and I were there and trying to motivate Smithers, which, you know, wasn't a hotbed of union activity to support OpSol and things like that. And, you know, there was a lot of criticism from the membership and everything and not too bad, but I remember that at the end of it, MacKinnon leads the whole group and a song of Solidarity Forever, and everyone got into it and it really changed the mood of the membership there at that moment. It was really an interesting little thing that happened.

PW [00:20:06] Yeah. So then you ended you ended up going to Prince George was it?

DG [00:20:12] Well yeah, I moved from Terrace to Kamloops, Kamloops to Victoria. Then I ended up in Prince George, where my wife then got elected to the hospital board and we didn't have a business in Prince George I don't think, but we that's where we ended up having our son Alexander. And from there we ended up going back to Victoria three or four years later. But it wasn't, you know, mostly my time in Prince George was just basic serving the membership, you know, organizing, negotiating. There was a lot of privatization in government services, highways and things like that. And so there was a lot of work around moving those into the private sector.

PW [00:21:12] Yeah, absolutely. So then you came back down to Victoria where you—

DG [00:21:19] I ended up in Victoria back in I think it was about 1993 and I stayed there till I retired.

PW [00:21:26] Right. And what position did you hold.

DG [00:21:29] Always Regional Co-ordinator. So you know, in each area in the north out of Prince George I was covering Terrace, Dawson Creek, Williams Lake and Prince George. In Kamloops I would have been covering Kelowna, Cranbrook and Kamloops. In Victoria it was the Island and we had an office in Victoria and an office in Courtenay.

PW [00:21:57] So thinking back on, this is a long union history you have, but what do you, what do you remember is one of the one of the things you're most proud of?

DG [00:22:09] What I always considered a really positive aspect of my union activity was when you'd get a group of workers a pension plan. I always considered that the pinnacle and you could do it, and I always made it a priority in every set of negotiations. I don't think I ever negotiated the collective agreement without getting a pension plan. But the best one, the one that I enjoyed the most was, Oak Bay Kiwanis Pavilion. I met the workers, I made the initial contact with the workers and organized and got them to sign cards. I represented them at the labour board for the certification and I negotiated the first collective agreement. So that was the first time I'd gone from beginning to end. And, we got them a pretty good collective agreement. But I always enjoyed organizing, I really enjoyed organizing workers and I always volunteered to negotiate first collective agreements. I just, you know, got to a great deal of satisfaction. But every aspect of bringing workers improved benefits, it's very satisfactory and I'm a member of a reading group here in Victoria now an all-men's reading group. And there's ten men they're professionals, doctors, scientists, teachers. And it's just a little personal quirk. I think I've had a greater degree of personal satisfaction from my career than any one of them have.

PW [00:24:09] I think you're probably right, because it's such a helping career, really, isn't it? You have the power to completely change people's lives.

DG [00:24:19] Yes. I mean, it is absolutely. Why there's not almost like a degree in union representative, like you have public administration, you have private administration degrees and undergraduate degrees and master's. Why we don't have some equivalent? But it's tricky, too. How do you organize that? But I mean, there should be an undergraduate degree in worker representation and a master's in labour representation, the same as public admin and private admin and that kind of thing.

PW [00:24:59] So I think one final thing I wanted to ask you is like if you're if you're talking to young people these days, what would you tell them about the labour movement and what it can do for them.

DG [00:25:15] It happens all the time. And my son is 32 now. But, you know, I've had the same discussion with him. You really react to what their concerns are when they bring it up in reality. I mean, some of them are absolutely brainwashed into thinking that the labour movement, the time has passed. And that's a common refrain that "oh, one time we needed unions, but now we don't." Tell that to Amazon workers in the United States and Canada, in Calgary, where they can't unionize Amazon workers, and yet it's owned by the richest person in the world. So there's no universal sales pitch. You listen to workers and

talk to them. And you can be most effective by telling little stories, I think. I mean, I one time was biking on the Bow River Highway and the flag people were out and I stopped to talk to them and they were complaining about, I think, the hours they were working. And I said, 'Well, why don't you file a complaint on the Labour Relations Board or something?' And they immediately couldn't, responding that they couldn't do anything because—and they gave their you know, the contract work, they'd lose their job. Even my own son was being abused in a worksite by an employer, in my view, and I encouraged him to go to the labour, the IRO, and ask for an explanation. He did. He discovered that he was right, that what the employer was doing was wrong. The action was taken and shortly afterwards he lost his job. So, you know, it's still the employer's game continually. So, you know, as I said, there's no universal advice you can give. When I hear young people and talking about issues, I explain to them what the number one solution is to get a workers' organization, you know, a union. And I point out to them that the doctors have a union and the professors have a union and everyone's got a union. They just sometimes call it a different name, but it's an organization looking after their own interests and that's what working people have to do, is maintain organizations that look after their interests because really no other organization in society will look after it like they can look after it themselves.

DS [00:28:03] If you have a minute I wanted to go back to your time in Terrace and Dave MacKinnon and unfortunately Dave is no longer with us. He was from Newfoundland as well.

DG [00:28:13] Dave was actually from P.E.I.. But he went to work in Newfoundland and he was instrumental with the Fishermen's Union in Newfoundland with Richard Cashin. Dick Cashin. And I think he and Cashin became pretty good friends over the years. But I think that's where Dave, he was a fisherman and he went with the Newfoundland Federation of Labour to organize the fishermen there. And so he was an adopted Newfoundlander. And he really did always refer to himself as a Newfoundlander. His wife was from Newfoundland and his kids were born in Newfoundland. But he was born into a family of 13 in Prince Edward Island.

DS [00:29:04] And do you recall how he ended up in B.C.?

DG [00:29:08] Yeah, he was hired by the BCGEU as a staff rep out of Newfoundland and as the staff rep in Terrace. And I think he stayed there, oh, eight or ten years. And then he became an IRO, I think. And he was a real dyed-in-the-wool trade unionist and really enjoyed the history of the labour movement. And, I mean, he was an endless storyteller of the old labour movement. And it's too bad he wasn't interviewed before we lost him.

DS [00:29:52] So do you have any other stories you want to share with us or things you wanted to say?

DG [00:29:57] No, I don't. Out of context they don't come to mind easily, but to just go back, I guess, to some of the organizing. I remember one time being in Penticton, just on some unrelated business and becoming aware of a mental health, I think, or some kind of workshop group that were interested in in having a union. And while I was there they were having a meeting with the staff and the director and I said, 'Well, ask your administrator if you could invite a union rep to come in and make a presentation in his presence to the workers there.' And so it was a bit awkward because the employer didn't want to say no. So I ended up doing a presentation there. And they did shortly after that get certified and become part of the BCGEU. So that was kind of fun and very satisfactory. But no, as I say

in context, sometimes they'll pop in your head, but I think that's about it. Okay. Thank you.
Yeah.