

Interview: Glen Edwards (GE)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
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Transcription: Jane Player

RM [00:00:08] Oh, am I supposed to say something?

DS [00:00:09] What's your full name and position, Glen?

GE [00:00:15] Glen Edwards, I'm the president of the International Longshore Warehouse Union, Local 505, Prince Rupert.

DS [00:00:23] Can you tell us a little bit about how you grew up, where you grew up?

GE [00:00:28] Well, I grew up on the East Coast and out of a mining and fishing town. And we had—actually mining was the main industry.

RM [00:00:42] Is that Cape Breton?

GE [00:00:43] No, it's in St Lawrence, Newfoundland and we had Alcan, and which is now Rio Tinto, as one of the main employers there. They went on strike back in the late seventies for I think it was a measly 25 cents an hour. Alcan being Alcan decided they're going to close the mines down, and move to Mexico to get cheaper labour. That was when I decided that I like unions and I want to be union because big corporations like that tend to walk over people. I seen in my earlier days.

RM [00:01:23] Were you working there then?

GE [00:01:25] No, but my dad was.

RM [00:01:27] Yeah. He lost his job?

GE [00:01:29] Yeah. He lost his job and had to go back to fishing.

RM [00:01:32] That was a lesson for you?

GE [00:01:33] Definitely a lesson for me and left a bad taste in my mouth for big corporations. How they can simply just flood the mines and get up and move because of a measly wage increase demand.

RM [00:01:46] What kind of a mine was it?

GE [00:01:48] It was a fluorspar. It's like a feldspar. Yeah, they were sayin' it's a profitable entity because they use in etching lumina, or making of aluminum, which is of course, Alcan's major. I guess, whatever.

RM [00:02:06] What did your dad do when he lost his job in the mine?

GE [00:02:09] He was actually a blaster. He was the blaster, you know, he used to blast holes and get to make shafts and stuff like that so they can go underground.

RM [00:02:28] What did he do when he lost his job? Did he just retire?

GE [00:02:31] No, he went back fishing.

RM [00:02:34] Cod?

GE [00:02:36] Yeah, cod fish, which is—he had to do something to sustain the family, right?

RM [00:02:41] You were out on small boats?

GE [00:02:43] Yeah. The little boats and [unclear].

RM [00:02:46] Did you go out with him?

GE [00:02:46] I did. Yup.

RM [00:02:48] What was that like?

GE [00:02:50] It drove me to the West Coast (laughter). No, it was actually a great experience. You know, it was early morning and long days and definitely not the life path for me.

RM [00:03:08] You came to B.C.?

GE [00:03:09] Then my uncle came back from Prince Rupert, and he looked at me one day. In fact, I just—I left after doing a bit of trade school, went to Alberta, and worked there for a while in a non-union environment, which wasn't my bag as well. I went back home. My uncle left here in a motor home, drove across the country and approached me one day and asked me what my plans were. I says, 'Well, right now I don't really have a lot of plans. I'm not going back to Alberta.' So, he said, 'Well, there's some longshore work in Prince Rupert.'

RM [00:03:51] When was this?

GE [00:03:53] This was back in 1982. I says, 'So you got a job for me?' He says, 'Well, no, I can't promise you a job, but I can get you a plane ticket back and you can hitchhike with us in the motor home and drive across the country,' which I did—slept on the floor. It's the best move I ever made.

RM [00:04:15] How long had your uncle been in Prince Rupert?

GE [00:04:18] My uncle was—he's an old—he was one of the old longshoremen. He had probably 25 years at the time when I—

RM [00:04:30] Was he originally from Newfoundland?

GE [00:04:32] No, no, he's actually from the Okanagan but he married my aunt.

RM [00:04:36] Oh right. And she's from Newfoundland?

GE [00:04:37] She's from Newfoundland.

RM [00:04:38] Oh right. When did he start longshoring?

GE [00:04:43] Oh, he's—he was probably in the sixties.

RM [00:04:51] He liked it?

GE [00:04:51] Yeah. You know, he was in the old longshore group at the old ore docks. They had the coastal boats. He used to travel up and down the coast. He used to unload those. Yeah. It's a bit of history there.

RM [00:05:08] It was mostly local trade then, wasn't it? The local boats?

GE [00:05:11] Yes.

RM [00:05:13] The deep-sea boats not the big ships that went across the ocean?

GE [00:05:16] Yeah, there wasn't a lot of deep-sea work then. It was coastal as they call it. He had, you know, the Heartland Prince. It was all like coastal boats that used to bring goods up and down the coast and he did a lot of that. Plus, there were logs. I guess that was the deep sea.

RM [00:05:35] And some fishing, I guess.

GE [00:05:37] Yeah.

RM [00:05:38] So you came out in '82?

GE [00:05:40] '82.

RM [00:05:41] And?

GE [00:05:42] Started in '82 and worked my way up the boards. Made the local in '93.

RM [00:05:50] Eleven years to make the local?

GE [00:05:52] Eleven years to make the local—it was a tough local to make and worked every chance I could get, you know, kind of thing. Then in '95, I got on the executive. In '96, on the executive; '97 went business agent and '98; then '99 vice-president, and 2000 president.

RM [00:06:23] You've been president and ever since?

GE [00:06:24] I've been president ever since.

RM [00:06:25] What's happened to the longshore? They used to vote guys like you out every so often.

GE [00:06:29] It's comin' this year. (laughter)

RM [00:06:30] [unclear]

GE [00:06:32] Probably. (laughter)

RM [00:06:34] Let's go back a bit. It took you 11 years to make a full member?

GE [00:06:41] Yes.

RM [00:06:41] So what's the process involved in that? Why does it take so long? And how do you qualify?

GE [00:06:46] Well, it doesn't take so long anymore because there's way more work opportunity. Back then, I mean, it was when I took over—when I took this job over, we only had about 35 members and then probably approximately 60 casuals, so about 95 people. Right now, we have 850 registered. So now the opportunities, it's, you know, it's—there's a lot more opportunity and it doesn't take that long anymore. How the system works is that you get in the entry level. It was hard to get training at the time back then. Now it's gonna require people to take training because most of it's machine jobs anyway. Then you work your way up the boards and then get in the local.

RM [00:07:42] Is it based on hours worked?

GE [00:07:44] Based on hours worked, seniority, yup.

RM [00:07:46] Was it always fair, or, do you ever feel you were discriminated against, or you got favours that others didn't get? Apparently, there's a lot of bitching about that.

GE [00:07:54] Oh, yeah. There's always bitching.

RM [00:07:56] Who gets called, who doesn't get called.

GE [00:07:57] Well, the thing, the key was to show up at the hall, every day. I did, I was there every day because I liked the job. My first job was on a pay day that I got called out. It was shovelling grain and I says, 'Oh, they actually pay us for this?' Coming from fishing at three in the morning—I'm up at three in the morning until sometimes dark at night for very, very little money.

RM [00:08:27] So is that your first hourly job?

GE [00:08:29] Yes.

RM [00:08:30] Wow. And you really liked it?

GE [00:08:32] I liked it, yeah.

RM [00:08:33] What did you really like about it in addition to the pay cheque?

GE [00:08:35] Oh, I liked it because it was on the water as well. It was coast to coast. The work was good. You know, some it was better than others, but you could see a future, you could see training, you could see, you know, that there was room for advancement there.

RM [00:08:55] You being a casual, could you make enough money to kinda of survive on?

GE [00:08:59] I went and purchased a house in '85 and I wondered, 'What the hell did I do?' You know, because there is no guarantees on the waterfront, but it actually worked out.

RM [00:09:15] You didn't have to get a part time job somewhere else or anything like that?

GE [00:09:19] No, I stuck with longshoring because you had to be there every day. If you're there every day, you got enough work.

RM [00:09:29] Was it physical work in those days?

GE [00:09:31] Oh, yeah, way more physical than it is now. We had a lot of bigger chains like manual work, tarps, nets, stanchions, you know, things like that. Lots more shovelling. Yeah, there was there was a lot more physical, harder work then.

RM [00:09:56] Did you like that?

GE [00:09:57] Oh, I didn't mind it. It was exercise.

RM [00:10:02] What about the weather? (laughter)

GE [00:10:04] The weather—I come from the East Coast. Very typical.

RM [00:10:08] Yeah.

GE [00:10:10] The weather. You know. Yeah. There was lots of rainy days. A lot more rainy days in Rupert, but you got rain gear.

RM [00:10:22] It was a really much smaller operation then than it is now?

GE [00:10:26] Absolutely.

RM [00:10:27] You really know the guys and there'd be lots of camaraderie and—

GE [00:10:30] Lots of it. Yeah, it was gangs—we used to call gangs, now not Hells Angels, and that, you know, that type of gang (laughter) we don't need that kind of publicity, but we get it anyway, I guess. But no, it was—yeah—it was a lot more camaraderie. Now everyone's in machines and radios.

RM [00:10:53] Well, I saw—was it you or somebody in that video talked about, you know, the containers come in and they never touch the ground. They're just loaded right onto the trains, right?

GE [00:11:01] Yeah.

RM [00:11:01] And away they go and that's it. Did you have a question, Donna?

DS [00:11:05] No.

RM [00:11:07] Did you have a preference for joining a union, even when you—I knew you had to go through the union to work, but I mean, why would you get involved with the union?

GE [00:11:18] Well, because I thought that there was things that could be changed. That needed to be changed.

RM [00:11:26] Within the union?

GE [00:11:27] Yes, within the union. Like you were talking about discriminatory practises. I'm not speaking against the union because everybody lives and learns from their mistakes. We were kind of looked down upon, too, because we were East Coasters, right? Of course, there was people here that's been here for years, and they have their own kids and everything else that they want to keep employed and I guess we were kind of a threat to that. You know, that was basically what I ran for. There had to be some change.

RM [00:12:07] Were you always successful when you ran?

GE [00:12:12] I had a few challenges, but—

RM [00:12:15] What does that mean?

GE [00:12:15] Well, a few close calls or a few close votes and stuff like that, but I managed to get through.

RM [00:12:21] The membership kind of liked your message, I guess, is what I mean?

GE [00:12:24] Yeah.

RM [00:12:27] Who gets to vote in those elections? The casuals get the vote, too?

GE [00:12:30] No, it's the members only because we don't have full member casual meetings. It's members.

RM [00:12:41] How many members would there have been when you first got elected to the executive board? Whatever you first got elected to.

GE [00:12:48] When I was first elected, there was probably about 60 or 70.

RM [00:12:52] And that has gone up, the number of full-time members?

GE [00:12:54] It went up and then it went down after the pulp mill closing and lumber getting diverted south.

RM [00:13:03] So you had to when you ran, it was really just a small number of workers that you had to appeal to.

GE [00:13:10] Yeah.

RM [00:13:11] But obviously they liked your message?

GE [00:13:13] Well, and sometimes there wasn't a lot of competition to run against people that just want to go to work. They didn't want to be involved in politics—the union.

RM [00:13:26] You've been, you know, union president for a long time. I mean, is there something consistent in your message to the members that they like what you're doing and like they really tried to focus on? What's your philosophy that obviously works?

GE [00:13:42] Well, it's definitely—it's a great job and look after it because I see in a common, I see a goal, see the peaks and valleys. Well, like, you know, we've been through it and a lot of the newer members haven't. A message to them is that you've got a great job, look after it. Take care of it.

RM [00:14:09] In terms of your philosophy is, as president, I mean, is—do you have a consistent philosophy or just to do a good job for the members as basic as that?

GE [00:14:18] Oh, as me, myself?

RM [00:14:19] Yeah.

GE [00:14:20] Well, it's basically look after the union, look at the members, and look after what they have, and look after everybody. My message is that that's why I'm there. That's not easy sometimes but uh—

RM [00:14:40] Do you do your own negotiating here? Or, are you covered by the coast-wide agreement?

GE [00:14:44] We got the coast-wide agreement, but we also got local agreements that, you know, because of the distance or geography, is that you have to make your own deal sometimes just to make it work. We do it and it could be a black book document.

RM [00:15:02] What was that?

GE [00:15:02] A black book document, which is an addendum to the collective agreement. You can get like local agreements there. Basically, over the years, we went by the honour system. As you know, I shook your hand on a deal and you shook back and we honour it.

RM [00:15:25] Have you had any local strikes?

GE [00:15:28] Local strikes no. If there was a strike, it would be coast-wide.

RM [00:15:35] What are the employers like here?

GE [00:15:38] I'm after seeing a few employers.

RM [00:15:40] What's that?

GE [00:15:40] I'm after seeing a few employers and dealing with a few employers. Right now, we have DP World, which is a big conglomerate. Dubai Ports, they have probably 70 or 80 terminals in the world. Everyone's probably treated different, but they treat us well in Canada.

RM [00:16:03] Have you had any employers that have really been bastards?

GE [00:16:08] Kind of.

RM [00:16:09] What's that?

GE [00:16:10] Kind of. (laughter)

RM [00:16:12] You want to talk about that?

GE [00:16:13] Well, like, you know, we have employers now that can be bastards. Like, you know, it's just it depends on who's runnin' it. I think they're bastards and outside of your job, you know, kind of thing. So. Yeah. We still—I have dealt with some. Yes.

RM [00:16:36] All right. We sort of touched on this earlier, but like when you look at when you started in the job and the way it is now, I mean, you must shake your head to some extent, at the changes?

GE [00:16:51] Absolutely.

RM [00:16:52] Do you think it's for the better?

GE [00:16:56] It worries me.

RM [00:16:57] Why is that?

GE [00:16:59] It worries me now because of the lack of camaraderie. For one thing, it's because of all the machine drivers. They communicate by radio only. They've cut down on our social life basically on the job. You get a half an hour lunch break. Not a lot of people even get together for lunches anymore. So that concerns me. The other thing concerning is the new generation of workers. They're something that we can't change; it is what it is. It's how they are brought up to communicate with phones and computers and stuff like that, which is we're the old school I know (laughter). It's hard for us to accept.

RM [00:17:51] I can relate to that.

GE [00:17:53] Yeah. I have to get my kids to show me how to use the phone. They have different needs now. Like, you know, there's family, which we always had and managed to work around, but it's a top priority now. It's lifestyle. It's whatever. 'You expect me to go to work every day? No, no, I don't do that.' So that worries me.

RM [00:18:18] It's interesting, we talked about the camaraderie because you'd have to like shift games or whatever, you know, working together like physical work.

GE [00:18:26] Yes.

RM [00:18:27] That really that was kind of the feature of the docks in those days, eh?

GE [00:18:31] Yes, it was.

RM [00:18:32] And maybe better?

GE [00:18:33] Yeah. We were all put together. We were there. Now, yes you can communicate to a lot of people probably a lot faster but I don't know if it's so effective.

RM [00:18:45] You knew everybody's name?

GE [00:18:46] Oh yeah. First name, nickname, whatever you want. If you didn't have a nickname, we gave you one.

DS [00:18:53] What were some of the nicknames?

GE [00:18:55] Oh, Christ. The Bombers. The Gum Bees. (laughter) There's all kinds of—Slippery because he was always the guy that could slide away. You wouldn't know where he went, you know, kinda thing.

RM [00:19:21] Does everybody know each other down on the docks now?

GE [00:19:24] I don't know people down there now.

RM [00:19:25] Wow. And you're the president.

GE [00:19:27] And I'm the president. I mean, I'm down there. I make a visit. I still work.

RM [00:19:32] Yeah.

GE [00:19:33] So I go down, you know, last week, for example, I was probably at DP World three days or four days last week. There's people there every day that I don't know.

RM [00:19:45] What's your job? What do you do on the docks now?

GE [00:19:48] I used to drive dock gantry, but because of my back issues and everything else, I kinda just faded away from that because it really bugs my health now. I go down [unclear] end, which is basically under the dock gantry, so guiding the dock gantry driver into the spots that he can't see and what have you, right. I do that and then I spend my other bit of time on the other side of the mountain working grain.

RM [00:20:22] You still like grain?

GE [00:20:23] I like grain.

RM [00:20:24] What do you like about grain?

GE [00:20:26] Because you still have some camaraderie, and you still have a few people you can talk to, and actually be on a ship as you are loading grain, have a conversation. We actually throw a fishing rod and every now and again catch a halibut. (laughter).

RM [00:20:44] Really?

GE [00:20:45] Yeah.

RM [00:20:45] That's great. Did I read somewhere that in Alaska [unclear] more detail about mechanization, but with grain, it hasn't changed that much. The methods, is that right or not?

GE [00:21:01] In my time it did because we used to go down below and load grain at one time. That was one of the jobs that you could get at the hall because you were down with a small hopper and a conveyor belt, and it was in the Russians. We had the tween decks. You get down and the only way you can get the grain in the tween decks was get down with the machine, pour into the machine so you could shoot in the corner. When it come back and hit you, the feet—you couldn't see nothin' anyway—and didn't have no mass or anything like that. Then you knew that it was time to move the machine. Yeah, so it has changed.

RM [00:21:41] But it still—maybe it's changed less than the other aspects of longshoring. Or am I wrong about that?

GE [00:21:48] But a lot of 'em now go into containers as well. A lot of grain.

RM [00:21:52] Oh yeah. Okay.

GE [00:21:53] So yeah, it has changed.

RM [00:21:56] Do you want to talk about mechanization, automation on the docks? You know, you'd think there'd be fewer people, but I guess there's more just because the business is more. I mean, when did you first really start to see a big change?

GE [00:22:11] Well, when it went from a lot of manual labour to machine. I mean, forklifts and then bigger cranes, bigger apparatus lifting, apparatuses. We went from taking two packs of lumber to eight packs of lumber, 10 packs of lumber, 12 packs of lumber, you know. It all basically started then. Loaded at the grain elevator now. You can do 40 tonnes a minute. (laughter) Forty tonnes a minute—well, we used to do 300 an hour, eh. Now you're going from 300 an hour up to 2,400 tonnes an hour.

RM [00:22:58] It's unbelievable.

GE [00:23:00] That was the start of mechanization that I have seen. Now of course, containers all are [unclear] that we used to do with lumber, pulp, steel—well there's still some steel, still some lumber and some pulp, but not here. We don't have a break boat terminal, so it's basically all going in containers.

RM [00:23:22] Is it more dangerous or less dangerous? How does that impact safety?

GE [00:23:27] It's probably—there's less people hands on; so, more machines, but still machines are dangerous. There's not a lot of people walking the docks anymore or anything like that because you can't. There's still a lot of accidents and injuries because it's such a fast pace. You know, speed. They want production, production, production, right now because—and those things everything is anywhere from 30 to 40 tons. You're lifting a lot of weight around you.

RM [00:24:06] You had some bad accidents here?

GE [00:24:08] Well, we had some serious accidents. Not really bad.

RM [00:24:12] No fatalities?

GE [00:24:13] Luckily, no.

RM [00:24:13] That's good.

GE [00:24:14] We have people die on the job and it was like natural heart attacks, what have you, not being run over by machinery or—but, we had some close calls.

RM [00:24:29] There is, of course, a dispute going on right now with the longshoremen over automation. Is that right? That affect you guys up here, or is just in Vancouver?

GE [00:24:37] No, it's probably going to affect everyone eventually. Right now, I always have conversations with DP World and whoever and say, 'When are we going to automate?'.
[00:24:45] I don't know. I don't know.

RM [00:24:54] When are you going to do what?

GE [00:24:54] When are we going to automate.

RM [00:24:55] I thought you were automated.

GE [00:24:56] It's not if, it's when. Right. No, we still run the cranes. We still run the machines. The automation is when robots start taking over.

RM [00:25:09] Aw, gotcha. Yes, yes.

GE [00:25:09] That's full automation.

RM [00:25:11] Right.

GE [00:25:13] Yeah, we're into—used to be manual checking or planning stuff like this. It's all about my computer now, but people still do it. They tell me they're not planning on automating here.

RM [00:25:27] But you see that coming?

GE [00:25:29] Oh yeah, absolutely. It's coming. It's definitely a way of the world. I mean, we work on automation now with coal.

RM [00:25:36] Yeah, the dispatch hall has certainly changed, eh? I mean, people used to go down there every day. Now people get called, don't they, or what happens. How does it work now?

GE [00:25:47] We pre dispatch now.

RM [00:25:49] Yeah.

GE [00:25:49] The day before. We've always pre dispatched here but most of the people we'd have go to the hall. Right now, with so many people working every day, we can't accommodate everybody going to the hall every day so we pre dispatch.

RM [00:26:03] That's a good problem.

GE [00:26:04] Yeah, for sure. I mean—

RM [00:26:06] How many people are working in a day?

GE [00:26:09] Well, it could be up to a couple of hundred, you know. At one time, it was only probably 20 or 30. It's a big change for Old Hall.

RM [00:26:23] Well, it's a big change for employment, too.

GE [00:26:25] Yeah, for employment.

RM [00:26:26] This is all good. These are good paying jobs, right?

GE [00:26:28] Well, the DP World told me couple of years ago they paid out a 100 million in payroll.

RM [00:26:35] Here?

GE [00:26:37] Yeah, here.

RM [00:26:37] Wow.

GE [00:26:38] That's probably after going up 20 percent by that, since that, or 20 to 30 percent because we just broke a million hours last year.

RM [00:26:49] Is that the first time ever?

GE [00:26:50] First time ever in history—a million hours and a million containers.

RM [00:26:57] You know, Prince Rupert has this tradition of boom busts and people say prosperity is just around the corner and your wild eye dreams and everything, but in this case, it seems to be coming true. They built that container port—I mean, they realized it's working.

GE [00:27:14] Absolutely. It's definitely between us and Local 505, the grain workers out there, which are an ILWU affiliate as well, and 523, which is the coal terminal. They're an ILWU Local 523. Rupert would be in sad shape without the ILWU.

RM [00:27:41] Can you explain those locals? I got a little lost there.

GE [00:27:43] Okay. Well, we're Local 505. We're the oldest local around. The grain workers have just joined us—the Local 333, Grain Workers Union, GWU. They joined the ILWU a couple of years back.

RM [00:28:01] Because they used to be their own union? [unclear] the Grain Workers Union.

GE [00:28:04] Yeah, that's right. Yeah. Now they're part of the ILWU and they come to board meetings and everything with us and 523 as well, which is the coal workers out there are ILWU.

RM [00:28:17] Is there any suggestion they should all be part of one local?

GE [00:28:21] There have been. There has been. We're growing so fast that we haven't really got time to concentrate on getting everybody together kind of thing.

RM [00:28:32] Are there so many members that you might—like you're not full time, right, as the president. Might that be in the cards?

GE [00:28:39] This is just the way I want it.

RM [00:28:41] Oh, it is?

GE [00:28:41] Yeah.

RM [00:28:42] Do you think the next president might be full time?

GE [00:28:44] I would say.

RM [00:28:47] Why do you like the way it is? Why is that good for you not to be full time?

GE [00:28:51] Well, for one thing, I don't want to be on call seven days a week. I managed to do my job and plus go to work too as well. Then I'm kinda get the pulse of what's happenin' on the job and it makes the job a little easier. Instead of trying to listen to all this rhetoric (laughter)—this was goin' on, or that's goin' on. Well, if you're there, you know what's happening, and you can deal with it right there.

RM [00:29:23] I have one more question. What's with the foreman's local? How does that work?

GE [00:29:27] The foreman's local is—traditionally a lot of them came out of the—right out of the rank and file. It has changed over the years because of the demand for foremen. I mean, they're going to have—they want 60 foremen, DP World does.

RM [00:29:46] Here? in Prince Rupert, 60?

GE [00:29:49] Sixty.

RM [00:29:48] Holy mackerel!

GE [00:29:50] They're up to 40, 46 or something right now.

RM [00:29:53] Wow.

GE [00:29:53] And they're hiring 14 more. So, they're comin' and, you know, so basically, they've been hiring a lot of foremen with like little experience.

RM [00:30:04] Why do they need so many?

GE [00:30:06] Because of the demand. It's just a—it's another 7-24 hour job. See the thing with containers, the biggest change that we have with containers is that they will basically stop for nothing. They want to go 7-24. We only have three days a year that we don't work—three non-work days— and that's Christmas Eve, or uh Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Labour Day. All the rest of the holidays, we work.

RM [00:30:38] Do you get double pay?

GE [00:30:39] Yeah, but you got to cover those shifts, right? You need foremen to cover those shifts while we're working.

RM [00:30:44] Got you. They were all part of a coast-wide local?

GE [00:30:48] Yup. Yeah, they're actually—yeah, they're coast coast-wide. They're not an autonomous local like we are. They're 514 up here, same as 514 in Vancouver. They have one president—so Frank, right?

RM [00:31:04] Yes. Right.

GE [00:31:05] So he runs the coast basin.

RM [00:31:07] So those foremen up here belong to 514?

GE [00:31:10] Yes.

RM [00:31:10] There's not a separate Prince Rupert foremen's local?

GE [00:31:13] No.

RM [00:31:15] Wow. I'm just shocked by how many people.

GE [00:31:17] Yes. Amazing, isn't it?

RM [00:31:19] Turned on, he was [unclear].

DS [00:31:20] I wanted to ask a bit about the union itself. It's celebrated 100 years, ten years ago. It's a very old local. Have you—what's your knowledge of the origins of the union in Prince Rupert and any stories that you may have heard from some of the old timers?

GE [00:31:44] Well, like I say, I've only been around since the eighties, right? So, it's—I mean, I worked with some of the old timers and you hear, you know, of the old hands [unclear] days, which I dismissed. (laughter) That's when automation was basically starting, when machines, like I said earlier, we used to go down and pack 500-pound bales of pulp and stuff like that. That was the story that they used to tell me. You used to have 13 men gangs then. In my time it went down to eight men gangs. Now it could be anything, you know, because there is no such structure anymore like it used to be. I don't know a lot of the old history. That's all—basically what I know is the history that I've been involved in, but certainly there's definitely a lot of stories from way back when there was the Shipping Federation, the BCMEA [British Columbia Maritime Employers' Association] was, and they were a payroll company, then they came in and got involved and all the other—negotiate, recruit, and dispatch.

RM [00:33:01] Did you ever know Norm Cunningham?

GE [00:33:04] Boutier? [unclear] I heard about him.

RM [00:33:06] The old SIU guy?

GE [00:33:08] Yeah. A lot of those people were before my time.

RM [00:33:11] Yeah. I used to cover Norm Cunningham when I was a labour reporter. He was colourful. (laughter)

GE [00:33:18] Yeah, and Wyles was the guy when I started there.

RM [00:33:21] Oh yeah, I didn't know him. I recognize the name. You guys have been, you've been on strike, I suppose, and you know, anything from those stories when you were on strike and so on?

GE [00:33:37] Well, when there was a strike, we participated. Definitely we got involved in other unions when they were on strike. We supported the postal workers, any cannery workers, you know, whatever strike was on the go. Prince Rupert is a pretty pro-union town. Always has been. Yeah, so—and our own, of course. I sat by a few burning barrels (laughter) during my tenure, but there wasn't a lot of strikes.

RM [00:34:19] Yeah. I mean, the major union in town, of course, used to be the PPWC [formerly Pulp, Paper, and Woodworkers of Canada, now Public and Private Workers of Canada].

GE [00:34:26] Yes.

RM [00:34:27] Which was not in the house of labour, as you know. How were relations between them and you guys?

GE [00:34:32] Well, we've actually managed to load ship—load and unload ships that they're about to ship side only. We had an agreement and it was an agreement from back in the early days, and they're still in the hall somewhere, Where the—that we would do the ship side and they would do anything on the docking end.

RM [00:34:51] And that was fine; they worked it out.

GE [00:34:53] Yeah, they worked it out.

RM [00:34:55] But there wasn't a—you didn't shun them because they're not in the CLC or anything like that.

GE [00:35:01] No. We always worked with them, and actually now we have a lot of ex PPWC workers.

RM [00:35:10] Exactly right. My God. Yup, go ahead.

GE [00:35:15] Yup, no, that's it.

RM [00:35:18] Didn't the BC Fed call a one-day strike in—[unclear] Van der Zalm? uh. Does that ring a bell with you?

DS [00:35:28] One day General Street? 1987?

RM [00:35:30] Yeah.

GE [00:35:32] Yeah. I probably would have been on something like a seaboard or—and so we probably weren't involved in that. Maybe the members were. It's a hard one to—.

RM [00:35:42] You know, Prince Rupert is such an unusual place. It really is, and you're still here. (laughter) You gotta love it. It's so different community then, you know, down in the Lower Mainland and so on, is that transfer itself to the longshoring too? I mean, when you would—when you go down to Vancouver, I mean, is it that much different, or is it still basic longshoring but on a small, kinda smaller scale?

GE [00:36:09] Well, when I took this job over in 2000, the life were pretty well [unclear]. And we had a local that was really struggling to keep our benefits and pensions and everything else up. During negotiations, I managed to negotiate a travel deal so our local could travel south and work. I was one of them, of course. We worked out of New Westminster mostly and Vancouver. The dock work is a lot the same; politics was always different. (laughter) Like you said, it's always colourful (laughter) because we got strangers now from up North basically going and working our boards, you know, and we got our own people that should be working there and, da da da. We got wolfed at, you know, because that's what we used to do in New Westminster was sign the wolf sheet.

RM [00:37:06] What's that?

GE [00:37:08] We'd go out after the local members. You sign a sheet saying that, okay, here's your ratings, so when they were dispatching, they would dispatch you according to the sheet. After those members were dispatched in Local 502, then we would get a shot at jobs before casual.

RM [00:37:28] There wasn't any conflict between you down there?

GE [00:37:30] No, not a lot of conflict, but the casuals did not like it.

RM [00:37:35] Oh, right.

GE [00:37:37] They would go wolf at us, you know, kind of thing and things like that.

RM [00:37:43] Were the Local 502, you know, leaders and stuff were they pretty good at trying to keep things calm?

GE [00:37:50] Some were.

RM [00:37:53] (laughter) Yes.

GE [00:37:54] Some were not.

RM [00:37:55] That's interesting, actually, and of course, it's very human. Would it ever erupt in the bar or anything like that or?

GE [00:38:08] We tried to keep our people away from any kind of events and what have you because you didn't want this to erupt. We weren't there to take your jobs. In fact, we were quite an asset to 502 because they were just gettin' into the loading logs and that was our speciality. Plus, it kept our skills up, as well. That's basically where we would be

put was on log ships and we thought the next generation of 502 will be coming up to load logs. It actually worked very well.

RM [00:38:50] How many of you guys went down there?

GE [00:38:53] Oh, Christ, sometimes we had 25 people travelling.

RM [00:38:57] Did you have to look after your own accommodation?

GE [00:38:59] No, I negotiated a deal with the BCMEA that they would pay our way down and back. They would give us a living out allowance for accommodation.

RM [00:39:08] Wow. I guess it was in their interest too?

GE [00:39:10] Well, of course, because they were on shortages down South, and I said this only makes sense. We got a labour pool up here that you could draw from.

RM [00:39:17] How long did that last? How long did that go on?

GE [00:39:21] Oh, it went on until I think the next—I started talking to Brian Marr from Marr terminals in 2002, but there was still no work here. I went back to New Jersey in 2005 and then our terminal opened 2007, but we had a lot of prep from, probably from 2005 to 2007 to get people trained up to container moving equipment, what have you, right.

RM [00:39:52] Do you think that longshore played—from other places like (I don't know where your locals are anymore) like Port Alberni or anything like that, that they also go down to Vancouver and work?

GE [00:40:03] Yes.

RM [00:40:04] Wow, that's really interesting.

GE [00:40:05] Yeah, the Vancouver Island, we got to know a lot of people from Vancouver Island. They come over from work—come over to New West to work, as well, and during cruise ship season in Vancouver it's crazy. They were looking for machine operators, like forklift operators, and we were already pretty trained.

RM [00:40:23] Did you like working down there?

GE [00:40:25] Yeah, I liked New West a little bit more than Vancouver because there's less congestion and we live that close to the docks, and you know, and there is a bit of a more—I should say, I gotta watch my words, eh. (laughter) Anyway, you know, there—it was more of a accommodation in 502 than there was in 500—500 is a bigger role in it.

RM [00:40:52] And I won't mention motorcycles.

GE [00:40:54] No, and that too, yeah. (laughter) Well, you know what, you hear all these stories that Kim Bolan does, and then—

RM [00:41:01] Yeah. Right. I know Kim.

GE [00:41:02] And whoever else.

RM [00:41:02] No kidding.

GE [00:41:03] Yeah. And, you know, some of it may be true, some of it may not. I've known a lot of people over the years, and I've never seen a lot of this, but I wasn't in the circles, neither.

RM [00:41:19] Do you ever think about moving permanently down to the Lower Mainland?

GE [00:41:22] Not a chance.

RM [00:41:24] Why not?

GE [00:41:25] I'm a small-town boy and the East Coast and West Coast.

RM [00:41:31] Do you prefer the work too in Prince Rupert than down there? Or is it the same?

GE [00:41:38] I bought a house on the other side of town in Seal Cove. People came up to me and said, 'Why would you buy a house on the other side—all the way on the other side of town?' I said, 'Have you ever been to Vancouver and work?' 'Well, no.' I says, 'Well, it takes me 10 minutes to get from my house to the dock. In 10 minutes, you can't change your mind in Vancouver.'

RM [00:42:02] That's so true, isn't it? (laughter)

GE [00:42:07] No way! I used to have to get up at five in the morning, and when we worked in Vancouver and we get off at six in the eve—probably get home around six that evening because of the travel. We get a pay—well, we get 4 hours for our living out—but, you know, it's just brutal.

RM [00:42:29] So what does a full-time—almost full-time, I suppose—longshore earn in a year, up here?

GE [00:42:38] A hundred plus.

RM [00:42:39] A hundred plus. Yeah, sure. That's pretty damn good.

GE [00:42:42] Not bad.

RM [00:42:43] Yeah, that's a wage of a millwright. (laughter)

GE [00:42:45] Yeah. Well, for you not having to go to school. I mean, we do have special skills, as well. I mean, if you're driving machinery all the time, you got to know what you're doing and it does take a lot of concentration and dedication.

RM [00:43:01] That would go a lot farther than it would in Vancouver, right?

GE [00:43:03] Absolutely.

RM [00:43:05] What's the price of housing like these days?

GE [00:43:07] Well, it's certainly creeping up. As you know, as the town get wealthier—and that's just economics, straight economics—you could buy a house here—when I bought mine in '85 for the price of a truck now. (laughter)

RM [00:43:25] Let's look at the labour movement in Prince Rupert. I mean, have you been involved in the—I know you have good relations with other unions, but have you been involved with the Labour Council, or you know?

GE [00:43:34] We have. We have delegates like in the local that were involved in the Labour Council. I can't be involved in everything, right. So, you have to—because I negotiate and travel and you can't be here, you can't be there, you got to, you know, and so, yeah, we have delegates.

RM [00:43:54] You know, I was wondering, though, even looking at it, I mean, Prince Rupert has suffered so many economic setbacks and most of those jobs that were lost were union jobs. I mean, how has that affected the labour movement in Prince Rupert?

GE [00:44:07] Well, it affected labour council, for sure. When we're at meetings, I ask for Labour Council, the delegates to report, and there's not a lot of reports. It's basically, yeah, it has certainly affected the Labour Council itself and they are actually talking about us looking at taking over the Labour Council on what have you, right, or just getting our presence in there somehow so that it survives basically, right.

RM [00:44:41] Yeah. Well, that's tough.

GE [00:44:43] Yeah.

RM [00:44:44] Well, when the pulp mill closed and the fishing just went to shit and everything, I mean, there must have been a bunch of gloom hanging over Prince Rupert.

GE [00:44:53] Oh, it was terrible. It was terrible. Like I said, when I when I was flying back and forth to Vancouver, you're looking down and Fairview lights were out. Now they're burning 24 hours a day even. Yeah, it's a big change.

RM [00:45:09] How long were the lights out?

GE [00:45:11] They were never out since—well, when I took this job in 2000, right up until probably 2007 when we started our first ship.

RM [00:45:21] So there's basically no work on the docks?

GE [00:45:25] Once we started training, we trained off the docks because they were expanding and—

RM [00:45:30] Were the docks totally shut down?

GE [00:45:34] Yeah, pretty well. I mean, we had a little bit of continental grain probably going on in there.

RM [00:45:41] The grain terminal was still going and stuff like that?

GE [00:45:42] Well, the grain terminal out at Ridley.

RM [00:45:44] Yes, just not Fairview, until later on.

GE [00:45:47] We had very, very little work at Fairview.

RM [00:45:49] Wow. That is amazing. So here's a—

GE [00:45:53] They're talking about using it as an airport if you took down the light standards. (laughter)

RM [00:46:00] Is that longshore humour? (laughter).

GE [00:46:05] A little bit.

RM [00:46:05] If you look at longshore workers today, here's a question that only presidents can answer. What's the most important issue, you think, facing the job today, or even the union?

GE [00:46:17] Automation.

RM [00:46:17] Yeah. You see you guys still being around, though, in ten years?

GE [00:46:23] We're certainly going to be around with whatever it takes to train our people up to be automated and that's what we're going to be. That's our goal.

RM [00:46:35] It's tough to win fights on automation.

GE [00:46:37] Oh, it's a tough one, for sure, but we managed to bargain some language this time around that at least we'll have a committee that's going to be regularly meeting. There are plans to automate. If we can get in from ground level, then at least we'll get something out of it.

RM [00:46:59] These young workers now that are coming on board and stuff and there's more jobs, do they— are they good union members? Do they know anything about the union even?

GE [00:47:10] They have a lot to learn. Definitely have a lot to learn, but there is some real good young people too as well that are willing to learn. It's just that we got to educate them.

RM [00:47:22] I was going to ask you about that. Will you see that as your job?

GE [00:47:25] Yes.

RM [00:47:26] How do you tackle that?

GE [00:47:28] Well, what we're going to have to start doing—and it may happen in my time and I hope it does—and there's been talk about it, is that we should all have meetings together and give the casuals the updates as well as what's going on in our benefits and our pensions. These are things that make members—get their interest right. I know when I was younger, I never thought about a pension, or anything that much, but guess what? Every day now I think about it. Depending on when you start—so it's not only young

people—I mean, we've got people that started at middle-aged and got people that started at older age.

RM [00:48:07] Are casual workers eligible for pension?

GE [00:48:09] A board are not yet.

RM [00:48:11] It reminds you, I've got two more questions. First of all, one of the big changes, of course, is that women are on the docks.

GE [00:48:17] Yes.

RM [00:48:18] Do you want to talk about that a bit?

GE [00:48:20] They really want me to talk about it?

RM [00:48:21] Well, I do. (laughter) You know, I mean, that's—

GE [00:48:23] Actually, I have two daughters that are working on the waterfront. It was a tough decision to introduce them to the waterfront, but that's—they knew what I did. I mean, we live together. They breathe longshoring. They heard about my complaints. They heard about, you know, the good days and bad days. They were kind of pre-prepped when it come to longshoring; it's just that I was apprehensive about having them a bunch of men, right, you know, on the waterfront and they could be cruel. My oldest definitely learnt that you had to have a thick skin and she adapted quite well. My youngest adapted quite well. Most of the women adapted quite well; they're good operators. They're not so good at physical work so that was a tough sell to begin with. When this thing first come online and they wanted to do recruitment, they were failing all the women when it came to physical testing. I fought that thing to Ottawa, basically.

RM [00:49:41] Really?

GE [00:49:41] Yes, because I said this is not going to work, not in this day and age. You have to hire women, whether it's physical work, whether it's computer work, whether it's—some of the best planners we've got right now are women and some of the operators. It took a bit of convincing.

RM [00:50:04] Was there a lot of harassment on the job?

GE [00:50:10] Some of the women were just as bad guys when they [unclear]— (laughter)

RM [00:50:13] Come on Glen, I'm not accepting that answer.

GE [00:50:15] Well, I'm just talking about as in longshore lingo and not as in harassment. No.

RM [00:50:23] [unclear] (laughter)

GE [00:50:23] Yeah. (laughter) Yeah, longshoremen. No, long harassment cases. We had some cases, of course, that the foreman would give some of the ladies a hard time. Of course, we weren't taking that.

RM [00:50:42] No sexual stuff that you know of?

GE [00:50:43] Not that I know of, no. Oh, I'm sure it happened or happens. I mean, you hear these odd stories and that. So listen, I don't want to know this unless it's written down, unless we're investigating or something like this. If there's some real hard ass complaint, then we got to deal with it as a union, of course.

RM [00:51:02] That's a big change in longshore to have women on the docks and that's a good change.

GE [00:51:06] Oh, yeah, for sure. It was a big, big change. We have people now, females driving dock gantries and adapting just as well as—. One of the big problems with dock gantries there's no washrooms up there, but the onus goes on the companies because if they don't want to put washrooms in the crane, I guess, we'll have—you're going to have downtime if you got to go to the washroom. Very simple.

RM [00:51:38] One more question about First Nations. Are there many First Nations in your membership?

GE [00:51:45] We employ probably half are First Nations.

RM [00:51:50] Half are First Nations?

GE [00:51:51] Yes.

RM [00:51:52] Wow.

GE [00:51:54] Quite a few are women as well.

RM [00:51:56] Wow. Has that always been the case?

GE [00:51:58] Well, this is a First Nations town.

RM [00:52:00] I understand that.

GE [00:52:01] No, it hasn't—it was never that many, I don't think. Because of the onslaught of work, and of course, I work with the First Nations. Any time we had a recruitment, we used to send an application to the villages and encourage them to come over—not a lot of applications but applications. The demographics of getting people back and forth, but a lot of them have moved to town now and are working out of it.

RM [00:52:36] Well, that's pretty impressive.

GE [00:52:38] Yeah.

RM [00:52:38] You know, First Nations have a big history on the Vancouver waterfront with Chief Dan George and all that kind of stuff.

GE [00:52:45] Yeah, absolutely.

RM [00:52:45] And here, too.

GE [00:52:47] Yeah, well, some of the better, best log people that we had were First Nations.

RM [00:52:52] Really interesting.