Interview: Sharon Yandle (SY)
Interviewer: Janet Nicol (JN) and Dan Keeton (DK)
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Transcription: Cathy Walker

JN [00:00:06] Okay. We're good to go. Sharon, thank you for doing this interview. I'll start with some biographical information. Can you tell us your full name?

SY [00:00:19] Sharon Rose Heather Yandle.

JN [00:00:23] When and where were you born?

SY [00:00:24] I was born August 20th, 1941, in Vancouver.

JN [00:00:31] Where were you raised?

SY [00:00:32] I was raised in Vancouver in the east side. I lived in the same house from the time I was born until I moved out at age 18.

JN [00:00:40] I understand you're three generations, Vancouver.

SY [00:00:43] That's right.

JN [00:00:46] Can you tell us a little bit about how you grew up. Were labour issues, politics, etc., a part of your family? What did your parents do for a living?

SY [00:00:58] The answer to this question about labour unions and politics. They were to the extent that my father was a plumber and he was a socialist. He was a very strong trade unionist. My mother didn't have a clue what union was about or for. She thought it was some kind of men's social club and that my father was an alcoholic, so he didn't work too much. I think he probably was. It's interesting to think about this because he was probably more of a negative than a positive for us in our family. Yet I certainly was very pro-union. I learned to be pro-union, which is interesting. It's an interesting development considering that my mother was the positive force. As I say, she was clueless about unions.

JN [00:02:01] I think that covered all of that. How about what and when was your first experience with labour and work?

SY [00:02:08] I was working. I had a job Friday nights and Saturdays working as a cashier at Safeway at Kingsway and Knight in Vancouver. In those days, (I understood subsequently that there was no employer sign up) once I got the job and was hired, I was ushered into a backroom and somewhat surreptitiously but deliberately told, here's the union card and you must sign it. That was pushing against an open door because I felt absolutely honoured to be in a union.

JN [00:02:47] Your very first paid job was a union job?

SY [00:02:49] It wasn't my first job. Before that, I had worked worked downtown at Eaton's. They had a food floor in those days that was non-union. Then I worked as a busser in restaurants and so on. I was about 17, I think, when I went to work for Safeway it was big in my last year of high school.

JN [00:03:15] Do you have a family of your own? Can you tell us a little bit?

SY [00:03:18] I have. I'm divorced. I have four children, girl, boy, girl, girl. They were born between 1963 and 1975. My eldest daughter was a newspaper editor for many years, is now an artist. My son is a graphic artist, his own business. My next daughter has been an ESL teacher. She was an ESL teacher at VCC. She just told me the other day that she was laid off, of course, when they took ESL out of the college system to put it in the community. I think she said that they've gone from several hundred instructors to 25, so she's too low on the recall list to ever be called back. That was what she did in addition to doing tours to Cuba. My youngest daughter, Rachel, is the coordinator of adult literacy in Halifax. She's the one that got away. She's a writer as well.

JN [00:04:23] Do have any of them have children?

SY [00:04:25] Yes, my son has two boys. My eldest does not have any children. My son has two boys. My daughter, Jessica, has a boy and a girl. My daughter Rachel has a boy. Five altogether.

JN [00:04:45] The last biographical question is, I know you went to SFU after high school.

SY [00:04:52] No, not right away. After high school I wanted to go to university, but I was only the second person in my family even to graduate from high school. I remember my mother telling me that if I were a boy, it would have been different, but if I were a girl and went to university, it would just be all wasted anyway. My father was very keen on my going to university when he was sober, but he wasn't sober very often. I didn't go. I always wanted to go. Instead I went to work in various places, then I travelled for a couple of years. I got married and had a baby in New Zealand, married my high school boyfriend and came back. Then the two of us decided that we would both start university. He had attended university before. We decided SFU was opening in the fall of '65. One of the things that I had not achieved when I was in high school was I didn't pass my grade eleven math.

SY [00:05:58] SFU allowed you to go in without having to take a math course or a science course. Then, I thought I would never survive UBC for that reason. I had all these ideas that math was far too hard for girls. I didn't start actually till I was 24 and by that time, I had two kids.

JN [00:06:20] Wow. You were quite involved in the activism in those first years of SFU existing. Can you tell us a bit about that and how that would inform your later activism, if it did?

SY [00:06:37] I was very interested in politics in general. I had been really interested in the civil rights movement in the States. I think one of the reasons I wanted to go to university in the early '60s was because I wanted to be part of what was going down there. I got very much involved in anti-war activities, the Vietnam War activity. Those were those were essentially the forms of activism. I wrote a column for the SFU newspaper for a number of years. I was on the SFU Senate. I was the first woman in Canada, woman student in Canada, to be on the Senate. In fact, I was one of three of the first student senators in Canada. That was a breakthrough sort of thing. Then, of course, you know, from the history of SFU that there was an eruption that took place. I actually had graduated and gone to grad school in Wisconsin by the time the balloon went up at SFU.

JN [00:07:43] What did you study at SFU?

SY [00:07:45] I wanted to study history. That was what I intended to do, but in the period of time before I got there, I was taking correspondence courses, one of which was History 101, which was the one and only course that they were teaching in history when SFU started, so I went into sociology. I stayed in PSA because it was such an interesting department. I ended up with my BA in PSA, in sociology essentially, but I had a very strong history at the beginning.

JN [00:08:29] Then you did grad work.

SY [00:08:31] I went to graduate school in the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was doing social labour history,19th Century and especially around the 1870's, the Paris Commune.

JN [00:08:47] You have a masters as well?

SY [00:08:49] I don't have a masters.

JN [00:08:50] You didn't finish?

SY [00:08:51] I didn't finish my thesis. I did all my course work, but I didn't finish my thesis. I never took a time out at all. When I started at SFU, I went for nine consecutive semesters to my degree. The reason I did that is because in those days there were scholarships and bursaries. That was such an important source of income for me that I couldn't take a semester out because I wouldn't have any income. I had two children at the time, so I was also single-parenting. There was no day-care, no reliable day-care at all at that point. After I did a year in Wisconsin, I was tired.

JN [00:09:35] You came back to Vancouver.

SY [00:09:36] I came back to Vancouver. I had intended to go back and finish my thesis, but life intervenes sometime.

JN [00:09:43] While you were studying and even after, what kind of work did you do? Tell me how you first got started on the job? Thinking about your young adult life with two children, what sort of work would you have done?

SY [00:10:07] Before I went to university, I was at home with my first two kids for maybe a couple of years. Before that I was travelling and before that I just did odd jobs, did not do very much. In the course of being in university and in grad school and then after I came back, I got very much involved in the women's movement and in political work, essentially the NDP. At that time, the women in the NDP had taken over, as it were, the existing women's committee, which had a been kind of ladies' auxiliary kind of thing. From then, because it was the nature of the times in 1969, '70, '71, that the women's movement was just exploding everywhere so it became a very important feminist creation.

SY [00:11:09] I'm trying to think at this time how on earth was earning money at this point. I can't think of how I was (unclear). I know when I was at university, I was TA'ing, both at

SFU and at Wisconsin. Honestly, my mind has kind of gone blank. I married again in '72 and had a baby in '73. Oh, I know. I went to work for the Inner City Community Service Project, which is now at the where the Cultch is. It was in this building that it was this some United Church or whatever. They had given this church over to this service project inner city so it was earning my income and so I was involved in community organizing.

SY [00:11:55] When I was in Wisconsin, I was also doing a lot of voluntary community organizing and stuff while I was taking courses. I did work there for a couple of years and eventually we decided to shut down what we were doing because all we were really capably doing was teaching people to apply for government grants. We were working with welfare recipients and public housing tenants and a whole range of activities. This was a time of OFY and the lift program and all the rest of it. We came to the point where we thought we'd kind of outlived our usefulness. Those of us who were the principal staffers at Inner City did a survey of the people. I have to go back a bit. What we did with our building is that we allowed any community group that to kind of pass muster with our project to have free rent so we had all sorts of very interesting groups. We had the grape boycott people, we had the Vancouver Free University that was starting off at the time. We had the back to the land people. Remember UCWIC, Unemployed Citizens Welfare Improvement Committee, whatever it was. We had some architects who were doing a pro bono architectural design kind of thing. We had the legal aid, which is the first place for legal aid. Mike Harcourt, as a matter of fact, was on our board at the time. One day we did a survey of all these groups that were in the building to ask them what they thought that Inner City did. The main response was something to do with the NDP, so we thought we probably have outlived our usefulness. In any event, so we kind of did shut that down.

SY [00:14:00] The NDP government, the Barrett government was elected in '72 or three, I forget which now. One of the things that they had done under the leadership of Rosemary Brown is they had this inquiry (I can't remember what it was called now) but it was basically directed towards women in need, and to try to determine what it is that they particularly needed. We had hearings and we toured around to listen to people. I remember there was a presentation made by a group of young women, a young mum who said that what they needed was more money. They were absolutely dead on serious, that that's what they needed. If they had more money, this is what they would be able to do. I thought that was the most sensible presentation that we had actually heard. After that, I concluded that I agreed with that, and so I decided to try to work in the labour movement because that seemed to be a place where women might be able to earn more money. That's a very long, circuitous route to how I got involved in the labour movement.

JN [00:15:19] Before we move into all your labour movement involvement, any other comments on sort of all the ordinary jobs you had like Safeway unionized, Eaton's food floor. Any observations that would later kick in as you got more involved in, certainly the single mothers when you were Hospital Employees' Union identifying and so forth.

SY [00:15:50] It wasn't the jobs that I had that were influential to me. My sense of the jobs that were out there when I was young is that you would do anything to avoid them because they were just crap jobs. When I got out of high school, I thought that what I would do is get married and get out of this, not be in the workforce at all because there was nothing appealing. Once I realized that I couldn't have access to whatever interesting looking jobs there were out there, which at that time was nursing or teaching, there was nothing appealing about it to me.

SY [00:16:29] Once I got involved in the women's movement and started to make connections, I realized that it was very important for women to have higher incomes and their own incomes. I learned that through the women's movement. I have to also say that I came into the women's movement quite reluctantly, because I was unusual at SFU on the left, because I came out of a working class family. Most people on the left didn't. The people that I knew that came out of working class families, they'd gone into business and moved to Surrey, buying homes. When the women's movement first presented itself to me, I didn't understand it. I thought it was a lot of middle class women. I couldn't understand why I would want to gain equality with oppressed men. I remember so clearly asking them that question. It took a while before I understood that oppressions come in different forms, and not just that one. It was so strongly ingrained in me growing up where I did, that the 'us and them', the bosses over here and we were over here, that I really didn't understand what feminists were saying.

SY [00:17:55] I remember when I was at university, my sister was married to a guy who worked for BC Tel at the time, and there was a strike. My sister always talked about, well, we're on strike now and we we're (unclear) That was not at all unusual to express it in that way, because that's what happened when, in those days there was a time when most women were at home and if the man of the house had gone on strike, then everybody was on strike. I didn't see any sense of that, certainly in the women's movement and quite a bit in the student movement as well. I felt a little bit estranged from that. To go to work for unions, which is what I wanted to do, made a lot of sense to me and particularly to go to work in a union where I felt that I could pursue these goals that we were having in the women's movement of independent incomes, that sort of thing, that just seemed to me a natural thing to do. And I did.

JN [00:19:04] One more question connected to this is when you were growing up, did you see maybe not your mother but other neighbours where the women had working class jobs or was your neighbourhood mostly men worked, women were at home, even in that working class?

SY [00:19:24] It was kind of almost in the lumpen area of working class. When I think of it, mostly the women were at home. I remember when I was in elementary school, there was a girl there who was whose mum was a single parent. That was just extraordinary not to come from a two parent family. I am sure that there was all the taking in boarders and all the level of work that we didn't recognize as work at the time.

SY [00:20:04] When I was very little at the place where Famous Foods presently is, that used to be a Venetian blind factory, Jones Tent & Awning. Before I went to school, I remember I would go up there and I had a kitten. The factory was actually almost below ground. There was this row of windows that were just above the ground. I remember going there and sitting down. These women who were wearing the kerchiefs, the 'we can do it kind of kerchief' were there on this assembly line putting out these Venetian blinds. They would come over when I kind of—they would open the window and talk to me and pet the cat and that sort of thing. I think I must have done that fairly regularly. That always stayed in my mind because that must have been just post-war maybe about '46 or '47 before the women were all kicked out of the workforce again. Those were the only women I saw working, and I didn't see them for very long.

JN [00:21:15] You grew up on the east side, up around Kingsway. What high school would you have attended?

SY [00:21:20] I went to Gladstone.

JN [00:21:25] Let's move to politics at work and labour issues. What was the overall relationship between workers, employers and unions? We'll start with the HEU. That was the first.

SY [00:21:42] That was the first union I worked for. I don't think I quite understand that question.

JN [00:21:55] The overall relationship between workers, the employers, so the hospital workers and the government employer and then the HEU, hopefully that was very and strong positive with the HEU. You came in the '70s to work for HEU?

SY [00:22:15] I did. It was about '74, I think it was.

JN [00:22:24] Would you have said that there was a lot of trust with the union, animosity toward the employer, or was it? What were the dynamics like?

SY [00:22:38] For me, at that time when I went into HEU, it was to organize the unorganized and the unorganized at that time were in private hospitals. This is before the long term care program. In that sense it was almost as if I were organizing in the private sector. I had to deal with employers who were looking at the bottom line, which people did not do in dealing with the health employers. That was called the health labour relations association with the big hospitals. The Labour Code had changed. The labour laws had changed. The Barrett government had brought in, a labour code that allowed for two things. One was, section 70 I think, they allowed for a first contract to be arbitrated. Section 73 allowed essential service workers to also opt for arbitration if they wanted to, to settle a dispute.

SY [00:23:46] Before I was hired, the union had made many, many attempts to organize private hospital workers who were (you know, the union itself at that time was 85% female), the private hospital workers were 98% female. They had never succeeded because they could sign them up, they could get a majority, they would win the vote, they could get down to the bargaining table, but they couldn't get that contract because these people were eminently replaceable. They were essentially unskilled. Even the ones who were skilled, like cooks were considered to be unskilled. There had been a very long strike at Sandringham private hospital in Victoria, though I don't know if that strike ever actually settled. It just went on for years and years. Oh yes, it did settle, and they settled at something like $0.02 an hour above the minimum wage. It was really unbelievable after all those years. HEU didn't want to go that route. I think it was CUPE, HEU wasn't part of CUPE then or HEU had broken away from CUPE and hadn't rejoined at that time. They didn't want to go that route, but when this new legislation came in, they thought that it was worth a try so that's what I did.

SY [00:24:58] We started a big campaign and I went around and organized a number of the private hospitals. Even though the labour laws were much more favourable than they'd ever been before or since, I was still signing up people at midnight by the headlights of cars in back alleys. It was still not safe to join a union. That's what we did. We arbitrated the first contract, which was just a disaster. It was a terrible settlement, but we kept plodding along and eventually we got huge increases for these workers, primarily initially through arbitration, but then through negotiation or a combination of the two. Section 73 of the code was very interesting because it gave these essential service unions, health, police, firefighters, the unilateral right to opt for arbitration. Paul Weiler at that time had thought, and had written that arbitration takes away a worker's right to strike. If workers are going to lose the right to strike, they have to make that call themselves. It was understood if they opted for arbitration, they're giving up their right to strike for the period of that contract. That was amazingly progressive legislation. It's certainly the first possible opportunity to deep six it, it was deep six'd. In fact, we had employers who were going to the government and asking them not to limit the right to strike for workers but take away the arbitration option because they could defeat a strike, but they couldn't defeat arbitration. It was a great weapon in the arsenal, then lost it.

JN [00:26:49] When was the first strike after you got settled in there with contracts, and then you could freely negotiate? Were you on board when that step happened?

SY [00:27:08] I'm going back a long time, we did have, I remember, a series of strikes at one point.

JN [00:27:14] You did reach that stage once you had the contracts in place?

SY [00:27:18] We did. But you know what? As with most collective bargaining situations, you got to the strike vote and you got to serving the strike notice and so on, much more often than you actually went on strike.

SY [00:27:38] There was a conflict that emerged within the union. The long term care program came into being during this period, in large part because of the work that we were doing, exposing the conditions of care at private hospitals, which are absolutely horrendous. I remember one woman who was a nurse aide had no training whatsoever. She was giving injections. It was staggering. The food that people were given to eat. It was unbelievable.

SY [00:28:12] I remember one call. It was the greatest thing in the world when the union came into these places, because now there was a countervailing authority. There was somebody that they could phone up. I remember this cook phoned up and she said, 'Do I have to cook green meat?' I said, 'Pardon?' She said, 'Do I have to cook green meat?' 'I'm pretty sure not. What's the situation?' She said that they had such a poor freezer that they would put these great huge chunks of meat into the freezer and by the time it was thawed again, it was going bad. She was being told to cook it. Of course, even without a contract, we didn't even need a collective agreement at that point to go in and start throwing things around and making noise, so that stopped.

SY [00:29:03] There was another hospital tragedy, private hospital, I remember where they had to pull up all the food up these three stories with a dumbwaiter. It was breaking their backs to do it. It was so heavy. We were able to put a stop to that kind of thing too.

SY [00:29:17] Eventually, the conditions were quite bad, we had pulled together a number of statutory declarations in one hospital, King George Hospital in Surrey, that persuaded the government to step in and do something about it. Interestingly, a very important person in that was Bill Vander Zalm. He was the mayor of Surrey at the time, and one of our people knew him. We got in touch with him and he met with us and we were telling him all of these horrible conditions that were going on and Vander Zalm being Vander Zalm, he said this is an outrage and so on.

SY [00:30:03] When all of this political pressure was going on, the long term care program came in and King George Private Hospital became in fact an extended care unit of Surrey Memorial Hospital. Within the Union there were some divisions taking place. The purpose of this, what I was doing was to bring the working conditions and wages to the level of the master agreement in health care, but there was pressure within the union leadership to make a deal and to leave it at five or 10% less. There was great internal battle going on which I lost because I was on staff. When you're on staff and you're fighting against elected executives, you don't win. That was 12 years.

JN [00:31:04] I did ask you about the strike and this question touches on again. Tell me about your experiences with going on strike. How long did they last, how were they organized? I know HEU and later BCTF you were involved on staff. Can you comment about strikes and your experience?

SY [00:31:23] I'd like to comment about solidarity in 1983 because I thought that was one of the most instructive lessons I learned. As you probably know, there was Operation Solidarity, which were the unions that were coming together to fight against this quite draconian labour legislation. Then there was the Solidarity Coalition, which was presumably a coalition of community groups, and it was left to the staff of unions primarily to go out to the membership and try to convince them to get on board with this strike. It was a very hard sell because it was a political strike. It had a questionable legal basis, shall we say.

SY [00:32:16] I remember going out and going to various hospitals to meet with our members to try to sell them on this, the very importance of downing tools and supporting this big effort. I'm talking to a lot of women whose feet hurt and who wanted to go home at the end of shift. They had all the things that they wanted to do. It was a very, very difficult thing to do. But we did it. I think everybody had the idea that there was a certain shelf life to that action. It could not go on for very long for various reasons.

SY [00:32:58] One of the things that completely blew me away is that I found that some of our strongest union members were actually Socreds. There was a counter organization beginning because they supported the union to the hilt in terms of collective bargaining, but not politically. At the same time I mentioned the Solidarity Coalition because the Solidarity Coalition had ideas that they would debate things and motions, and pass motions and that the unions would be bound by these motions that they were passing, which was a real silliness. I mean, it was never going to ever happen, ever.

SY [00:33:43] One person who was involved in that was this guy, Bryan Palmer. Bryan Palmer subsequently wrote a book about the strike, which was very fanciful. It was all about the betrayal that had taken place and Jack Munro and so on and so forth, but the Solidarity Coalition and Bryan Palmer were not seeing what we were seeing. It was not necessarily the case that someone is a strong trade unionist and is therefore a lefty. That was manifestly not the case.

SY [00:34:24] As to the Kelowna Accord that Jack Munro signed I have always felt, and Jack Munro was never my favourite guy, but I thought he wrongly carried the can for that. The meeting to endorse him going to Kelowna, there was only one person in that whole meeting, one union that was opposed to it, and it was a little union. When he came back with the deal, there was only one union that opposed that. You would never have known that afterwards. Everyone was standing up, yelling 'betrayed', and so on and so forth.

DK [00:35:01] What union? Don't remember?

SY [00:35:05] It's a little food service workers' union that I seem to recall. I think it might have been that. I have to say I wasn't at the meeting and so this is (unclear) in the category of hearsay. I had a friend who was at the meeting and she told me, she just rattled off all the unions. The whole idea of going to Kelowna and all the rest of it is not something that I think was a good idea, but I never thought that Munro should have carried the can like that.   It always amused me that in all the flack he got afterwards with The Face of Jack Munro and that, he never, ever said.

DK [00:35:51] He had a hide like an elephant. He just let it bounce off him.

SY [00:35:54] Yeah, but he never said 'Oh, everybody else was in on it' and he never did. You know, he just kind of took it. In fact my criticism of Jack Munro much more around the fact that he didn't do anything about the tech change that was killing his industry. That was far more significant to me.

DK [00:36:17] It's speculation, but I just wonder why even some of the public, do you think the leaders of some of the unions and really what we're talking about is really the public sector unions, were just getting scared of all of this, that it could get out of control, that you might even have martial law declared or something like that? I just wonder, did it seem that suddenly after a big role, there was a real loss of nerve there or something?

SY [00:36:45] In terms of HEU, what I think happened in the HEU is that they were afraid that it would that it was going to be shown that the emperor had no clothes. I remember Jack Gerow was the secretary-treasurer at the time and I remember that he was just telling us we had (unclear). This had to stop. You know, we can't go on this. It wasn't because of the idea that there'd be martial law or something. It was the idea that you could stand up and make a militant speech and the members wouldn't follow. I think that was a huge concern. There was a lot of bluster in the labour movement. Oh, my God. There's a lot of breast-beating and threats. 'We're going to shut this province down.'   I was like, 'Yeah. Yeah.'   I mean you know that's not going to happen.

JN [00:37:43] Do you think there was any positive outcome from the whole Operation Solidarity, say, for your union? Was it was it a good exercise?

SY [00:37:53] It was certainly good for the BCTF because the BCTF got out of it the language that they never had before, which was seniority-severance. They didn't have any clauses on severance before. That was part of the deal, part of the little compromises that they were going to leave all these alone. It was David Yorke who was working at the BCTF at the time who I think drafted up this language for the BCTF and we kind of got in there and sneaked in and got it. We didn't have collective bargaining rights at the BCTF at that time. The collective bargaining rights didn't come until about '87, this was '83. The seniority-severance clause that was negotiated was a great clause, wonderful, one of the strongest clauses that exists as far as I know of in any union. That was a very, very positive response. I think it was good for the teachers in the sense that it was, I think, very heartening, for them well, anytime there's a solidarity action, it is heartening. Strikes are teachable moments and people, I think, learned a lot there.

SY [00:39:01] There are funny things to remember. This one case in which it was, I can't remember which school district it was now. The only person that walked out during the Solidarity strike was the principal and all the teachers went in. Just to show you that no good deed shall go unpunished, this guy was then transferred to the armpit, some one room schoolhouse.

DK [00:39:28] The bigger irony is later on, when the teachers got bargaining rights, they separated the principals and vice principals.

SY [00:39:37] That's right. At that time they were still in.

DK [00:39:39] Yeah.

SY [00:39:40] Now, at the same time, this is thinking back in HEU this in the early '80's we did have a really, really good, what I think it was a great strike that took place in 1981 at the Windermere Care facility on West 12th Avenue. I had the chance at this time to put into action the way I thought a strike should be run. You don't always have this opportunity when you're a staffer. This was kind of my territory and I was responsible as the negotiator and as the strike coordinator and all the rest of it. We had 85, there were 85 women almost, there were a couple of men. They were having minimum wage conditions but the owner of this place was a big corporation whose name slipped my mind, a big national corporation. They're paying these minimum, pitiful wages. We did go on strike and by this time we didn't have the option to arbitrate anymore; that had been taken away. I thought I would do, would try to do there, is to be perfectly candid with the members. We had regular meetings every week. We were fortunate because we were just one strike within a big union. We could have a meeting once a week and we could still have our picket lines staffed. The place filled up with scabs immediately, as one would expect. We told them the good news and we told them the bad news, when there was any. Every time we issued any statement at all, we used to always put it in the context, Trizec Holding Company that was the corporation. Every strike bulletin we had, we would have another little story about the profits that the Trizec Corporation was making.

SY [00:41:39] These women, they were almost all complete immigrant workforce, very limited English. They were amazing stalwarts. In that course of that, it lasted three or four months, we didn't lose one person. Nobody went and got another job, although I knew they would get whatever work they could do while they were on the picket line. The reason we were able to win that strike is because at that time my counterpart in the BC Nurses' Union was Ray Haynes. Are you interviewing Ray Haynes?

JN [00:42:17] Yes.

SY [00:42:17] Have you done so yet?

JN [00:42:20] He's on our list.

SY [00:42:20] Yeah, you definitely should interview him.

SY [00:42:25] They started and we still had pretty good labour laws in those days in terms of secondary picketing. They could easily fill the jobs of our own members, but they needed nurses, so they started to bring nurses from their other hospitals or with nurses voluntarily going. We told them that we knew. We put a picket line up in front of the hospital. We could do that because they were an ally of the employer. We did that with the tremendous assistance of the BCNU at that time, which means Ray Haynes. He was the guy who was helping out.

SY [00:43:07] It suddenly occurred to the other hospitals, they didn't give a damn about this Trizec corporation. They didn't want a picket line in front of their hospitals so they dried up totally the supply of nurses. We had said that if any nurse that works here, I can't remember now because of the mists of time but whether it was we who said it or whether it was the BCNU that said that any nurse that crossed that picket line and went to work, would not be eligible to work at another hospital, so no nurse was going to go there either. They started flying them down from out of town. They would put them up at the Plaza 500 hotel. We went to the Plaza 500 and we said, if you're going to put these people up in this hotel, I want you to know that you've lost our business as a union, and we're going to tell all of our friends, that is, the other unions. That was the end of it suddenly, that they couldn't go over to those hotels either. It was one thing after another.

SY [00:44:03] We also put a person in as an apparent scab who was actually the chair of one of our locals in West Van or North Van. She went in there and reported to us every day when anything was broken, she would tell us and then we get in touch with the elevator people and we would say, there's an elevator broken there, but you don't want to go in there because we would really be unhappy. At one point we had these food deliveries. We knew when the food deliveries are coming and there were these massive trucks coming. We had this one little, I think she might have been Filipino about four foot eight or something standing like this in the middle of First Avenue with her picket sign on in her hand. They said, 'Okay, what's the matter?' She said, 'We're on strike.' I remember this big U-turn that this truck turned around and went on First Avenue. That was possible because the labour laws allowed us to do that in those days. Of course, over time, they've been whittled away.

SY [00:45:05] In any event, we did end up with a huge victory. I guess they just made the deal with the government, the government is going to kick in whatever they gave up. When we had the meeting, the ratification meeting, this woman who was our apparent scab had come to this meeting and the workers in that room didn't want to let her in the door. We said, well, she's actually one of us, but they had learned to hate her. She crossed that picket line and they learned to hate her so much that they couldn't get a different mindset about her.

SY [00:45:44] That was probably one of the very few actual, when I think about the HEU job, strikes that I was involved in; many more with the BCTF.

JN [00:45:54] Like the BCTF in that strike, getting the public onside, we've seen some members of the public because there's families in that care. How did you, how would you deal with that during a contentious strike?

SY [00:46:12] You would try not to make enemies of the families. You didn't try to stop them from going in. A lot of them were very sympathetic because they recognized the care-aides. You couldn't either in that strike, pretty well any strike, you couldn't develop your strategy and your plans based on whether or not they're going to support it. If that were the case, there would be never a public sector strike ever. That was just a given. You just had to accept that.

JN [00:46:51] They seemed to be quite sympathetic. You didn't run into a lot of aggressive confrontation.

SY [00:47:01] Not from relatives because there was no need for them to be confrontational with us. We didn't stop them from going in. There was confrontations with the strikebreakers, of course. Part of that settlement, too, a really important part of that settlement was that nobody was going back to work if any of those scabs were there.

SY [00:47:20] It's funny, I remember talking to Ray Haynes about this and I said they've come to the table and they've said that they want to keep some of these people on. A few of our people crossed the picket line. There was eight actually that crossed the picket line, our own members had worked throughout. I said to Ray, I can't imagine a settlement that would allow these outside scabs to stay there. I said they're absolutely adamant on it. He says, they'll give that away. He said because they don't care about them. The employers wouldn't care about those scabs either.

SY [00:47:58] Getting back to the labour laws at the time. The eight people that went to work, we then put a claim that for their wages during the time that they were working. We claimed their wages less strike pay. We didn't even want to give them strike pay because they weren't doing picket duty or anything. The Labour Board decided that they did have to turn their wages over to the union, the union had to pay them strike pay and the union couldn't stop them from returning to work if they wanted to. I think that most just moved on.

JN [00:48:35] That was pretty good.

SY [00:48:38] You wouldn't be able to do that now, no, because those laws (unclear) those rights were taken away.

JN [00:48:42] What were some of the issues most often raised by workers, let's say, in the HEU years?

SY [00:48:58] Time off. There were a number of issues, but the first issue was not time off. The first issue was the condition of patient care. That was always absolutely number one. When we went to organize, it was stunning to me to see at the time because I had expected the people who are making minimum wage, they had absolutely no benefits and that there is just a violation of all of these labour laws. But what motivated them to join the union were the conditions of patient care. I really do believe that people, as a rule, want to do a good job at whatever job they're doing.

SY [00:49:36] I couldn't also believe how many times these care aides were buying supplies for the patients because there weren't supplies. At one hospital I remember that they said that they didn't have any Depends or diapers or anything for their incontinent patients because they locked up the supply cupboard at 8:00 at night. The reason they locked up the supply cupboard is that they said that they were using too many of them. They said they'd have a problem, somebody would be sick, somebody would be incontinent or whatever. I said, 'Well, what do you use?' Whatever we can find, plastic bags and bread wrappers. It was really quite, quite stunning. This came out over and over and over again.

SY [00:50:33] I remember talking to another guy who worked for a public sector union. He worked for the GEU. We were talking about how workers in, we were talking about social workers, I don't know what, that they were motivated by the same thing. I had always thought that people would be motivated by the fact that they're making minimum wage, but that was big.

SY [00:50:59] I also when I was organizing in the HEU, as I said, we used to have to go to places, individual houses. People found ways to kind of make do, too. I went to one place and this woman was there with her husband. The one thing also that we knew was that the wages were very individual, very individualized. As a general rule, white workers would make more than non-white workers, and they would be given a little more or a fancy title or something so that they could use racism to keep the others down. A horrible situation.

SY [00:51:42] You always knew that their wages were going to be all over the place. I went to this one place and I asked her, her husband was sitting in the room, and I asked her how much she was making at that time. I think that the minimum wage was about $3 an hour or something like that, so I asked her. She was a cook, I think. I asked her how much she was making. She said, '$4 an hour.' I said, 'Okay, I'm going to write this down.' Her husband walked out of the room and she said, psst, she said (raising five fingers of her hand) 5.

JN [00:52:23] You mentioned the hours too, were they working gruelling shifts, or was it a complaint the hours of work?

SY [00:52:35] A lot of complaint would be not getting enough hours.

JN [00:52:38] Not getting enough.

SY [00:52:39] These people are going to be working in two or three jobs and spending time on buses in between and so on. All of the labour laws and standards at that time were certainly not being observed.

JN [00:53:03] That makes sense though that it was a piecemeal work.

SY [00:53:07] They would be putting together. We're going back a lot of years here, trying to remember this.

JN [00:53:16] You started with the HEU in the '70s, early '70s?

SY [00:53:20] I did. I think it would be '74.

JN [00:53:22] Until.

SY [00:53:23] I was there till '86.

JN [00:53:24] Then BCTF?

SY [00:53:29] No, I was doing contract work for the BCTF, but I was also doing contract work for other unions then on my own for a couple of years. Also I was working. I got a job at UVic teaching labour relations and collective bargaining for it in the public administration department. I was doing that, but I was also working just freelancing for other unions, helping, advising on organizing drives, advising negotiating teams and that sort of thing. By that time, I basically I was doing everything that unions do, whether it was organizing or education or arbitrations, negotiations, grievance handling, all that stuff. I had had enough experience to be able to hang out my shingle in some capacity. I had worked for the BCTF as a winger in arbitration courts. At that time, they didn't have collective bargaining rights. They would have only the rights to negotiate salaries and benefits, so I would sit as a union representative in these arbitrations, and also, did some education for them as well. I was brought on staff temporarily when the unions finally acquired bargaining rights in '87. After that, I was put on continuing employment.

JN [00:55:04] Until.

SY [00:55:07] Until I retired in the year 2000. After I retired, I did contract work for them again for a number of years. By that time, the time that I had retired, I was basically doing arbitration work and I had developed and focussed on duty to accommodate issues, so I was dealing with those kinds of cases.

JN [00:55:34] You watched the teachers' union become stronger in terms of rights and contracts. You were working at that time?

SY [00:55:44] They had worked a lot, teachers had worked a lot before they got bargaining rights to get bargaining rights. The only reason they got them is because they were going to get them anyway because of the Charter. They made a Section 15 application of equality and everybody knew it was going to succeed. That was when the government brought in brought in collective bargaining rights for teachers. They attempted. It's almost like Wile E. Coyote trying to get the Roadrunner. Honest to God, the efforts that they made to just get rid of the BCTF has been huge. Everybody kind of anticipated.

SY [00:56:19] At that time, every teacher was a member of the BCTF. It was a condition of employment. They were also members of their local associations. The salary arbitrations were done at the local level. When the legislation came down, it said that membership in the BCTF was no longer mandatory and that instead of being the collective agreement everyone thought it would be, they said there were going to be 75 collective agreements. There were 75 locals and 75 school boards. It was such a transparent attempt to get rid of the BCTF but they did say that the locals could negotiate membership in the BCTF if they wished to. What had previously been legislated now became a bargaining issue. It was a profoundly stupid thing for the government to do.

SY [00:57:20] What they should have done is that they should have given them an option to arbitrate. They should have said, you can go this route and arbitrate your collective agreements, all the language and everything, or you can go this way and the right to strike. It would have split the federation in half easily at that time. Then they tried to do it about a year later. They tried to amend the legislation. Everybody told them just forget it. Their, what was friends told them to forget it because by that time you weren't going to keep them down on the farm anymore.

SY [00:57:50] Especially, there were so many strikes, the first contract strikes that had taken place. As I say, there are teachable moments and teachers learned a lot from them. We went through this process of having 75 consecutive bargaining tables and very, very little expertise, very, very little experience at bargaining. Ray Haynes actually came on for a while as a temporary staff person. I came on in that capacity and we were just sort of sent around to try to provide support for these locals. In the Okanagan there was the Okanagan teachers had gone to the table and had been kind of, they were beaten up pretty badly at the bargaining table for a while. Then they just went back to the BCTF and said, this is ridiculous, we're teachers, we're not bargainers. I was sent in to actually be spokesperson for those particular locals. There were strikes and lockouts and various things arising from that.

SY [00:58:59] It was a completely different situation in education than in health care because health care hospitals are modelled on the military and it is very, very, very hierarchical. In fact, I remember when I worked at HEU that the VGH, which was the biggest hospital at the time, for a grievance to be filed and to go to ultimate resolution, if it were not settled at any stage, would go through 12 levels of management. It could be a grievance that was I wasn't paid enough overtime on Thursday, up to the level of management before the ultimate connection's made.

SY [00:59:41] In education it was completely different because there's always been this collaborative relationship that works on all levels. So many committees. You couldn't really run schools the way you run hospitals. That was a very, entirely different experience. That legislation, I think if they had been a little less brutal, the government might have made more inroads, but what they did was to turn the BCTF into a very, very strong organization. Teachers said that they had no place to go, even teachers that weren't particularly pro-union.

SY [01:00:25] If you went into places like, I worked for a while in the Southern Okanagan, which is conservative territory. Teachers are part of the community. They reflect their community. They weren't particularly pro-union, but that's what they had, was the BCTF. The government had not really left them with a lot of choice. There was a strike that took place around that question of BCTF membership. There was one in Shuswap, I remember, particularly when this happened, this happened in South Okanagan too.

SY [01:01:03] Where someone refused to join the BCTF because they said BCTF supports abortions. I remember being at a vote with Vince Ready at Shuswap at one point and that was the big hangup. No, they couldn't do this. At that time I went to Salmon Arm and I was surprised there was anybody there, I thought they were all chained to the abortion clinic down.

SY [01:01:26] They were militantly opposed to that. I remember once at about two or three in the morning that somebody told Vince that actually they had always been members of the BCTF before. When he heard, when he realized that he read the Riot Act to them and they got that settlement.

SY [01:01:42] Actually now thinking about that raises another question about the BCTF that I really think is worth talking about. That was the role that this group called Women In Negotiations played. The Status of Women had been a quite a strong committee in the BCTF in the '70s and the '80s, and they were quite determined. The principals in that were quite determined that women were going to be involved at the bargaining table. They had this group called WIN.

SY [01:02:21] I thought of that actually when I was just thinking about Ray Haynes, because I interviewed him once years ago for a magazine I used to edit called New Directions. Do you remember New Directions?

DK [01:02:30] Oh, sure.

SY [01:02:32] There was a two or three part interview that I did with him that you might find interesting to show in your archive. I remember at the time that he had said that somebody that, I had asked him, about if he felt there were gender differences in support for the union or whatever. He said in his experience that he felt that women were harder to move at the outset. They were more cautious, but once they got in, he said, then they would be the strength of the strike. He said you'd see these, it's almost verbatim. I remember this quote that he said that the guys would be out boo-hoo'ing, crying, and bawling away (Ray), but the women would hold it together. All this kind of stayed in my mind. When I went to work in the BCTF, I had exactly the same experience because I was going from, in my job, I was being kind of fired into local after local whenever they got bogged down in bargaining. I would kind of go in and try to loosen them up. I found that, and Shuswap was one of these places, that I found consistently that the women were holding these strikes together.

SY [01:03:51] Then when I looked into it, it dawned on me that there was quite a divide between male and female teachers at the time, because as now, teachers in elementary are predominantly female, really, really predominantly in those days. Whereas men were in secondary. One of the big issues was class size language and class sizes didn't have all that much meaning in secondary as it did in elementary.

SY [01:04:26] Also the women were much more concerned to get these rights in writing in the contract, not just class size, but everything. As one of them said to me, 'Well, you know, I can't go out like Jack and go have a beer with the principal at the end of the day, you know, I'm not doing that.' There was that sense that there was kind of an old boys club happening that women were not privy to so they had to have it down. Right? Right. They had to have it in contract.

SY [01:04:59] I also learned that in dealing with secondary teachers the money was a much more important issue than with elementary teachers. Probably for the same reason that in HEU time off was more important than money to most of the members because of the fact that they had this other job to do. They have families to take care of and so on, so having vacations was really, really key for them, for men, not so much. That same thing happened for the teachers. I really hope that that doesn't get lost, that little bit of history doesn't get lost because it was important.

SY [01:05:41] We felt that without that divide between elementary and secondary and the necessity of getting things done in the contract, I'm not sure whether we would really have been successful in negotiating class size. At the time, I thought, I told them, you're never going to get class size language in the contract. Famous last words, you're never going to do it. I was thinking of my own experience in health care. We tried to get staff-patient ratios and we put that on the table. My employer got up and walked out of the room. You had to say, I guess they're not too keen on it. How do we get them to come back? I said that right at the outset. I couldn't imagine that anybody would agree to this. In fact it came into being until the government took it away.

JN [01:06:33] Those are great issues to talk about. What was your proudest moment during your time in the labour movement?

SY [01:06:47] When I was in HEU, the Windermere strike was a very important thing for me because I felt that it demonstrated a way in which the leadership could relate to the membership and that was the right way to do it. I was not, as a leader, I wasn't afraid that if I stood up and made a militant statement that there would be nobody behind me because I knew how far ahead I could get, and where people were, without losing them.

SY [01:07:21] There's a lot of bravado in the labour movement. There's a lot of breast beating and more militant than thou and all this kind of stuff. Years later, there was a big rally downtown once after HEU had been stripped. This is many years later. God, who's the name of the, who was the secretary of the Fed at the time? She's a woman.

DK [01:07:46] Rosa Carmela.

SY [01:07:48] No. The HEU was the issue because of the fact that they had just basically destroyed their contract and allowed the contracting out to private industry. I think she came from the Machinists' Union, Angie.

DK [01:08:07] Angela Schira.

SY [01:08:08] Angela Schira. Yeah. At this time, there was this big concern of wanting to support HEU, this big rally downtown. Angela Schira got up, and she started making a very militant speech saying, we won't back down, we won't back down. I knew because Karen had been involved in this at the time, that they were just there backing down all over the place. The other unions were not providing the support. There's Angela yelling, we won't back down, we won't back down. The response from the crowd was saying, general strike, general strike. I didn't think the general strike was on at that time. But damned if I wasn't standing there yelling general strike with the rest of them. It was just as genuine as we won't back down.

DK [01:09:03] Caught up in the moment.

SY [01:09:05] Yeah. Oh, my God. I felt like I was taking a tremendous amount of credit for that Windemere strike. Absolutely I'm not. The fact is that there are these 85 women who are really vulnerable in their lives and to just stay right through to the end. It's stunning to me.

SY [01:09:26] I believe there's a connection between their willingness to do that and the fact that we weren't bullshitting them. You stand there and say to these people, look, this is the bad news. They don't want to hear the bad news, but they respect the fact that they heard it. The other thing, too, is that if there is bad news, they're going to hear it somewhere and then they're not going to trust you anymore, so that part was important.

SY [01:09:49] In the BCTF, proudest moment, I could tell you a couple of seminal moments. One was in the early stages of the first contract negotiations that there was this profound belief in the BCTF, what we used to call the omni-competent teacher, that teachers can do everything. There was the idea that the teachers could sit down at the bargaining table and go up against the employer and be fine. In fact, they had very little experience. What was happening is that there were these 75 bargaining tables. Because these people were inexperienced in how to put demands forward and how to listen to the other side and how to move, they were kind of getting picked off one by one. We could just sort of see the employer going (shoots pistols at them).

SY [01:10:51] We had this conference. I remember talking, saying at the time before we had this conference that we had to get control of the situation because it was all falling apart. What you didn't want to happen is you didn't want to have a weak collective agreement become a pattern for the next one and the next and the next one. That's what you could see going on.

SY [01:11:26] We said we thought we needed to do. We sat down and we looked at every bargaining situation of each local and tried to determine which is our best shot. What does this one have going for it, what don't, what's weak, what's strong. We said now we're going to have a conference. We're going to bring people together and we're going to ask them to use some self-discipline and let this local go first. You guys just push them on, and that sort of thing. They were prepared to do this. That's interesting that they were prepared to do this because locals have always been very autonomous in the BCTF and very jealous of their autonomy. We did that. It was a good strategy. It was good strategy because it worked. We got a few good collective agreements and then started using that as a pattern.

SY [01:12:19] The reason I knew that that worked was that a couple of years later I was coming back in a plane from Penticton where I had been negotiating opposite the guy that had been hired, an outside guy that had been hired by the school board. We'd just concluded an agreement and we were sitting opposite, across the aisle from each other and talking. He said, 'Something changed.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'You had a conference and something changed.' He said he was in the Kootenays and he said we were doing really well. We were plodding along, we going ahead and then all of a sudden they came to the table, they just sat there and wouldn't agree to anything. That was when I knew that that strategy had worked because I heard it from the employer side. That was the right strategy. I was happy that the people had agreed with us and I was happy that I had a role in that.

SY [01:13:21] There was another occasion in which we had negotiated collective agreements, probably about mid-nineties, it was just prior, maybe a few months prior to a provincial election. We had done a number of rounds of bargaining in the, maybe it was bargaining round number three. Then the government created this, his name was (unclear) he's an admiral, Yano or something. He was going to be a wage tsar and that all these collective agreements are going to be rolled back to a certain figure. You could go and appeal to this guy to save what you could out of it. That was put out to all the public sector unions. Everyone screamed and yelled and hollered this is an outrage and so on, which it was. BCTF was just apoplectic about it. The slogan that we developed from that was that 'A deal is a deal' because they were negotiated freely at the table, they were ratified, but they were not going to be put into effect.

SY [01:14:33] A couple of us had said within the BCTF that we have to not go before this guy and we have to convince our locals not to get engaged in this discussion. This was a very, very hard sell because we were basically saying to the locals is you can go before him and you can get something, or you can boycott him and get nothing, because that was the alternative. You ask people to give that right up or, it wasn't a right, give that option up.

SY [01:15:06] We were the first off the mark on that one, ahead of the other unions, although all the public sector unions were affected by it. We came out swinging on that one. We had basically established this boycott. That put tremendous pressure on the other public sector unions. The fact is that they couldn't. They had to do the same thing, because they couldn't, in the face of that, just go and say, well, people, but we're going to do this and so they didn't.

SY [01:15:42] Part of the strategy at the time and part of our considerations at the time is that we were not that far from an election. This was at a time when Gordon Wilson had his, whatever his party was, Progressive PDA. We went into an election campaign and one of our big demands on behalf of the teachers was that we wanted our contracts honoured. We went to the NDP and tried to get the commitment that if they were elected that they would they would honour our contracts. We could not get that commitment from them. They wouldn't say yes and they wouldn't say no. We put that to everybody, of course we put it to Gordon Wilson. 'Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. This is outrageous,' he said. 'Of course,' he said, 'That legislation is gone.' He said, 'Gone in a minute.' Then there's the NDP is outflanked by Gordon Wilson, so they were driven to say, 'Us, too'.

DK [01:16:52] That's not the first time they'd been outflanked by something to the right of them.

SY [01:16:56] I know, it was really stunning. I remember speaking to Hans Brown, do you remember Hans Brown? He was a guy I used to work with in HEU, but he was kind of Mr. NDP. He used to be the provincial secretary of the party on many occasions. He was telling me that when the election night results were rolling in, not when the election results were rolling in, a week before the election, they were following their polling and they could see this big shift over to Gordon Wilson. They were absolutely panicking over it. There'd had been that debate, a TV debate in which Gordon Wilson had done well by saying not very much, but looking more sensible.

DK [01:17:37] This was the 1990 or '91 when Harcourt got in?

SY [01:17:45] Probably.

DK [01:17:47] He had the Liberals then.

SY [01:17:50] He was still PDA. He wasn't Liberals at that point, I'm pretty sure. Had he captured the Liberal Party at that point?

DK [01:17:56] He got the Liberals 17 seats with his remark.

SY [01:18:00] That's right.

DK [01:18:01] This is the problem in B.C., this is why nothing gets done.

SY [01:18:04] That, ladies and gentlemen, nothing will ever get done. That's right. He'd abandoned his previous party. He was a Liberal at that time. That's right. Hans had told me that they were watching their votes disappear, going over to Gordon Wilson. He said he thought that if there was one week longer in the campaign, he would have won, because there was just suddenly this sweep that was taking place.

DK [01:18:29] One bit of history would have been deep-fried.

SY [01:18:34] We did this strategy of boycotting and telling people you can have something and you can have nothing, and we were advising them to have nothing. The teachers were prepared to do that. Then the other unions were dragged into it. The fact that that had happened, the fact that we then got that commitment from Gordon Wilson, forced the commitment out of Mike Harcourt. In that way, when the NDP was elected, they had to reinstate the previous negotiations. I thought we did pretty good on that one.

JN [01:19:07] Those are good stories. What were some of the difficulties or hurdles you faced? We've mentioned some, but what?

SY [01:19:20] In HEU there were difficulties in HEU because the leadership at the time had, as I said, had decided, without actually articulating this, to abandon the quest for parity with the master agreement for people who were working in long term care, but that was never articulated. There was lots of that behind the scenes maneuvering and so on.

SY [01:19:48] I remember I was negotiating for it on behalf of six or eight long term care facilities opposite this guy. I said I had taken some position on something. He looked at me very surprised. Then he said, 'Can I talk to you privately for a minute?' I said OK and we went out. He said, 'Well, I guess you haven't heard.' You never want to hear this. I guess you haven't heard but the principal guy in your organization and the principal guy in my organization have actually come to an agreement on these negotiations.

JN [01:20:28] That's tough.

SY [01:20:29] Yeah, and so I actually resigned soon after that. I didn't resign quietly because I did resign with quite a long statement about why. Of course, a number of the people who were working for those long term care facilities when they got wind of this they got really pretty choked at what was going on. That was kind of a bad thing, bad time.

JN [01:20:54] That was your ending with HEU?

SY [01:20:55] It was. That was the reason that I left. I mean, it's ridiculous at that point. If you don't leave under those circumstances, then you're just there drawing a salary.

JN [01:21:07] That was a big challenge. How do you think the labour movement in B.C. has changed over time?

SY [01:21:20] Of course it's much weaker, much weaker. The long militant stage of the labour movement, of course, reflected the good days of the economy in the '50s and '60s. Not to in any way minimize those fights. People went to jail, like George North, for example. He was the director of the bargaining division when I went to work at the BCTF. Prior to that he'd been the editor of the Fishermen's newspaper and he had gone to jail for an editorial he'd written. There were really, really significant fights, but there were significant fights that the labour movement shouldn't have lost. They did lose because there was a failure of nerve. I don't know.

SY [01:22:05] Penny Farthing has got to be the biggest; that's about 28 years ago. Penny Farthing was the development down here. That was the first big development that was going to be built with using both union and non-union labour. That had just not been the way things were, so there was this confrontation that took place. Just about everybody that I know today who is still alive was at Penny Farthing.

DK [01:22:36] One time or another.

SY [01:22:39] You too, right. During that particular confrontation, that was an issue in which the building trades leadership, they should have defied it. Whatever was going on, they should have defied it. They should have taken it on. They should have gone to jail. They should have done whatever it is they had to do. But they didn't. When they didn't, then that just gave them a green light to carry on. Am I wrong about that?

DK [01:23:06] No, and they're decimated now, right?

SY [01:23:12] The building trades?

DK [01:23:13] Yeah.

SY [01:23:14] Oh, come on. When. I think about what it used to be. I have a son-in-law, my daughter's partner who is in the construction industry here. He's a labour contractor.

SY [01:23:29] I didn't mention this before, but when I was a kid, as I told you, my mother didn't know what the hell a union was about. Once she said to a family friend, she didn't understand why my father wasn't being called to work. There seemed to be lots of work, but he wasn't called to work. He didn't believe her. Then subsequently she said, you know, I'll pay the bills, I'll buy the food, but I'm not going to pay his union dues, so this guy said, well, you know, if he hasn't paid his union dues, that's why they're not calling him. She said, 'It is?' She thought it was like a men's social club. Of course, he wasn't going to tell her either. He didn't like working too much. As soon as he paid his union dues, the phone rang the next day. That was the building trades' hiring hall. Gradually that was lost.

SY [01:24:26] Now, my son-in-law is a labour contractor. That's what he does. He finds labour through site. Nobody's union. Nobody is union. The safety conditions are appalling. The amount of cocaine on the sites is appalling. There's nobody, there is no countervailing authority to go to, because if you haven't got someone who has your back and for the workers that means the union, you're not going to go up against the boss. He was telling me, he went on one site, they're day labourers. These guys get called back every day because they supply cocaine to the foreman. That's the price. Somebody knows about that and is not keen on it, who's that person's going to tell?

SY [01:25:19] A lot of fight went out of the labour movement for a lot of reasons. Things got worse and worse and worse, of course, and unions became less and less powerful. I think part of it was that I think unions became complacent.

SY [01:25:39] I think the leadership became distant from the members. I'm still not certain whether I think checkoff is a good idea or not. I keep thinking about the woman that took me into the back room at Safeway and signed me up. We had to have a conversation about it. She told me why I needed to be in the union, and so on.

SY [01:26:05] When I worked at HEU, I organized these private hospitals, lots of them for a number of years. One of them was Inglewood Private Hospital in West Van. I hadn't been there for quite a long time, but the wages themselves, the benefits, they were pretty well up to par. A few years after that, I had to take a strike vote or report a contract, I think report a contract. I went to this meeting and I walked in and I was so stunned to see all these blonde, blue-eyed members, whereas before they were all these Filipino, South Asian. I was really surprised about this. Then I realized what had happened is that these were decent wages that people were making, and so you were able to attract people who lived around there I started talking to a couple of people there and I asked them how things were and so on, were they enjoying their work and so on. This one woman said to me, 'This is such a great place to work. People are so nice and the salary is good and the benefits are good but I just wish we didn't have to pay these union dues.'

SY [01:27:20] Talk about the disconnect, so somewhere along the line, something had, some complacency had taken place. At the same time, it's hard. So many jobs have been disappeared. I don't want to be, I do really feel critical of a lot of the decisions that leaders in the labour movement have made, but I don't want to be too critical because it was easier in the '70s than it is now. When I describe some of the labour laws we were operating on, what if we didn't have those labour laws? Would we be still be standing on a picket line on 12th Avenue? We didn't have that. There was a reason why we had those laws, too, and that's because a lot of fight went into it. That's the same old, same old, same old. I mean, you don't fight, you don't live.

DK [01:28:19] Yeah.

JN [01:28:20] What do you think are the most important issues facing workers today, given some of those comments?

SY [01:28:27] The precariat, that's kind of the fact that there's the gig economy, as they call it. Everything is so radically changed with the idea that they call it the gig economy or the Hollywood model, whatever, where you just take yourself as an itinerant person, you take your skills, you work on a project and then you go off again. I think that that's huge. The fact that so few workers are unionized is absolutely the critical, the greatest difficulty I think that workers are facing.

JN [01:29:07] What about the BC Fed fight for 15? Is that a good strategy given all these low wage jobs?

SY [01:29:15] I think it's an important thing to do. I didn't go to it. Did you go to the 15, Fed had 15 rally, the last one?.

DK [01:29:24] Which rally?

SY [01:29:25] The BC Fed rally last week?

DK [01:29:26] Oh, yes. Yeah.

SY [01:29:27] I didn't go to that because I went to the one before that. I thought there has to be a better way of doing this than to go to a rally where there are too many people making too many speeches and where you stand around and hear what everybody agrees with, what they hear, because they all believe that anyway before they walked down. You're not learning anything new. I thought to myself when I was there, I thought I took a bus down here and I'm standing here and it's kind of cold and I'm listening to all of this. What's the point of this?

DK [01:30:02] I think everybody walks away with that feeling now. It's different from the old Solidarity rally where you had thousands and thousands of people. Just the force of it was overwhelming.

SY [01:30:15] It's different from the old teach-ins where you actually learned something. Old Bernie Sanders every time he gets up and talks, he's telling people something they don't necessarily know. It's one thing to say, we need $15. People can't live on this. We all know that, especially people who are at their rallies. I keep thinking back in my student days that the teach-ins were wonderful because you learned something.

JN [01:30:45] The Occupy movement did that. I remember going to the art gallery. There were circles and young people were talking.

SY [01:30:55] Whatever the, and I'm not saying I know what the strategy is, but I know what the strategy isn't. That's, what's the point? Think of the money and the organization that has to go in to something like that. What are you going to get, like 3 minutes on the news that shows somebody speaking into a sparse crowd?

DK [01:31:12] You're lucky if it's organized.

SY [01:31:14] That part is very disheartening.

JN [01:31:17] Connecting to our project, why is it important that we commemorate workers of the past? I know you mentioned the fights in the past, how important they are.

SY [01:31:28] Why is history important? I don't know. It's kind of an obvious question.

JN [01:31:37] I know we're touching on some of these things. Why does labour history matter to you?

SY [01:31:43] This is something to talk about commemorating the past, reading about the history. I hate the idea that this history is going to get lost.

SY [01:31:53] Years ago, the B.C. Fed Women's Committee did a survey about sexual harassment in the workplace. That term 'sexual harassment', that was a new, new term. Nobody ever heard this term. What is this sexual harassment? Yet I knew what was going on, and any one of us every, any woman. We knew what harassment was profound and it was constant, it was physical with people, guys grabbing at you all the time. But we were blown away by the responses. We had no idea that this was going to be, focus that were so many people were to be identified. 'Yes, I have been sexually harassed in the workplace.' That was much greater than many of the women's committee thought it was going to be. It informed a lot of collective bargaining subsequent to that.

SY [01:32:46] There were almost fistfights. I remember you didn't in the union, at least in my union, in the HEU at the time that someone would claim sexual harassment against another union member and they said, well, you can't do that. You can't accuse the brother of this. The way that was resolved is that they each were given a union rep, to go to represent them because there was no language in the collective agreements at that time. I'm always so concerned that this kind of history is going to get lost because now, not that sexual harassment isn't, of course, it's out there and it's very current, but it's not all that long since it's even had a name. That was a very important thing that they'd done.

SY [01:33:36] I did a study for the BC Fed, when would this have been, probably in the early nineties, I guess, and the women's committee wanted to have a study on the status of women within BC Fed affiliates. That is to say, were they in leadership positions and what positions and so on and so forth? We did this really interesting survey and there was interesting results. It showed that women were very present at lower levels of leadership, were not present at higher levels of leadership, that they did not, leaders did not by any means represent the members. For example, HEU was 85% female, but it wasn't 85% of the executive or the staff or the bargaining or any of the leadership positions that we had down.

SY [01:34:33] There was one response that we got. I forget which union it was now. We asked all these questions. There were a couple women who were the president and the vice president of a local that were filling this out. One question was, 'Is there an active women's committee in your local?' Their response was, 'We haven't had any time to do this since we took over the local.' OK.

JN [01:35:06] Great answer. What is one thing you wish young workers understood about labour history? You mentioned the sexual harassment. What else?

SY [01:35:16] I think that young workers don't know where their entitlements have come from. Absolutely not. They don't. The slogan that says that unions, the folks that brought you the weekend. I think that's a good slogan because that's not known. There's this assumption that suddenly governments became enlightened and gave us this and gave us that and gave us the other thing. Maternity leave and parental leave, they were fought hard for by CUPW, for example. They were leaders and the teachers were leaders in expanding that. But now it's just sort of considered that's what we have. That's absolutely I think the most important thing for them to understand that these were the results of big struggles. They also haven't—

JN [01:36:11] We've completed all those questions. I've got a few and maybe Dan will want to put it in a few more. You've described yourself as a feminist union activist. Can you comment a bit more about your trade unionism and your feminism and how those two identities have informed all the work you've done?

SY [01:36:41] As I indicated that the response to the people that made the submission to the Rosemary Brown inquiry that said we don't have enough money. The problem is we don't have enough money. I still laugh at it because I can think of all the studies that have taken place into poor people. What can we do? What can we do to help people in poverty? Give us more money. That was very key for me.

SY [01:37:12] Isn't it interesting? I look now at this movement that is referred to as intersectionalism, the intersection of gender, class and race that people, that a lot of young people are focusing on. I think I would have felt very comfortable with that because, as I say, I was never comfortable at the outset with the middle class nature of the women's movement. At the same time, I realize that would have been totally impossible at the time, that women really had to separate. We had to separate ourselves out in order to be able to find out what the problems were and fashion some solutions. I don't make any distinction at this point between anything I would do as a feminist and anything I would do as a trade unionist. I'm quite happy with the marriage between those two.

JN [01:38:07] You mentioned you talked a bit about bargaining and women in bargaining. I was at a BCTF AGM and we had a caucus of women talking about how women teachers tend to get involved in professional development more than bargaining and how can we build up women in the more confrontational model of bargaining and even union organizing? What are your observations about women in bargaining and the whole union model, which is kind of confrontational? Does that fit with women's way of being, or do you find that's a struggle for them and?

SY [01:38:57] That's not just an issue for union work, you know? The basic institutions of our society are adversarial. The political system is adversarial, government and opposition. The legal system is adversarial, prosecuting, defence. The collective bargaining systems are adversarial in that sense too. I don't know if, particularly among teachers, because as I say, even if the bargaining table is adversarial, the situation we had side tables going on all the time with committees of employer and union reps to work out the details of, say, the resource room or ProD days or whatever.

SY [01:39:51] It's a hard question for me because I'm not, I absolutely understand what you're saying, that women operate on a much more cooperative model. My son-in-law was a headhunter for many years and he was. He had a mission in life which is to place women on boards. He said that if you've got a board of ten, if you have one woman on that, nothing will change; if you have two women on that nothing will change; if you have three women on that board, something will start to change; if you have more than three, the culture will change and the culture of decision making will change too. It will become much more cooperative and much more collaborative, so that is true throughout.

SY [01:40:34] I myself have never felt uncomfortable in the adversarial situation. Maybe it's because I was brought up with a (unclear) model in my mind.

SY [01:40:47] I've seen lots of examples of attempts at cooperation, but I've never had. I felt that people got sold down the river in those cooperative models. What did they used to call some of these damn systems and same side bargaining. There was a thing it was very trendy for a while, it was a 'getting to yes' kind of thing. There would be these rewards for it all worked out like rewards if you don't use your sick leave, and what the hell was it?

DK [01:41:28] It was a model or something. I can't remember, but I do remember what you're talking about. A consensus. I don't know.

SY [01:41:39] Yeah, consensus bargaining or something like that. I've never seen that work out well for workers.

DK [01:41:43] Not like when you have really iron-clad interests on each side, right? I mean, i.e. bosses don't want to lose money.

SY [01:41:54] Also, when you go to the bargaining table, you know that whatever your collective agreement is going to be at the end, it's going to have this clause in it that says management rights. It's going to say management has the right to operate and direct the workforce and to hire and fire and suspend and transfer, layoffs and blah, blah, blah. If that clause is not in the collective agreement, it's deemed to be in the collective agreement, so that's where you start off.

DK [01:42:20] So much for cooperation and consensus.

SY [01:42:23] What you're doing at the bargaining table is you're just. Then at the end it will say, except as specifically defined in this collective agreement. That's why you want a collective agreement that looks like the Manhattan telephone directory used to look like because all you're doing at the bargaining table is transferring some of that power and some of those rights to the workers. That's exactly what that's doing, what you're doing. Normally, employers really don't want to do that. They absolutely do not want to lose that control, so it seems to me it's inherent in the system that conflict is inherent in the system.

SY [01:43:07] Now, you can be nasty and bullish, you know, stupid about it, or you can try to have a cooperative sense at the table. Certainly I think the most important thing that you can do at the bargaining table is to listen to what you're hearing, the other side, and finding out where that settlement could be on that particular issue or on a range of issues. You're always looking to see how you can end up with the agreement, with an agreement, which is what you're there for. That probably speaks much more to manoeuvring than it does to the question of whether it's an adversarial relationship.

SY [01:43:57] Not all this, 'We all want the same thing.' No, we don't all want the same thing. No, we don't all want the same thing. Probably, we want more of what you have, and you want more of what we have.

SY [01:44:11] At the same time, I don't believe in the secrecy of the bargaining table. That's certainly one thing the teachers were great at. Ray Haynes said that time that we were both working temporarily in the late '80s. He said, 'You know, I've been here for two months and I've never seen a document marked Confidential.' I said to him, 'Why would they show it to you?' You know, it's like a joke because you didn't, you didn't see that. That openness, I think, is important.

SY [01:44:39] I always felt that provincial bargaining was not good for. I don't think provincial bargaining was good for teachers. I think that it was interesting because when I first went there, I thought that that's what they needed, provincial bargaining, just seemed to make sense to me.

SY [01:44:55] The reason I don't think it was good for teachers is because they lost a lot of control and I had to learn, me at the bargaining table with them in the early days that we would agree to something. Okay. Yes, we can agree to that, agree to that. Then we'd go back to a meeting of the members and they said, well, we don't want that. No, go change that. We said, well, we just agreed to it. Well, we didn't agree to it. You go back and say, you know, that thing we agreed to yesterday, we're not agreeing to it today. They'd just go crazy, but eventually they would learn that that was the way that kind of had to work.

SY [01:45:38] The idea of bargaining, where the bargaining committee goes in this closed room and you never hear anything. Like at HEU, I used to go and take ratification votes or strike vote sometimes, in locals who didn't even know that we were bargaining.

SY [01:45:52] The BCTF during the time of local bargaining was just the polar opposite of that. I also remember, I mentioned George North, who was the director of bargaining, and he was the most, very, very modest person, personally, very committed guy. In the early days we were taking the strike votes in the first round of bargaining and I came away from one meeting with a 96% strike vote. This was at a time when we were getting lots of high strike votes. Let me think, I want to make sure that's right. Yeah.

SY [01:46:49] I was very proud of myself, but it wasn't unusual to get 90%, 92% and so on at this particular point. Wait, I just want to make sure I've got this right now. No, it wasn't strike votes. It was votes at that time to basically be a. Part of that initial collective bargaining legislation gave teachers the right to be part of a collective bargaining framework or not. I think that was what it was. Yeah, that was what it was to be a union with collective bargaining rights or not. Then the error that the government made is that when they gave them the option of 'not' they didn't give them any other option. That's where they should have given them the option to arbitrate, but they didn't. That's what those votes are about, these big membership votes that we were getting to get people all to agree to become unions. There were 75.

DK [01:47:51] Is this like back in '87 with 19 and 20.

SY [01:47:54] That's exactly what it was.

DK [01:47:56] Right.

SY [01:47:58] Every single local association had to vote to become a union or not. The government, I guess, was assuming that not everybody would, but as I say, naturally, because even the people who were not particularly pro-union didn't want to be all by themselves, so they were voting for it. That's where my 96% came from.

DK [01:48:16] This is a watered down thing starting out. They created a teachers' college, but made it so that teachers could basically take it over and run it. It was supposed to be something to kind of control the power in the BCTF or something, and all it really did was reinforce it.

SY [01:48:38] Well it did because then the BCTF put forward its nominees for the teachers' college. They did a lot of very stupid things. In this one case, that's where the 96% vote came from. People were getting 90%, 92% of the vote and so forth. I came back into the building and I was so full of myself about this. I said to George, 'Look, we had, and it wasn't a very favourable area either for unionization. I said I'd taken this vote and it was 96%, we got 96%. I said, 'I don't think, nobody's got that. We got close to 96%.' George is not saying anything. He's just looking and looking really, really worried. I said, 'Well, what's the matter, George?' He said, 'I'm just wondering what happened to that other 4%.'

DK [01:49:32] Ha ha.

SY [01:49:34] The thing about George is that he never wanted to hear 'I' he wanted to hear 'we'. I remember it so clearly because it was called 'being taken down a notch'.

DK [01:49:48] George North was still in the Fed, in the Teachers' Fed in those days, wasn't he? That's right. You're talking about George North?

SY [01:49:58] George North was there till he died.

DK [01:50:00] Pardon?

SY [01:50:00] George was there when he died. He was the director of bargaining at the BCTF.

DK [01:50:05] Sorry, I didn't remember that.

SY [01:50:06] Yeah, he had.

DK [01:50:08] Died in office.

SY [01:50:09] Yeah, he was a good guy.

JN [01:50:14] I've seen his archives out at Special Collections.

SY [01:50:17] Yeah.

JN [01:50:19] Real papers and labour history. Sharon, I feel like I, thank you so much, but, Dan, you've been listening so intently, you might have some more things that I missed.

DK [01:50:34] Not right now I don't think, other than I was, say it was really great, Sharon. I don't think I ever really talked with you about this before.

SY [01:50:46] Yeah.

JN [01:50:47] Anything else you want to say that for the record that you want to ask or you want to touch on or have we exhausted you?

SY [01:50:59] It's strange to try to put this all together. First of all, the sequence. You can remember the things in the past, but remembering the sequence.

DK [01:51:12] Not always easy.

SY [01:51:15] Then also I'm so struck by how people, including myself, can have memories of something that another person who was there has a different memory. How does that work? I'm just so struck by it. I had this conversation with Allen Garr recently. We were students at SFU. There was a magazine that I was putting out at the time called Compass. We had this photo of him in the front being covered by a towel with his hand up. It was called 'Ginsberg Revisited', from the famous Allen Ginsburg. I said, 'you remember when we took this photo?' And he says, 'Oh, yeah.' I said it was in the kitchen in my house, and he said, 'No it wasn't.' I said, 'Yes, yes it was.' He said, 'No, it was over at such and such a place.' I'm sitting there thinking I remember this so clearly that I was kind of backing out of the kitchen because he was only covered by a towel. After all, I was trying to look in the other direction. He's absolutely adamant that it was at someone else's place. Whose memory is correct?

DK [01:52:23] I have had experiences, just where I thought that something happened at a certain time and place. I realized later, comparing it to something else that it wasn't, right. Our memories are indeed quite creative things.

SY [01:52:40] Yeah, we all remember 1066 and all that. History is what you remember. You hope that the other guy doesn't remember something different.

DK [01:52:55] Yeah, it's curious.

JN [01:52:57] Thank you so much, Sharon, for this interview. It was wonderful. Thank you.

SY [01:53:02] You're more than welcome.