

Interview: George MacPherson (GM)

Interviewer: Phil Legg (PL)

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Transcription: Pam Moodie

PL [00:00:06] Okay, George. Glad you could make it. This is part of an ongoing project that the Labour History Centre has been doing to get the oral history from people who've been active in B.C.'s labour movement. And you've certainly fulfilled that one. So I wonder if we could start by you describing basically early life. Where you grew up, those sorts of things.

GM [00:00:29] Early life for me. I was born in Saint John, New Brunswick, went to school there and stayed there until I got married, which a very young age and headed west. But my time in the industry, really started back there. Served my apprenticeship in Saint John Dry Dock, and I was very active as an apprentice with the labour movement, so it kind of just followed through as the years went on. But, that's kind of the background of where I came from and the influences I had back then was, it was interesting enough, my father owned a trucking company, which is now owned by Day & Ross, but he was really not a union person. But I had an uncle that was very active in the pulp mill, ended up being the president of Irving Pulp and Paper, and eventually Irving talked him into, but he was a very active president. They had a lot of stuff going on. Irving, at some point, don't know why, talked him into taking on a superintendent's role. So he took on the superintendent's role and then they fired him, within months, and actually blackballed him from working in the province. And, through that experience, it really, that really drove me west, told me that I really didn't want to stay in Saint John because it was controlled by not a very nice family.

PL [00:01:50] Yeah, no, they were mean from top to bottom. Yeah. It's interesting. So shipbuilding, of course, in that part of the world is a big deal?

GM [00:02:01] Yeah. It is a big deal. It's a big deal in Halifax. Irving shut down the dry dock in Saint John, which was the largest in Canada at the time, which was another annoyance but it was the federal government that paid them to shut it down, paid them 100 million dollars to shut that yard down. The workers got nothing. And it was just a nightmare, which really, really took the city a long way back, they didn't, I don't think they really ever recovered from it.

PL [00:02:31] And the rationale for shutting the, at least the federal government's rationale for shutting the—

GM [00:02:37] Their rationale at the time was, shipbuilding was, and it's always been, I guess, since the Second World War, has been an up and down industry. You know, it's feast or famine. And, for whatever reason, the Conservatives believed that there was overcapacity and that they needed to get rid of some of these yards and try and rationalize the industry and get it down to a size that was manageable. Um, the reality is that, in my view, is that, you know shipyards will make it or they won't and will decide themselves whether they want to be in business or go do something else. But federal government should never be paying companies to go out of business, it is just a wrong concept.

PL [00:03:13] Yeah, no, I mean, the money's going to the wrong spot.

GM [00:03:16] Yeah.

PL [00:03:16] So what brought you out west? Why out west as opposed to someplace else?

GM [00:03:22] I was about halfway through my apprenticeship and my now, brother-in-law, him and I were about the same age. He was doing different things but decided he wanted to come west and have a look. So I was 18 years old and we just jumped on a plane, one-way ticket and landed in Vancouver and started looking around. We stayed here for about four months and just fell in love with the place. So then the decision was, well, what are we going to do now? So, my decision was to go back and finish my apprenticeship, and soon as I was finished my apprenticeship head west, which is what we ended up doing and, never looked back.

PL [00:04:03] Yeah, no, it is a special place for sure. So when you came out west with having completed your apprenticeship, where were you working?

GM [00:04:14] So my first job out here was a fab shop in Richmond. Stayed there for about six months and then there was an opening in Vancouver Shipyards. So I went in there and at the time Vancouver Shipyards was a small Yard. It was about a hundred people and all it really did was it was barges, but it turned out to be a great job. It was, had a lot of fun. And, you know, you just carried on from there. Got very active with the Marine Shipbuilders Local 506 at the time. I got to know the President who ended up being the Business Manager. This was Ron Ferguson. He was a character, but I worked with him on the tools and then he decided he was going to run for the Business Manager's job. So I was the campaign manager in the Yard. So it was an interesting election.

PL [00:05:02] Yeah. Yeah. Like a closely fought one, or was it?

GM [00:05:05] It was a battle because it was, they didn't have a lot of certifications. So there wasn't, the people were kind of concentrated and it was just the two camps and they were deeply divided. But the Beyer family who was Joe Beyer, ran that union for years and he was a tyrant. He was just, as far as I was concerned, he was stealing money. They would do their health and welfare pension meetings down in Hawaii, and it would just be him, his wife and his kid.

PL [00:05:37] Yeah, there's stories all over the place of how that's gone wrong in different unions. Yeah. But. And so you were part of a reform push?

GM [00:05:46] Yeah. And it worked out well. Ron was there for quite some time, and he did, he did a good job.

PL [00:05:52] Yeah, You know, from, you know, being involved at the bargaining unit level, did you also branch into local politics, as in the Labour Council, places like that?

GM [00:06:03] Yes. So I was living on the North Shore, so I was part of, we were part of the council looking after David Schreck at the time.

PL [00:06:11] Oh right.

[00:06:12] Very much involved with that, and municipal politics a little bit, but more on the provincial level.

PL [00:06:19] Yeah. So, the most active provincial election was which one for you?

GM [00:06:25] Oh, that would have been Davey Barrett's.

PL [00:06:27] So '72?

GM [00:06:31] Yeah '72.

PL [00:06:31] Yeah. That was momentous.

GM [00:06:32] Yeah.

PL [00:06:32] And some excellent stuff has been written about all of the accomplishments in three and a half years.

GM [00:06:37] It was a great job. Yeah, we end up taking him out of office, but he did a great job.

PL [00:06:41] Yeah. No, exactly. It really transformed and modernized the province from what it had been before. And also the Labour Code would have changed things significantly. Did that have an effect on politics within your local?

GM [00:06:56] Within the organization? Not so much. You know, it was at one point it was easier to go and organize and then that changed again, of course. But so, you know we were active in organizing. We were out there trying to do the best we could to get, build the memberships up, and then of course, you know, along comes rationalization of the industry and then the industry takes a big dive to the bottom.

PL [00:07:25] Start all over again. Yeah, kinda like snakes and ladders. So let's start with some of the ups and downs in the industry from the time that you came here, out to B.C. What was, you were mentioning, barge building was a big part of the operation you were part of. What else was going on around the Inlet?

GM [00:07:45] Burrard Dry Dock was extremely busy and eventually I left Vancouver Shipyards and ended up at Burrard, which was a great experience. At the time the Marine Workers had about 1200 people in there at that time. You know, we were extremely busy and they were building B.C. Ferries, they had small icebreakers. And, you know, it was it was really some good work.

PL [00:08:07] In the middle '70s, late '70s?

GM [00:08:11] The industry kind of went down in about 1982, it started to trickle backwards. And so it was I think that we did pretty good. We kept our membership up going all the way through, was other people were going down but. And then the Arctic opened up, so we started building small icebreakers for Tuktoyaktuk.

PL [00:08:39] Oh, no kidding!

GM [00:08:39] So and that was always interesting too because we, I ended up still on the tools at the time. I would end up going to Tuktoyakuk every year for usually for about two to three months.

PL [00:08:51] Just to kind of run the—

GM [00:08:52] Well, just working the new ship and repairing the stuff that was up there.

PL [00:08:58] And so the ships would leave here, go around through the Strait?

GM [00:09:02] Yeah.

PL [00:09:02] Wow. Okay.

GM [00:09:05] Yeah. So it was it was an interesting, it was an interesting project.

PL [00:09:08] Yeah. Now, in terms of the technology, was there something specific about the icebreaker technology that was significant for the Yard?

GM [00:09:16] For the Arctic, or for the Yard?

PL [00:09:18] No, for the Yard.

GM [00:09:19] Ah, there was a couple of Yards that had the capability of building them. It's all heavy steel. So you've got to have the equipment, the machinery to be able to move it, shape it and put it together. But Burrard was one of them. Allied was another one. Arthur McLaren who was the owner of Allied. He was a naval architect. Very clever guy. And so he designed quite a few of them.

PL [00:09:43] So there was, I mean, part of the idea from government was putting out projects that multiple Yards could all work on. Is that something that, did that concept work?

GM [00:10:00] Well, it worked better in the east than it did in the west back in the early days. The frigate program, which was a project that was done in Saint John and it was 12 vessels. Three of them were built in Davie and nine were built in Saint John. So that came to tender, the government put it out with the idea that they would try and share it around, but you had to bid on the project. Burrard Drydock, when they bid on the project, were actually the low bid. They won the bid, but politically the government was not going to give it to them. So they promised them the Polar 8, which was a massive, big project and gave the frigate program to the east. But the Polar 8, of course, was never built and the east did really well. They had a good 15 years of new construction, similar to what's going on right now, and did extremely well. The problem for Saint John at the end, when they closed it, was that they were just geared for working for government. They didn't do any private contracts at all. So to try and get back into the market after you've been out that long was very difficult.

PL [00:11:08] You know. So what's the story on the Polar 8?

GM [00:11:12] The Polar 8 was, actually it was a week before I became president of the Marine Workers. Michael Wilson got up in the house and announced in his budget and he cancelled the Polar 8. And so a week later, two weeks later, we were at the North Shore

Winter Club because he was there doing some speeches and trying to sell his budget. And so we had, probably about six or seven hundred marine workers, pipefitters, electricians there, doing a rally. Had Frank Kennedy was one of our speakers and Fitzpatrick, of course, he'd moved over to Frank's old job.

PL [00:11:52] Yeah. And the mood in the room was?

GM [00:11:55] It was ugly.

PL [00:11:57] And how did Wilson respond to all of this?

GM [00:12:00] He, it was just water off a duck's back. He didn't care. You know, he didn't—

PL [00:12:07] He's from Ontario.

GM [00:12:08] Yeah. It didn't matter.

PL [00:12:11] No, but the actual project when it was initiated was just a carrot? Was it?

GM [00:12:16] Well, I think it was real for a while. They actually started, there was people in Ottawa who started working on the Polar 8, designing the Polar 8 and trying to put the numbers together back in 1969. So it was on the books for a long time. And eventually when they, with the frigate program, when that came along, they used that carrot to appease the west. And, you know, it actually worked for quite a while, I mean, people really thought it was a real project and it was going to happen.

PL [00:12:46] It was just one of those things where, "we'll get to it in a year, we'll get to it in six months."

GM [00:12:50] Yeah, just kept pushing it back, pushing it back.

PL [00:12:54] And so what did that mean in terms of employment, displacement, the whole thing within the industry?

GM [00:13:01] Um, well, we lost 1,200 jobs when they cancelled the Polar 8, they were gone. We went down to a skeleton crew with, at that time, Burrard Dry Dock became Versatile Pacific. We went down to a skeleton crew, probably had about 60 to 80 people in there, and it just kind of stayed that way for about 18 months and then they were closing it. So then we had to start chasing government because it was the same thing when they closed it. It was Shieldings people that had bought the Yard. They are an investment group out of Ontario, out of Toronto, and they were able to negotiate a package out of the feds to close the Yard, and more rationalization. But there was nothing for the workers. So yeah, so I ended up at that particular time started lobbying the federal government. I was back and forth to Ottawa. There was weeks where I was there twice. I could go in on a Sunday, come back out on Monday night, back in again on Wednesday.

PL [00:14:02] So this was, because I remember in the forest industry we tried pretty much the same thing, but we were always running up against the same problem, which was you had EI money that was there, but you couldn't access it.

GM [00:14:16] Well, we.

PL [00:14:17] At least not in the way that you think.

GM [00:14:19] Yeah, we got lucky and, quite a bit of it. I mean part of the, part of what they were doing was they, they'd done a deal to sell the Panamax Dry Dock offshore, so they were going to take that away. The Panamax was built by the—the federal government paid for the Panamax. It's the dry dock that you see in North Vancouver.

PL [00:14:40] It's the one that they brought in, floating.

GM [00:14:42] Yeah. 1980 they brought that in, paid for by the Feds. And so the Shieldings people now they own it. So they, they'd done a deal, they were going to sell it off. So first our campaign was to save the dry dock. And they interviewed me on Global, I think, or CBC, one of them, and asked what we were going to do. And I said, "Well, if we sell that dry dock and try and take it out, it could be a thousand shipyard workers standing on the dock, going to wherever it's going." And that kind of got, that just kind of got the momentum for the campaign going. We started to get some people on board that wanted to become part of the project. So the Feds were watching us very closely as to what we were doing and how we were reacting so, Vancouver Shipyards, at the time, was Tom Ward, who eventually became President of B.C. Ferries for a short period. And so, him and I put a committee together and we co-chaired it and kind of pushed it along. We had a couple of other shipyards that wanted to buy in as well. They didn't stay long, they left pretty quick, but at the end we were able to salvage the dry dock.

PL [00:15:43] It stayed.

GM [00:15:44] It stayed. The province put some money into it and the Feds put some money into it to appease Shielding. And so, now we've got a dry dock, we've got a little bit of land that the Port owns. So we did, they did a deal with the Port, so we were able to secure that property. And so then after that, we had to start looking after workers. What are we doing with workers? So we were going back and forth and trying to put a package together. We were fortunate that we were able to put what they called a POWA program, to give people, at the time I think it was around 1200 dollars a month. If you were 55 and older or older, you got it till age 65. So we were able to get that. There was a lot of people who qualified for that.

PL [00:16:29] So bridging basically.

GM [00:16:30] Yeah, Yes. And then there was another \$300,000 that had people who didn't qualify, but were just not going to go anywhere. So they gave us \$300,000 to go and buy some annuities for people.

PL [00:16:43] That's good.

GM [00:16:44] So, we did well and the part of the program, it was, we had to do a deal with EI because we got a training program as well, got a pot of money to train some people. And so you get them on to EI and you put them into training. And some of the training was, took over two years. So we were able to keep them on EI for that full period, which was really unheard of at the time. So yeah, that worked out well.

PL [00:17:12] That program for older worker adjustment, the POWA stuff was, I mean, it was something that was novel at the time. You guys were able to kind of break through and, I mean that was significant, being able to get that bridging from 55 to 65.

GM [00:17:30] Yeah.

PL [00:17:32] Because those were big challenges all over the place.

GM [00:17:37] And of course everybody that was under 55, they were into training, but that's where we were going with them. And it worked out well because, for some of them, we try and pick programs that last them a couple of years. But eventually these people trickled back into the industry. Once things start to pick up.

PL [00:17:53] Now, where does this Washington Marine Group fit into all of this?

GM [00:17:56] So Seaspan, Washington Marine Group. They're really a transportation company. That's what they do.

PL [00:18:04] Tugs and barges.

GM [00:18:05] No. It's more trains.

PL [00:18:06] Oh, really?

GM [00:18:07] Yeah.

PL [00:18:08] Oh. Interesting.

GM [00:18:08] And so when they, when they looked at Seaspan, their idea, from what I was told, was that they looked at the tugs and barges and they thought, "Well, we can make money with that, as we are into transportation." So they can kind of adjust to that and that's okay. "Don't know what are we going to do with the shipyard." So the thought was that, eventually, they were probably just going to close the shipyard, which they came within, I would say, six months to a year of actually closing the Yard because there was really no work for it. And so it was just ramping down. And then, of course, the Feds come along when they got this megaproject that they're now working on. So that, that revived the Yard.

PL [00:18:46] Right. This was the new, think of it as the new frigate program.

GM [00:18:51] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PL [00:18:52] But it was, again, the work was spread out. It wasn't just—

GM [00:18:56] No it was. Well, there was two Yards, there was two winners, there was Halifax and Vancouver. And the other Yard that had bid it was Davie, and Davie, and the Feds really wanted to give Davie a good piece of this, but they couldn't. Davie was in bankruptcy. So that created a problem for them. So, but eventually, because the the vessels that were currently being built, that were in the fleet, because they're old, they gave up and that would be their supply ships. So Davie was fortunate. They got new owners and they got some more money, They got good capital behind them. They were

able to come along and say, "Well, we can go buy a vessel and we'll lease the odd vessel, we'll do a conversion on it, we'll do it and what have you." He made a fortune on it.

PL [00:19:39] Interesting. So the connection between what I think of as Seaspan on the North Shore and then the Esquimalt Yard. What's the crossover between the two?

GM [00:19:51] The crossover is, I mean, same owners, different general managers, they run it as separate, separate businesses. Vancouver Drydock as a separate business from Vancouver Shipyards and Esquimalt. But at the end of the day, of course, it's all the same, the money was all in the same pot. But the Esquimalt Yard is basically it's a repair yard. They don't do new construction. It's a repair yard. They're doing the submarines over there. So they work pretty closely with the federal dockyard.

PL [00:20:21] So, that's the distinction I'm trying to figure out here, because there's the, what I think of as the Navy's dockyard. Now, that's separate and apart from everybody else?

GM [00:20:32] It is. Yeah. They're part. One of the unions in there is part of our Federation.

PL [00:20:37] Right.

GM [00:20:39] So that's the connection that we have with the dockyard. Other than that, they're a government organization that, they don't really want to work on anything difficult. It's a nice job.

PL [00:20:50] That's good. So let's move along a bit and talk a bit about some of the work that you guys, that the Yards did when it came to ferry repair and then ferry new builds.

GM [00:21:07] Well, the ferry repairs, I mean we, I think back in the day when you were with the Fed, we had campaigns going because they were trying to take vessels offshore to do midlife refits. It was crazy stuff, you know, going on. But part of that, part of the reason why that came about, we had a change of government, of course, but part of that came about because of the Fast Cats, when we did the Fast Cats.

PL [00:21:29] Yeah.

GM [00:21:29] Which was purely a political decision to build them. There was a lot of people in the industry that weren't prepared to come out publicly, but certainly had a lot of conversations in the background that, "Is this really the right project for what you want to do?"

PL [00:21:43] In terms of, is the vessel itself the right vessel for this coast? Is that kind of the—

GM [00:21:48] Well, part of what the industry looked at and that would be the shipyards as well as the unions, was that you're going to put it on a run, you're going to knock 15 minutes off a run. You're still going to have a guy sitting in the parking lot for 2 hours and you're going to spend all this money on vessels that really, what are, what are you doing? Why are you doing it? Because we'd just done two Spirit Class. And there was supposed to have been four. They cancelled the other two and moved into the Fast Cats. So, and it really put a sour taste in a lot of people's mouth. But the reality is, is that the Washington Marine Group brought those three vessels for 20 million dollars. They stored them for a

couple of years in North Vancouver in plain sight so that everybody can see them. And then they sold them over to Saudi Arabia and I think they are now just coming to the end of their life and they made, they did really well with them.

PL [00:22:39] Yeah. Yeah. Really well, as in they sold them for far more.

GM [00:22:44] Oh, yeah, yeah.

PL [00:22:46] I think. Yeah, you're right about they parked them there for the longest time. Yep.

GM [00:22:50] Oh, yeah. They wanted everybody to see them.

PL [00:22:52] Yeah. No matter what. Yeah. So in terms of the issue around having worked on offshore, I know that that's been sort of an ebb and flow. Take us back through how that began and then where it ended up.

GM [00:23:09] Well, at the time when they first started doing this, we had, membership was full. We had lots of people, lots of very good qualified people, but they just didn't want to, the government of the day was the Gordon Campbell government. They'd made some changes and they made some changes in the Ferry Corp. Brought along David Hahn and—

PL [00:23:29] Million dollar man!

GM [00:23:29] Million dollar man. And so they made the decision that they were going to start taking stuff offshore. They weren't going to do it here. It was too expensive. Still all taxpayer's money but it was too expensive. So we mounted the campaign and I think we did a fairly good campaign. We certainly got a lot of profile out of it, and I think we came very close to stopping them. And they made the decision that, where they were going to go. And that was the rally that we did over in Victoria with Jackie Miller. From then, we've done no new construction. Everything we've done here has been repairs and midlife refits on the smaller vessels, what we call C-class vessel. The two Spirit class have just recently been done in the last couple of years. They went offshore for a midlife refit, which is two vessels that we built here, and the capacity to do them was certainly there. But, today, if we tried to put together a Yard to actually build something for B.C. Ferries, it would be done but it'd be difficult.

PL [00:24:37] Because?

GM [00:24:37] The yards have downsized that much, there's just not enough of them left. Vancouver Shipyards, of course, is tied up for the next number of years. They couldn't do it. Allied would be a mid-size yard. They'd have to do a fairly big investment in order to get back into it.

PL [00:24:54] Allied is the one that's just to the east of the bridge?

GM [00:24:59] Yeah, yeah.

PL [00:25:00] Yeah. No, I mean, this is the thing. Once you take a step in downsizing it's hard to come back.

GM [00:25:06] Yeah, it's very difficult. We still make a lot of noise when they're putting contracts out. I mean, it's the offshore bidders and they don't really give the local industry an opportunity to even bid. And the way the federal laws are kind of set up, you know, they, they build a vessel in Romania and they're able to bring it in with duty free. And if Allied want to build that same vessel, they have to pay duty on everything that they bring in.

PL [00:25:41] Oh, wow.

GM [00:25:42] So all the components that you put into a vessel, they've got to pay duty on it. So it's just an unfair advantage. It's just they've set it up so that you can't do anything with it.

PL [00:25:52] So is it like a very specific exemption for a fully complete ferry to be—

GM [00:25:56] They make an application. And their argument in their application for exemption of the duty is that, "Well, no Canadian Yard bid on it." And the Feds say "Oh, yeah, you're right. Okay. Yeah, we won't charge duty." Yeah.

PL [00:26:10] Yeah. As long as there's duct tape over the mouths of people who want to bid.

GM [00:26:12] That's right. Yeah. Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

PL [00:26:15] Go back to. So I'm interested in going back to this, some of the transitions that your members have gone through. I always think of Yard crews as being terrifically skilled to begin with. So in terms of training transitions that they went through over many, many years, where did people end up?

GM [00:26:38] A lot of people ended up—well, a lot of people ended up trying to courses that were going to extend their EI. That was their focus. And, so, but they would end up with Sprott Shaw doing stuff with them. We had three people that actually became helicopter pilots.

PL [00:26:56] Oh wow!

GM [00:26:57] And that wasn't, that wasn't cheap. It was like 25 grand to put a guy through that.

PL [00:27:02] And it was it was covered by the program.

GM [00:27:04] Yeah, We had control of the money.

PL [00:27:06] Very good.

GM [00:27:07] Yeah, we had total control of the money. We didn't have to answer to anybody.

PL [00:27:11] Wow.

GM [00:27:11] So, yeah, if we looked at it and the guy had had a reasonable plan on what he was trying to do. Yeah. Okay, That sounds like fun.

PL [00:27:18] Yeah, that is so neat! Yeah. Yeah. No, I can't tell you how many times different unions have had to wrestle that one, and always ended up having to have a bureaucrat with sort of the oversight, which can be frustrating.

GM [00:27:36] Both the province and the feds really wanted to have hands off. Go run your program. Just leave us alone. And at the end of the day, there was some money left over. When everything wrapped up, it wasn't a great deal of money. But the province wrote it off, and the Fed says "We don't want to know." So we kept that little pot of money and just used it for people that had tickets expiring, whatever needed an upgrade.

PL [00:28:02] Yeah. Very good. That is so neat. Wow, it's very powerful. And I don't know whether it's something that's just kind of idiosyncratic to your industry or whether it's advocacy over the many, many years.

GM [00:28:16] I think it's advocacy over many, many years. And, you know, we go all the way back to Jeff Power and John Fitzpatrick, how they, how they did things. And then, you know, my approach was somewhat different, but it was still, it was effective.

PL [00:28:28] Yeah. Yeah. Well, and always being on the doorstep in Ottawa making the case, making the case, making the case.

GM [00:28:34] Yeah. Yeah.

PL [00:28:36] When I say squeaky wheel, but.

GM [00:28:39] It works. Oh yeah, it works. Yeah.

PL [00:28:42] Good. So just want to go back a bit to the connection between some of the marine locals and B.C. labour union politics. I mean, it's been an area that's been active over many, many decades, actually. I think of Vancouver District Labour Council. It's kind of the Marine locals have been the sort of heart and soul of that. Has that been part of your experience?

GM [00:29:11] That was part of my experience as well. I started going to the Vancouver District Labour Council back in the day when they had all the radio stations sitting at the back and, you know. It was, they were, they were good meetings. They used to report on, you know, nine o'clock would be, the reporters would be on the news saying what happened at the Vancouver District Labour Council. They were exciting meetings.

PL [00:29:32] So, I was at a celebration of life this past weekend. And Rod Mickleburgh, who did the book 'On The Line', was talking about his early years as a reporter and that back then there were many reporters that covered the labour beat all the time. And it's interesting how, you know, the power of media to silence that.

GM [00:29:59] It's, yeah, it's because the industry's changed that much too, all the industries. You know as people got older, there wasn't a whole lot of apprentices being run through, so. And the people that had all the labour background were retiring and moving on. And the people that we brought on, and the Marine Workers are as guilty of this as anybody, weren't really teaching the young people coming in as to what the labour movement was and the things that we've done and how we got to where we are, you know, and that's, that's true of most unions.

PL [00:30:29] Yeah. Now it's a sad fact that kids coming into a good union jobs look at their wages and benefits and think, "My employer is giving me this!"

GM [00:30:39] Yeah, that's right.

PL [00:30:41] No, no. Forty years of this and this and this and you have all these terrific benefits, but this is an upward struggle. Let's just talk a little bit about some of the challenges you see for the labour movement writ large, let's say, over the next 5 to 10 years.

GM [00:31:01] I think it's going to be—and I hope I'm wrong on this—but I think over the next 10 to 15 years, we're going to see the decline in the labour movement like we've seen in the United States where it just keeps shrinking. And part of that has to do with education and part of it has to do with geography. You know, we used to get union meetings, if we had less than 100 people at a union meeting back when I got involved with the Marine Workers, that was a small meeting. Today, if you can get a quorum of 15, 20 people, you've done pretty good. So they're not, nobody wants to engage. And part of it is that, you know, people live too far away. It used to be that everybody was kind of, you worked in North Vancouver, you weren't far from that. And it was easy to go to a union meeting. Today they're coming in from Maple Ridge. We've got members coming in from Chilliwack, Mission.

PL [00:31:53] Okay, so they're not coming in for—

GM [00:31:54] No, they're not coming in for a meeting, so.

PL [00:31:56] There is that. What if organizing? Just take off your Marine hat and talk generally about organizing within the broader labour movement. Is that, what's your feeling on that?

GM [00:32:13] I think that, uh, I think there's an opportunity for some unions to get in there and do stuff. I find it, for the unions that are looking after trades, it becomes very difficult. As you go out, if you're not, if you go outside of your comfort zone and decide, well, okay, and we've done it. Take on a couple of shops that aren't marine related at all. There was one that was making eight bucks an hour when we took them. This was a number of years ago, but that was a minimum wage. And the organizers, God bless them, were out there hustling and trying to do things, but they're saying, "Well, you know, we're the Marine Workers. I mean, our guys are making 20 bucks an hour. They got a pension, they got this, they got that." Well, you're not going to get that eight dollar an hour guy anywhere near that. You're going to work away at it over a period of time, but they want it right now. So it's difficult to hold on to those. The one particular one that I'm talking about is the, ended up, it was, we got raided by CLAC and they took it. It was 20 people, and it was okay because we raided them too and we got one of their shops that actually got paid very, very well and we were able to hang on to them for years. But it was going back and forth. And I think it's, I think certain unions need to go after those kinds of certs, and other unions should just leave them be.

PL [00:33:38] And it's always the first collective agreement that's—

GM [00:33:40] It's difficult. Yeah.

PL [00:33:42] And if you can't get something good.

GM [00:33:44] Yeah.

PL [00:33:45] This is the natural conflict.

GM [00:33:46] Yeah. I mean I had one that, trying to get the first collective agreement. We had them on the street for ten months and never did get a, get an agreement. We got, we got a buyout, a very decent buyout but the company never survived. It's alive but it's totally downsized.

PL [00:34:06] Yeah. No, organizing is certainly a big challenge and having a Labour Code that provides some support. That's a big first step. But there's so much more that needs to be put into place.

GM [00:34:21] Yeah. We worked hard with the Labour Board to try and get them to impose a first collective agreement and I didn't care how good it was, but I wanted to impose. So then we had a starting point. And they refused to do it. So, which is too bad, but—

PL [00:34:37] I'm mindful of time and I'm thinking about some of the things that are kind of important to the marine industry going forward. Is it, do you see a time when federal contracts aren't going to be the lifeblood of it?

GM [00:34:59] I do. I think that if they can position themselves in the right areas, they'll do well. We've got a Yard over in Port Alberni that, we got new owners to come out of Dartmouth actually. The Yard's been around forever. The new owners have been there for about 10, 12 years. They had about, for years they had about 30, 30 to 35 people. That was their nucleus. And we've got them now up to 100 people. And they're just, you know, they're just thriving and they're not really doing, they're not doing government work.

PL [00:35:35] What kind of, what kind of boats are they making?

GM [00:35:37] They're doing fish boats, they're doing barges. They're doing stuff that's up Island. So yeah. So, and it's very profitable for them. The wages are good, the benefits are good. So that kind of stuff is going to do well. Yards, mid-sized Yards, are going to do okay on the private sector stuff. Vancouver Dry Dock will do well. Not everything, but most of what they do is public sector. It's not government. They're currently in the process of trying to get approval to bring two more dry docks in there. The people that bought all those condos over on that property aren't happy about that, but it looks like it's going to happen.

PL [00:36:16] Interesting. Wow, that's very good.

GM [00:36:19] So I see some growth. I see some positive things going on. Got to do better with the apprentices. Gonna need, need to get some people trained.

PL [00:36:27] Yeah, Yeah. But, every industry is suffering the same problem.

GM [00:36:30] Yeah, yeah.

PL [00:36:31] I mean, they always talk about labour shortages.

GM [00:36:35] They're real.

PL [00:36:35] And they're real, but they also go back 10, 15 years when people just didn't, or employers didn't lift a finger to push through apprentices.

GM [00:36:46] And one of the arguments they use, which I totally discount, is that well, they spend all this money to train the guy and soon as he's finished he leaves. And my argument to that is, that's exactly what you want the guy to do. You want him to leave and go finish his training with somewhere else, find out how else to do things. And you want to steal that guy, where he's going, you want to steal that apprentice. And that was the way I was brought up. And that's how I really learned my craft.

PL [00:37:13] Yeah, adding to the supply. The supply ultimately benefits the employer community writ large. The more that, the bigger the pool the more skill you've got. It's just this idea of portability too. I mean, I move from east to west. And that wouldn't have been possible without having things, your skill recognized if you moved. And that's something that employers have fought tooth and nail against.

GM [00:37:43] Yeah, they have and I think it's to their advantage to have that portability. That's how you get good tradespeople. That's how you make money.

PL [00:37:51] Yeah yeah yeah. And that's how you get projects done too.

GM [00:37:54] Yeah.

PL [00:37:55] I mean this idea that you want to create different fiefdoms, I think is just chasing the wrong money there. Yeah. So, this has been good. You've got great stories to tell and you've had a great life in an industry that is really important to the province.

GM [00:38:14] Well, the industry's been very good to me, so I've enjoyed it all the years that I've been in it.

PL [00:38:19] Yeah. Good stuff.