

Interview: Barry O'Neill (BO)
Interviewer: Keith Reynolds (KR)
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Transcription: Warren Caragata

KR: [00:00:05] Hi, my name is Keith Reynolds. I'm here today with Sharon Prescott. Today is the 20th of March 2023. We're here today to interview Barry O'Neill, former president of CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees) BC, longtime executive member of the national union. Longtime CUPE member, longtime labour activist. I'm going to suggest that we start off at the beginning, which is can you tell us about where you were born, where you grew up, and where you went to school?

BO: [00:00:34] I was born in on Cape Breton Island. Some would call that no part of Nova Scotia, but I'm from Cape Breton, so we don't. I was born and raised in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, and moved to Sydney, and I went to Constantine School when I was there.

KR: [00:00:57] You weren't too old when you moved from Cape Breton, were you?

BO: [00:01:01] No, I wasn't. My father got in an unfortunate accident and died when he was 34. We got on a train, my mother and my three siblings and went across Canada, and that's where we ended up at the end of the day, Vancouver, and then Vancouver Island. I left Nova Scotia but continued to go back for a number of years. It was a tough time for my whole family, but we adjusted well. We got out of Nova Scotia and out to B.C. and then visited Nova Scotia all the time.

KR: [00:01:38] When did you move to Nanaimo and where did you go to school?

BO: [00:01:41] In Nanaimo, I went to NDSS (Nanaimo District Secondary School), Fairview Elementary School, and in Vancouver I went to Vancouver College. We moved to Vancouver first and we were there for about a year and a half and then we came to Nanaimo, where my mother was working with my sister, and they developed the licensed practical nurse course in Nanaimo at the vocational school at the time.

KR: [00:02:06] Can you tell me when you moved to Nanaimo?

BO: [00:02:10] God, dates are not my favourite. I'd have to look back. Had to be somewhere in the late sixties, early seventies.

KR: [00:02:23] Your dad passed away young, but can you tell us what your parents did for a living and if they were involved in politics or labour?

BO: [00:02:31] My father was a train engineer and my mother taught RNs (registered nurses). She was a nurse obviously and she took on the role of teaching RNs at St (unclear) Hospital. A long career, a large family of 16 children. They were all nurses. Politically, I think that—I just had the feeling when I got to know a little bit more that everybody in Cape Breton leaned a little bit left and never ever really got too much stress about it. I think that my father was involved in the engineer's union. And my mother, of course, was an RN and an RN teacher, so I suspect that she was involved because she was involved when she came to B.C. as an RN.

KR: [00:03:19] Now, you went to work early, and I understand you went to sea on a freighter when you were 17. Can you tell us about your life at sea?

BO: [00:03:29] (laughter) Yeah, it was quite an experience. I came to B.C., that was in the seventies, early seventies, and a friend of mine was actually deep sea. I always was wanting to travel a lot but never seemed to have the right amount of money to get anywhere. He asked me if I would like to go with him. I paid on a 37,000-ton freighter in Tahsis, British Columbia, and started off with the Panama Canal. After that, it was something I did for two years, travelling across the eastern seaboard to Japan, to Scandinavia, and back, and then back again the next year where I paid off and stayed in Germany for a year. So yeah, I spent some time on a freighter and I enjoyed it. I'm afraid you couldn't do the same thing now, but it was really a eye-opening experience for me on a very small budget.

KR: [00:04:30] Now you were also very interested in sports. How did you end up playing hockey in Germany and what was that like?

BO: [00:04:36] Oh, a friend of mine who had been to Germany played. This was when—auslanders—you could have one or two auslanders on team in Germany, and hockey in Germany at that time wasn't too significant, so I thought maybe I was good enough, although I really wasn't. My friend, who was quite a good hockey player, wanted me to come. He wanted me to perform on the ice some things that I'm not very proud of in my hockey career, so it didn't last very long. The idea of going there and travelling around Europe once again after my days at sea was intriguing to me. I got a job there and just travelled across Europe and came back to (name unclear) in West Germany where he still played. I gave that up after a little while because I was just getting a little tired of that role.

KR: [00:05:31] What was the name of the team and where was it located?

BO: [00:05:34] In West Germany, it was straight on the Dutch border and the place that we were was called Grafrath. There was a number of Canadians there, and they were in Krefeld and Dusseldorf and played in that league right up into Berlin. There was a lot of people there that I knew.

KR: [00:05:55] You went to Canada in the mid 1970s. What did you do then and how did you end up working for School District 68 in Nanaimo?

BO: [00:06:02] Well, I started out in construction business for a long time, and I think that I did all kinds of areas and ended up doing a lot of things around building houses. My son eventually and I would do something and as well I had another company with a good friend of mine, so I did a lot of stuff in that area. Then you hit the middle-to-late seventies, early eighties, and the economy goes in the tank. Interest rates are over 20 percent, inflation is up to nine and 10 percent at that time. There was nothing significant going on, but I got an opportunity to go to the school board. I'd just had my first child with my wife and so we proceeded from there. I think that I did every single job that you could do in the school district. Then I found my way quite by accident into the labour movement.

KR: [00:07:02] Well, that was going to be my (noise). How did you get involved with the local and what made you decide that unions were important?

BO: [00:07:09] Well, a little bit was just as a result of an accident that I had on Forbidden Plateau in Courtenay. I had since been working at the transportation department with a

bus and bused children back and forth on charter trips to ski trips in the winter and so on and so forth. We had an—I had an agreement with the teachers there that I would take a group out and we would ski together. There were certain times that I came back and did that. Well, one day that didn't work out and I broke my leg in many places and I had to get another driver up to drive them. Being of that age with one child and the school district decided that, first of all, that they would fire me. Second of all, when that didn't seem to be working out the way it should have, they said they wouldn't pay me and I was suspended. My union didn't fly forward, but I knew that there was somebody out there. I decided from that point that I would do my grievance myself. I found out that, you know, you can be successful if you're determined enough. I got some money over top my job back and discipline dropped. That was, I think, the start of it all, that you could make a difference. I did. From there, I moved into the local union, processed from job steward to chief shop steward to vice-president, and finally to the full-time officer for that school district, School District 68, and three other school districts, Qualicum, Duncan, and Lake Cowichan—very large education local. That's where I really cut my teeth. It was from that time something that I knew that I wanted to do forever. That's what I ended up doing, both nationally and provincially.

KR: [00:09:20] You moved up from steward to full-time president pretty quickly. Could you tell us about that process? How did that happen that you moved up quickly in the organization like that?

BO: [00:09:33] Well, mostly because nobody wanted to do it. (laughter) The local was quite big and we had just decided that we would have a full-time position. I had a great crew, I belonged to a great executive there. I think that's really what made me interested in wanting to do far more than I was I was doing, and I was the only male on the board. I think that people might think that's odd, but for me it probably made me continue. They were tough, all of them, on me. I think it was a result of them that I actually moved ahead and, of course, the part of that was being a full-time officer in the local. They moved me from there, encouraged me provincially and nationally. Those were those were my real eight mentors.

KR: [00:10:28] We've talked before and one of the things you told me you were proudest of at Local 608 was the local's first gender-neutral job evaluation. How did that happen and what was the result?

BO: [00:10:39] Well, knowing my background (it was 606, this was the local number), and I had always thought that the way that the working process in school districts, in particular, not only there, but as I would find out in municipalities and other areas that I represented, so it angered me to find out what employers thought about in that occupational group. I used, now education assistants, then teaching assistants, that the wage for one of those occupational groups was far below the lowest. That really made me angry, so I took a course from what turned out to be a good friend of mine, Gaby Ethier in Ottawa, and he trained me in the area of job evaluation. We put it to the table. We got it on the table, I think, in the late seventies. From there, I started a gender-neutral, weighted-point job valuation program. It took 18 months to develop. Myself and a good friend, since passed, Joy Fagan, wrote 19 new job descriptions for 1,700 people and away we went. I think we're the second in Canada to actually do that program, certainly the first in British Columbia. I did it with Nanaimo in particular. We didn't have a single red circle and we lifted some of the bottom people from, in some cases, being far below the lowest scale up to the same wage as a tradesperson and four different classification of educational assistants. That really got me inspired to do—I really thought that those kinds of things—

the one thing that I had always believed in was equity, that was drilled into me. I believed in it and I thought that laws and I continued in my career to do more around legislation and those kinds of things, never as successful as I had thought it would have been. The program is still in existence. It's changed, and I'm still convincing people that that's what they need to do at the end of the day.

KR: [00:13:13] Now, moving on a little bit in time, you were president of the local at the time of Operation Solidarity.

BO: [00:13:18] Yeah.

KR: [00:13:18] What was the relationship between you and Operation Solidarity and the local and locals in general for that period?

BO: [00:13:32] The Solidarity days were an opportunity for us, for the labour movement, to kind of reignite themselves. That's how I looked at it. Marches and, you know, to 20, 30, 50,000 people at the Coliseum—a huge, great plan, but we hadn't done anything significant around that. I'll just throw that over there because it's driving me nuts and we can edit that part out. I thought Solidarity was the first time I'd really seen the labour movement be collective, really doing things that made a difference. Pushing back on Bills 19 and 20, which were to devastate the labour movement, and 20 in particular, aimed at the teachers and education and putting education into chaos in British Columbia. I think at that time, that was Bill Bennett that put that on. That was, I think, one of the most satisfying things as well as one of the most difficult things that I ever got involved in managing. I'd just become or was just becoming or moving towards an officer of the B.C. Federation of Labour. It was a wake-up call, I think, for not only myself and our union, but also for the labour movement generally that we could make some difference. We pushed back hard. Not everybody believed in the resolve, but at the end of the day, we got there, and that was a result of our collectiveness. That's what Operation Solidarity was all supposed to achieve, and it did for the most part. There are things that we didn't get done, but certainly that was the start in B.C., at least as long as I was around, of putting things back together. We used that standard as long as I was president of CUPE in British Columbia, and different models of that, to make other things happen through governments that were at least as bad as that one, if not worse in some areas. We found out that you could still make a difference by being collective.

KR: [00:15:54] Now, in the early 1990s, you got more involved with CUPE at the provincial and national levels. You moved up from third VP to general vice-president, and then you were elected president of CUPE BC in 1997. Can you tell us something about those years?

BO: [00:16:09] Wow, there is a lot! I didn't really want to move from my position in Nanaimo. That's at the end of the day the reason I did, because I found myself doing some of the things that disturb me from leaders staying on and just deciding, well—the analogy I've always used is one day somebody came into my office and asked me to get something done, a serious problem. I just told him, 'Oh, don't worry about it. Go back to work and I'll fix that up tomorrow.' That was when I knew I needed to leave, because my feeling around leadership was that if you're starting to do everything, you're not building anything. That's why I took the advice of my executive and wanted to do something about that, and that was getting more involved. I had already been involved with the provincial executive forum but run for the position of president.

KR: [00:17:10] You had a fairly broad support in that run.

BO: [00:17:13] Yeah, I did. Well, I always say that the whole thing the way I did it was different than others. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I was a little controversial in other matters. I knew that I couldn't be wrong if I had the support of our members. I was adamant that we do that, that all of our plans wrap around that—not just saying it, doing it. I would say as a result of those people getting involved, and the fabulous team of staff that I had around me all the time, made me look awfully good, perhaps a little better than I should have looked. They worked hard; I worked hard. The members felt it, and the members started to work harder to get where we were. I think that they proved that over those years that were really significantly terrible for people. We were under attack and others were under attack. We did some things right. I think for us, it moved public sector unions a significant way. I know that my predecessor always said there was a problem with public sector unions, that they weren't being recognized for what they really provided and what they did. We changed that by establishing with the private sector—we did lots of work with the Steelworkers, for example, as well as other public sector unions. We really stepped out of the public sector for a while to start to talk about communities and that's where we started to deal. We put together a program called Strong Communities, and that's what we focused on for the next three or four years until we put that plan together. As people will know, we converted that into a different kind of plan with additions to it for the circumstance. It served us well what we did in the first few years that I was elected in establishing a good feeling from members to what their union was doing and how great their union really was and how important it could be. All of those things really wrapped around what they did. I'd love to say, you know, I made all that happen. I didn't, they made it all happen. Our staff helped make it all happen. I played a role and the role I played, I played it as best I could, but certainly that was the biggest move that our members have ever made in the history of our union, the biggest.

KR: [00:19:56] You said in the past that in your early years as CUPE BC president, that sometimes it was harder to get along with your friends than it was to get along with your enemies. What did you mean by that?

BO: [00:20:06] Well, it seemed that nobody wanted to get outside the box very much. That was one of the—when I was elected, I wanted to start to plan for what was inevitable in that climate, in that political climate, of course, working politically to make that climate go away and put another party there. We started to build the second week I was there, that we needed to start building on things that we just did. I mean, we talked about all of these great things we were doing at that time, and that was international solidarity. We had a spectacular program, but we had decided that how we would do it is members would pay a certain amount of money every year. That petered off and I said, 'You can't do that. You know, I just think that our members are ready to take that on and fund it realistically with a per capita.' Well, that wasn't the most popular thing I could possibly say, in particular around that time, because, you know, union dues inevitably are difficult to pass. I said, 'I believe that our members will support the five major international programs that we have. I'm going to suggest at a convention that we move our per capita up 0.5 percent to take care of that, and that will be designated to take care of those programs for a very, very long time.' Everybody, I think, including the executive, anybody who was there, thought I had finally lost my mind. I was going to take a per capita increase to a convention and I was going to be the first one to speak to it, and it had no chance of doing it. Little did they know at the end of the day, it passed by about 87 percent. That's what it was all about for me, building new things, move on from something and deliver. Not big projects all of the time, but stand up when you needed to stand up and continue to build those things that

we've done for so long and practiced, put them in place forever—and we did. I think they're still using some of that stuff and updating it to make it better. That's what I started to do when I got there and it was probably the last things I did when I was there.

KR: [00:22:33] Twenty-three years ago, back in 2000, there was a school workers strike that ended up being legislated back to work by an NDP government. How did that work out for CUPE members?

BO: [00:22:46] It didn't work out very well because people are of the view—this was probably one of the reasons I kinda had that and a couple of other times where the labour movement really didn't believe in what we were preaching. In this case, it just happened to be a friendly government that, if it had've been an unfriendly government, we would have raised hell. We decided that that shouldn't happen and we were going to be legislated back to work. The end of the day, we didn't get legislated back to work. We said that we won't go if you do that, but if you give us time, we can get a collective agreement under legislation. As it turns out, that was good. The rest of the labour movement didn't see it quite that way and I said, 'Well, you can only do it one way. You cannot play the game when it's not impacting you and suggest that other peoples do it differently. And when it happens to us, we don't do anything.' That was probably the first time we've crossed the line. We went to a federation convention and the then-premier of the province came to the federation and our members said we're not staying here. We left a pretty big hole on the convention floor. We walked out on his presentation. We learnt a whole bunch of stuff about doing that, because I knew that I had to do it. I wasn't particularly fond of the idea at the time, but as I said, I judged all of the things that I did based on whether or not our members wanted to do them and that's what they wanted to do. If I didn't believe in it, I still needed to make sure it happens and that happens the way they want. They decided that and so that's what we did. That kind of carried through for a lot of things. I think that people now look at it as the right step for us, that we walk the talk. We can't just talk about how bad that is when it happens to you. You've got to get yourself together and make a statement. I think that they did a great job of that.

KR: [00:25:01] I remember those meetings at the convention centre. A year after that, in 2001, the B.C. Liberals got elected. You've often said that that meant big changes for both CUPE and the labour movement. What did you mean by that?

BO: [00:25:16] Well, it goes back to those strategies that we hadn't worked on until the crisis started. We had by that time perfected some of the practice we had around with the Hospital Employees Union and others and some big CUPE locals. We were developing and had developed that time a strategy that would take care of that without absolutely losing our whole defence fund. I think later on, a little bit later than that, we did that with the teachers as well. Those times for, you know, probably five or six years in a row, it was difficult for CUPE members everywhere. They were losing their jobs, they were falling behind in wages, the services in their communities was going down. They were feeling it as well as the community members, because at the very same time we were doing that, what you just mentioned, we were trying to get a better grip on local politics and that was really important to us. We started a program called Neighbourhood Watch. We did a couple of tours across the province and talked to people how we could do better. The words that we were using, I think, were important for people to understand that we're the recipients of the same services we provide our neighbours, and we wouldn't sell our neighbours rights away for a collective agreement. We were preparing ourselves from both sides, from the provincial government, and we were doing our political action stuff and trying to elect as many progressive or conservative-progressive councillors at the local

level, which became more important for us than provincial politics. That's where we worked. That's where we had an impact. I always said that we have an ability to do more and we just knocked that around and talked about it all the time that, you know, you can't always get your MP from Ottawa and you don't always get your MLA, but you'll see your local councillor at the hockey rink at 4:30 in the morning. Whether he wants to talk to you or not, he's got nowhere to go. He's not on a plane to Ottawa or Vancouver or Victoria. Our members really liked that plan, and from that time on, CUPE joined service groups, they became members of the chamber. They got involved like they were a business and they started to play a major role in communities. I think that when we look back, the number of people we elected as municipal politicians was dramatic. We got involved with the UBCM (Union of BC Municipalities) in a big way. We got involved in local politics in a big way. I think at the end of the day, that put another tool into our toolbox around strategies for what's going to happen next—and all of that seemed to happen as we predicted.

KR: [00:28:39] Barry, I'm going to go right back to when the Liberals were elected and started bringing in some pretty bad legislation. Part of CUPE's response to the provincial government was on-the-job canvasses, a solidarity vote, a job-action plan. That really seemed to be the underpinning for a lot you did. Could you tell us about how those actions developed?

BO: [00:29:01] Well, as I say, the plan for that was in place in a different time frame, probably eight or nine years ago when we started to work on CUPE Works—that that was a part of how do we get around this whole idea of when there's a major dispute, how do we keep supporting people, how do we support our own people, how do we support the community when we do that? We came up with some guidelines on how we might do it and we used the very same one with the teachers. We did it with the HEU (Hospital Employees Union) to some extent. We did it with our big university locals. We said that—some of the guidelines were just off-hand and that I recall is that your local needs to lead this. If your local does lead it, then your region will lead it, you will get involved. Ultimately, after everything's done, that we will see whether or not we could walk every CUPE member in the province. That was a big thing for us. That's perhaps the most significant of my career in that regard. To watch us put that together was—it was very difficult to do. I'm sure a lot of people didn't think that, okay, well, we're doing good, and these programs are working, but I'm not sure that we had everybody's support in doing it. I can remember, I met with the staff every other day. I think it seemed like every other day and I said, or I was on the road, and I just said, 'we can do it, we can do this,' and we did it. We used it. I think that we had a major difference with the labour movement at that time on what we were going to do. We didn't ask anybody whether or not we should do some of those things and many of the other unions followed. It certainly didn't put me in high regard at times. I was getting used to by that time to being the blacker, dark angel.

KR: [00:31:25] Barry, CUPE is different in significant ways from some of the unions. It's not the sort of organization where you could pick up the phone and order the union out on strike. People have often said that CUPE's biggest strength and its biggest weakness is local autonomy. Could you talk about that for a minute?

BO: [00:31:49] Well, it was, it was the biggest hurdle to get through. I mean, it was spectacular that they had that kind of autonomy and that kind of belief in their autonomy. It was difficult to do much of that stuff at a provincial basis. You had to actually get on the street. You actually had to do it. We had to contact every single solitary local in the province, and we had to do that on a regular basis. We had to keep them up. We had to keep staff there and positive. You know, our staff is great, but have had the same feelings

about it. There was some funny things that happened too but you know some things stick out. I phoned in one day and—'Barry, this has got to stop. We can't manage this. We can't do it. We can't get it done.' There was tears and all that happened but we pulled it all together and we did it. Our members, surprisingly, were a little bit angry when we went back, but we followed our guidelines exactly to the nines. With the teachers, I can remember the call from Jinny Sims, 'Well, it looks like we have agreement.' Well, that's too late because we're going to be at the Coliseum tomorrow and we're going to be at the— where was it—the Stampede, the Cloverdale place, and those people need their chance and that was Vancouver and the other areas in the Lower Mainland. All that strategy, we didn't think it up in two weeks before it happened. We knew it was going to happen. As long as governments that were coming into power were going to treat the labour movement as they did and prove that they would whenever they got a chance, we needed to be ready for something like that, even though we may never use it. We had a plan. The plan was always there, and we used it to the nines and to the letter. That just shows how amazing our local unions can be with local autonomy and still provide that collective provincially.

SP: [00:34:14] Barry, we also have to remember we didn't have Zoom calls then and we actually did walk a region out every day for a week. I remember being on those. We had regional conference calls with every union president in that particular region, and then at the end of that call, people would vote and they would go out. You're right, it culminated into the finale where we were going to do the calls daily and on the last day it was a huge success, but it was long before we had technology like we do now. Again, local autonomy being the biggest challenge, but in this case was our biggest strength.

BO: [00:35:02] Well, I think the one thing people think that it's just that—we didn't invent that program. You know that kind of a move before, well long before my time, was a strategy used by the labour movement all across Canada. It wasn't, 'Oh, Barry's come up with this really cool thing.' Barry didn't come up with this really cool thing, unfortunately. Leaders and members for at least back to the late twenties were doing this kind of thing. I think that there was a, not a reporter, a guy from the University of Winnipeg, a researcher, I think, who wrote some things on it, and he came to see me about it and I said, 'Well, no, I have a problem with it, but you could resolve the problem. If there's no mention of any of the leaders to start with, no leaders, not me, not anybody. If you talk about this as our members did this and don't refer to me or anybody else, then you'd have to be very careful and that you could do it. We let you publish it.' I've read it. I'm not sure how many people ever did read it, but I read it. He did do a very good job in making sure that my wish was carried through. I don't think that our members have seen enough of that because that same program that we talked about and most will know, you will know, Keith and Sharon, that was when unions really did support themselves through kind of a sympathy strike. It was effective and it wasn't new. That strategy hadn't been used for a very long time, but it was a good one, according to my reading. So, some adaptation I guess we needed to work on, but it wasn't the miracle that people thought it was dreamed up the day before yesterday at the Blue Button Club.

KR: [00:37:17] Barry, talking about these things there were really two big actions in the first 10 years of this century. In 2004, the government brought in back-to-work legislation against the Hospital Employees Union. Now that was the trigger for the solidarity action that you've been talking about there. What happened? What happened with that? What was the trigger for it? What did CUPE do?

BO: [00:37:39] Well, that was the first time that we actually got—I actually went to the table in that dispute— myself and Paul Moist at the time went. The was the government was sticking very hard. Of course, people will know with the grief that those workers have went through is just—it's unbelievable how they were treated and how little respect they had for them. We also had a big stake in that, not only because the HEU was a service division of our national union, they were CUPE, but we also had like 5,500 paramedics as well who were going through as bad, if not worse, treatment and the lack of respect they got. The problems we had of that, that we didn't work significantly on—the HEU and the paramedics both had the same problem. The government was now moving the paramedics into the central bargaining system where before they had some independence that they could still do. Neither one of them had really the right to strike. Paramedics in particular, and the HEU didn't either. They had to do kind of the things—they wouldn't have fit very well in the format that we laid out for doing that. We didn't get that developed until we had the teachers do it. Then we just—we put a couple of things in here, but the teachers really needed to kinda heed what that rule was. The local has to do it first. We had that problem with some locals, and we had it with the HEU that couldn't do it for all kinds of reasons. You know, it would have been easier for us. We know the private sector did what they could, but they were facing huge fines and they did pay them. Our members said that this is our dispute, and we should be the ones to lead it—and we did. The HEU in particular and the paramedics, surprisingly, I'm back working with them again.

KR: [00:39:55] Then two years later, the same thing happened to the teachers.

BO: [00:39:57] Yeah.

KR: [00:39:59] How did CUPE respond to that?

BO: [00:40:01] The problem that the teachers had—well, we had I suspect—is that the previous job action involving CUPE and school workers was—the best way to put it, not very productive and disrespectful. We've had people getting run over on picket lines when we were on strike. That's no reflection perhaps but when you're looking at the 85,000 members we have and they hear that kind of stuff they're not in a really good mood to take on a strategy to walk out after all of that stuff's happened. We developed a different kind of relationship, in particular, and Jinny Sims had to do some work on her members and I had to do some work on our members to make them understand, because of that instance. That's no reason to abandon the kind of collective that we had working between us. We worked together. In fact, we're the closest thing you can do from being one union was with the BCTF and CUPE. It was more difficult, and we got there with the help of arbitrators. I think that the government blinked with the HEU. Some of those stories that happened with the paramedics were equally disturbing. I can remember we had—I was at the table for that and we took (unclear) myself and Ian Downie took out a proposal to the minister at that time, George Abbott, and we had a deal. We found out in the morning that George Abbott had been transferred from that portfolio to another one. They put in, I believe it was, Mr. Falcon, so that was gone. We were always doing those actions like where, I think 20 years ago, it was difficult—the public sector unions were kind of the poor second cousins to everything it seemed. I thought that changed with the BCGEU, it changed with us. We needed to get our members to a point where they could defend themselves equally as well as the private sector does, and remembering that it's two different, huge, different animals to do that. Our members managed to do it.

KR: [00:42:44] Barry, in 2006, CUPE wasn't in complete agreement with the rest of the labour movement about what needed to be done. Could you talk about some of those disagreements and how they worked out?

BO: [00:42:56] Yeah, I know people were angry, I guess, that we had done that—the mini-convention. Was that the one you're talking about? Where we left the convention, or we didn't go to the convention? Well, we did that one. That was a significant interpretation that was made, we thought, or I thought, in the constitution of the Canadian Labour Congress. The constitution talked about things like not paying dues and how long that could happen and where you could be if that was the fact. It's not an action that we wanted to do. I tried to resolve it a number of ways by getting a number of people involved. It was the night before or the day before the night that the BC Fed convention started. Others would know that better. I had other things I was doing, and I said, 'This is not constitutional and it's got to be fixed.'

KR: [00:44:08] I'm also thinking of the fact that when CUPE was organizing those big rallies in support of the teachers, it didn't necessarily have the support of some of the BC Fed.

BO: [00:44:19] I respect what the labour movement did, but unfortunately it looked worse from my point of view (unclear) we couldn't force anybody. They had said they'd done their part and we said we were doing our part. Our part is that we're going to support these people. We're supporting the whole labour movement, but we're going to support our colleagues at work and we're going to go. There were rallies from the whole labour movement and I had some louder conversations with some other leaders, and they said, 'You can't do it if we don't get involved.' I said, 'You're making a mistake if you said that. We work with these people every single day and we're obligated to support them.' That's the whole idea of the sympathy vote and that's where we started. We would do it. Nobody will ever know, including me, that last day when it was supposed to be the province, that was the next move. I think that everybody who bet against us not being able to do it, I would bet that we would have done it—but we didn't get the chance. Then our members said to me, 'Well, I don't care.' That's not the rules, right, so we went back and we paid a price for that. There is more conflict in those years. Socreds and Liberals—governments just tore us apart. I don't think that anybody would doubt that what was happening was just atrocious in our province. We found ourselves in a constant battle with things that were happening to our union, but as importantly, were happening to other's unions, in particular the HEU, who were losing tens of thousands of members. We were losing services, we were losing everything, and we needed to be better—and I think that that made us better.

KR: [00:46:24] Barry, I remember, in one of those actions, we generally felt that with all of the organization that had been put in place, that the trigger had happened for some kind of job action. I remember you saying, you went into the office and the phone started ringing. It wasn't a matter of you telling the locals that the trigger had happened. It was a matter of the locals phoning you.

BO: [00:46:47] That's right. That's exactly what it was. I think that I mentioned it before. I've mentioned it a thousand times, actually. It's hard for me often to say that the really heart of that dispute was all managed by one young woman who came to see me, when I was going to a plane to go somewhere else, about the union meeting, and 'I've never been to a union meeting but I will never miss one again.' That just ripped me apart.

KR: [00:47:16] I want to talk more broadly about some of your background. For example, you had a focus on health and safety throughout your career and you were on the Health and Safety Canada and saw (unclear) the Outstanding Labour Achievement Award for the development of the Spot the Hazard campaign. Could you tell us about that and your other health and safety work?

BO: [00:47:33] Well, I always thought at the end of the day—I did some work following Judy Village for a while, who was a great ergonomist, and worked through a number of regulation reviews for new regulation in B.C. I started out as an activist in health and safety and still am. One of my mentors in that area was Tom Kozar and he often came with me and kicked down the doors. When we went to those meetings and got up and I was told I didn't have a spot on the agenda and if you know, Tom Kozar, you know that didn't matter. He was kinda like my dad: 'You just get up there and start talking and if there's a problem, I'll deal with it.' Yeah. I have always been like that. I really thought that my career would end up being because of the work I did in particular offices and how you could make it better. Judy did fish tables and all the examples of what could really happen if you had a workplace that was ergonomically sound. It didn't have to cost millions of dollars and you didn't have to buy \$1,700 chairs and all of that stuff. I thought that's what I was going to do. As I was doing kind of the work of that, I really saw some nightmares in workstations, primarily for women in clerical positions, and others. The same number happened with men, with machines and those kinds of things. I thought that was going to happen and we didn't have anything to push back on that. Myself and brother Dennis McGann—God love his soul—we worked together and I just—one of those things that pops in. We built some spots, and we asked our workers all through B.C. if they saw something, then they put a spot on it. That's where the whole thing came from, the award from Southam magazine and all those things was really—that was just something I didn't do myself. I did a lot of talking about it and persuaded people that it was the right thing to do. Some people are still using that program. We were actively involved in every regulation that had to do with occupational health and safety in this province, in this country. I was a part of that, and I was honoured to be part of that.

KR: [00:50:14] Barry, you talked earlier about the growing involvement of CUPE with municipalities and communities. I think a big part of that was the Ten Percent Shift campaign that you worked with toward the end of your time as president. Can you can you talk about where that came from and what was involved?

BO: [00:50:32] Yeah, I can talk about that for like six or seven hours, actually, but I'll keep it brief. I still think it's probably—it's my favourite program. I still think that, you know, if I was a little younger and my voice didn't crack so much anymore then I would carry on. There's no time better than what's happening right now. Those communities that developed the program around some kind of a shift. I think that it was something that we never did follow through. I did a lot of work. I had a good friend from Washington State, Michael Shuman, who, like, I went down there a couple of times to speak, and he came up here a number of times. I still think that it should be carried on. It should still go. It is so important for us even now to understand not only the kind of local economic, you know, the multipliers that are provided. We got to talk about how we employ because the groups that are—traditional work is not necessarily the norm. We have to figure out a way in things like procurement that give the opportunity to communities to really be this kind of engine of the economy that we talk about. I've written a couple of things that I'm going to get somebody to put into—because there's more talk about it now. People have finally understood that buying local is not a fad, it's a reality, it's an economy. It can develop fabulous things, and all of the evidence is out there. You know, we did a report. The only

thing that bothered me ever about it is we couldn't find anybody in Canada that could do it. We hired Civil Economics to do it. I'm not finished with that. You know, that's something I want to carry on. I would like to have a group of young people work with me to, like, make sure it happened. I had a great entourage for that tour. I think we visited about 32 communities in British Columbia and talked about how you could do it. I think we're a success, but the problem was we were a success when I did it in P.E.I. and in the Cowichan Valley, I did a good job of it, but we didn't carry through on it. That's something that has always bothered me because that's how we were successful as an organization for all of those years that I was there. We didn't finish the job and the job is still unfinished and the disasters are still happening as a result of the Targets and Wal-Marts and everybody else. Everybody sells groceries and nobody has anybody at checkouts anymore. It's like something I'm still thinking that I will get involved in somehow.

KR: [00:53:50] Correct me if I'm wrong, but the idea behind the Ten Percent Shift was that both people and organizations would shift 10 percent of their spending directly into the local economy. You talked about some of the research that was done to show the impact of that. You got some support for that whole idea from different people who you might normally expect to support a labour movement idea.

BO: [00:54:15] Well, I can't remember her name—we did a joint press release with the Vancouver Sun. Oh, the business community, what was her name? Oh, I can't remember her name. You could look it up (unclear) Anyway, we did a joint release and the Vancouver Sun published it, and she lost her job the next day. It's simply because she did it with me. It was clear as a bell that she did it with me, and not just me, Barry O'Neill, but did it with a labour leader. It was, what's the major business group?

KR: [00:54:51] The chamber of commerce?

BO: [00:54:51] No, BC Business. You're right, Keith. It really had some—there's some great parts of it and it wasn't really, it wasn't the first try. I had been thinking about it prior to that in another program, and I know that somewhere in the southern states there was a 10 percent thing as well. It was really—the whole percentage thing—was based on my kids. I say that because they're my first test case. Right? And Charmaine. I run it by my family because I think they're pretty average. I ran that whole thing through my four children. They said, what, you know, new families but Dad, we can't afford it. 'We can't afford to go to the local place. We can't do that, unfortunately. We believe in it.' Well, then, take a piece of that, take a percentage of that, and see what you can do. I know that I've done some things—I did some things in northern B.C. around people buying cars and going to Brown Brothers Ford. I saw I got involved in that and said, 'You can do it differently. You can talk to the detailer company. You can talk to the tire shop. You can all get together and you can sell one car, but you can serve as a whole bunch of things. You can actually get jobs in your community and add to that dollar that's going around.' That was the whole 10 percent thing. Just do a 10 percent. Municipal governments and provincial governments and regional governments should have a procurement system that serves the community first. They do it in the States. It's not some lefty idea that if you look at the number of states in the free-capital place of the world to our south, you'll see that many counties give a 10-percent lift to local business to make things happen. I can go on and on, so I won't.

KR: [00:57:13] Well just a few more questions. Starting off with: It almost seems like a different world today than at the time you retired in Canada and North America and the world. Looking at the situation today, are you optimistic for the labour movement?

BO: [00:57:31] Yeah, I am. I don't know how they get there from here because there are more international tragedies than we have seen probably in my lifetime. I don't think we've seen these kinds of pandemics, this kind of climate change that's creating things. I know people say, well, that's just the weather. It's not the weather, and people are thinking that now should know better. I mean, you don't have to look very far to find that out. I think that the labour movement has to again—I talked about it earlier—we have to start to prepare for that now because it's inevitable. We're not in the last pandemic. Historically, we know about all of those things and there will be another time. Unfortunately, I hope I'm wrong and all the stuff, that's going to happen. We need to get a better plan as workers. We need to play a bigger part. We need to get the respect and the kind of recognition that we're going to have in communities. I think that that's going to be a very tough job for the labour movement to do it because of our structure as it is. I'm not sure how they go about doing it, but I am optimistic that they can because some of the young leaders that I see out there now have all of the tools to make it happen. Sometimes it just a matter of kind of working it out. I wish them the very best and I know that they're bright enough. My daughter is one of them that is understanding quickly the importance of where I always end up going, and that's local governments, you know, whether it be school boards or city councils or boards of trade, to get there. I think that we can do that at least and that's a huge start if you're in the room with the people that wanna to gun you down.

KR: [00:59:45] Barry, you're still working, but you've been retired for a few years now. Could you tell us a little bit about your life today? Could you tell us if there's anything that you would change in your life that got you here?

BO: [00:59:58] Well, I did, I told my family that I would not do anything for at least five years. That was my commitment. They paid enough—I was away an awful lot. Too much. When I look back at that and, of course, my wife can tell me to the night how many nights I spent in hotels and how many miles I flew in the air. They really did. They paid the price for my career, there's no doubt. Now, I just lost my train of thought.

KR: [01:00:30] Well, tell us about what you're doing now.

BO: [01:00:32] Oh, yeah. I wasn't going to do anything for five years and I didn't. I didn't do anything at all but, you know, we did things differently. Now I've just taken on last year a crown corporation, and I'm sitting with the British Columbia Emergency Health Services. I've taken that committee on and I've taken a trust committee on (unclear IC). Of course, as it always goes, you get asked by a friend of yours, a minister, and they tell you that's probably going to be one meeting every three months or something and you end up four days a week. I should know that by now, (laughter) I did the same thing to other people. I'm doing that now and I'm enjoying it. The emergency health services—that was the reason I think that Adrian asked me to sit there because my experience with paramedics and what they did and how they had been impacted, it was significant, and I was glad to be part of that. They are a great group. I don't know, you got have some kind of special personality to do that job. They've been tramped on and tramped on and tramped on and they're still there. Hopefully, just these last couple of months have made a difference. We will see those goals met that everybody wants to see in health care.

KR: [01:01:55] You've gone back and done some construction as well.

BO: [01:01:58] Yeah, but I'm kind of getting out of that. My son is really the construction guy. I was kinda just to hang around, more or less. He's still doing construction and since

bought a restaurant as well, and he lives at arm's length from me. I'm kinda of away from that and happy to be away from that. We had a lot of good times together as a result of it. That's what I'm kind of doing now. I think that what will come back in my life is the shift. If there was ever anything that I'm going to revisit, that's probably it.

KR: [01:02:42] When you look back over your life and your life's work, anything you'd have done differently?

BO: [01:02:50] I don't know. I really don't think so because all of the bad things that happened and if they didn't happen, you know, fate would take care of itself. I'm glad I went through what I went through with our union. It was my honour to do so. For me to build my self-building, the work was hard, and the hours were long, but the people were great, the experiences were fabulous. The losses sometimes weren't the greatest things in the world, but I wouldn't have traded my career for any other career. I really enjoyed it. I missed it for about an hour after I finished. I still miss the people a lot, but no, I don't think I would change a single solitary thing.

KR: [01:03:43] Barry, for the last question, I'm going to go back to a story you told earlier about one of the job actions that we took in the first decade of the century. You ran into a young woman at an airport who told you that she'd never been to a union meeting before in her life and that she would never miss another one. You run into that young woman today, what would you say to her?

BO: [01:04:03] I wouldn't be able to hold it together. I sometimes think it was, I was actually in a park in Penticton and we were, Jinny Sims and I were flying by helicopter, fixed wing all over the place. Then we had to be in the legislature. She kind of ran up to me as we were going to the van and said that, you know, she said, 'Mr. O'Neill, I want to tell you something.' It was that, it was, 'I've never been to a union meeting, but I want to tell you, after you've come here, I will never miss another one.' That was significant. That made it all worth it.

KR: [01:04:47] Yeah. I think I've done the list of questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your life's work in the trade union movement?

BO: [01:05:01] No, I think that I have learned something in my retirement too—how really lucky I was to have so many people around me now that I'm doing things on my own. The one thing I always say is they didn't let me do nothing so now I don't know how to do nothing. No, I am so grateful for all of those people—you, Keith and Sharon, and many others who I've had the opportunity to work with over the years. I don't think that I could ever pick a group like that, because I would have never have thought that you could get a group like that together. I know that at the beginning of all of that, I really did have something to do with—and I was very happy, and myself and Colleen Jordan often talk about this—we couldn't have everything that we wanted to have in the division because we also had a national union, and so we took chances. I can remember, we went out and we hired six people, and we were told that we couldn't have them and we said, 'Oh yeah, we can. We can hire them and you're going to look like really bad because they're really good and they're going to be working for us and that's going to create a problem. You better pay attention to that.' That's the secret; it's the worst-kept secret in the world. We did, we had those people because they were fabulous. Colleagues still to this day talk about how tough it was and how impossible it would be. When people get up and thank, you know, the staff and all of that stuff, it always feels to me like it's inadequate. I don't

want to do that. I would like—wanna go out and see them because I lived—if any success I had, it was a result of my family and the people around me. Absolutely.