Interview: Jim Sinclair (JS)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
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Transcription: Cathy Walker

KN [00:00:05] Good morning, Jim.

JS [00:00:05] Good morning.

KN [00:00:07] I'd like to start by having you tell us when and where you were born.

JS [00:00:12] I was born in 1954 at Saint Joseph Hospital in Toronto, Ontario.

KN [00:00:18] Can you tell us something about the family you became a part of? Were they supportive of unions? Did they have progressive politics? What kind of work did they do? Did you have siblings? Tell us a bit about the early days.

JS [00:00:29] I would say my family was mostly the opposite of progressive. My mother was a conservative, a supporter of the Conservative Party and fairly outspoken with conservative ideas. My father probably voted for the Liberal Party when that local defenseman from the Maple Leafs ran, but otherwise he would probably follow my mother's lead on his conservative politics. Both my brothers are also fairly conservative, one very active in the Conservative Party and the other one generally pretty right wing, not fanatical right wing in any case, but pretty right wing. Unfortunately, my mother was also a racist and that was always difficult for me when I was growing up, especially as I became more and more aware about what racism is.

KN [00:01:13] Where did you do most of your schooling? You had a couple of experiences when you were young that had you doing diverse activities, like working on the floor of the legislature and actually walking a picket line. Tell us a bit about both those experiences, as well as your early experience working on the newspaper.

JS [00:01:33] My first experience was my mother said to me, 'How would I like to miss school for three months?' when I was in grade eight. I said I thought that would be a great idea, if I could miss school. She said, 'Well, I have a connection to the Conservative Party.' At that point, Bill Davis was in power in Ontario, so she set me up to be interviewed to become a page in the legislature. I did get the job as a page. For three months I worked as a page in the legislature in Ontario. The interesting part was, it was during the election, I think it was '68, there was Trudeau, Stanfield and Douglas running in the federal election, so that was also the buzz. I got assigned -- how that happened, perhaps fate, to go to every NDP office every morning and change all the Hansards because it was all done by hand then. You had to go and put the shoelaces in and untie and put it in. I spent three months talking to all these NDP MLAs. It was kind of fun, not that I left an NDP'er, but just this good experience. I listened to the debate in the House and realized there was a lot of theatre here, but not a lot of activity. That was my first job there, my first real job in grade eight. That kind of ruined me because I really didn't want to go back to school after only having to go to school for two hours a week on Friday afternoons. It was pretty nice.

JS [00:02:55] My next job was at McDonald's. Got hired, I worked my first two weeks at the job and I looked at my paycheque and I was two hours short. I went down and I said to

the boss, I said, 'I'm two hours short in my paycheque.' He said, 'Did you do clean up?' I said, 'Yeah, I did do you clean up. We cleaned up, two or three nights, I stayed to do clean up.' 'How long did it take you?' 'A couple hours.' There's this pause. I said, 'So is that a problem?' He said, 'Well, a manager can clean it up in one hour and there's two of us we hired to do it, so we're only going to pay you for an hour, so if you worked after that hour, that's your time, not my time.' I went, wow, that kind of sucks. I didn't say anything, of course. Then I just went and did what workers do, I grumbled. I grumbled to my co-workers about working for this big company for nothing and all that.

JS [00:03:49] About two weeks later, there's a notice goes out that there's a meeting at the restaurant for all the students. We were students. All the students had to show up for the meeting at the restaurant at 8 o'clock on a Saturday morning. It was a bitter morning. We walked in. We're walking up to the McDonald's to talk to them and we all go to this meeting. The guy at the front stands up, the boss, and he says, 'Some of you have been complaining about working for this company for free.' He goes through the whole routine, the one hour, the two hour, the whole stuff. He lets it hang for a while. Then he says, 'But in the interest of solving this problem, we're going to pay for two hours a night on that thing. We all kind of went, great. Then I learned the first thing about bosses is that was a 'but,' The 'but' was, this goes back to when I first got interviewed and I raised this question that came back to haunt me. He said, 'You're being paid a dollar and a quarter an hour. The student wage is a dollar an hour, so we can either pay the two hours at night, but we'll lower your wages to a dollar to cover up for the fact that these people aren't doing their jobs. Or you can vote not to do that and keep your dollar and a quarter an hour and they'll just get paid for the hour.' At the end of the day, you can imagine how the vote went, of course. That was the end of that conversation. That was it.

JS [00:05:08] I was only subject to one more meeting where they called a meeting because I was complaining about this multinational company screwing us around, another crew meeting to talk about this and explain what a franchise was and how we were owned by a Canadian and everything was wonderful. Anyway, I didn't last there.

JS [00:05:22] That was one of my first jobs in that period of time. I did a few others, and then the next thing was really high school. For high school I went to an alternative school. At that period, I actually got a job teaching. After two years of going to that school, I got a job teaching at that school. I taught a political science class and 'The outsider in English literature' class for six months, for two semesters at the alternative school, which was kind of fun. I got actually paid to do that.

JS [00:05:58] At the same time, I got a job. Actually, just during that period of time, I also got a job working in an Ontario housing project. I applied for what was called OFY Grant, that was to operate a drop-in centre, basically an illegal childcare centre during the day and a drop-in centre at night. I went to apply for the job. It was the first time I realized how this all works. The same day I went much earlier and walked around the project, went to the recreation centre, talked to all these people, kids, what do you want? What do you want? I went to this interview and gave my speech and everything else. I was competing, don't forget, I'm a person without a Grade 12 graduate certificate. I'm competing against a BA in social work. They come back and say to me, you did a really good job in the interview, we're really impressed, but we have this other person who has a BA. Can you come for three days and try it out and decide if you like it? Then we can try both of you out and see what we think at the end of it all. I said, sure. Then I got a phone call back about two hours later saying, 'Well, the other guy didn't want to do that, so you got the job.'

JS [00:07:12] I worked there in an Ontario housing project, and that really helped me to develop my view of the world. Those were mostly poor people, mixed, a number of Black people lived there as well. We ran with the woman in the place. I ran the drop-in centre and for tots during the day. At night we ran that centre for young people. I spent a lot of time working with them and really had a really good experience. It was really a very positive experience in my working life at that point and I felt we did a lot of good things. Eventually there was a whole movement by the security guard that worked to get me fired, blaming me for bringing drugs into the site. It turned into a rather ugly scene. There was actually a sit-in by the kids at the drop-in centre to defend my job and keep me from being fired. I didn't get fired, by the way.

JS [00:08:13] There was one point where we had this, they had a riot, another riot in there, they went and did a bunch of crap. They were all mad about something. I finally got in and sat down with them. We had this amazing conversation about living in this place, what it means to live in this place where people are poor and where you're stigmatized by people. Kids talked about the stigmatizing and about this stuff. There was one kid about 20 or 19 there, and he just challenged them all about their lives in this place and the kind of shit they put up with. It was an interesting moment to hear that reflection for me about what it was like, because I grew up in a working class family. My father was a salesperson, my mother was a homemaker, but we weren't poor by any stretch of the imagination. But these people were poor, there's no doubt about it, and they hung together. That was that was the job. Up until, my next job was working at the Latin American Working Group [LAWG].

KN [00:09:08] You talked about walking the picket lines. Where was that?

JS [00:09:15] I went to this alternative school called SEE. It was set up by this person, there's still some guy I know now, we just had a conference call with him and another couple of former students of him. He set up an alternative school in the public system. There was 100 students. You got to go by the lottery and participate, and I won. I was one of the ones picked out to go to this alternative school. It's basically a program based on a university model. You basically had one course a week, one period a week. You did a lot of your own work and you were free to do a lot of things. Most of the kids that went there were pretty progressive. We had a group in Etobicoke where I grew up called Volunteers. We were a progressive high school group. We made things like briefs to the school board and organized support for demonstrations, etcetera.

JS [00:10:07] I went to that school. One of the things, these people came to me and said, and I think they were from the Young New Democrats said, 'Hey, there's a picket line in Hamilton. You've got to come, Sinclair, you got to go to a picket line.' I didn't really know what I was going to. I go out at 5:30 in the morning and get picked up by this car. We're driving out there and these people start talking about bombing things. I don't know what's going on. I'm just like, I think they're having such fun with me. I'm 17 years old. They're just having fun. Anyway, so we have this whole thing and I get there and we stop at the first place and they're picking up scabs to go to a plant in Brantford that makes bandages for the American military. All immigrant women organized by a CCU [Confederation of Canadian Unions] affiliate, Madeleine Parent and Kent Rowley, that group of people. We arrived there and at that point the scabs are freaking out because the buses have been stopped in this parking lot. I'm standing there and there's this news reporter with this big camera. At this point, they were big then, taking pictures. This woman walks up and grabs the camera, throws it on the ground, smashes it. My eyes were this big. Now I'm going, what is going on here?

JS [00:11:12] The next thing that happens is, ok this all dissipates but there's another scene where they're picking up the scabs downtown. We get told I should go down there to support that picket line. We go down there and there's two or three buses and they're lined up full of scabs. There's people milling everywhere and they'd just run over two people. The buses tried to leave and they ran over two people. One of them was John Lang, who later became a friend of mine, and Ian Lumsden from the university. This is chaos.

JS [00:11:42] This little short Steelworker comes up to me and says, 'You come with me, follow me. When I stop, you stop and surround me.' He grabs three of us. There must have been a hundred cops there. We walked around to every bus. He takes out his pocket knife and he says, we surround each tire. He walks up and goes like this. He flattens every tire on every bus. We just walked around and did this. The cops watch us do it, and I'm just realizing, wow, there's something happening here I should know about. This is pretty interesting stuff. Around we go to all of the tires and he slashes all the tires. The next thing you know, they had to back up the paddy wagons and load the scabs into the paddy wagons and take them away in the paddy wagons, which I thought was appropriate. Then we went to back to the Steelworkers hall and there was Madeleine Parent, Danny Drache, Mel Watkins, Kent Rowley, generally the crowd of people that would become influential in my life over time. They were the sort of people that I started to relate to. That picket line moved to Vancouver and I went out a number of times on that picket line.

JS [00:12:48] The next picket line a year later was Artistic, same situation, CCU Union, a very, very violent picket line actually. I spent a lot of time on that picket line with some people who I later met later in life. Those are my two picket experiences. I wasn't in a union, I was still a teenager.

KN [00:13:07] It would be very formative for you and as well as that, there was another experience that occurred in 1973 in Chile. That apparently had some impact on your political views.

JS [00:13:24] It really affected, shaped my life really in a lot of ways. This particular teacher I was telling you about, he was very political, a Waffle [Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada] member. He really took a few of us on, to educate us. One of the things he taught us about was the coup in Chile. At this point it was about Salvador Allende in Chile. Part of his whole course on world politics was about Chile, about socialism and about Chile. I became quite enthralled with Chile. This was a really interesting example. It was a non-violent revolution that was really challenging capitalism and in a very amazing way. I became quite amazed by the whole thing. There was another student that was also very interested in this work, too. That was just in high school. I never went there. I didn't have any firsthand, I didn't talk to any Chilean people, but it became something that was very important to me.

JS [00:14:20] I remember on September 11th, the coup happened in Chile in 1973. I was home visiting my mother and father, and my mother said, 'Salvador Allende has committed suicide.' I said, 'Really? I don't think so.' This was the coup, we were talking about it. He was shot 17 times, of course, and it was an impossible statement. That night I met my friend in a bar downtown and we sat there and got drunk and chanted slogans in Spanish and rolled back to my basement slum I was living in at the time, and I didn't know what to do. I was just completely, this is so wrong. I got a piece of cardboard and I made a picket sign. I went down in front of the U.S. embassy the next morning and walked around with a

picket sign, Nixon kills another (whatever I said on it at the time) and walked around with the picket sign. That was my first demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy, all by myself on September the 12th. Of course, it didn't mean anything. The only person to talk to me was a cop who made some joke about it, and that was the end of it.

JS [00:15:25] My friend Suarez said to me, 'Well, that was useless, Jim, but there is this group called the Latin American Working Group,' and that he'd been working at this harder than I was. He said, They are in a nunnery or an ecumenical institute where the nuns hang out, and they have a little office on the top. I went there about a week later and walked in that door and spent the next two years of my life basically working there too. The Latin American Working Group was a group of mostly Christians, but not all of them, who had been working for years on Latin American and Central American solidarity. I ended up working there for a couple of years, learning about Central America and South America. Unfortunately, I didn't learn to speak Spanish. That was one of the only drawback. That really was a political formation for me in my life because I got to be involved in left politics without joining the Communist Party or the Trotskyite League or something like that. It really gave me sort of a different kind of view of it, but it was also progressive. There were a number of people in that group that were trade unionists and other people. It was really a good experience for me in lots of ways, a crazy time and a good experience.

KN [00:16:33] Shortly after that. Jim, in 1975, I guess you were only 21 years old, you moved out to B.C. Tell us what prompted you to move to B.C. and actually what was your first job in B.C.?

JS [00:16:46] The truth was that at the age of 21, I was pretty burned out, pretty tired, and kind of getting alienated from work. I didn't really want to work. I kind of decided that I just wanted a job. I didn't want to work for a collective or something like that. It seemed like a lot of my experience was in those situations and I just wanted to get a real job and go off and do that. My friend said to me, 'You're not having a lot of fun here. I'm going to Vancouver, why don't you come?' I bummed a hundred bucks off my parents, got whatever I did, bought a railway ticket and got on the train and came to Vancouver. People say, why did you go to Vancouver? The train stopped here and that's the end of the trip. Here I am in Vancouver, 1975.

KN [00:17:29] What was your first job?

JS [00:17:31] My first real job. I did some work because I was staying with a friend of mine who I met in Toronto. She was a teacher of OISE, actually, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and she was studying in our school. She became a good friend and she got me some work in a day-care and at her school where she taught, which was Templeton doing support work or substitute teaching work. My big first job was really Co-op Radio. I knew some people through Toronto connections that were then in the process of starting up Co-op Radio. I went down and got involved and said, okay, so what's happening here? I remember there was a moment, I was living in the Cobalt Hotel. That's a whole other story. I'd moved into the Cobalt Hotel and I remember I had to go for a job interview the next day at the radio station. I was going through this dilemma in my head, should I go to the job interview because I'm going to go right back to the same situation I said I didn't want to go? I was up half the night reading because I was living on the other end of the clock. That was something I do sometimes. I said, okay, if I wake up in the morning in time to go for the job interview, I'll go for the job interview. Sure enough in the morning I woke up in time so I went for the job interview and got the job. I started working at Co-op Radio and that was a really good experience for me.

JS [00:18:49] I had a Gestetner when I was 15 years old and put out an underground high school newspaper, our high school newspaper, a left wing, high school newspaper. I've always been involved. In Toronto, it really was that communications piece of my life that was formed throughout those early ages. I learned to print. Actually Bill Saunders taught me how to print at the Better Ed Graphics U of T print shop run by the left wing students there. The Latin American Working Group put out a newsletter and the whole process they had, which was interesting, was you could teach, you can come, and we'll teach how to use that. You work for LAWG, you're at LAWG, you can learn to print, we'll teach you how to print, so you can do your whole newsletter. We won't do it, you will. We'll just give you the building. I did that and learned how to put that out, writing. I'd also was writing poetry. I started to write poetry at that point when I was a teenager, and that carried on for a good chunk of my life. That communications piece was always something I was fascinated by.

JS [00:19:52] I went down to Co-op Radio and signed up to learn how to be a radio journalist. I was there for two, two and a half years, I guess, working part time, full time and part time. In those days, it was a different world. You go for the interview and they say to you, the job is three, six months or six months long. It's a grant. We'll give you a job for six months. If we give you a job, you have to agree that when you get UI, you'll stay on for your UI period too. Of course we did. We all agreed that that is how the world would work. That's how Co-op Radio was made, on cheap labour without a doubt, but it was made out of sweat, blood and belief that we were gonna make a better world by having a radio station that was owned by the people. Without going to details, I learned lots about communications.

JS [00:20:43] The other thing is I moved in with an Indigenous family at that point in time and a number of the people at the radio station, two in particular, Art Pape and Rick Salter and then Jim Harper as well, were quite involved. Art Pape was married to an Indigenous person. They had their family and so I moved into his house. Through that I got connected to the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. We set up a consulting sort of group that we worked at, myself and Jim Harper and a few others. We set up a place where we worked doing research and to work with the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, mostly on energy projects.

JS [00:21:18] The same time we developed a magazine called Energy File, which was really the cutting edge back then. It was really about big energy projects and all the downsides of those and it was about Aboriginal rights. We were critical, and I was very involved in fighting the uranium mining proposals in the province. That experience of working for the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs and at that point working for George Manuel was really also profound and had a big impact on my relationship to Indigenous people for the rest of my life, and also in terms of my understanding of the oppression of Indigenous people. That was really formative for me too.

JS [00:21:53] I got to the end of that period of my life and the woman I was seeing at the time decided she wanted to take her horses and move to the Kootenays. I thought the Kootenays was a pretty radical place. I guess I should go check it out, so off to the Kootenays I went.

KN [00:22:06] In the Kootenays you ended up working for the Nelson Daily News?

JS [00:22:09] The Nelson Daily Snooze, Snooze we called it. Nelson Daily Snooze at the time. Yes, I did.

KN [00:22:14] Can you talk about that experience working for the newspaper and living in this part of British Columbia?

JS [00:22:19] It's a beautiful part of British Columbia. If I hadn't gotten fired three years later, I'd probably still be there. I really thought it was a beautiful spot. I knew a few people when I went there, but it was full of great people, lots of progressive people that really were fascinating in lots of ways. I got a job freelancing for the Nelson Daily News, who were putting out a paper in Castlegar where I was living at the time, (I was living in Krestova actually, a Dukhobor community). They were putting out a weekly paper to try to drive the last remaining independent paper in the whole area out of business. The paper was owned by Conrad Black and David Radner. It's one of those great moments where I walked in, I did that work for a while, then the sports editor left, so they wanted to hire me to be the sports editor. I decided that Jocko Jim could live and be a sports editor, providing I could do other writing as well, which they agreed to. It was so funny because he looked at me, the guy Ryan, the editor, when he hired me, he said, 'By the way, I don't have a clue who you are. Who are you, anyway?' It just stuck in my head. You know, you don't advertise who you are if you want to be hired by Conrad Black.

JS [00:23:28] I got hired, and it was a great newspaper. I love small town newspapers because honestly, you get to know the town, you get to engage in the town, even as the sports editor. Also in town, people know you. I like the relationship between the small town newspaper or the small city newspaper and the community, because you walk down the street, the people you wrote about the day before actually walk down the same street, and they actually know who you are. There's this interesting dynamic that develops. Rita Moore was there. She was a reporter. She's a brilliant writer. I got to know her really well. I still know her. She was very progressive and a brilliant writer, just a way better writer than I ever would become. We had a great time on the paper. We used to write great stories. They were always good progressive stories. We even covered Labour Council until we were told not to. I thought it was good to tell you sort of how the world saw us. There was a big meeting of the forest companies and Rita went to cover it. The guy who was chairing the meeting was the president of Kootenay Forest Products. When she walked in the room and walked down to sit down, he said, 'Oh, I just want to let everybody know that the reporter from the Nelson Daily Worker is here.' (laughter) We did have a bit of a reputation.

JS [00:24:52] I went to Nicaragua. I started my work in Nicaragua and I was hired by CUSO part time to help organize this trip to Nicaragua. The Sandinistas had won in '79. This was '81. We organized a tour of trade unionists and church people and others, from the Kootenays, from the island and from Vancouver. I got back from there really pumped up. I went to Nicaragua. That's a whole other story and it was fascinating for me and also life changing experience. The first time I'd been after spending two years with the Latin American Working Group, first time I'd been to a third world country. I'd just gotten back. Ronald Reagan had come to the parliament buildings in Ottawa and the local, about six of the local NDP MPs wore black armbands and refused to stand up when he came. They did that because this was shortly after, I believe, six nuns and two priests were murdered by the paramilitary in El Salvador, supported by the U.S. military.

JS [00:25:56] About four days later, I'm walking by the editor's desk and I look down and there's this editorial sitting there that's going to go in the paper and it's a complete slag about our MP, Kristiansen, Lyle Kristiansen, for wearing the black armband. It's a complete slag and the end says, next time we're so angry, I hope you take our lead and don't vote for him in the next election. I was really pissed and of course I was pumped from

being in Nicaragua. I thought, you guys can't do this. I looked at the editor and I said, 'You're not going to put this stuff in the paper, are you? You didn't write this, right?' He said, 'No, I didn't write it.' I said, 'Well, you're not going to put it in the paper, are you? You're supposed to be in charge of this. You're the editor.' He goes silent, doesn't say a word. About three days later, sure enough, it's in the paper. I go to him and I say, 'So you put it in the paper.' He said, 'Yeah, that's from the publisher.' I said, 'It's not from the publisher. The publisher couldn't write this if you paid him. It's from the company. The company told you to put this in.' Rita and I got incensed, just totally incensed. The next thing we knew, the same editorial was in the Trail Daily Times. The difference down there was the editor had a backbone and he put a column, a note at the bottom, and it said, 'This does not necessarily reflect the views of the local editorial staff,' which was great. But Ray Pico, who was the publisher, went into the composing room, took that off the editorial and put in the editorial, if you agree with this you can send your comments of support to Ronald Reagan, to us, and we'll send them on to Ronald Reagan. It turned out it was printed. Also, Jim Fulton had the same ones, the same editorial plastered over, the whole thing.

JS [00:27:41] Rita and I wrote, (we weren't allowed to put columns in) so we wrote a column and basically said, why do we have to print this crap? We didn't really expect to get it printed, but we thought, we have to do something. We wrote the column and it was rejected, of course, and then we had to phone up. We phoned up Lyle and said, 'What did you think of the editorial, Lyle?' He said, 'Well I thought it was a pretty interesting editorial. It might have been better if I'd actually worn the black armband.' At this point I didn't know whether to yell at him for not wearing the black armband or go, wow, that really makes this a really shitty situation.

JS [00:28:22] The next thing that we did was we went to the Kent Commission. The Kent Commission was reviewing the papers in Canada. That was a big study by a fellow named Kent who was an MP. He was looking at the concentration of the press and we phoned them up and said, (that's right, Tom Kent) phoned up his researcher and said, 'Do you want a story? We can actually prove that this is the stuff that we get told to do at our local paper,' He said, 'We would love that. That would be great information to put forward to the commission. Can you submit a brief to us and we can call you as witnesses?' We did write this brief about this story. The other thing was that at that time, the Fraser Institute had, Rita was getting going, we got a letter which I saw in the editor's desk, don't ask me why I knew it was there, telling us to run Michael Walker's stuff. I went in and swiped the letter too, to put into the argument that this is what we're doing, this is what's going on, this corporate control in newsrooms. They were really happy. Then there was a cone of silence from, after we submitted this stuff, a cone of silence, and we never heard back from them. We phoned up and they said, no, no, we don't need you to testify, etcetera. Conrad Black didn't testify but David Radler testified. He said, 'Can you believe it that in some of our newsrooms, we have socialists working there.' We just got a laugh and said, 'Oh, you must be talking about us.' As if 45% of the population in the province that vote NDP in the province, you might get one or two working in your newsroom.

JS [00:30:07] This story, is a bit long, but at the end of the day, I had started with the student union and the Labour Council, another newspaper called the Kootenay Reporter. The Kootenay Reporter was really the money from the Students' Council and the Labour Council and a few of us and I did it anonymously of course because I couldn't do that and work for the Nelson News. I was basically one of the main players in putting this whole paper together. It came out every month. I went to the Labour Council and said, 'Why don't we take the article that the Nelson Daily News wouldn't publish?' They published on

the front page of the Kootenay Reporter. The Labour Council paid to distribute to every house in Nelson and were featured on the front page, plus a story about what's happening to us at the Nelson Daily News. That's what we did. They published it and it the headline was 'Refused by the Daily News,' and it was the story of what was happening to the reporters at the Daily News particularly Rita and I. That's when the shit really hit the, excuse me, proverbial stuff hit the fan. We got both disciplined by the company threatening us any further actions like this. They were getting us on a technicality, to be honest. They were saying you'd said that the lawyer told, you released private information that you got from the lawyer of the paper, which we did, we said what should we do? We never wrote the editorial. Not true. He, of course, said we should write an apology in the paper. The company refused to run the apology. Eventually they did, but they'd refused. That made us even more furious. So that was fine. That was in the fall.

JS [00:31:43] I went away for Christmas, came back down to the coast for Christmas and went back home. They'd taken the person below me on the seniority list and they transferred. He was a fascist. I say that interesting enough, he had pictures of Mein Kampf and Hitler. He was a brilliant writer, but he was a total right winger. He'd worked in about three papers so I guess they sent him there to clean us up. I don't know what the story was. He wrote some terrible, terrible editorials for the paper. They moved him to another paper and I went back in. Honestly, the editor was upset and said, I'm sorry to tell you, but you're done. That's how they did it. They didn't want to fire me because I could grieve it so they just laid me off and robbed the newspaper of two reporters until actually I left. At that point, I was all done at the Nelson Daily News because a former Socred owned the paper at Castlegar. Trail, Nelson, Kimberley, Cranbrook, were all owned by Conrad Black so I didn't think my chance of employment very big. I got a phone call from this guy named Geoff Meggs, who I worked with and was a friend from Co-op Radio saying, I'm working at the Fisherman's newspaper and hey, maybe you want to come and work at the Fisherman's newspaper. I said, 'Gee, that sounds like a pretty good chance to move ahead in my life.' That was it.

KN [00:33:02] That ended your experience and you did work as the associate editor at the Fishermen and also organizing for the union for a number of years, for 18 years. Talk a bit about that period, some of the highlights of that period.

JS [00:33:18] Oh God, there was a lot of them. It was a great experience for me. I mean, at that point I got to go to work for a union that was progressive, that believed in being part of a larger labour movement, had a world view. I was one of the few non-Communists working for the union at that point. I remember Meggs saying to me, I had to get a Communist, a social democrat and somebody in the middle to give my references so that could be cleared by the whole political apparatus of the union when I got the job. I got Scotty Neish who was a lovely old Communist fisherman, Stan Lanyon, who was very good, sort of an NDP'er of some high profile and I forget the third. I went out and collected all my references and got hired.

JS [00:34:04] It was a great experience. The staff there, unlike many unions, the staff there were all political. I think there's some different cultures in different unions. In this union, you were told, George Hewison would say, you're the secondary leadership of the union, get out there and do your job. You were considered part of the leadership of the union. It was very egalitarian. I mean, we all got paid the same wages. The president made the same thing I did, ten bucks a week more. The highest paid person in the place was the bookkeeper, and there was no such thing as overtime, car allowances, insurance, clothing allowances, and none of that great stuff that other people were having. The pay

was the equivalent of what shoreworkers made on a 40 hour workweek, even though they got paid overtime after that or 8 hours on the day, we never got any of that. But that was the pay. Every time we negotiated more money, we got exactly the same pay as everybody else. It was a very egalitarian union and it offered me the opportunity to really go out and do a lot of things.

JS [00:35:03] Working on the paper with Geoff, which was just part of the job, I went there because it was a union newspaper, but it was also an industry newspaper. It was published, if you can imagine, it came out twice a month. Most union newspapers come out once every two months, maybe, a lot of them. There was this tradition in left wing unions, the Carpenters' union were the same, the IWA was the same, the Fishermen's Union. There was a series of unions that had real newspapers put out by journalists, and they were really about the industry, so I went to work on a really wonderful newspaper. Also, as soon as I went there, I started to travel the coast because everybody had to do everything. We had to go out and organize every fisherman every year. Think about it. You've got 3,500 members that you have to sign up into the union every year, and every year they can refuse to sign up in the union. We had to go and starting early in the season, go out there and pound the docks and in some cases up on the central coast we'd go boat to boat to boat, signing up union members.

JS [00:36:09] I cut my teeth, being a union organizer and I have a great story about that, but we're running out of time. No? I go first to the docks over in Port Alberni and I've only been in the union a month and a half. Port Alberni was the beginning of the fishery in B.C. every season. There wasn't a lot of fish caught, but there was a lot of fishermen went there to get their gear together, to catch a few fish at the beginning of the season and get away from home, probably. We went over there. The organizer, Frank Cox, says here's the book, here's how you sign up, you look through the list of members and you check them off and you clear the boat by filling out, they get to fill out these vouchers. The vouchers go to the company. Even though we had no bargaining rights, the companies would accept the vouchers and we could take it off their settlements. They would take it off. I jump on the first boat, seine boat with my kit and I say, 'Hey, I'm Jim Sinclair from the Fishermen's Union here to clear the boat.' 'Oh, great. Oh, come on in.' I come in and I sign all these guys up. They were all friendly to me and asking me questions. I'm new, all this stuff that I learned, that Jimmy Sinclair used to be a federal fisheries minister, and then he came to work for the companies. There's a really ugly boat named after him. I walked off that boat and I thought it was friggin' Joe Hill. I am an organizer. I'm having a great time.

JS [00:37:25] I go jumping on the next one. I kind of jump on with great excitement onto the next boat and say, 'Hi, I'm Jim, I'm from the union, I'm here to clear the boat.' Guys are sitting around the galley table and the cook is there and they don't say a friggin word. 'Hey, I'm Jim Sinclair. I'm here to clear the boat. How's that?' They don't say nothing. They're just looking at me like, where are you? who are you? The cook kind of looks over at me. He's got a big knife in his hand, kind of looks over and says, 'Clear the boat, eh? Well, I'll tell you what, I'll clear your nuts off. Okay? Come here. Okay?' I went, 'Oh, gee, really sorry. I must be on the wrong boat. I jump off the boat and I go whipping over to Frank and I say, 'What the fuck just happened, Frank?' He said, 'Oh, did I forget to tell you? Not everybody is in the union, Jim.'

JS [00:38:13] That was my first day on the docks at the Fishermen's Union. I saw the best of it and the worst of it. You got to give leadership. I really was attracted to the job, to the people, travelled the coast, spent a lot of time in Prince Rupert and the membership was 50% Indigenous, so that was really powerful in its own right and were very active in the

union. The shore plants were all organized, most of them on the coast at that point. Fishermen were a mixed bag and we had a lot of strikes and a lot of bargaining. We bargained twice a year for herring and for salmon, so for me personally, it was such an opportunity to learn how to bargain, to be part of bargaining.

JS [00:39:00] I also became very involved in safety, fishermen safety. Fishermen safety was horrendously horrible. There was no safety for fishermen. There was no rules for fishermen. You could put a gill netter, a drum on a log and take a 14-year-old kid out there and there's no rules applying to you to do that. It was absolutely outrageous and the death rates were outrageous. At one point, the government, the NDP government, in 1975, there was, I think, 11 deaths in the industry, in one herring season 11 fishermen died and they, the NDP government stepped in and took over the regulations. The companies fought for the next 30 years to stop them from doing it, including Supreme Court decisions, everything else. They took it over. There was opposition at the Board. Somebody from the union picked up all the files on the fishermen. Somebody left it on their desk and left them alone in the room at the WCB. He just picked it up and walked out with all of these documents about covering fishermen. It was a very elaborate document saying basically looking at all the economics of it, saying basically it's better to pay fishermen who die than it is to pay for coverage of fishermen. That was the conclusion that they'd come to about covering fishermen.

JS [00:40:13] I was very involved in the safety file. I fought very hard for safety, both for shore workers, too. There was a horrendous accident that taught me a whole lot about how the WCB doesn't work. It was a young guy. There was an ice hut. Most of the major fish companies had these on their plants. Basically there would be a huge room full of ice and it would be an auger, just a slow moving auger. It's supposed to have a grate on it and it would go down the grate. The auger would take it to the edge of the thing and it would drop down into the boat. That's how they iced the boats. There was this whole thing in the industry. I was coming to work and I was hearing about this horrible accident at the Cassiar fish plant. What had happened was this young kid, he was 19 years old. He and this other guy were, you got to clean up the icehouse at the end of the night. There's some chunks of ice that won't fit in, you have to throw out the door. Of course, it was just normal practice that you took the grate off, exposed the auger, put the chunks in the auger and kicked them into the auger. He put the chunk into the auger, kicked it into the auger, his foot slipped and his foot went into the auger and it grabbed him. It basically took him in up to his hips. It was horrendous.

JS [00:41:32] I remember walking into the union hall that morning and I didn't know all the details but it was an ice auger accident, but I saw a graph and I remember in the newspaper office, I said to somebody, Wow, this is incredible. These ice augers. What is this about? They said to me, Yeah, it happens all the time. I went, What? It happens all the time? He says, Yeah, this isn't the first time this has happened to somebody. That set me off on a crusade.

JS [00:42:01] One of my first crusades in the union was to clean up the ice augers, and it took a couple of years. What I really discovered was that there was a complete acceptance by both the company and to a large extent, the employees themselves too, but I don't blame them. I never blame them. This was really a company decision to allow them to take the grates off and kick the ice in. When I looked at it, I found example after example, including a series of deaths already in the last five years previous to that, and had many close calls and also people with lost legs. I just went, we've got to do something.

We did a lot of work on that. I interviewed people. I wrote a major exposé on it. I went to the WCB a number of times and pressed them to take actions, inspect all the plants.

JS [00:42:50] I remember sitting, and this really tells you about safety sometimes, sitting with the tradesmen at that Cassiar plant I mentioned. I went out to the plant and the tradesman took me up to the room where it was and the ice, the grate was now screwed down. He said to me, you know, for fifty cents worth of bolts and t minutes worth of work that kid wouldn't have, that wouldn't happen to him if I'd done it. I feel terrible. The other guy who was in the ice house, he panicked and ran downstairs instead of turning it off, to find the boss because he didn't know what to do, he just panicked. He felt terrible. He actually had a nervous breakdown, which really is to say that accidents at work are really collective experiences, not just individual experiences. That conclusion I drew from that is, that if you've been trained in emergency procedures, he wouldn't have had that. They probably never trained him because they never acknowledged that the grates came off. We eventually made a movie about it to show people.

JS [00:43:50] I did a lot of education and cleaned up the industry and the accidents stopped happening. I don't know if that stayed going because I heard years later that they were starting to happen again. It did clean up the industry and the WCB brought out standards.

JS [00:44:02] They inspected all the fish plants. We held educationals on it. At that point I moved towards saying we needed to have a safety director for the union. I said we could take a bit of the dues and we could hire a safety director. or a dues increase. The president of union gave me hell for it, said there's no way we're paying for that. I said, okay, then let's go to the bargaining table and try and get it. We did go to the bargaining table to try and get it. We did get the money. I got hired to be the new safety director of the Fishermen's Union. That lasted four weeks.

JS [00:44:42] The reason it lasted four weeks was because it was just at the end of the strike. We'd settled the contract. I was hired to do it and I went down to the fish dock and we would use the shore workers, to pressure the fishermen. We would say to the companies, if you want your other fishermen that aren't in our union to go scabbing, that's fine, but we're not going to unload the boats when they come in. Shore workers were critical to the union. We were the only industrial union except Newfoundland that paralleled ours, where in the fishing industry the fishermen were in the union or a lot were in the union in the different sectors, coast wide, and all the shore workers were in the same union and the packing crews. We were all together. When we bargained there was three groups that went to bargaining. They all stuck together and no one would go back to work unless the other one settled. I went down to the fish dock. I got called down by one of the workers who said, 'Come on down here. We got one of those scab boats coming in.' I went down and said to everybody, just ignore it. The company came up and said, 'Oh, is this a safety issue, Jim?' I said, 'Yeah, I don't think it's safe, those scabs coming in.'.

JS [00:45:46] I went back to the hall and said to Nichol, 'I don't mind doing this, but honestly, I don't think that this safety job will last very long if we take advantage of it like this. If you want me to go do that, then you can't give me this other job to be the safety director of the union, because that's just not going to work. I don't think we want to give up that safety job and we can get somebody else to go down to the dock.' The next thing I know, I was an organizer for the union and not the safety director. Shortly afterwards Nichol came to me and said, 'I'm going to retire in two years and I want you to take the job, so I want you to start bargaining the contracts now, I want you to do all this stuff and see if

you've got the jam to be the leader when I leave.' I said, 'Okay, I'm willing to take that on,' and off we went.

JS [00:46:40] One of the biggest things was because the union was an activist union, then we were involved in the labour movement. I was involved in the Action Caucus from the very beginning. There was two things about my experience in the labour movement at that point. One was the Action Caucus and the left and the labour council and all those things where we all participated.

KN [00:46:57] Can you tell us what the Action Caucus was?

JS [00:46:58] The Action Caucus was basically a group of individuals and unions, so it was a combination of both. In the case where the union was called progressive or left wing, then they would be part of the Action Caucus. There was also members of less progressive unions that would come to the Action Caucus too, and we would organize on the floor of the convention and organize during times too, but to give a progressive view. We had quite an impact on a lot of the direction of the labour movement at times. We were pretty well organized. It was sort of a mixture of communists and socialists and independents, including myself. It was very active, in particular around elections and around campaigns and work like that.

JS [00:47:50] At conventions we met every day. We had a program that we put out. We organized on the floor where I learned to organize on the floor of conventions to make sure we could send back resolutions we didn't like or to get the ones passed we wanted passed. I became quite good at it because I was the co-chair of it for a number of years, both federally and provincially. I became very good at negotiating with the factions in the labour movement to figure out how to get these things through and what compromise might be necessary to win the day. It was a really good experience for me to do that. That was very positive, for me anyway. There was another action caucus from the Workers' Communist Party, the Maoists, they formed their own action caucus. We had two of them, the good old left, divide and conquer itself every time. We're all good at that. We can do that pretty well.

JS [00:48:42] The other area that really took off was the Nicaragua work during the same period. We organized Tools for Peace. In fact, a couple of us dreamed that up in a bar one night. We were going to call it Tools for Peace and get on with it. We organized across the country in the labour movement to take people to Nicaragua. We actually hired staff down in Nicaragua to coordinate the tours, worked with the Sandinistas on all of this work, the trade union movement down there. In B.C. we had the B.C./Nicaragua Solidarity Society here and we had the Trade Union Group. The Trade Union Group was really all the people that went to Nicaragua.

JS [00:49:15] What was fascinating about this for me was it was really easy in the labour movement to stay in your own lane and the action caucus was its own lane. Fortunately you got out of that sometimes, but you were basically in that lane. The people we chose to go on the tours, especially the trade unionists, were across the range because we wanted a broader base of people to go to Nicaragua. That was important because the CLC at the time wasn't supporting the Sandinistas. They were supporting a rump trade union group that supported Somoza during the dictatorship. This was the ICFTL or whatever it was called, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and the CIA-led group from the American, whatever it was called, a group in America that basically was funding all of these right wing reactionary trade union centrals. For over five years we took people from

all depths, all parts of the labour movement to Nicaragua and did these tours. They went to factories, they went to farms, they toured the country, they met with leaders, they met with local people, they celebrated, and everybody came back changed. We were the first tour, that first tour I went on from the Kootenays and worked on. That was the first tour that went from Canada to Nicaragua.

JS [00:50:31] We decided that our job was twofold. One, institutionalize international work. Truth was the labour movement did not, had left, for the most part, international work to the CLC. We thought from our experiences, that there was two groups at the same time, there was SACTU and there was the Central America work. Those were two blaring examples of where the CLC was offside with progressive people in those countries and the real trade union movement. We worked and built a national network of people in the labour movement with two goals. One goal to overturn the CLC policy on these issues and the second goal was to institutionalize the work within the affiliates. I would say that during that period of time, over the next ten years or so, that we were successful, very successful on both fronts.

JS [00:51:19] Another organizing job for me was, as one of the people leading this, our job with a few others across the country, we organized the floor fights. We had them over a course of about two or three conventions. We attempted to overturn the resolutions. Finally in Montreal, we actually managed to overturn the International Affairs paper and send it back. It was an amazing vote, which we won by 11 votes. It was also when Dave Werlin was running against Shirley Carr so it was being portrayed as a straw vote on Shirley Carr's leadership. We turned back the policy, not that it ever came to the floor again, but it really was about changing that.

JS [00:52:00] At the same time CUPE, the Steelworkers, the CAW, PSAC, many of these unions, thanks to in part the work that went on, the stewards brought back, set up their own committees, international solidarity committees. They started to put a penny or two pennies into their humanity funds or whatever they're calling it. That work institutionalized the work so that that went through the unions, not the CLC, and it went to groups that were set up. In B.C., CODEV was set up at the time, which we would give, using Oxfam to do that work. The people here decided they wanted, led by the Teachers and Rick Craig, really wanted an institution in B.C. That still exists today and it still does really solid work. It really grew out of all that work we did around Nicaragua and South Africa, but particularly Central America. It really had a lasting impact on the work that we did. It was really good, really positive.

KN [00:53:00] One of the other things, Jim, that you got involved in the '80s and '90s was the opposition to the free trade agreement, leading us into agreements like NAFTA. Why do you think such agreements were harmful to unions and to working people? Can you talk a bit about your experience in that?

JS [00:53:21] It really struck home in 1989. It was just after the agreement was signed and we'd been fighting the agreement. We had massive campaigns, protests, everything. I was member of the Action Canada Network. We were meeting in Ottawa, coordinating our work. We put out incredible materials on it. That '88 election was really a turning point for the country, to lose that election that brought in free trade. During that election, I was back in Toronto and there was a story in the paper about a company, an auto parts company, Fleck Manufacturing, that had moved to Mexico. I became obsessed by that and went to my friends in the Globe & Mail, got access to the libraries, did all this work on Fleck because they moved to Mexico. It was right in the beginning of the election period. I

thought, it's not something you have to imagine. They did exactly that. This was an organized plant. They'd been organized five years earlier, terrible working conditions. They had raised all the working conditions. This guy picked it up. He was also an adviser on the free trade agreement. He's also on the Ontario government's panel on the economy. This was the story that could have put life and imagery to what the free trade agreement was.

JS [00:54:37] Then of course, in that election, the NDP in my conversations with them were saying, we want people who are in favour of free trade to vote for us and people who are against to vote for us. They were walking a very interesting line. I phoned up somebody I knew in the leader's office during the campaign. I said, 'Look, I have this great information. The debate's coming in two days. You can turn to Mulroney and say, this is your guy. This is what he just did. Why aren't we to expect that this isn't going to happen to more people when the wage disparity is $3.50 a day versus, $8 an hour or $10 an hour at that time? To this day, shocked by the response, which was, 'That's a great story, Jim, and a great piece of research. Maybe you want to talk to John Turner's campaign.' He sent me away with all my research to the Liberal Party, which I didn't go to, by the way, but I did spread it around and it did get published in the newspaper. Then Broadbent, after the debate, he was invited to go to the plant by the CAW. He wouldn't go. He just drove right by it. This caused a lot of anger. That wasn't really what made me decide it was horrible. It was just a good example of it.

JS [00:56:01] Very few months after that, we went into bargaining in the Fishermen's union. That's where it became very real to me, because we walked into the bargaining table, now don't forget these companies, especially some of the local home-grown ones, had been against the free trade agreement. The president of McMillan Fish wrote a big op-ed page saying we don't need this. The roots of the industry was always in the controlling of the export of the fish. You wouldn't have got all the canneries built here, you wouldn't have got all this stuff, if they didn't have access to the fish, and a guarantee they would get it. They would fight amongst themselves, but no-one had to fight with Americans or Japanese or Alaskans for that fish. That fish, salmon and herring particularly, and particularly sockeye and pinks, the backbone of the canning industry, they were all obligated to be in B.C. We lost the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] ruling and then free trade came along and it institutionalized the idea that that fish could go south of the border.

JS [00:56:51] We walked into the bargaining. This is the first time I met Vince Ready, too. We walked into bargaining and the company sat down and gave us the proposals. The proposals were for a $5 an hour across-the-board cut to every new employee that comes in, extend the probationary period from 400 hours, which took two years to get in the fishing industry, to 5,000 hours. It was basically to ghettoize the next workforce. It was really well done because they put on the table that two and two and three, whatever the percentage was for everybody who worked there now, no-one would suffer a penny loss. But the wages for the starting fish plant workers, would go from $13.75, which was very high in those days (the minimum wage, I think was $6), $13.75 down to $7 an hour or $8 an hour. It was a $5 cut and a guarantee that that's where you'd be for the rest of your career in the fishing industry, because you'd never get 5,000 hours. They looked at us and said. This is what became very clear to me what this whole thing was about. It wasn't about free trade or anything else. It's about destroying democracy and the right of us to make decisions about our country and how do we actually take care of ourselves. The institution we have for that is democracy. It's one of the most powerful ones workers have,

when we use it right. It was about destroying that right to make those decisions that would do things like keep that fish in Canada.

JS [00:58:08] They came to the table and said, you have a choice. You can export. We can export the fish or you can import the conditions. That became the benchmark for many, many rounds of bargaining across this country over the next ten years. We can export because there's no controls on the exports now under a free trade agreement. You can't say we're going to keep those fish here or those trees there, or this here or that here. It turned into the most brutal, almost--it reminded me or taught me that you can't take the union for granted, that actually you can lose the union, that there are certain circumstances that can be created by the right wing that can destroy us. I think they've done that many times in the late 50 years. In that particular case, the other thing they offered was the fishermen a good deal. The big difference was that these companies had gone to the States and lined up fish companies to take fish during the strike.

JS [00:59:07] In the old days, prior to this day, you'd have a few scabs in the fishing industry, maybe a handful. A handful. Why was that? In part because all the fish plants were shut down. All the main fish plants were gone. Even the ones that were started to get around strikes didn't survive. Going fishing meant you basically could give your fish away. Why be a scab and give your fish away? No one could buy it. Long story short, they'd gone to the States so suddenly, the first week of the strike, we're a little bit early, that's a whole other issue, but there's way more people out there scabbing than we have ever seen. Then we start going, Well, where's the fish going? The fish is being trucked into town and trucked across the border. For the next three weeks, we saw hundreds of trucks going across the border full of fish by scab fishermen. It was really difficult. I was at that point, I basically had become attached to the shore workers. That was my base in the union in a big way. I was part of the bargaining there. The fishermen, we were losing in the union. Really we were.

JS [01:00:19] We made a decision, a couple of decisions along that way. There was one moment I really appreciated. We had a series of meetings with the membership, and it really came down to a question about whether or not we were going to sell out the next generation. Workers understood that this was wrong. They really gave these incredible speeches at these meetings about our obligation to the next people who are coming to work here. It was a very profound sense of solidarity, but it was also self-interest. They also talked about, if these people get this amount of money, the next time they're coming for us. Do you think they're going to let us earn all this money? We take a strike vote. Are they going to vote for us to keep our money when we took theirs away? We got to Thursday night, three weeks into the dispute, and it was really coming apart. We really were at a crossroads. We were losing the fishing section of the union. There was no end in sight. The companies hadn't moved an inch and we hadn't moved an inch either off our demands. It wasn't that. It wasn't about the demands. It was that we hadn't moved onto their agenda. You have to understand about bargaining, that's either on their agenda or your agenda. Companies, in the last 30 years, they brought, their demands became thicker than ours. We had to deal with this.

JS [01:01:33] We're in the parking lot. We're having a conversation in the parking lot at two in the morning about what do we do? At this point it is a conversation, not about the money, it's about we're in danger of losing what we call the Fishermen's Union. At that point, there was this person who said, why don't we just give them all the money they want? They're offering us back. It's not about money anymore, folks. If they're so hard done by, I would rather give the money back that we're being offered than to take those

people's money that are coming into the union, and create that division in the union and to screw those people. We almost decided that night that that's what we do. We went back to the bargaining table. We didn't do it. That was the good news. We didn't do it. We got out of it, thanks to Vince Ready. We did make a decision then, which was we sent the fishermen back to work.

JS [01:02:25] I went to the meeting to sell this to the fishermen. It was very controversial because for 50 years no one had ever gone to work when the other group hadn't. The hardcore fishermen were going, We're not going back to work. I said, No, you have to. We're losing the union. We don't play by those rules. The companies were furious. They thought they could just jam us forever. We sent all the fishermen back to work and they went back to work. On the Sunday night, we went to the hotel to negotiate with the companies and we made a tiny little move on the concessions. I think we agreed to freeze their wage or something. I forget what we agreed, but it was not anything of significance. Ready came in the room. We hardly ever saw Ready. We hardly ever bargained that year but Ready was there. He came in the room, took the demand, went away, came back in about 15 seconds it felt like. Said, You guys aren't even on the same page. Think about this because you're not getting out of this room tonight with a deal at this point in a million years. I'm going to go away and think about it. He goes away. I'm starting to learn about Ready and how he works. He let us there for four hours stewing, wondering what to do. Can we make another move? What can we do here, realizing that we're still having serious problems about losing the union.

JS [01:03:37] At about midnight,(and of course, the fish are starting to come back, which actually gave us some pressure too) Ready comes in and says, 'Well, you're screwed. You know, but I've been thinking about this and I've been talking to Hayward, Doug Hayward in the government, and I think I might have an answer for you.' I'm thinking, okay, this better be good. He says, 'Have you ever heard of an Industrial Inquiry Commission?' I said, of course I hadn't. He said, 'Well, you know, they take your demands and their demands and they put it together. You have a chair and you have two wingers either side. You take all the demands, you go to those people and you make your case. In the meantime, you go back to work. You get a decision and the decision's binding, whatever the decision, it's binding on you.' People didn't like to do it, but I just went that's the only way out of the situation and that's what we took.

JS [01:04:33] That was free trade for me because that really told me this is about really destroying our collective power, both as a government and as unions, to control our stuff. When my dad worked in the tire company, he started at the plant, then became a salesman. There was never a discussion about the plant going to the States. He always said they could put the main plant in the States, put on an extra hour shift and they could close this plant down. That plant did close down eventually, thanks to free trade, in part. That really taught me that that was wrong. NAFTA was the same thing. NAFTA became even more the extension of this to Mexico, which meant your competition was going from, very few dollars an hour to, some comparative wages, we were higher than the States but it wasn't that bad. But the Mexicans were getting down to $3.50 a day. NAFTA was the next target.

KN [01:05:27] Jim, we're going to move on now to your presidency of the B.C. Federation of Labour, the position you were elected to until 2014 when you stepped down. I want to ask you to talk a bit about how you decided to run for that job, what some of the factors were helping you get elected.

JS [01:05:57] It's just kind of funny. Ken Georgetti was off to become the leader of the CLC. I think the convention was in May, and he announced it much earlier than that, that that's what he was doing. That opened up the debate in the Federation of Labour about who was going to take his place. At that point, two candidates had come forward, Patrice Pratt and Angie Schira, to be the leader of the Federation of Labour. Some people said to me, Hey, why don't you do that? I said, Are you crazy? I'm just in the fishermen's union. I thought about I said, I could do that job. I kind of believed enough in myself that I said I could be a good president of the Federation of Labour, I think. I started to ask around. I went to my union, and it turned out that Jef Keighley was thinking about doing that, too, and looking for support to run. First of all, I had to get over the hurdle of my union who they would support. I was on the executive board but not on the executive council. The executive board I was on. You had to be on the executive board to run. Angie was okay to run. Patrice had to have John Shields step down to run. Then I needed somebody to step down to let me run, which in that case was the leader, Len Ruel, the leader of the CAW. First, I had to get through that hurdle, and I did. We both had to go out and see if we had support. I had more support than Jef had to run for the position.

JS [01:07:38] They had a straw vote at Harrison, and there was three camps at Harrison of the officers of the Federation of Labour. It was seven, seven, seven was the vote, seven for Patrice, seven for Angie and seven for 'other'. There was no 'other' at that point that was officially in the race but there was 'other'. I said, okay, what I got was a lot of encouragement to run from a number of unions, unions that you might not expect to get encouragement from. One of my biggest supporters were the public sector, not the private sector. The public sector was very strong. Let's remember the context. Gordon Campbell's, we're about to get whacked. We don't know how hard we're going to get whacked, but we're going to get whacked. We're going to have a Liberal government, right-wing Liberal government starting in 2001. This is 1999, halfway through 1999. That I think made a big difference to me being able to get elected or not, because people were looking at that and saying, what kind of leader do we need at the Federation of Labour for whatever is going to happen with the Campbell government? With the exception of the BCGEU, I might be wrong about this, so I'd better be careful not to get nasty letters back saying that's not true, Jim.

JS [01:08:53] Generally the public sector, and one of the biggest turning points was Colleen Jordan. We'd known each other through the SACTU work and through other work and had a lot of respect for each other. I phoned her up to ask her about this. She said, 'Oh, I've been expecting your phone call, Sinclair.' I said, 'Yep.' She said, 'Yeah, well, you know, I want to talk to you about this. We went out and we had a meeting with Barry O'Neill, and at the end of that meeting, CUPE endorsed me to run for president.' That kind of went across the board. Then Angie dropped out of the race, and I picked up most of the support that she had. To be clear, none of it was overwhelming. I don't think most people knew who was going to win on the day of the election. It was the executive board elections, 52 votes, as I remember very clearly. Those people have been approached by everybody 13 times, I'm sure. You had some wild cards there, but most of the people had declared. I remember one of my supporters came back to me that he'd told one of the other candidates that they'd support them. I said, I was just hearing this rumour. I don't know what's happening. He says, 'Look, you let me deal with my politics, you deal with yours, okay? You have my vote.' I think it was hard for everybody to know because it was very tight. The final vote was a landslide. I won by basically a swing vote of four. I won by seven votes. That meant some people whose unions didn't support me, supported me. People we didn't understand. Who knows for Patrice how that happened. I ended up at the end of that, the president of the B.C. Federation of Labour.

JS [01:10:39] A very difficult time. It was the time when Glen Clark was under more and more scrutiny and pressure. That last year was a difficult year for the Federation of Labour. Given all of that sort of, election coming, that was going to be a disaster, trying to motivate people to work in that election, very difficult. I walked in the door. I didn't know most of the staff very well. It wasn't my world in a way, but they were incredibly supportive. The whole place was supportive. Privately, I think most of the staff were happy that I got elected, to be frank, at this point, not that it matters. I will say this, that at the end of the day, after the election was over, people just got together and said, okay, he's the president now, let's move on. People who didn't support me were just as supportive as the people who did.

KN [01:11:36] We're going to get into what you were talking about, the B.C. Liberals in power and some of the things, some of the threats they posed to the labour movement. Before we get into that, I wanted to ask you a question about one of your thrusts for your presidency during the whole time you were president, which was right from '99 to 2014 was to turn the BC Fed into being a voice for all working people, not just for unionized. Can you talk about that particular thrust of your presidency and some of the initiatives and campaigns that led you to accomplish this goal?

JS [01:12:24] What I've said basically of my life, I always was part of a broader movement, starting in high school. For me, the people we represented were working people. Union members were a part of them, and we had to represent them and we should and we should be there. Certainly under my leadership, if you were in a battle, the Fed was with you, and varying different points up to including calling general strikes and regional strikes and everything else. I always felt that was its primary job. The other primary job was all the people that didn't have a union, or a voice, or a way of effecting change in their lives. The other issue for me, as you've watched it go through my life, the safety issue. The idea that you get killed or hurt on the job to me was just not okay. It was part of my passion that people should be safe. That really was true. Even as a journalist, I wrote a whole series on, it's complicated anyway, the work on the Trail smelter and the poisoning and the cancer rates there. It always was a big piece of my work too. Those were some of the themes that we developed.

JS [01:13:34] The campaigns were, some of the ones that were very well known. Shortly, soon into my time, three women died in that terrible van crash. I thought, just as soon as that happened, I went, that's outrageous. The thing about it, again, it's kind of like the ice augers. What's wrong with the system that allows this to systematically happen? That where we basically stopped doing our jobs as a society and institutions like the WCB to support people to be safe, disappear. That's what happened to the farm workers. It disappeared for absolutely overtly political reasons. I phoned up Charan Gill. I said, 'Can you get me a meeting with the families?' He said, 'Yes, I can do that. We're having a meeting. Why don't you speak at it in Surrey on the Saturday?' I went to that and met the families and talked with them and went out and met them out in their communities.

JS [01:14:40] We wrote a series of recommendations, but we asked the labour minister for a meeting and she actually gave it to us. Olga Ilich was an interesting labour minister under the Liberals. She actually was. She had a heart and she actually knew that part of her job was protecting people, and righting wrong, for which she later got in deep trouble for, from the premier of the province. She agreed to a meeting with the families and me four days later. We got together and wrote 28 recommendations to change the rules. What we discovered was that the van was a coffin with four wheels waiting for people to

die in. I say that because it really, truly was. It had gone into an inspection. The whole system was corrupt. They'd gone to an inspection and they'd been given an inspection—the inspectors work for the same companies that were doing the repairs on the van. They wrote the inspection—two weeks earlier, the van had holes in it, the brakes didn't work. The brakes were screwed, the tires were bald, the van had holes in it, the seats weren't there, the seatbelts weren't all there. Everything about that van said this is a death trap. That became our mantra. We put a great deal of pressure on it.

JS [01:16:01] We spoke. The credibility the Fed got. If you watched that through the years, how that worked at the Fed was it wasn't just us speaking about people we didn't know or had no relationship to. In all of the cases, whether it was the farmworkers there or the mushroom workers or the late night workers or minimum wage workers. There are people that we had relationships with and they gave not only real examples of what we were talking about, but they gave us credibility as a labour movement, that we had these relationships with the community. That's always been an issue in the labour movement, whether you're related to the community or not. Why is that a good or a bad thing? In my mind, all my life, whether it was Solidarity or whatever it was, (and we didn't talk about that). Those things, the community is a critical part of the labour movement and we need to be part of that community. Whether that's the kind of campaigns we were doing here or the kind of campaigns we're doing otherwise.

JS [01:16:58] They went out and they did flash inspections of their vehicles. They did the flash inspections and they took almost 50% of them off the road immediately because they were unsafe. It was incredible. They did that under pressure from us, of course. They also did it another time. The next time they did it, they found the same owner, of the people that were driving that van that day—and the woman driving the van did not have a license to drive the van, was not licensed to drive it. They found that same company with a new van in just the same kind of condition as the old van, doing the same thing a week later. What it really taught you was there was no fear in that whole world of anybody interfering in what you did and how you did it. The contract system was built on that.

JS [01:17:55] The Saturday before the meeting, we went out—the van was going to a nursery in the valley. We went out to the nursery and we parked in front of the nursery and just watched. I just wanted to go feel it, but that's kind of me. I got to go feel things, got to go see things, so we went out to see it. As we're sitting there, this group of South Asian women came out of the plant, We went up and Jessie was with us and she went up and spoke to them in Punjabi and they were going to another facility. Don't forget, this is the guy that was on the radio saying, I have nothing to do with what happened to the women in the van, because that was a contractor, not me. Three days earlier saying that he's not responsible, he wouldn't let that happen. We're sitting there and the supervisor pulls up in a van and he goes to get, he gets everybody's going into the van. They get to the last person and there's no seat in the van for them. She's standing there. She knows we're watching. She knows we're from the Federation of Labour. She knows she shouldn't get in the van. The boss, the guy yells at her, says, Get in the van, we got to go. Sure enough, she goes in the van and sits on the corner of the seat. I thought, this is a situation that is completely, it's about racism in one level, it's about this corporatism, about the corporations being able to run the show, and about the complete failure of the public system to protect the people that are in it. This is three days after three people have died coming to work on this place. He's telling women to get in the van with no seatbelt and no seat. It's just unbelievable.

JS [01:19:33] We made a lot of changes there and put a lot of things in place that made a difference. I think people appreciated us. They also knew the labour movement was about everybody. The other one was of course, the De Patie's, the death of Grant De Patie at all-night gas stations. It's funny how you miss things. I missed it all when it happened. I didn't hear about it. It happened in Montreal. They said these two places had better regulations. I thought, do we, really? I started to look into this and I issued a press release saying we should have better regulations for late night workers. I get a phone call from Grant De Patie's grandfather saying, 'If you want to talk about this, you need to talk about Grant De Patie, man.' I said, 'Oh, what's that about?' He explained who Grant De Patie was to me and said, this is what happened. I don't know why I missed it. It just didn't register when it happened. That started the whole campaign to augment that these people were working alone not just in gas stations, but in liquor stores, everywhere. It's unsafe.

JS [01:20:41] We eventually won the battle, working with the De Paties. It's also the time where the Young Workers' Committee at the Fed, which was a real big project of the Fed at the time, was to get young people involved. They took it on too. They went out and picketed and appeared at hearings and did everything else. The WCB said, You either have two people that work at night because there was lots of evidence to show if there were two people, much less likely to be robbed because a robber would want to rob one person, two people is more of a challenge. Two, if you don't have two people, you have to lock the door and you don't let people in, you have a window. We won the fight. It wasn't about just pumping gas. That's what the government wanted to make it because they brought in, they did bring in pay before you pump. That's what happened to Grant De Patie. Don't forget, he was chasing a car that was speeding away and that was very difficult. You dig into the story, there's so much—as an old reporter, you know, there's always something beneath that story. That story is the last gas station he worked at, there was a dine and dash or a gas and dash, in that case. The boss came and said, I need $50 cash from you. He said, What for? That's the gas they stole and you have to pay me for the gas that was stolen. It was just that kind of abuse of human beings.

JS [01:22:00] Unfortunately, what happened was, and this is where Olga Ilich got into the situation, she agreed with the changes that the WCB had proposed. They accepted. I remember the head of the WCB saying to me, you won big here. This is big because this just doesn't affect gas station workers. This affects the whole late night convenience store crowd of people and all those places where people are working late at night, at work, late at night where they're exposed to the public. When it was announced, we celebrated of course. Within about three weeks, later I was to understand from the labour minister that it came up at a cabinet meeting. Campbell berated her in front of everybody, basically called her in after the meeting and said, 'You get rid of this right now.' These people are all on our case and you got to go get a way out of this. Get rid of this because it's not going to work. You've really screwed up here. Honestly, she was willing to say that to me in our private conversations that this is what happened, Jim.

JS [01:23:10] What did they do? They went out and made another system where you can have a button you can press if somebody is robbing you with a knife. However that will help you, I'm not sure. It goes to some owner somewhere that might come in half an hour later or figure it all out or phone the cops for you, and a camera. They didn't say you can't do this, have two people or this, they said you don't need to, you can do this. That's how they got around it.

JS [01:23:35] Two weeks ago there was a demonstration at a convenience store on Commercial Drive by the Young Workers' Committee of the B.C. Fed still fighting this government to put the right regulation back in place. These battles go on and on.

JS [01:23:49] The minimum wage was the same thing. We had a big debate in the labour movement, people saying, as long as the minimum wage is low, we can organize these people. They can be organized and it should be lower. I would say, we're not organizing them, frankly. The real question is whether they're going to think that we're the problem. Right now lots of them think we're the problem. We get the big benefits, we get the big wages, we get all the great things, and they get nothing. Why, particularly in the public sector, why are they paying taxes so you can have what they don't have, which was the right wing chant at the time. We made it a major part of our campaign and we did a hell of a job on that. When Christy Clark finally went to the ten bucks like we said, the labour movement got credit for that.

JS [01:24:32] You don't really know. You talk to people. The guy cleaning my house one day, no, the guy putting the poison for the mice in my house says to me, 'Are you Jim Sinclair?' I always laugh and say, 'No, I never heard of the guy.' He laughed and said 'I recognize your voice.' I said, 'Oh.' He said 'I just want to thank you.' I said, 'What do want to thank me for?' He said, 'I was a gas station worker. For five years I worked in a gas station. I just want to say to you, you were the only guy that gave it damn about us. Even your folks, the only people who cared about us for the whole time, that ever cared about us. I want to thank you for doing that because it made us feel important.'(I thought, that's what I want those people to think about the labour movement, that we made them feel important, and that they were.

KN [01:25:16] We're going to move on now to look at some very significant issues that happened during your presidency. As you indicated, you soon had a very conservative government in this province led by Gordon Campbell.

JS [01:25:28] That's an understatement, is it? (laughter)

KN [01:25:30] The B.C. Federation of Labour, the coalition of unions supporting their member unions and major strike actions. The first time that this happened was with the Hospital Employees' Union when they were under attack by the government and they attempted to fight back. Can you talk about that briefly?

JS [01:25:50] That was quite a time. The first time it happened when they brought in Bill 29 to rip up the contracts and destroy those women's jobs, and it was mostly women, immigrant women by the way, that was a moment for the labour movement, had to decide how we're going to respond. What happened very quickly was there was a day in protest from those people and certain industries, a one day protest which the state was willing to tolerate, frankly. We sat down with some of the public sector unions who were directly involved and said, What are we going do here? We've got to do something. We can't let this go by. They agreed that they weren't ready to call their members out on a prolonged job action, but they did say that we need time to educate people and the rest of labour movement. etcetera etcetera.

JS [01:26:41] We put together a proposal, and this is in 2002, I think when this happened, for a vote of the entire labour movement in B.C. over whether or not this is right or wrong and whether they would support the action plan of the B.C. Federation to defeat it, that was up to including job action. Our idea was that we would take a month to mobilize

people and then start to figure out how to use the mandate to start causing the government grief. I did learn later in the next round where the HEU was involved, that shutting down the private sector was a tough thing to do in that kind of solidarity strike. Also, very important because it starts to affect the economy in a big way, even on one day. It sets up an attitude. At the officers' there was a fairly couple of major affiliates that didn't support it and support taking the vote. We never took the vote. We did a survey. I always thought that was a missed opportunity. In retrospect, as a leader, I always knew we talked about whether we wanted to divide the labour movement over this kind of action. I think we should have done it. Later on I would do it. You didn't wait for everybody to agree because if you wanted to get things done, you had to go and stand up. I look back on that and I said, I made a mistake at that point. A mistake. I'm not sure that we could have changed the outcome, but we could have done a better job. That was the first round of that battle.

JS [01:28:12] The next round was when they came for the 15% pay cuts. Contracting out was proceeding. They had attempted—and we'd done a lot of work—they'd attempted to negotiate a new deal that was turned down by the membership to stop the contracting out. The HEU refused to go back to work when the other unions did. All the other unions ended up having to follow the HEU to stay out of the job. The Federation started holding emergency meetings and we put together a list. I remember the ad in the paper, 'Fed plans week of havoc in B.C.' and it really was. We just went around the room and said, What are people willing to do? We need to do something here, and it has to be big and have impact. That's when we got to the regional strike ideas, which was later how we dealt with the Teachers, actually.

JS [01:29:03] We agreed that we would negotiate and the officers were part of that negotiating process. We were at the hotel and for three days we negotiated to try to find an answer. We met with the HEU and they said their priority was to stop contracting out and the 15% pay cut, which the union had already recommended, wasn't really discussed at the time. They said our priority is stop the contracting out. We ended up negotiating a deal and I won't go into the gory details, but a deal which basically capped all the contracting out at six hundred jobs over the next three years, couldn't put it in the collective agreement, of course, because that was illegal. You had to sign a commercial contract between the HEU and the government to make sure that happened. I think at the end of those years, they actually didn't even do that. It really just meant any kind of wholesale contracting out, the [unclear] were next and others were stopped. It was controversial in the labour movement. I think I got 250 notes saying I sold out the working class. In retrospect, you could see where people were coming at. This was their chance to kick the government.

JS [01:30:03] From the opposite point of view, we all looked at how do we get get out of this without getting the HEU millions of dollars in fines or whatever, contempt charges and get the agreement, which ultimately wasn't really fair, you have to learn this. Ultimately, the Fed doesn't make decisions like that and it shouldn't be making those decisions. The unions should make those decisions. That was one of the lessons I took away from that process was that even though they wanted me there, I didn't need to be there. They needed to be there. That was the resolution of that dispute. Shortly afterwards, the Teachers found themselves in a similar situation.

KN [01:30:42] They did. I wanted to mention also that they joined the B.C. Federation of Labour. At this point in time they hadn't been members of the B.C. Federation of Labour although they had worked with labour very closely on a number of other struggles in the

past. In 2003, they became members of the B.C. Federation of Labour and the Nurses had joined too so the B.C. said was becoming—

JS [01:31:08] Those were two victories for us, for sure, for the working class.

KN [01:31:13] In 2005, teachers ended up responding to, once again, having their contract imposed by legislation, which was technically an illegal strike.

JS [01:31:26] Definitely.

KN [01:31:28] The BC Federation of Labour played a major part in helping to see that through. Can you talk about that event?

JS [01:31:38] At this point all the other contracts had been settled and they were offering the teachers zero, zero and two, like everybody else. The government completely misjudged the situation. They thought, they weren't sure about the teachers, but they thought nobody in the labour movement was going to support them to get more than they got. That was the line the government was using with the people in that government. Fortunately they were absolutely wrong about that. We spent the first week of that dispute meeting with the teachers. Also I spent many, many hours on the phone because at the end of the day, your job in that position is to line people up to the right ideas that they'll support in the majority and then to apply pressure. I think we all understood that it had to be more than a statement of solidarity or a demonstration, that we were going to have to put real pressure on the government to force them to the table.

JS [01:32:25] It's really important to understand that this wasn't about us negotiating the collective agreement. This was about giving them the right to negotiate a collective agreement. What was taken away was the right to bargain. This is important because during that process the sentiment changed about what we should be doing because they had won back the right to collective bargaining. Having a general strike to support people at the bargaining table was different than having a general strike to support people for the right to collective bargaining. The second one very seldom happens, although in effect, it did happen in this case, because the first thing that happened, of course, was the Monday, was the the rally in Victoria. The government, the court ruling on the Friday was that they couldn't spend any money on that rally. They couldn't participate in that rally officially or any of that. Particularly they couldn't spending any money, so we came in and picked up all the bills.

JS [01:33:14] We organized the rally and made sure that we even hired a ferry, the Solidarity Ferry, to bring people over to the rally. That was a massive rally and it really set the tone. It was a Sunday night meeting. The officers met on Sunday night before the Monday. I was approached by the Premier's office to have a conversation about what should happen next. We sat down with the Teachers' union and said, should we go to this meeting—should I go to this meeting? And who should go with me? The decision was that I would take an officer, Anne Davidson, and we would go and see what the government had to say. At that point, what I think we all recognized, and I certainly did, was that these parties were four million miles apart and they were heading into the second week of an illegal strike. That's when something we did, this wasn't the only time we ever did this. We did it more times than that in disputes. We said the government needs to bring in Vince Ready and they have to go back to bargaining. We went and had a meeting with the Premier's office and the labour ministry and they said, Well—we'd planned a week of job actions, but we'd done it very strategically. We did Monday, Wednesday and Friday if

necessary, and we set a day to bargain. Let's give them a day to bargain. We don't need to be doing this every day. Let's see what's happening.

JS [01:34:40] It was on the Sunday night that they agreed that Vince Ready would get involved in bargaining and call the parties back to the table. At that point, don't forget the government had said we're not going to the table as long as you're out on strike. There was no chance of a deal here. Where does that end up? Hard to say. At that point, though, I've got to say the courts and the judge was being very sympathetic. I got to say, not everybody gets that kind of treatment. I've got to give full credit to the judge on that one, in many ways. We went to that rally, and that was a really expression, Victoria shut down and people came from all over the island, major services shut down, government services walked out. It was a great day for the working class, in my opinion. One of the great highlights of my career at the Fed. I remember in the meeting in the Premier's office, he said, Well, I know we can't stop you on Monday. And of course they couldn't have. But what about Tuesday? Can you call off Tuesday and see what happens? Of course, we didn't have anything planned for Tuesday. I said, I don't think so. I said, the only way we call off Tuesday is if you get Vince Ready here and he announces tonight and gets involved in the negotiations immediately. He said, Well, I don't know. I said, Well, you got Tuesday, you got that. I think that's a pretty easy choice to make. He made the choice to invite in Vince Ready and make the deal at that point. We called off Tuesday, but we didn't call off Wednesday, of course.

JS [01:36:04] We called off Wednesday—Wednesday was the Kootenays. Of course that was a big deal because you had the mines up there, you had the pulp mills up there, you had all of those things up there. It was a complicated piece to shut down. Then it started to get a little wobbly because the debate was, why are we risking our jobs when they're back at the bargaining table? We'd called the dispute and I'd called the action for Wednesday. Then we had an officers' meeting that went on for about four hours discussing what to do. We went back and forth with the teacher's union. What did they want to do? What did we want to do? I just realized, you know what, we called off the job action under the HEU on Sunday night. It was slated for Monday and there was a mass disappointment out there. I looked back on that and went, not a good idea. I finally said to the officers, We can't call this off tomorrow, it's got to proceed. After that we'll see what happens, see where they get to. We did the action in the Kootenays and they went back to the bargaining table.

JS [01:37:04] They got an agreement, no, they got a recommendation from Ready, which was significantly better than anything anybody else had gotten, made major improvements on everything but class size and composition. That's where it fell short. As you know very well, Ken, it would be many years before that was resolved and it would take the Supreme Court of Canada to fix that problem. They weren't going to fix that at the bargaining table at that point in time. Ready wasn't going to do that but he did give major pay increases, changed the, you know all the details. It was something to be very proud of and for everybody to be proud of. It set the tone for some other job actions and taught us about when we work together we can make a difference. It wasn't until we announced all of this that Jerry Lampert from the Business Council is phoning me saying, 'What the hell are you doing, Sinclair?' I said, 'You're phoning the wrong guy. Don't phone me, phone your guy. Campbell has to. You've got to phone Campbell, talk to him about this.' I think that was really a lesson for me too. These guys don't get riled up when we shut down the public sector, necessarily, especially for a day. But they do get riled up when we shut down their pulp mill for a day. I can tell you. That was a good lesson and really the reason for private-public sector solidarity. It wasn't last time we did that. We did it on a number of other occasions, too, and were involved in a number of labour disputes.

KN [01:38:29] That was a very significant event. One of the other major initiatives that the B.C. Federation of Labour undertook under your leadership was to increase its strength and its role in political action at all levels of government, municipal, provincial and federal. Can you talk about that for a bit?

JS [01:38:46] I must say, I think we were all on our heels in 2001 when we ended up with two MLAs. That radically changed, in a way, the role of the labour movement to a certain extent, because as we were called often was the role of the loyal opposition. We were considered part of the opposition to the government and as such ran many campaigns as you know, fighting the government on whatever front it was. We sat back and started to think about what's our next move here? We're in trouble. Their mandate is 77 to 2. They're taking advantage of us. They're turning back the clock in a whole lot of areas. They're damaging the social network that we've created over ten years of NDP government. They're ripping it up. They're taking away people's services. The list is massive. The conversation came back to, so it's about politics.

JS [01:39:38] Really, in my whole experience, was I was learning that the ballot box and the bargaining table are two tools that are fundamental tools of the working class. Nothing happened in the last years that didn't change my mind. The bargaining table was how working class people change their circumstances on their job, and the ballot box: A determines how they can bargain and whether they have a right to bargain, but also changes the circumstances in the community. I remember thinking I want trade union people to open up their window and look out their house and look out on that street and see themselves and their life as part of that street, too, and part of that community. We looked at the electoral map and said, municipal elections are coming. That's where we said, okay. The CLC had been doing some work in that area, but it was pretty minimal. Certainly Vancouver CUPE had done some work in that area, but the labour movement hadn't done work in that area. Most unions did not participate in municipal politics. They were not part of it. They didn't do it.

JS [01:40:39] We said, can we change that? We went to the labour movement and said to the officers and said, can we launch a campaign in the municipal elections to elect the slates, use the labour councils to appoint them? You would mobilize your members and you would phone them and talk to them and you would give them literature. We made the cards and did all that stuff for all the different cities where people were running. We made a significant difference for the first time in a really big way to the outcome of those elections. We elected over 250 people, I think, that we endorsed from the labour movement. We swept city council in Vancouver.

JS [01:41:14] I think it was Phil Legg who told me a great story. The day after the election he was out playing soccer with his daughter, his daughter was playing soccer. A guy came up to him who ran in the school board election in Burnaby. Phil said, 'How did you do?' He said, 'I got beat. I didn't have a chance.' He said, 'Well, what happened?' He said, 'Well, it was you guys. How can I compete against? My wife is a BCGEU member. First she gets a letter saying, Do you know that municipal elections are coming? You've got to be thinking about this. We really encourage you to go out and vote. Then she gets a letter saying, Here's the candidates, here's the issues and here's the candidates you should be voting for. Then she gets a letter and a phone call saying, Have you gone to vote yet? How do you compete with that?'

JS [01:41:57] That was, to me, part of the situation that became the model for, not just the municipal elections, but for provincial elections as well. That led to the next one where we started the Count Me In campaign, which was the provincial election in 2005. The organizing for that election, I'll give full marks to the labour movement. We all sat down and said we got to do something different here. We have to mobilize our members and we have to engage them in a conversation about their lives, their politics, etc. That meant we had to go knock on doors. You couldn't do it on the worksite, you could do some of it on the worksite, but you couldn't do it all. You had to go talk to them and just as importantly, listen to them and hear what they had to say about politics. Also, when the union showed up on the doorstep and I went to many doorsteps with unions, their first response is, what are you doing here? They're kind of shocked the union would knock on their door. Once they found out why we were there, most of them were, well, that's great. A lot of them want to talk not only about that, but about the elections, too, and about their union. That really was the beginning of the change.

JS [01:43:02] A year earlier, we had organizers out there. A year earlier, people started doing the education. You realize that in elections, you can't expect a good outcome in 30 days of work. Elections are always on. You're always got to be out there promoting an alternative vision for society and working. I think 2005 brought us back to life. I will say there was a moment in that time at the Fed where we didn't know whether the NDP should survive. There was a discussion about whether this brand was done. I remember Meggs at that point had come to work, Geoff Meggs, had come to work at the Federation of Labour and we were talking about this. He did a bunch of polling to see where we were at. I remember he came to the officers' meeting or the board, probably both, and presented this and the polling showed that the NDP was actually polling in 40% again, 35, 40%, and just turned off that whole conversation. This was like a year in with polling 40% again. We got over that dilemma or that crisis by saying this is workable, we can do this.

JS [01:44:03] I think that really taught the labour movement some lessons about how you mobilize people and how you organize. We spent a lot of money. It's not cheap. Millions of dollars were spent on those members and some unions did a better job than others, for sure. Some unions took it on with vigour. Everybody took it on in their own way. Some unions are non-partisan per se. Some of those non-partisan unions spend more money than the partisan unions on politics. Teachers would be a good case in point, many times. Spent millions of dollars on advertising campaigns basically going after the Liberals. I think that became the theme of the Fed, politics as really important and that you need to have your members onside. Certainly as election laws have changed now, it's the only way you can have real influence because you can't write the cheques anymore.

KN [01:44:52] Okay. So I just wanted to hit on a couple of more—

JS [01:45:08] I'm running out of steam, I'm sure you are too.

KN [01:45:08] No, I'm fine. Are we okay for time?

JS [01:45:08] What time is it?

KN [01:45:08] We have some time left. I wanted to ask you about the book that you wrote after you retired from the presidency of the BC Fed, the history of the B.C. construction unions. Can you talk a bit about that? It's a significant book.

JS [01:45:26] I'd gotten involved in the building trades. That was another case where the building trades where they came back to the Fed in a big way during my time, which was nice, some of them. I got involved in the building trades around the LNG project and about trying to make sure that we weren't bringing in temporary foreign workers to build the pipeline, if we're going to build it. That was a whole other debate. If we were going to build it, our job was to make sure that Aboriginal people got hired, equity groups got hired and we spent four or five years working on that. Then when the NDP got elected, we started to look at community benefit agreements. I was involved in developing the community benefit agreement for unions to negotiate with the government and began negotiating with the government to do that.

JS [01:46:09] When they had their 50th anniversary, they came to me and said, we want to write a book. I thought, it's tempting. Just came through—Susan had been through cancer treatment and had come out of that and was feeling better about herself and the world. I thought this would be a good project for me to take on. It didn't pay a whole lot, but it was okay. I liked the idea of getting back to being a writer, which is sort of part of what I've been all my life, a communicator and a writer, so I decided to take on the job. Probably, if I'm looking back on it, I wouldn't have done it, to be honest with you. It was too much work. I also set the bar really high. I didn't want to make a happy book about the labour movement. I wanted a book, and I said to them when I did it, I want a book that apprentices can pick up when they're sitting on the toilet, look it through and learn something about their history. The book has to be accessible, it has to be visual, it has to be in different pieces. Every page had to have a picture or a call-out or a cut-out or something on it that would actually break up the text so it wasn't just a bunch of grey matter.

JS [01:47:15] I spent, it was crazy. I was researching and writing the book as we were laying it out. It was six months deadline, it had to be done for the thing. Most of these histories take a couple of years. I just thought, arrogance of all kinds, I'll just get this done. The last two months were brutal on everybody. The woman that did the graphic arts, Nadine Remby and her partner, Peter. They did an amazing job, the last cycle— And what I tried to say was through the voices of their own people, what did you learn? How did you go from being organized in every single site, besides residential, in British Columbia to being less than 25% of it? I wanted to tell the story. What lessons did they learn along the way and the political struggles they had and the lessons they learned and the role of the government?

JS [01:48:12] I wanted to tell a story that would help them to figure out the future, not just the past, and what was the success and why did they fail. I will say this: I looked in archives of union basements and archives in the storage shed out in Port Coquitlam and pictures everywhere I could find them. I think it was a, hopefully it's been a useful book for people who are interested in, how do unions win, also, how do they lose, and how do they rebuild and what's their future? It was a challenge. Like I say, I'm not sure if I'd do it again in that kind of timeframe. And like I say, the people who laid out the book, I thought it was a beautiful layout job. I don't know if you've seen it. How many people are reading it now, I have no idea. They printed 10,000. That's a lot of books to print. Some unions delivered it to every single one of their members. Hopefully it's still being handed out to apprenticeship courses.

KN [01:49:19] One of the other major things you took on and you began this while you were president of the BC Fed was to chair the advisory committee to the SFU labour studies program. Also, to see it grow to the point where it could enable students to actually

obtain a bachelor's degree with a major in labour studies, which hasn't been possible to this point now. You continued to head up this initiative after you retired from the BC Fed. You want to talk about this initiative for what it achieved and what you see as the future for the SFU labour studies program?

JS [01:50:02] Well, two words: Margaret Morgan. We wouldn't be having this conversation if it wasn't for Margaret Morgan, who was an incredible human being and made it possible by single handedly funding the program for ten years. She was a working class woman from the east side of Vancouver, from Saskatchewan, and then the east side of Vancouver, who faced enormous hurdles in her life and rose from real abject poverty to do amazing things. Along the way spent a year in bed in a TB sanitorium. Just an amazing woman, became a principal in the school system and a union leader in that area, married Lefty Morgan and were the founding members of the NDP.

JS [01:50:50] I met her because when Lefty Morgan, her husband died, we were building a boat for Nicaragua. This was a huge project the Fishermen's Union had taken on, much bigger than I ever would have imagined. I imagine now that I wouldn't have done it either. We wouldn't have done it, but we did it. She came and said, 'Can I do something? I don't want to donate money to charities.' Lefty knew a lot about Nicaragua. They had close friends there. She said, 'We want to do something for the boat.' At this point we thought this would be done. They said to me the day we brought the boat shell, the fibreglass shell into the shed. We made a press conference out of it. They said, When will the boat be done? I said, Hopefully within a year, we'll try and get done in a year. The guy who was building the boat took me aside and he said, Jim, this is how it works when you're building a boat. Take the number you just gave and multiply it by eight and that'll be about right. As it turns out, it was about right.

JS [01:51:41] We were stuck because we needed $25,000 for an engine. I said, 'Do you want to buy an engine?' She said, 'How much does it cost?' I said '25,000'. 'I'll take care of that.' Margaret went out and she raised $25,000 up and down the railway where Lefty Morgan worked and friends that she knew. She raised $25,000 and bought the engine for the boat. I started off when I was working on the newspaper to do this. I later became a leader of the union, didn't have the time. We kind of were fading and Al was doing this thing. Al Brown was an amazing fisherman that did this. That's a whole other story. We needed that engine for the boat and then we needed our asses kicked to get the boat finished. She kicked our ass to get the boat finished. I actually travelled to Nicaragua with Margaret to set up where it was going to go to and make all the arrangements for the boat to go there.

JS [01:52:28] This went on and she did this and at the end of all this, this is about 15 years ago, she said, 'I have two houses, one of them we built in Deep Cove. I bet they're worth', at the point they were probably worth, they were worth over $2 million then, the two of them. She said, 'I'm going to give the money to Simon Fraser.' Simon Fraser wanted to set up an endowment and then just use the money for research and stuff in history and things like that. When I talked to professors up there, they said, Well, Jim, and I want to say this. What Margaret said was, I want working people respected on this campus. That was her thing about this. Lefty had had a relationship to them too. I want them respected.

JS [01:53:07] When we talked to, when they talked to professors, they said, Well, we grant degrees up here. That's what we do. If you want respect, you have to be in the game. You have to grant degrees and you need a degree in labour studies. You need to have a degree granting program up here and maybe someday you'll have a department. That

changed the whole course of negotiations. It was the worst set of negotiations. I used to laugh. It was easier to get $2 million from the companies in fish prices and wages than it was to give $2 million to the university. It took a year and a half, over a year and a half, almost two years of bargaining, because they kept wanting no controls and no obligations. We kept saying, we want a program, we want staff, we want a full time professor. People were telling me, professors, you need a full time professor on this thing or it doesn't have any substance and no obligation.

JS [01:53:55] Finally it came down to this. Margaret was getting tired, and she was tired of listening to this stuff. She said, this is in August and she said, 'You have 'till Labour Day. After Labour Day, don't tell the CCPA this, but after Labour Day it's going to the CCPA. But you have till then.' I went around the person I was trying to deal with to the finance department, the fundraising department, and I sat down with the guy there and I said, Look, this is the deal. You're either going to agree with us about the staffing and the commitments, etc. and you're going to agree, we're going to hold back the house until you have the staff so we're gonna have some leverage here to make sure you do what you're supposed to do, or this is all leaving you. In about an hour and a half, we finished the whole thing. You learn that about bargaining. It's all about timing. Ask Vince Ready, it's all about timing. Now we're happy we finished the whole thing. That was the beginning of the journey.

JS [01:54:43] That journey was we set up an advisory committee of labour people to advise the thing. We set up a steering committee of professors that were interested in it because there were no professors in the program, but there were progressive professors who are still there now. We've gone from being basically a program that had a couple of courses a year to one that has a core course load of about twelve. We've graduated our first, over the last couple of years, our first BA's in labour studies. We're having a session in September to talk about expanding the program and we set up the institute. We're doing major research with CCPA on that precarious work.

JS [01:55:20] I think the only thing I'm not happy about is that we haven't done a good job selling it to the labour movement. I think we have more work to do there in terms of making sure the kids of working people know it's there, and getting them more involved in the program. That's one thing that we've been talking about. How do we get them more involved? It's still a small program. It was Layne Clark who came and spoke at the opening of the whole thing and said, she took the labour study course and really liked it, but she said, 'How come when everybody works and everybody goes to work almost, that there's no program about that at Simon Fraser University about working, but there is a huge program for business of which only a small minority are part of?' It struck me that part of the battle, we've got a long way to go yet to establish it, but it's been a real great process.

JS [01:56:08] They made me an adjunct professor, which was kind of exciting and interesting for somebody who didn't graduate from high school that I got to be an adjunct professor. It didn't mean anything, but it was an honour that they gave me and I appreciate that. Kendra Strauss, the woman that took over from the last person, she's done an amazing job. She's got a lot of energy and vision. She's really been the one driving it. The steering committee, we try to give help, but really she's been the core driver of the whole thing and got it through all the hurdles. Now I'm happy to say that this year Margaret's money ran out. This year that program is now part of the money of Simon Fraser, and they're funding it. That was one of our moments that we had to make sure that when the money ran out they were going to pick up the tab, and they did.

KN [01:56:57] Last question. Can you tell us in the last number of years, you've gone through this major pandemic with COVID, and throughout all this you've been chair of the board of the Health Authority, which is a large health authority in the province. You've had some challenges that have been facing health care that you've had to deal with in your specific role. Can you talk a bit about that, about your role and some of the challenges you've had?

JS [01:57:31] I've had a couple of jobs, thanks to the government. The chair of the board became a full time job when COVID hit. It was all hands on deck, basically. We had enormous challenges, there's no question about that. We seriously were not prepared for this. To be blunt, we were not prepared for this kind of thing and nobody was. Nobody on the whole planet was. You saw all the scenes. I think that, collectively led by Bonnie and Adrian, British Columbia did a hell of a job dealing with this. We didn't have all the crises that many other people had. We had crises and we dealt with them, but we didn't have it. It was all hands on deck for a couple of years there. That was really six or seven days a week sometimes to stay on top of what we're doing, sorting out how to do it, and lots of really tough questions about at what level, how do we enforce, how do we make sure the rules are being enforced? Bonnie makes all these rules, but do they actually get enforced? Do we follow up? How do we do it? The health departments suddenly became inspecting businesses for safety standards, not something we ever did before. It really changed everything.

JS [01:58:50] The other thing that I'm kind of proud of that we did. They set up a committee at some of us urging, because Fraser Health had the most working class people and the most working class work, if I say that right. Things like warehousing and manufacturing and—they're all in Fraser Health. Most people who do the jobs live not in Vancouver but in Fraser Health. Bonnie, to her credit, went to the government and said this whole area of work where it's spreading at work, and we had of course the poultry plants and farms and things where some of the most vulnerable workers were and where that stuff spread faster than in the hospital. They set up that committee and said to the health authorities, get to the table, gave me the job of being the chair of the committee, and so for a good chunk of COVID, we met every week and we talked about all the rules and enforced the rules and got all the health authorities to start working together to do the inspections, create a new inspection system, work with the WCB. It was a really good example of where people get together and decide they're going to go out and fix something they can, if all hands are on deck. Bonnie was incredibly supportive of us doing that and that was really important.

JS [02:00:02] The other thing that happened was back to where we started from about a half an hour ago, which was the workers in the health care system who were contracted out. That happened in 2002. They had two generations of people working. For the workers today in the hospitals in Fraser Health, cleaning the hospitals up until about three or four months ago were earning less than they were earning the day they were fired in 2002. Twenty years later, they still hadn't gotten back to the union wages, let alone the benefits that they had. They were a job ghetto.

JS [02:00:37] It occurred to me during this process and thinking about it, if you take all the wages they gave up, the amount of money, it's hundreds of millions of dollars, if not a billion dollars in wages. That was the largest donation. It makes Jimmy Pattison look cheap, given what he's given. These workers gave up everything and they did some of the hardest jobs in the hospital. We were very progressive on this.

JS [02:01:00] We did two studies of it in Fraser Health to get this happening. We wanted to do it in a big way. The institutions weren't really jumping for joy to have to do this. Then COVID came and it got set back. It was after COVID started to wind down a bit that the government agreed with those of us who've been doing this for 20 years fighting this battle, that it was time to do it. They set up a committee and made me the co-chair of the committee and said, Get to it. And we did.

JS [02:01:25] Now over 4,000 workers are in the public sector again. They're getting good wages and good benefits. They've got respect on the job. Their work has improved, their safety has improved and the hospitals are cleaner. We all know that to be true. Food service is the same thing. They're all back in. It was a really a moment for justice. You have to pause and think when you're in these battles in the trenches all the time, you don't always see it. It takes a long time.

JS [02:01:53] It really says to people who wonder whether elections make any difference, they do. They make a huge difference to what we do. Could they make more difference? Yeah, we could always get more. Even from NDP governments, they could do more. But the truth is, this conversation never would have happened because the Liberals never would have done this in a million years or any other government would have done it. Is that a big difference? Yeah, it is. Now we're working on security. That's the next job of this group, is we're looking at bringing all the security services back in to the public sector. The government's just added 200 more security, 320 new security workers to beef it up, because of all the violence in health care. All those people are now, they're not being contracted out. They're being contracted in. It's been a challenge. I've been there six years and I've learned a lot about—it's the second time, I was on the health board in '96 to 2000, or at the end of '99. It's been a great opportunity. I really appreciated that the government had faith that I could go and do the job.

KN [02:02:58] This will be the end with this question, Jim, which is very open ended. Is there anything else you would like to say about your involvement with the labour movement in your lifetime that you would like to identify as a highlight or anything like that?

JS [02:03:11] Two things. One is, I remember going to my first Fed convention as Fed president and I said, 'Everybody who's under 30 stand up.' About six people stood up. I said to people, take a look at that. Do you think that's okay? That was beginning of the revitalization of that youth program at the Federation of Labour, which I really supported, and I think unions supported. During that period most unions developed youth committees of their own. The youth group grew and grew. The first chair of the committee is now the President of the Labour Council. It really brought young people together from different unions to experience the experience of young people in other unions and they showed solidarity to each other and fall in love and do all kinds of things. We started the Camp Jubilee retreat, over 100 young people show up.

JS [02:04:04] Just one quick story about sometimes you don't know what you're doing until you see what you didn't do. I was at the CLC convention, shortly after we started this. I was in the bar with a whole bunch of our young folks that were there. They were talking about the elections and how the elections were being run for the youth committee rep on the executive board and all that stuff. Basically they were really frustrated with the convention. They weren't happy. Here it is, I'm out there praying that these unions bring all you people to the convention, and then I'm realizing these people got to the convention

and they didn't like it. They didn't like it because A, they didn't understand it, that was part of it, and it was so orchestrated that they couldn't, that it wasn't their style.

JS [02:04:45] I came back home and we sat down and said we don't want that to happen here. That's when we said the day before the convention is the youth convention. They spend the whole day together, usually 75 to 100 people, young people, and they go through the whole thing. Here's how it all works. You want to do this, you do this. We have fake debates or, you know, debates where they learn how to go to a microphone and speak and do all of that and introduce people to the youth movement and to the people they're going to share the convention with. It really was a revelation on my part that your assumption was wrong about that as it is often if you're not clear about what people think, and you don't listen to people. I think that was really a big deal. I think that changed the labour movement. I think a lot of people were thinking the same way, but we did that. I'm really proud of that history of the labour movement, taking on that question of young people.

JS [02:05:35] The other thing is I just feel incredibly lucky about the labour movement, about my life. I look back in my life and the number of people that helped me be who I am today, the good, the bad and the ugly, I guess you could say. Honestly, what an opportunity. What an honour. What a chance. People paid me, paid me money to go out and cause trouble, paid me money to change, to try and change the world, paid me money to inspire them and be leaders and work with leadership and workers and make me part of their lives. People still come up to the street out of nowhere and say, just thanks, Jim. I just was really very, very lucky to do that and very lucky to have a partner who believed in it and hated it at times, gave me more hell than anybody else for not being tough enough, and my son who put up with it too. I think that was the other lesson of a lot of these jobs that you learn over the labour movement is that it's like the workplace. You don't do it alone, and you don't do this alone. I just want to acknowledge at the end of all of this that I couldn't have done any of the last 30 years that I spent in the labour movement without Susan, without her support. I know there's lots of other people like me in the labour movement that owe a lot to the people that supported them through this.

KN [02:06:50] Thank you very much, Jim.

JS [02:06:52] You're more than welcome.