

Interview: Randy Pearson (RP)

Interviewer: Phil Legg (PL)

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Transcription: Pam Moodie

PL [00:00:05] Randy, thank you so much for making time and actually coming down to the Lower Mainland to do this interview as part of our oral history project that we're doing for the Labour Heritage Centre. You've had an awful lot of experiences, and we want to cover them all, in the labour movement. So why don't we start with where you grew up and some of the early influences?

RP [00:00:30] Sure. Well, I, I grew up in Prince George. My parents moved over from Melfort, Saskatchewan in late '40s, and I was born in 1950. And Mum and Dad, I guess they wanted to get away from the farming and into the logging industry. So my dad partnered up with a number of his friends and relatives and opened up small sawmills early. And then eventually, I guess when I was born, they moved into Prince George from out in the bush and he worked in mills there. And after a few years, they moved south of Prince George about 12 miles and worked in that area. And I remember in, I was probably about four years old, and we were way up in, east of up where—on Buckhorn Road, and they had a mill, my dad and others. And, you know, the storms would come up. A tree fell on the house. 'Course at four years old, you remember those things. And so those are my memories of, you know, early on there. And then there were some, Carrier Lumber. They opened up work in that area. And so my dad generally worked with Carrier Lumber off and on, and we, we went up in a—They were building a new mill way up on Buckhorn Road. So we stayed up there and I don't remember if it was one or two years, but my brother and I were on Correspondence. And so that was an experience that, you know, you always remember that. And, and then we had about 80 acres just in that, right on the highway near Buckhorn Road. And so we had, you know, a small farm and Dad worked at the mill. And so that's where we grew up in, and either in one way or, as my brother and I were 10 and 12 say, something like that, we used to help Dad on dry piling down at Carrier, which was not far away. It was probably about a 15 minute, 20 minute drive. So the lumber industry was where we were, you know, and went to high school there in Prince George. And yeah, quit early to go work at the mill.

PL [00:03:07] Yeah.

RP [00:03:07] And, you know, spent a couple of years working in various jobs and ended up at—

PL [00:03:14] Were you always with Carrier, or were you, did you go to other mills?

RP [00:03:18] Sorry?

PL [00:03:19] Were you always with Carrier Lumber?

RP [00:03:21] Not always, but generally. When I quit school, I did some construction work and, you know different jobs, and the pay was poor and the work was hard. I didn't mind the hard work, but the pay was poor, and the safety, it was bad. So, went to Carrier, it was an IWA [International Woodworkers of America] mill. I mean, there were safety issues back then, there's no question about it. But at least you got a good wage. And, you know, I

was working with people I knew and, you know, yeah, But after two years of that, you know, I didn't have any money and my car I couldn't even afford to insure. So I decided to go back to school and it was a couple of years in grade 12 and, and then I went on from there again, worked in some retail, a lumber yard. And, but again, the money wasn't good enough. I worked there a year. I said, 'Look, I need a raise.' They said, sure, 25 bucks a month more. I said, 'Well, I'm out of here.' So, back to the mill and get union wages. You know, So I was saving money to travel and that's what I did. Once I had enough money, I took off for, you know, about nine months or something like that, and then came back and, and met my future wife and we travelled again. And then we got back into, you know, Vancouver Airport. We didn't have any money, which was okay.

PL [00:04:54] Yeah.

RP [00:04:55] And then worked here, you know, odd jobs. My brother moved down and him and I are working out of the casual labour office in East Vancouver and picked up everything from painting to delivering flyers and you name it, and then decided, well, I've got to find something a little more substantial. And Dad always said, 'Get a job where there's a pension plan.' because IWA didn't have a pension plan when he was there. So get a job with a pension plan. So that was always in the back of my mind and my oh, excuse me, my brother's and I just decided, well, I'm going to go see if I can work at a liquor store. So I just kept going back to the main office and warehouse here on Broadway.

PL [00:05:43] Yeah. Right.

RP [00:05:43] And said, 'Look, I want to get a job. You know, I. I've got retail experience at a lumber yard and, you know, taken a cocktail lounge management course. And I've been a bartender.'" You know, you do this, do that, then. Okay. So they hired me down at Robson Street Liquor Store down on the West End. Well, it was a pretty crazy place! A midnight store. But my girlfriend and she said, 'Look, I want to go back to Prince George,' even though she wasn't from there. I was the one from there. But she wanted to continue her education to work in a dentist office. So, I think I'd worked about three months downtown Vancouver. She'd gone up to Prince George, and her sister found a job for me in a liquor store in Prince George.

PL [00:06:30] Oh, wow.

RP [00:06:31] And this was like, Friday a manager said, 'You show up Monday morning at 8:30, you got a job.' So I quit, throwed, threw everything in the car and drove up there and yeah.

PL [00:06:44] Wow.

RP [00:06:45] Yeah. So I was there about 17 years. I guess this would have been in 1974.

PL [00:06:56] Okay.

RP [00:06:56] And the BCGEU [then, BC Government Employees' Union] had just gotten bargaining rights from the NDP government and, and they were in negotiations. And so that sounded good. And I think it was in early '75, it was retroactive pay. And, you know, we got this big cheque. The wage comparisons were to the Retail Clerks' Union in Safeway and, you know, Save On, well, Overwaita at that time. And so we got a boost in wages and there was a modified work week where you could work either nine day

fortnight, seven days, or five days or four-day work week. And we were one of the stores that were on a trial basis, and that was really popular with us. We liked that. A lot more time off and of course, good benefits. And, you know, and I was just come back from doing a couple of trips and, you know, so more time off, more money, and benefits. And I was kind of mouthy about that, you know, round the workplace. So the steward that was there, he retired or, not retired but moved someplace, I don't remember. And so there was a vacancy for shop steward. And so myself and a fellow out of the Kootenays, he started the same day as me. We both ran for the shop steward position and I got elected. So that was okay. That was all right.

PL [00:08:43] So I like your description where you said 'I was mouthy about how good things were.'

RP [00:08:48] Well, people, you know, were excited about it. About the union. You know, because we'd just gotten a boost and I guess I was saying the right things or something around that time, you know. But, so anyways, that got me involved in the union to some degree. And you know, I've always been a bit kind of fussy and I always disliked favouritism or anything that was unfair, whether it's goes back to the school days or at work at a mill or, you know, like, I remember one time this one mill I'd worked at, and it was so unsafe, tailing the edger and I nearly went down into the chute and into the burn pile and I just, 'Hey, I'm out of here,' you know, I'd literally walked off the job. It was summertime. I didn't need it. And one of these slabs caught me, and I'm not a heavy guy, so it almost threw me in there. So I thought that's, so I did that stuff at work now. And so if it was unsafe or unfair, I tended to speak up about it. And so anyway, so that was fine. And then about, I think it was around three years later, a friend of mine from, actually from high school, we knew each other and he was the local chairperson and he'd gotten a promotion to Quesnel.

PL [00:10:17] Oh, yeah.

RP [00:10:17] And so he says, "Well, why don't you take over the local Chair job?" Sure. Well, I'd already. We'd had a negotiation, inflation was running high and the union, John Fryer, had negotiated a collective agreement of 8, 8 and 8 percent increases over three years.

PL [00:10:44] Wow.

RP [00:10:45] And I didn't like that because inflation was running higher.

PL [00:10:49] Yeah.

RP [00:10:49] And I, you know, I was upset with it. So I wrote to John Fryer saying, you know, this is crazy. We needed more money. And you didn't, you know, you didn't deliver. I'd never met John Fryer. I was just upset with it and so were a number of people in the workplace. So anyways, someone from the union headquarters had phoned Bill, and I'm sitting in the office side by side with him at work, and Bill says, "Yeah, yeah, I'll be finishing up on a certain day", whatever it was. And Randy Pearson will, he'll run for Chair. Well, I'm sitting beside Bill. I could hear this voice say 'Find someone else. (laughter) And I thought, 'Well, what the heck did I do?' You know, I didn't even know anybody knew me, anyway, but it was because I'd written the letter and I, you know, it was trouble, I guess. I don't know.

RP [00:11:42] But anyway, I was elected and attended and I guess it was about '78 or so. I can't remember for sure. And there was a change at the leadership on the Retail Stores and Warehouse component, which was the warehouse workers and the liquor store workers and, um, the guys that came out of the Armed Forces and that were retiring. And so, us young people were coming on and, you know, we're in our 20s and that, we were enthusiastic, you know, about the union generally. So yeah, we were taking over in the leadership. So I met a lot of people I could identify with quickly there and, and you know, we got along well and then. I got, well, I got elected as a recording secretary to the component on the second meeting. So these are the, you know, there was someone that didn't want me there, but already it was working out. So, yeah. And I took the union courses that were put on in Prince George. There was lots of stuff going on.

RP [00:12:56] And then in the latter part of the '70s, 1980 or something, we had the Social Credit government wanted to cut back on, on I think it was the, it was the inflation adjustments on our pension plan. So we did provincewide shut down, just walked off the job and attended rallies around the province. So that worked out good. People were upset with it. Even though we were young people, a lot of us, and the pension was, you know, they took money off your paycheque, but it was far in the future. But we still cared, you know, So we shut down all the liquor stores, no problem in Prince George and many other places as well. And also, the other, with the Trudeau wage controls, we were able to deliver everybody off the job. And if someone wanted to stay on working, the peer pressure was just too great. (laughter) Everybody left, you know? And so we kept, you know, and it kept people going. Even if we lose a day's pay. So what? Or whatever it is. People were enthusiastic, and that was a good thing, you know, like if I remember back on that. And then, well later, around '80, I think '80, '81, the Social Credit government start talking about, you know, they should be selling liquor differently.

PL [00:14:26] Yeah they were pushing to privatize.

RP [00:14:29] Privatization, privatization. But there was an element out there, even in the Social Credit party, about the evils of liquor, the booze. And so they were, you know, under the influence of lobbyists like the big grocery chains, London Drugs, hotel owners and neighbourhood pubs that were coming on about that time, to give them that slice of the gravy there. So there was those trial balloons that came, you know, in the early '80s. Well, to me, when they talk about this, I didn't look at it as a trial balloon. I look like they were planning to do it.

PL [00:15:11] Yeah. Yeah.

RP [00:15:12] And so, that's not okay. So I remember, you know, contacting the President, Norm Richards, and telling him about, you know, we need to do something about this. The union needs to be prepared to fight back on this stuff. And but, in his wisdom, it was, it wasn't there yet. But, so we started in our component bringing resolutions to our Convention, resolutions to the B.C. Federation of Labour contacting with Liquor Board Unions across the country. What were they doing? And so we, you know, we started talking about this a lot. And job protection and the consequences of greater proliferation of alcohol sales. So that was the education stuff that we were, we were doing for a few years.

RP [00:16:11] And then in 1985, I believe 1985, '84, '85, they started allowing these beer and wine stores in pubs and even drive-thrus, and so we started doing campaigns around that. And that was, a lot of that was neighbourhood by neighbourhood because they needed to get the approval within a circumference of that particular liquor establishment,

from the people whose in a neighbourhood, there was a little referendum held there or they had to go to the municipal councils for the hotels and so forth. So we started mobilizing around that to some degree, but at the same time, of course, starting in '82, '83, '85, there's the war Labour was having with the Social Credit government in their wage controls legislation, their general anti-worker agenda. So we were always fighting, you know, on those issues. So here now we tossed in another one, you know, that we had to keep track of, that affected us directly as liquor store workers. So we kept going, and quite honestly, it was the dedication of a lot of the activists. At that, at the local level. And, although there wasn't a tremendous amount of people that would come out and leaflet and do these things, there was enough of the, of the senior activists in that and they had a few people that we really made a difference. We were winning some of those issues.

PL [00:18:07] So typically, on some of the neighbourhood by neighbourhood campaigns, to put a stop to—

RP [00:18:14] To turn down the license, the Liquor Control and Licensing branch required approval of the neighbourhood, or in the case of a, if it's within the municipality that the, that the hotel for example, has to get local government approval.

PL [00:18:33] You were getting some wins on that front?

RP [00:18:35] Yes. Yes. Not a lot. But then there wasn't a lot coming forward at that time. There were, you know, there was some and, you know, I think some of the ones that were. I think the Knight Street pub affair come later, if I remember right. Yeah. That was one that was kind of hard on Vander Zalm. But, so we were in negotiations often around all these issues, you know, in bargaining. And it was always a strike. It was always—going from '83, of course, there was a general shutdown. And so, that was, you know, it was one thing or another going constantly. And there was always action and members would participate. There was the big rallies in the Lower Mainland, in Victoria. In Prince George, while maybe we didn't achieve anything like that, but we, you know, people would come out to the meeting. There was a meeting, I think, in Vanier Hall, which was part of our high school. It was literally packed. And that was people walking off the job to fill it. So yeah, it was participation, it was action all the time. And of course that, people look to the Union, you know, to represent them on all these things. And so, yeah, there was always something happening and, you know, as part of the local leadership, all of us were meeting on regular basis or tripping out to McKenzie or Valemount or Fort St. James, having meetings with members, and we were doing that beyond the just your local union, your occupational group, but generally.

PL [00:20:37] I can imagine that a couple of things. One is you became more involved in the Labour Councils within the, you know, Prince George area?

RP [00:20:46] Yes.

PL [00:20:47] You'd be probably more involved in municipal politics than you had been before? I mean, if local councils are making decisions about liquor stores or private liquor stores, having a union voice on that council can make a difference.

RP [00:21:08] It could. And it did to some degree, but not the majority. I mean, we did lobby. I mean that for a while, we had our Staff Rep Ed Bondor was on Council, you know, and there was others that we could rely on. But again, there was a lot of issues. And I'm saying, you know, starting in '82 there was big bargaining, you know, to catch up on, on

the inflation we'd lost in the early years in that 3-8-8-8, it wasn't enough money. Right? So we were fighting for more wages. And that happens, you know, not just with the BCGEU, but CUPE and HEU and all the other unions. So the Labour Council, I would say was really important, you know, locally in Prince George. We would have, when there was municipal elections which were, at that time, every two years, the first all-candidates meeting was held at the Labour Council, you know, downstairs in the Carpenters Hall, smoky place. But it would be filled. But we'd get headlines because that's— and of course, every candidate showed up was, you know, a union member at some point or other, which was—you get on council and they were anti-union. But overall, I would say we worked really well with all the unions in—especially over, around Operation Solidarity. People, you know, we'd cross picket wherever we can. We were shutting things down, protecting each other, you know, the Teachers, Pulp and Paper Workers, all over, we all worked together. And, you know, because it's a smaller community, we knew each other as well, which was good, you know?

PL [00:23:03] So that was your neighbours?

RP [00:23:04] Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So, it was, in a sense exciting times, but at the same time it was dead serious business here. We can't let these bad guys in, you know, destroy the labour movement because that's what they were out to do. There was no question about it. They wanted us, you know, to buckle us under and, and we didn't do that. So anyways in '85, '86 we're doing, you know, in negotiations and— our Chairperson of the Retail Stores and Warehouse Component, he was out of Fernie and, just one liquor store in Fernie, and remember what I said about the beer and wine stores? Well they'd opened one up there and it was course drawing the business from the government liquor store, the beer sales, cause they were able to have coolers and whatever. And so he got laid off. There's no place to go. So he's on the master bargaining committee, in the middle of bargaining, he gets a layoff notice that basically cuts him off his union position. It gets laid out, and he's got so many days to make a choice of what he wants, whether he wants to get severance payout, etcetera, etcetera.

RP [00:24:33] Well, he wanted to be moved. He said, "I want to, I'm going to continue on. I'm in the union, I'm involved in the union, and I want to work in the liquor store. I got many years in there." So he gets transferred to Vancouver, into the Vancouver, one of the liquor stores there. And so it put him off. He was no longer our representative at the bargaining and, because now he was placed into Vancouver until we can open up a vacancy, hold an election and get him back in, we don't have representation in the negotiations. And I was the first vice chair, and this was, yeah, it was, I guess Vander Zalm was in, maybe it was '86. It would have been '86. I think Vander Zalm was then the Premier. And, of course, there's the whole agenda of privatization and all the stuff going around there. We'd had some bargaining around, in our Component level and every single time the employer tried to take away our modified workweek, the four-day workweek, they said, well, that's no good. It's not efficient enough. We need to get rid of that. Well, our answer is, no, it's not going to happen. We will not agree to, you know, people love it! And the warehouse workers had a nine day fortnight, so they work five days, then four or five and four like that. And, and during that time, you know, I want to talk about the, uh, Nelson, Nelson Mandela was coming out of jail at that time and we were pushing boycott of South African liquor products.

PL [00:26:25] So the GEU was pushing for that or the labour movement was pushing for that?

RP [00:26:29] Well, it was across the country and in fact Mulroney at the time was in favour of that.

PL [00:26:36] Right.

RP [00:26:37] And our contribution with the BCGEU was booze. Well we'll shut, we'll stop the flow of it. But there was a lot of, you know, across the country, a lot of people knew that times were changing. We can't keep this anymore, can't keep supporting and push so Mandela can get out and, you know, change what was happening in South Africa. So the best way to do that is if, you know, we stopped in some of the stores, stopped selling it, just put it in the back shelf. It's not going to be touched. But some of it, it just didn't work that way. But if you shut it off at the warehouse, they can come in on the boats, on the wherever, cross on the train. But they, they don't get loaded on the trucks. They don't get out to the stores. So the warehouse guys were solid on that. Don't touch it. So it just kept stacking up. At the same time, they're trying to take away their modified workweek.

PL [00:27:39] Yeah.

RP [00:27:40] In bargaining.

PL [00:27:41] Yeah.

RP [00:27:42] And we would not agree. So because we didn't agree to this and we sold some things, it went to the master bargaining chip, which was for over wages and other outstanding issues. And this time it, you know, to solve the impasse was—the government said we'll send the modified workweek in the warehouse to an arbitrator to decide whether we should change it. End it. Well, you can do stuff like that, maybe with wages or maybe not sometimes, but not hours of work. We would lose that. So as first-Vice I got, there was a tentative agreement, and so I hooked up on the phone call, you know, and the President says, 'Well, you know, here's the deal. The warehouse workers hours of work are going to the arbitrator.' I said, 'Yeah, well, I'll tell you, I'm going to organize and we're going to vote no and I'll go beyond the liquor component.' I said, 'We're going to vote no and we're going to say why. And by the way, as well, the South African boycott is off. I can't tell the guys to support this while our union agrees to send our hours, their hours of work to an arbitrator.' So, I mean I just went ballistic on him. I just couldn't believe it. You know, to me it was, we had no representation at that time. So anyways, a couple of days later, we got a call. 'No problem, it's off.' (laughter)

PL [00:29:32] Way to go! Brilliant!

RP [00:29:33] So but it was bizarre. But at the same time it taught me a big one is, we really got to speak up with our union about issues as well. You know, some things may not seem important to some people, but they're important to others. And, you know, you got to stop that. So anyways, I got on the—elected as the Chair and onto the provincial executive of the Union of BCGEU. I think, I don't know, in a few months or something like that. Well, actually it was yeah, it was later. It was January of '87. I was elected on there. And right at that time, Vander Zalm announced, you know, more privatization of the liquor. And so he established a Liquor Policy Review, chaired by one of their MLAs out of Chilliwack. Well this is, to us, this is Bible Belt thing and probably is the right person to be chairing this because the evil booze, right? So, so to us there were 16 hearings around the province and we just organized of having people there. And to speak out about, you know, the consequences of what they were planning, to just turn this over. Not only is there the

revenue that's, you know, well over \$400 million clear to the government every year and which offsets, you know, health care costs, you name it. But all the research shows the greater availability, the greater consumption, the greater social problems. So we had a lot of allies. Thinking back there was the Alcohol and Drug Addiction Society of B.C., I think was called. They were right on to it. The B.C. Nurses Union was great!

PL [00:31:36] Wow.

RP [00:31:37] Yeah, we had our local chairs, a lot of them, to make presentations, they teamed up with the Nurses representative in their community that was around the province. And also the Nurses picked the school districts, to lobby school districts, to take a position against liquor privatization. So they, they did that and they were good at it. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. I contacted Andrew Murray out of Toronto who headed it up and they had some active chapters around B.C., in the Lower Mainland here, Kelowna and other areas, and we worked carefully with them, and they'd give us great statements for leaflets and, you know, and worked in that neighbourhood by neighbourhood campaigns and made presentations to those Liquor Policy Review whenever it was in Burnaby or Vancouver or wherever it might be. And the Downtown Eastside Residents Association, Jim Green, you know, great stuff there. And we had statements from, you know, the Chief Constable of Vancouver City Police and I think Harcourt might have been the Mayor then, but we had good resolutions—starting with Vancouver, and then Art Steinman from the Alcohol and Drug Addiction Centre, they wrote through all the municipalities in the province to take a statement, make them take a position against privatization. And so that, over about three months, a lot was happening. You know, on that end of it all, where we'd attend these hearings every from place, from, you know, on Haida Gwaii to, you know, Cranbrook or wherever it was. And of course our local activists were there and talking to them. Later in the fall, they announced that they weren't going to do privatization, but they were going to sell 140 of the liquor stores in the province, the smaller ones, they're going to sell them off.

PL [00:34:01] Sell them off and close them or just sell them?

RP [00:34:04] Sell them. They were going to not close them, sell them. They were going to sell them off. So, what we did was put a price tag on each one. I think we took seven times the income, or something like that, and put a price tag on these liquor stores and, and then reminded people that the price of a case of beer in Atlin or Fort Nelson or Cranbrook or downtown Vancouver was the same. A bottle of whisky was the same. All this. So if you turn it over to the private sector to run these small stores in Atlin or Telkwa or wherever it happened to be, that the government's either going to say, 'Lock in the price' or 'do whatever you want.' If they lock in the price, how are you going to make any money if the government is interfering in private sector? You know, on what the pricing should be? You know, the union's not going to go away. We want those union wages. So, you know, we're going to be after on successorship on all this stuff. So, those are the things, we decided to go to local newspapers, which were in every little town, and brief them on it. Because sometimes it's not easy, you know, for the local reporter who is doing everything in that little office. So we had a whole package together, left it with them, explained it all and answered any questions or whatever. And we got just great stories everywhere.

PL [00:35:45] Wow. Very good. It's this is what you're telling, what you're recalling here is, it's a chapter and verse of coalition building. You don't just start with your own. You start with your own plus, plus, plus, plus.

RP [00:36:03] Yeah, It was. Well. I mean, even our church groups, you know, they were involved in that. And wherever we could make those connections. You know, I remember in Prince George, I went to this. I'd made an appointment. I think it was on like a noon hour or something. Had good sized church there. And, you know, a preacher invites me up to the podium there, and the place was packed.

PL [00:36:27] Wow.

RP [00:36:27] You know, and, you know, call them to write letters, right? You know, and do whatever they can, you know? And so this was going on. And the fact that it was so easy to get an appointment to talk about this meant that there was many others that were thinking the same thing. So, you know, they would maybe not, you know, had anybody in speaking, but the pastor would say, we need to do something about this, you know, And their letters would have gone in. Like I say that was in the latter part of '87, and then going into '88, they backed down on it. They backed down completely off, off selling off these 140 liquor stores. But they were going to expand the beer and wine store model, which they'd introduced in around '84-'85, and allow it easier for more and more of these beer and wine stores in a neighbourhood pub or hotel. So there, where we go again, you know, we got to deal with this. But in a much grander scale because now this was the model that—and those that didn't have a beer and wine store, neighbourhood pub or hotel, wanted one. But, you know, in a community, say like Prince George or Kamloops or, you know, mainly there. It was, you know, if you have a license to sell, you don't want any more competition.

PL [00:38:07] Exactly.

RP [00:38:08] So found out that, hey, a pub owner might, they'd hire a consultant. There was one out of Kamloops that he, making nothing but money around the province. And then the former general manager of Liquor Control Licensing who lost his job over the Knight Street Pub affair. He took the fall for them, you know, for Vander Zalm there, well he was doing this, too. And so they found out, of course, through our local campaigns, you know, community by community, that we were having an effect. So I was getting calls from these guys saying, well, you know, I just wanna let you know we're mounting a campaign in this area. And so we'd sort of, in fact, you know, they had the gall to say, 'Well, we'll pay for the leaflets if you guys, your guys will take them out.' I said, 'We won't. We don't want your money. We don't want nothing to do with you. Well, you know, we'll be in contact with each other,' you know, because.

PL [00:39:14] We'll talk.

RP [00:39:14] Well, yeah, we'll work it if, if we can get the same result. And that's, you know, prevent any more licenses, we're all in favour of that. So anyway, as well as us creating allies in the communities and having, you know, whether it's local councilors or school boards or interested—community associations were good. And I want to say downtown Vancouver, Vancouver was great. The community associations just were far more active and there was very few that got established during that period of time. And no liquor stores were being shut down, not like in Kelowna where we had seven liquor stores and I think, you know, today there's two. And they just simply started shutting them down because you don't want any government liquor stores competing with the private sector. And so rather than limit the number of private sector beer and wine stores, so you shut down the government liquor store.

PL [00:40:23] Yeah. Yeah.

RP [00:40:24] But maintained, you know, a good size Signature Liquor store they'd call it, to provide the beer and wine stores with their wine. So they're being subsidized. That's what it's all about. So rather than the beer and wine store having to inventory cases of wine, the liquor store would have it and then they'd just phone up and say "Well we want two cases of that." And then they'd get a, I think it was like a \$25 delivery charge, and they got a 10% discount anyways. But not only that, they ended up inventorying it. So basically the taxpayer was paying for the privatization not only in the loss of revenue but also in subsidization of the liquor privatization model that the government come up with. So, you know, you can't stop it all, but we did as much as we could and stopped many of them, mainly in small neighbourhoods. People didn't want them, any more traffic and they didn't want any drunken drivers around and all the rest of it. Some city councils were good and Vancouver was great.

PL [00:41:44] Remind me, you reference it a couple of times: the Knight Street Pub debacle. What was the story behind that?

RP [00:41:52] Well, we started picking up information about someone getting a license and it wasn't—I think it was going around the local government. I'm not exactly clear all about it, but because it didn't involve a beer and wine store license, it was just a pub license. But it was Peter Toigo I think it was, that was a good personal friend of Bill Vander Zalm. And he just happened to get this license and the community wasn't for it. And so some of the media were picking it up, and the more you got, the more there was a connection between the two. And so at the end of it all, the general manager got the blame for that, of the liquor control licensing. And so he took the fall for that. But just on that one, Peter Toigo had a hotel in Powell River and we got wind that he was applying for a beer and wine store license. Well, I happened to—the shop steward from McKenzie. She worked, she'd moved down to Powell River, so I knew her as a steward up in my local union. So anyways, I said, "Well I think this is— because that's a media story there." For, you know, Peter Toigo was branded, you know, if he gets a license, Bill Vander Zalm must have approved it, you know, and it's like literally right beside the liquor store. Like, why would you need a beer and wine store and the liquor store is here and hotel is here? So anyways, I went down there and I can't remember his name. He was an author and he lived in Powell River. Anyway, he picked me up and gave me a little tour of Powell River, and I met with the person I knew there at the store. So I did some leafleting and there was a great steward there. I got to meet him and he did some leafleting. Well, he wasn't afraid of the boss.

PL [00:44:13] Yeah.

RP [00:44:13] Yeah. Well, he, in his liquor store uniform, he was handing out leaflets and talking to people, you know, which is great! So we contacted the CBC, I think it was, and said, "Look, here's what's happening. You know, here's the goods on this stuff." So they sent it to a TV crew there and ran around. Meanwhile, we had it all set up and I said to her contact the steward, he's in Powell River. He's great! You know, so in they go with the camera on, and you know, he'd come out, it was in a mall. He'd go out in the mall with us and he gave the lowdown about why this Peter Toigo hotel shouldn't get a beer and wine store. Of course, it ran great on the news. And it, all this, bring it all up again. Vander Zalm must be behind it all. So anyways. I don't know if they ever did get it, but they got, everything got delayed. It was just like, it was just bad news for them, right? So but, the reality is we had a great time with it and members were really happy with that stuff.

PL [00:45:24] Yeah. By that point, the Vander Zalm government were starting to fall apart.

RP [00:45:28] Oh, you bet. Yeah. Yeah. And you know everything, so it was just, being a good friend of Vander Zalm, was like the kiss of death, right? You know, I mean, if you want to do something. So anyways, it was a lot of those good-time campaigns that involved the members and even the ones that were a little timid of some of that stuff weren't involved. And we had some great leaflets and I'm just gonna dig out a couple of them. They were really popular. We had, this was when the 140 stores, I think, we had this great 'bottle in the bag' ones, you know, and we sent them around all over to the liquor stores, to the province and to hand them out. Well, many of our members just simply handed them out right at the liquor store.

PL [00:46:25] Oh, yeah.

RP [00:46:26] Of course. So and those were, I guess, were pretty expensive. And we had all kinds of different things. I remember getting a call from McBride. I was down here, you know, helping out because I was the chair of the component at the time. And the manager, it was just the one person in the store in McBride. And he said, "Oh, I just got a call from the area manager that, you know, I'm going to get suspended if I keep handing out these leaflets." But he says, "You know, he's in Prince George. I'm in McBride. Nobody's gonna know the difference, right?" I said, "Look, you do what you think is best. I'm not going to tell you to stop doing it. You decide. We'll support you no matter what." I don't know what he did. My guess is he continued handing them out.

RP [00:47:23] We had a great local chair here in the Vancouver area, Hank Bodner. And he simply, and he's downtown Vancouver on Cordero Street, I think it was. And, you know, it's a busy place. He's got these, everybody that comes to his cash register, he gives them one, and he talks to everybody. Well, you know, the TV cameras are there and he's on TV and he says, "Bill Vander Zalm isn't going to tell me to stop fighting for, you know, for my union." (laughter) He says "If my union tells me to stop handing these out, I'll stop. But in the meantime," he says, "I'm not going to stop." And I mean, that's powerful stuff for the members. And so, you know, it strengthens your case. And then the bosses see that stuff. They stayed away from him. They never disciplined him because they didn't dare, you know, he wasn't afraid of them. And so we had that tremendous support. I mean, some places we didn't get any, you know, but overall it was good. And so, you know, that's part of the stuff that, you know, we had all kinds. These were little, you know, these (indicating a flyer) were the neighbourhood ones, short and sweet and, you know, nothin' flashy and, get those out.

RP [00:48:56] So it worked good, I'd say, overall. Did we stop privatization? No, no, we didn't, but we limited the impact and it continued on right up until the NDP was elected in the fall of '91. And so it was a good ten years of having to deal with the government trying to privatize. Meanwhile, across the country, Alberta, when the Conservative government there decided to privatize, they just did it. Just did it. They tried in Manitoba. Backed down. But a lot of time that was NDP government and so we didn't have to worry about it. In Ontario there was always a threat, even in Quebec where it was private to some degree, they still wanted to privatize. But there, you know, strong union. When there was any talk of that, they fought back. I remember hearing it because we'd meet on a regular basis to, you know, support each other. And, he says "When they started talking about it", he said, "we walked off the job, we put every bottle on the floor and walked off the job." He says, "you know, we may, we sell the top wine. People were really interested in good wine, good French wines, wines from around the world," he says. "And we did our campaign. But we'll

let the boss know, the government know, that we're prepared to take militant action as well." So they would literally walk off the job, put everything on the floor and walk out. And they left them alone, you know, I mean, because it was already, you know, I guess it was grocery store wine you could buy there. Saskatchewan, Conservative government there, they fought back and kept it going. So, overall throughout the province, or throughout the country, we were successful in stopping that, but it was simply working together. Motivating, you know, saying, "Hey, this worked here," you know—

PL [00:51:17] Try it there. Yeah.

RP [00:51:19] Yeah. We, we did all right on that I think over, you know, thinking back. And then, oh, well, for a short time after the NDP was defeated in 2000, 2001, I can't remember. And Gordon Campbell, well Gordon Campbell wanted to get rid of anything, you know, so he was going to privatize as well. And we were concerned about Vancouver and, of course, good progressive council at this time. I remember meeting with Raymond Louie. And we talked about, you know, what's the best way to do this? Cause he was simply, you know, they were going to shut down the liquor stores to give these beer and wine stores and turn it all to private. You know, talking with Raymond—Raymond, of course, comes from a good union background. He says, "We'll just say no. We'll just say no. No shutting any liquor stores, no more, no private licenses will be issued in Vancouver." That held, and I think it's holding today, you know.

PL [00:52:40] Yeah, but it's interesting because I remember, this is Larry Campbell, was the mayor.

RP [00:52:44] Yeah, well, when they were elected. But Vander Zalm was going to overpower that, because it's a provincial thing. But we were concerned because if they started giving license, they can do anything they want, right? And so Vancouver Council took the strong position. And that was, that held it. And of course, we all know what happened to Campbell. We were preparing. At that point, I was no longer elected position. I took a staff position in Victoria, but I was helping with some of that. And I remember sitting up the island a bit in <unclear> just about in Duncan there. And we were working on a campaign of fighting back against some closure, and the news come on, that Gordon Campbell had been picked up for drinking and driving in Hawaii. And we go, 'What?' You know, that was, we didn't have to worry about liquor privatization anymore. (laughter) And of course, you know, Mothers Against Drunk Driver, Andrew Murray in Toronto. The union arranged to have, you know, we had a joint press conference in Vancouver with Andrew Murray and George Heyman talking about privatization should not occur. We need tougher laws about drinking and driving out of Gordon Campbell. Well, never heard another word about privatization of liquor after that. So that was another upside of sort of, the consequences to—

PL [00:54:26] Well the quirkiness, too, you know. Like, in campaigning. You can't predict where the next bend in the road is going to come from. Yeah, so that's amazing.

RP [00:54:35] So anyway, ever since that we haven't had to deal with it too much. That was a big part of it, I guess. It went to bargaining I think that year, because the government still wanted to get rid of the four-day work week. And there were some changes there. I wasn't involved in that. But, you know, there was some concessions there. And I, to this day, if I meet someone that was involved back then, you know, they're pissed about the loss of that four-day work week, even though they retired. (laughter)

PL [00:55:16] But that was a big move. That was a huge gain to have that schedule.

RP [00:55:24] Oh, yeah, no, no. I mean, today it's popular. I mean that discussion about is, after the pandemic is, you know, a shorter workweek. And what's wrong with that? You know, happier workers? There's nothing wrong with that. And it should occur. I mean, screw the efficiency stuff, that's no good. And we need to protect jobs and that's what needs to take place.

PL [00:55:55] And people need to live, not work.

RP [00:55:57] Yeah, you bet. I'd say that, you know, the overall wars during the, you know, the Social Credit period in those '80s and, right up until '91, were just the general labour, attacks on labour and the privatization that's, which we all faced in various ways. Yeah that was a big time for us. Yeah.

PL [00:56:31] So I just want to focus in on that period when the NDP took power in the early '90s, here provincially and you know, held on for two terms. During that period of time, were there any particular issues that you guys were working hard on that you, you found some good results out of the NDP?

RP [00:56:57] Oh, absolutely. I mean, right away, I mean, it was like—

PL [00:57:04] Night and day.

RP [00:57:05] A sigh of relief. I mean, I guess is, we took a deep breath. This is a new era. And yeah, things were different, that's for sure, right away. I mean, there was some turmoil, of course, you know, Harcourt had to step back and Glen Clark went. But, thinking about it at the time, yeah, we were quite happy with Glen Clark. I mean, you know, he'd come from in the unions and I at this point, in '92 I took a job with the BCGEU in Victoria. In June of that year, you know, it was getting difficult being away a lot, for the having a young family and that. It was, you know, it was just ten years of chaos. And that's hard. And so I was hired on and so I did different things at that point, got involved in. Well I worked in in an industrial area, you know, early on. And anyway, there was confidence that I— we had a certification, well it was a servicing agreement with the Point Hope Shipyard Workers, and they had a cooperative. They said it wasn't—it was during the hard times of the '80s, I guess it was, and there wasn't a lot of work and I'm not sure who owned it. Well, I can't remember. And so about 60 of the workers there formed a co-op.

PL [00:58:58] And bought it.

RP [00:59:00] And kept it going, you know, fixing fish boats and whatever. And of course there's a servicing agreement. And so that was assigned to me. And it was just different, because it's a whole new language you need to learn. You have to understand that, what they're talking about and the trades there. And so, they won a contract. Federal government to refit a supply ship. It was a huge, huge—moving from fixing fish boats, a few barges or whatever, to this huge contract to refit a supply ship. And it was anticipated they needed 400 workers. So they came to me and said, well, here's what's going on. Things are going to change. And we're worried. We're worried that the craft unions that work for—it was not CPAC, it was Victoria Shipyards, which is part of the Washington group of companies—they're going to say, well this is our jurisdiction.

PL [01:00:20] Right. Yeah, yeah.

RP [01:00:23] And this is a wall-to-wall union, the BCGEU. And what does this public sector union know about, you know, shipyard work? And so, okay. So they said, well, you know, we're a little worried about this, because they—the members are, some of them are owners. They're members of the co-op.

RP [01:00:47] So I checked with the higher ups in our union and said, "Well, Look, here's what's going on." So we talked about it and said, well, the best thing is, you know, we're not going to provide any servicing stuff. They're going to have to join us. They're going to be full members, and then we can control this a little better. And, well, we've got the resources because we can't—you know, it's gonna be a big deal. And it was. So they, they voted to simply join the BCGEU, full scale. So along comes the ship in to work. And of course, these 400 workers have their membership in the Boilermakers, Electrical, IBEW, Labour, you name it. They're from the Painters' Union. They're all members there. So they say, well, huh, you know, this is a lot more than a 60 or hundred people that the BCGEU has tax into. Because you got to pay your dues at the craft unions whether you're working or not. So you have a right to vote.

RP [01:01:53] So there was a raid. So they raided. Well, okay, this is new stuff for me. So anyways, you learn real fast. Because they're, it's now competing, you know. Democratic process. There's laws around this stuff. We've gotta win. And so it was pretty heated. We'd hold meetings and, you know, people need to stick together. They need to talk to the people they know because it's not a— Victoria is different from Vancouver. Everybody knows each other down there. They all work, cross. You know, if a ship comes into, into Victoria Shipyard, well some of the workers maintain their Mechanic union card so they can go over there and work. Whenever someone doesn't have work, they go over where there is work. So they're moving between the shipyards. So we need to stay together here. Point Hope got the contract and so we, we just kept it going, held meetings and fought back against it and they couldn't get the support. It failed. The raid failed. I mean, I think it's the eighth or ninth month or something, and if you don't do it, well, that's it. So you can't try again.

RP [01:03:16] Well, I'll tell you, I was number one enemy amongst the business agents in Victoria. (laughter) You know, I used to attend the Labour Council meetings there. Well, that's the way it is, eh? I mean that's the way it goes. You lost. And at the meantime of course they'd—the Painters' Union had fined one of our members there and pulled this card, he couldn't work! And there was a big— this is just before the supply ship come in and they had, it was a cruise ship or something in there, and that was the only work in town. He lost all that work. He couldn't work, and pulled his card and whatever it is. And now they were going after him even more. They were charging him out of Florida where the head office was, right? So we got a lawyer. The union bought a lawyer for him to take on his union. Well, it's a violation of the Labour Code. You can't discriminate against what union you belong to. So, we win this. Meanwhile, the Painters' Union has spent thousands and thousands and thousands on a lawyer out of Vancouver to beat this. Because it started out with just writing letters. And I was, you know, sending my nasty letters back to them and pretty soon it goes off to the Labour Board. And, well, the Painters' Union had to raise their dues to pay for the lawyer. They fired—they unelected, because they're elected business agents.

PL [01:04:55] Yeah.

RP [01:04:56] The business agent lost his position. The members said 'hey, this is crap. You didn't get our permission to hire this lawyer. You didn't get our permission to punish our brother. So, it changed the dynamics, because it, that word gets around. You know, and of course, it gives us a higher standing. You don't mess with these guys, right? Well, I faced two more raids. Three raids all the time. Each time we won and (shrugs).

PL [01:05:28] Never give up.

RP [01:05:29] They didn't give up. And some of them were just—I'd see them at the Labour Council (laughter). They didn't like me sometimes. And I said, "Well, you know, again, we can agree to disagree." But, at the end of the day, some of these people change and they understand it. And so, it worked out fine. But I just wish I had more knowledge of co-ops. The understanding of how they function to help them out, because this began eating each other after a while, and it disintegrated.

PL [01:06:04] So that shipyard, the co-op one? Has it survived?

RP [01:06:13] No. And, like I say, because you've got 60 core members. They didn't allow any more members to join and then they would elect, who was going to be the boss and who was doing what. And, they had all made big money at the supply ship. The guys would buy a nice big boat, house, sock it away. But you got to set aside money for the, more equipment, replace things and all this.

RP [01:06:46] Remember the fast ferries? Well, Point Hope, Nanaimo Shipyards and, there was one other shipyard they joined up to do components of it. As well as the BC Ferries because we had connections on where the contracts are going to go. Just repair work on the BC Ferries and to send it around to keep all the shipyards. Everybody's working, and keep them all going. Because things were picking up a bit more then. And so it was okay for Point Hope. They were doing well. But again, make sure they all got their dividends and not putting enough back into the business. And then, of course, fighting about that stuff. So, eventually it, they were going down the tube. So three entrepreneurs decided to pick it up, I guess. And then they fought amongst themselves and one was left standing at the end of it all. I mean, we had nothing but trouble. They deducted dues and wouldn't remit them to the union. And you'd file grievances, but you couldn't get any money out of them, out of the stone. Eventually, it was sold to a company that handles recyclables. And I forget the guy's name, investments over there, they anyways, the place is still going. They're doing well. But he made it clear, "You want the BCGEU, I won't buy this place." Yeah. So, you know guys between, they had to join because he— There was a union at his recycling plant and so forth and I can't remember which union it is, but, yeah, you had to join their union and forget the BCGEU. So that was the end of it. But I'll tell you, it was probably the toughest assignment that I ever had., And there were some— But it was worth it.

PL [01:09:01] Yeah. Well, because you're I mean, pardon the pun, but you have to jump into the pretty deep water there, you know to figure out how to do it.

RP [01:09:07] Yeah. But again, it's the members. You know, it was good, strong support. We did negotiations and we boosted everything, packed a little meeting room down at the shipyard and—Ken, he was from the Painters' Union and 6'6", about this wide (gestures) across the shoulders. He read out every single word of the agreement, even though we'd hand it out. He read it out. That meeting went on and on. I don't know how many times we had to stop for smoke breaks so the guys could go outside. And it was a show of hands

and I had a ballot box there. Everybody gets a secret vote. Not that night. Ken said, "Anybody opposed?"

PL [01:09:59] (laughter).

RP [01:10:00] Everybody's— "All in favour?" Everybody's hand going up (laughter). You know, but that was the nature of it there. But they were, they were solid bunch and, yeah, it was good but like I say it was a tough assignment sometimes.

PL [01:10:19] The ups and downs of it. Well, this has been fascinating. I mean I'm just so impressed by some of the coalition work that you did. I mean, it sounds at one level very spontaneous, but tremendously effective.

RP [01:10:32] Yeah.

PL [01:10:33] The fight against privatization is a tough one, but the way you pulled that one together was, it's a textbook, you know it.

RP [01:10:43] Well I think it was, a lot of us in the leadership of the component were around the same age.

RP [01:10:54] Overall we got along well. And you know, we provided that leadership in our local unions and within the union as well. You know, we were front and centre on raising dues. We were at the mic, saying yeah, we vote in favour of the raising the dues. You know, where others were, you don't want to do that but we didn't have a problem with that stuff, and we had fun.

PL [01:11:23] Yeah.

RP [01:11:24] That's an element. Yeah. You know you might have to work hard and you get beat sometimes or whatever it is, but you have to have enthusiasm and fun around it. And that was going on in Victoria or— A couple of slow spots, you know, and I think back over. The Okanagan wasn't always the greatest. There were some exceptions. We had some great leaders, like in Summerland and places like that, and she covered off Penticton.

PL [01:11:53] Yeah.

RP [01:11:54] You know, and effective. And bringing the churches together on this stuff and talking to the council members and knowing people in a small community like Summerland. And then there's a—

PL [01:12:09] Yeah, yeah. It's like bringing together the unusual suspects as opposed to the usual suspects.

RP [01:12:15] Yeah. I guess one has to just look at like whatever the issue is, "Who's on side?" And if they're on side, I need to talk to them. And will they do something, you know, and write a letter?

PL [01:12:30] Who they are isn't important. Are you on side? That's important.

RP [01:12:34] But, it was so quick. I didn't even know that the Alcohol Addiction Society existed, you know? So, I was just "Oh, Art Steinmann." And yeah, well, they were doing great work and they were coming up with all this stuff, right? So it, it just started to work fast.

RP [01:12:50] And the other thing that—the media is interested. They were always interested in booze stories, for some reason or other, I don't know. And so you get attention on things like this. I know our local Chair out of, he was in 100 Mile House. He was having trouble, going to the mayor and council and, "Say no to the beer and wine stores," and kept going back and forth. And Bill just would not quit. I mean, that's the way it was. Just because they say no doesn't mean it's going to be no, we're going to keep at ya. And then the local elections come up. Well, Bill decides to run for mayor (laughter). He didn't win, but it wasn't just a single issue about privatization. You know, you talk about what facilities are available for youth and sports, recreational. But he had fun with it and we'd all send him some money. So it's outside of that as well. You know, what can you do? A lot of people started doing different things in their communities as well simply because they felt empowered by some successes and stuff like that. Try to change it, or get involved in politics where they might not have been before.

PL [01:14:18] Successful campaigns will do that. It's kind of like you really get charged up and energized to vote [unclear].

RP [01:14:26] Yeah. Because you realize you can make a difference. And even sometimes when it looks like you lost, you've made some progress for the next one or whatever it is.

PL [01:14:37] Move the bar up.

RP [01:14:38] You bet. Yeah. Yeah.

PL [01:14:41] Listen, this has been tremendous. And once again, thanks so much for making the time to come down and tell us everything that you've been able to share with us today.