

**Interview: Patrice Pratt (PP)**  
**Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KB)**  
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**Transcription: Jane Player**

**KN [00:00:05]** Good morning. It's May 29th, 2023, and we're here at the BC Labour Heritage Centre to interview Patrice Pratt. Patrice, we'd like to start by getting some background information on your early years. Like when and where were you born and where did you essentially grow up and go to school?

**PP [00:00:26]** Great, Ken. I was born in Akron, Ohio, March 17th, 1948. Very interesting now when you get those kind of dates, and they're quite a long time ago. I'm 75. That's obvious. I then, because of health, my parents moved to Arizona and the health was my health. I was very ill as a little kid. Bronchial pneumonia and all kinds of things, so my parents picked up and moved. They bought a big old truck and put everything in it and then sold the truck when they got to Phoenix, Arizona. In Phoenix, there was an uncle that had already migrated from Ohio to Arizona to the desert. Of course, that was a great thing for a kid with pneumonia and bronchitis and things like that. I grew up—family staunchly Catholic—so I went to Most Holy Trinity Elementary School and Saint Francis Xavier High School and sort of learned catechism, the Baltimore catechism and all that kind of stuff. Interestingly, though, when I was there and was in Arizona, I began probably some of my work that probably carried on into the trade union movement. I remember that John Fryer, who was a boss, my boss in many later years believed—called Catholics names and things because he was from England, but the principle of you're your brothers and sisters keepers, you take care of people, sort of the basic principles of Catholicism was there. I taught catechism to migratory workers, kids, the nuns. We'd go out to the farms in Arizona and pull the little kids together in one of their places and teach catechism, and like when I think about it now, it's fascinating. My early right and wrong probably, helping others that needed help probably began in that Catholicism.

**KN [00:02:42]** Did your parents, either of your parents, have anything to do with unions or were unions ever a part of your younger life?

**PP [00:02:48]** Well, Arizona, of course, is not exactly a hugely progressive state, although half and half we know. There was a Democratic governor while I was there, but Barry Goldwater was there. My dad was a machinist. He was in the Machinists Union, IAM [International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, IAMAW]. There were days, 'cuz he worked for the government in that he worked for the Navy as sort of a civil servant as the term was used. He paid dues in those days, even though he didn't have to, and he had five kids, and he was making 100 bucks a week. He paid dues because he believed—and the way the negotiations went, as I understand it, the IAM negotiated for machinists tool and die makers, those kind of guys, and then the government would take that rate but the government guys were never directly involved. My dad paid dues, so I would say yes, he was a principled man then and my mom was a principled Catholic. There's some examples depending on where you want to go here, that would show that. So, my parents—I came from people who did care about helping people, had lots of kids, were involved in their community so many of those principles probably carried on into my trade union work.

**KN [00:04:18]** You subsequently went to university in San Francisco?

**PP** [00:04:22] I did.

**KN** [00:04:23] Can you talk about your life in San Francisco a bit?

**PP** [00:04:26] Yeah. Oh, wow. Well, here I am in Arizona on the desert with the family of five kids, very much centred in church and school and things. All of a sudden, I go to San Francisco. At the time, the song, "If you go to San Francisco wear flowers in your hair," and Golden Gate Park, and Haight-Ashbury—Haight-Ashbury was in its prime. I went to the University of San Francisco, as you noted, Catholic Jesuit University. Had to take S.A.T. tests and everything to get in. Got a little. baby—well, loan from the federal government in those days. I forget what it's called but \$3,000 to go, and worked in the foreign student office, worked in a downtown sort of dress shop on weekends in order to make money to go to this school. It was very expensive. Famous for law and medicine, the University of San Francisco, but two blocks from Haight-Ashbury. I was on Fulton Street in San Francisco. Two blocks from Haight-Asbury. You walk down the street and there you are, [beons unclear] in the park. Fillmore West. Did I see Jethro Tull? Yep. Did I see The Band in the park? Yep. You know, did I see lots of naked folks? Yep. That's where I first—and now it's legal—so we can talk about cannabis and marijuana. That's when I first had my first toké would have been in San Francisco, 1969, Ken, and that's where I met my husband, Ron Pratt. That's how I got to Canada because Ron chose not to serve in Vietnam and was called 'a draft dodger' in Canada. That's when we came to Canada in 1969 and that sort of covers— University of San Francisco, by the way, I was taking sociology because I wanted to help people. I wanted to get out there and fix the world and sociology at that time was kind of the way I thought I could do that.

**KN** [00:06:36] As you said, you came to Canada in 1969 to Winnipeg and ended up working with the Manitoba Government Employees Association. Can you talk a bit about that?

**PP** [00:06:45] Certainly can. Just to round out this out. The thing I first came to Vancouver, we wanted to settle in Vancouver, very similar to San Francisco, and we couldn't. There were just a ton of draft guys coming up the coast there, almost the underground railway for draft guys. There was a committee to aid war objectors [Vancouver Committee to Aid American War Objectors], though, in those days. A guy named Tom Sandborn, many of us know Tom, Tom and Ron were buddies at USF [University of San Francisco] and so we came there. The second person we knew in Canada, Ken, was again, Ron's contacts was a guy named Cliff Wilde. Cliff lived in Winnipeg, and his dad was a rich farmer and sent his son to San Francisco for university. So went there.

**PP** [00:07:32] Very amazing and friendly people. Forty below zero binds you together. You have parties like—we immediately entered into this sort of, I don't know, just lovely group of people that had Grey Cup parties, birthday parties for everybody. Just any event, you would be there, and you would be welcome. We never felt unwelcome, despite the fact that we were sort of left wingers coming from this weird place. This guy Cliff's dad said, 'You know, I don't agree with what you did, but I agree with your right to do it.' I thought, 'Whoa.' You know, so this is Manitoba. I started working at something called the Manitoba Health Services Commission. So, if we were to liken that to MSP [Medical Service Plan], probably, but it was commission, it wasn't part of the government exactly. Now, I can't remember the structure that it had, but I was a claims coder, which meant I had piles of cards from doctor's offices. Those are the old computer days where you had the cards that they fed into the computers. It would come in saying they saw you for a cold. You had to

put the morbidity code in—like what is a cold, and so you'd look it through your little book and you'd find out the code for that, and you put it in.

**PP** [00:08:54] I was in a sweat shop. I literally was in a—I'd say 40 claims coders. Literally, you almost had to count three up and two over to know your desk or have a bud vase or something on there that you could tell. I wore a little smock. Came and went. One wastebasket was at the front by the supervisor's office. You had to go up and put any trash in there. I started to get involved in the union. I thought there were lots of things that needed to be fixed here, given that situation and volunteered. I was shop steward and again, a story that I tell often, the day that I ran for shop steward from this group of women that I was sitting with doing this coding, I had to go down after work, I had to be in the cafeteria, I had to say my name and where I worked. I was scared shitless all day. I could barely eat. I was sweat, clammy palms, and I was scared to death to stand in front of people and say my name and where I worked—so began in those modest days. There's lots more with the union, but I'm going to stop and see if you want me to do any more.

**KN** [00:10:07] No. Can you talk about the MGEU?

**PP** [00:10:08] Sure can. MGE—and it was called the MGEA in those days, Manitoba Government Employees' Association. They did what we used to call collective begging. Once a year or every three years, they would go forward and say, 'Please, Mr. Premier, can we have some more money?' One year the Premier offered us like a minuscule amount of money. We voted on it and voted to go to binding arbitration. We might as well started the revolution. Never had civil servants been so disrespectful and ridiculous and stupid as to not accept the Premier's wonderful, magnanimous offer. We did not. I had been the shop steward. You knew that. Let's see—and at that point, a whole bunch of us were really mad, and we really started doing things. There's a guy named Gerry Smith, I want to say—I don't think that was his name. He subsequently came out to B.C., but there were all sorts of people that got us going that were involved. We decided to go to arbitration. They chose some sort of an arbitrator. This guy who died within six months, he was an older guy. We got a second arbitrator. It took years and years to do that. Maybe months and months, now when I think back on it. We finally got a settlement. We then decided that we needed to reorganize the MGEA, in those days.

**PP** [00:11:43] By the way, a really good colleague was Gary Doer. Gary Doer, who subsequently became our ambassador to the US and did all kinds of things. Premier of Manitoba. Gary worked at the youth detention centre. I worked at the Health Services Commission. We were on something called an organizational task force where we decided we had to reorganize the entire BCG, err, the entire MGEA. I wrote to all the provinces asking for constitutions—I was chair of the Constitution Committee—asking for all constitutions and structural information, and Fryer made a joke saying, 'Other than the marine component, you took our entire structure,' because we didn't have any ferries at the time in Manitoba. I came under the scrutiny of John Fryer and people in B.C. because really in the end, we did choose a structure that was very similar to the BCGEU [BC Government Employees' Union, now BC General Employees' Union]. I was elected second vice-president, and then—again I'm saying all the BCGEU folks came to conventions and lauded me for the wonderful structure that we had put in place. I'd say that's probably a good round—oh, and then I was hired. I got—I went on staff. So, from second vice-president to employee relations officers, I think we called ourselves, assigned certain areas of the province of Manitoba. Travelled all over Manitoba—excuse me, now, and little drink of water here—and, you know, I just did grievances, arbitrations, everything, you know, rep.

**KN** [00:13:22] In 1976, you moved British Columbia.

**PP** [00:13:26] Mm hmm.

**KN** [00:13:28] What brought you to British Columbia? Can you talk about that and your initial work with BCGEU?

**PP** [00:13:34] The first people saw who's this young person here? 'Maybe cute young girl,' for all I know, what they said. There was a position of staff representative for BCGEU, and they sent it to me. They said, 'Apply.' So, that was pretty heady. So, I did. The rest of your question? Like, what'd I do when I got here?

**KN** [00:14:02] Yes, what was your first job when you got here with the BCGEU?

**PP** [00:14:05] Yeah. Maureen Hedley, God rest her soul, a colleague in both NDP and the trade union movement and BCGEU. Maureen Headley was my supervisor. When I was hired as a staff representative, I was hired basically to do admin services provincewide. That would be the clerical workers, people that had administrative jobs throughout government. Maureen and I, a woman named Jackie Corso, who is also no longer with us. We were the three people provincewide, three women as that happened, that were servicing the admin services component. I worked under Maureen for a long time. Then, I guess—I'm just trying to get the chronological order straight here, Ken—all sorts of projects. We had one campaign called 'Keep on Buggin'', and we—b-u-g-g-i-n with our little symbol was a ladybug. Clerical workers in government had basically no rights, particularly secretaries. They made the coffee for the boss but couldn't drink it. Office wives, order flowers. Do all kinds of stuff that they did. They typed letters, of course though, and typed on a typewriter. We fought for women, clerical women, to have the right to put their initials after the colon of their bosses initials. That was called the— that was, you know, the designation and then the BCGEU in small letters below. So, 'Keep on Buggin''. We had a whole campaign. Little pins. I keep pointing here. I should have worn my bug pin today. Little pins, brochures, you know, just all kinds of stuff which gave women a sense of dignity, of course, and also acknowledged the work they did, almost like union bugs on many products that our trade union brothers and sisters produce.

**KN** [00:16:08] One of the things you did early on was you set up the office in Kelowna. Can you talk about that?

**PP** [00:16:14] Mm hmm. Sure can. I'm trying to think. Again, I keep doing this, Ken. I'm getting so old. Gordon Hanson, God rest his soul as well. We have many of our colleagues who are no longer with us. Gordon Hanson and I, BCGEU reps, were told by Fryer, 'Go outside. Go in the garden. Walk around for a while and decide who's going to Kelowna.' The one that wasn't going to Kelowna was going to stay in Vancouver, certainly in the Lower Mainland. I think that's where again Gordon started. I think he moved to Victoria after. There I was deciding to go to Kelowna, so I talked to my husband Ron. At the time he was a teacher, we thought pretty marketable. He could probably go teach in Kelowna. I would have the job. There we would go, and he did. He taught high school in Kelowna.

**PP** [00:17:03] So, went there. Yeah. A couple of stories of that, Ken, for sure. Fryer said, 'Go to Kelowna. Find some office space.' We put out the word we needed office space. Phone call came in. I picked up the phone. He says, 'Is this John Fryer's secretary?' I said, 'No, it's the staff rep that's gonna come to Kelowna.' The guy didn't know what to say. He

was IWA [International Woodworkers of America]. They had an office, and so they had space to rent, so, there I was. A guy named Charlie Peck. Charlie is still here, I think, around with us like I am, a little old, but still with us. Charlie was also elect—I think, he was electrician's union, as far as I recall. Charlie was the other staff rep in the IWA office upstairs, just two little, small places, but that's where we were. So, I move there.

**PP** [00:17:55] I want to just tell you a couple of things about that. The operational services guys, the highways people—I think they're all guys, I don't think there was a woman at all—said, 'We thought Fryer was sending us a rep and he only sent a girl'—very unhappy that I was going. The IWA guys said—they didn't know what to say. They were just like speechless. I was in my late twenties. They said, 'We can always use another girl around the office. Welcome, Patrice.' You know. So, 'Patricia, welcome, Patricia.' They used to call me Patricia 'cuz they couldn't get my name. So, wow. There was a [unclear poly] mixed crew. I had my baby, Jordana, was born in Kelowna General Hospital. I was a pregnant female rep. I mean, like, how much more can you take? When I left and when I moved back down to Vancouver to work in head office, the guys were unhappy with the male rep that they got after me and they wished I was back. So, you work hard.

**PP** [00:18:58] Oh, and one time, Ken, after Labour Council meeting, there were so many things going on. I was spokesperson for, you know, BCGEU. Bennett had a hardware store there still. Mr. Bennett was in town—Bill Bennett was premier. We go for a beer—you go for a beer after Labour Council. Well, you just don't—I mean girls don't do that. Well, I was used to going for beers, and, of course, people were—women were unhappy with their husbands hanging out with a cute little union rep, I think. There was a stripper one night at the Royal Anne Hotel with a white boa while we were having beer after Labour Council meeting. I mean, they had Ms. Lady of the Lake contests; they had Ms. Peach Blossom contests. All the guys were very proud when their daughters ran for these positions. I had to be—this is maybe where I learned my gentleness here about you can't tell guys where to go. You've got to say, 'Wow, I don't think I'd want my daughter do—you know, but I had to do that and I did it. I did it. Nobody thought I was a total ridiculous idiot, but there you go.

**KN** [00:20:10] After coming back to Vancouver for while, you ended up in Victoria. Yeah. Notably, in 1983 when lots of things happened. I wonder if you could share your Solidarity experiences with us.

**PP** [00:20:23] Yeah, well, I mean, our president, John Shields, was fired. Diane Wood was fired. There was—I believe it was called Billy too, Ken. I might have that wrong. Where all the—where the government was basically annihilating the BCGEU collective agreement and any rights we might have had and all that sort of thing. We got into huge campaign mode and Solidarity—that was after Lech Wałęsa had done all the wonderful work in a trade union, you know, responsibilities and stuff in Poland. We took on that name Art Kube was president of the BC Fed [BC Federation of Labour] at the time. Again, has left us, Art has. So, boy, oh boy, it was exciting. I was in Victoria. I was appointed Solidarity co-ordinator for Victoria by the BC Federation of Labour. Then a whole bunch of folks were over here. Cliff Anstein, [John] Shields, the whole executive was here. There I was. A guy named Moe Sahota was a storefront lawyer. He'd just gotten his law degree and was doing sort of storefront work as far as I could tell, sort of the young lawyer. He was appointed the head of the community coalition. I was head of the labour coalition, so worked lots with Moe. In the end we got 30,000 people to march on the legislature. It was amazing. The police, of course—police, fire, everybody was on our side. I mean, this was OpSol [Operation Solidarity]. The marching down the street, I mean, even now get goose

bumps thinking about it. It was amazing. Bennett was so unhappy, and he said things like, 'Well, I had a garden party that had just as many people. Like, I don't know what this was.' It was just really heady. Of course, then going on Empire Stadium in Vancouver with all you guys over here. We know the results, and we know I'm not doing an Art Kube story or anything, and Jack Munro story, but you know, interesting results with OpSol, but yes, I did coordinate.

**KN** [00:22:32] Okay. You held a number of different positions while you were working at the BCGEU. Obviously, you had a number of experiences. I'm wondering if you could maybe just identify a few of those.

**PP** [00:22:46] I can, Ken. Yeah. Thank you. When I knew I was coming for this interview with you and trying to put my dates together, that's really tough because, for instance, again, my pal Gary Steeves is no longer with us. Gary and I, over the years when I look through various papers and emails and things, at one point Gary supervised me, another point I supervised Gary. Andstein and I—Cliff came back from the BC Fed and he and I were the two directors of the union appointed by John Shields in those days. I was director of every department at BCGEU over my almost 30 years. I was on all sorts of committees of the BC Fed, again appointed by my union, by BCGEU. When I think back on what happened to me there, primarily, the trade union movement was my school because I never completed university. I have the two years at USF [University of San Francisco], and then I went to University of Manitoba and just took courses. Travelling to a different country, you gotta write exams on what did you do, and you know, the statistics 100 or something. I never did that. I just sort of kept educating myself. The trade union movement and the stuff that John Fryer and then John Shields made me do, I almost—it was like pushing me into the deep end of the pool. .

**PP** [00:24:17] I can remember Fryer did that. He assigned me some things, bargaining things, and I went, 'Oh, I don't know how to do that, John.' 'Well, you'll figure it out,' which I did. Shields appointed me the Labour Relations Board as a labour member. I go, 'John, you know, there's so many people here that have done more arbitrations.' 'You're way better.' He goes, 'Patrice, well first of all they need women.' You know what Ken, I was always—I was many times, not always—but many times the only woman in the room in so many places. I guess I was bright enough. I had a mouth for sure. Once I got over the saying my name in the Manitoba Health Services Commission in 19 whatever, '69, '70 something, I guess they couldn't stop me talking, but I would, you know, I was careful. I didn't call people down, you know, which those were the days where trade union women were often maybe not kind when they—because they were so angry at what had happened to them. I mean, Lord knows I get it, but I thought I got to say it in a better way, and maybe that's what helped me be involved in so many things. Appointed by John, by Ken, by others, I was out there in the community doing many, many things and was single mom with a kid with disability, sometimes had purple hair, spoke out, you know. That's who I was, and people used to call me—there was one term in Burnaby Now or somewhere where I had an article written, straight shooter. There you go, the straight shooter.

**KN** [00:26:01] Okay. I think that during that period, 30 years, you must have seen a lot of change happening in the union that you were working for itself, the GEU. Can you talk a bit about some of the changes you saw in the GEU during that period?

**PP** [00:26:13] Excellent. I love to do that. First of all, I think probably—certainly at MGEA and then it subsequently, of course, became the Manitoba Government Employees Union

under Gary Doer—we called ourselves civil servants. That was the term that was used for government employees, and it's very demeaning. I mean, just the whole name, just unbelievable. So BCGEU changed—but of course, when John Fryer came—John Fryer hired me. John Fryer—so there's no way John Fryer would be called a civil servant for sure. Amazing leader, by the way, he was. Again, I've already said both John Fryer and John Shields were my mentors in so many ways. Tried to pick a woman mentor, and I really come up with these two guys, frankly. We became a union. We got bargaining rights. Fryer got bargaining rights whenever Dave Barrett was elected premier. We were a militant public service union. In those days that didn't mean—that meant we we stood up for ourselves and asked for things and asked for our rights. Fryer was a major organizer. I mean, he had done that, you know, while he was in England and then in the United States, when he worked for the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. Shields, of course, was also really brilliant in where he came from with the Catholic Church and moving into the trade union movement as an extension of that. I was very good friends with John simply because my Catholic background, we could say little weird phrases and we both understand what we meant. John and Madeleine, his wife and I were we're sort of a spirits you know, where it was really interesting.

**PP** [00:28:02] Okay, what happened? So, BCGEU did that also, John and John, both John's were NDPers. They were certainly New Democrats, and often public sector unions, particularly when we worked for the government, you had to figure out how to do that and represent that. When I became president of the NDP, I mean, wow, that was a statement. Vaughn Palmer thought so. We've got all kinds of interesting articles where Palmer would write about that. BCGEU, Patrice Pratt, president of the NDP. We became, I guess, more politically aware, more organized in terms of elections. We were always careful to say vote for whoever is representing your interests and your needs and that we would come out, 'Oh really? It's the NDP.' We did all that. There was a lot of privatisation going on in those days because of the conservative nature of government and Bennett and people like that. BCGEU went out and got successor rights for many, many parts of government that were privatised and put out there. We'd go out and organize our former workers, and I can't remember there was work I saw at the Labour Relations Board, so some of that was done that way. Or, if we had to just go sign everybody up again, we did that. That's what led the BCGEU to change its name from B.C. Government Employees' Union to big B.C. Government Service Employees' Union to now [BC] General Employees' [Union]. Yeah. I think that started the base of recognising that we're a union that can represent workers wherever they are. Because the government is so huge and, you know, you range from workers in an institution that could be in the boiler room to cooking, to cleaning—what's different than hotels and other places—right up to people that were directly involved in government policy and members, you know, MSP [Medical Services Plan]. The spectrum of government workers was huge, it was acknowledged. Nothing was something we couldn't organize, really.

**KN** [00:30:19] Okay. One of the other things that you got very much involved in was organizing educational opportunities for BCGEU members in particular, and you did a lot of that through the [CLC] Winter School at Harrison. Can you talk about that experience?

**PP** [00:30:37] I can. Again, the history of BCGEU as all of the unions and organizations that we have been associated with or been part of, boy oh boy, things changed over the years. Different people ran for president. Staff sometimes were asked to stay out of political stuff within our unions. There were all kinds of interesting things. I became education officer. I sort of got out of the lines of direct servicing reps and responsibilities.

Different times. You know, you're in favour and you're not in favour. Some people like you, sometimes, some people don't. I became education officer, which was sort of a non-political—well not really when I start to think about what I did as education officer. I taught the leadership courses. I taught facing management, shop stewards, you know, built new programs for the BCGEU, according to what John Shields wanted done. John was a popular education guy coming out of out of the Catholic Church and doing education himself. I mean, he was with Martin Luther King and the Berrigans on, you know, I have a dream. John, again, the respect I have for John is immense.

**PP** [00:32:02] So we designed a whole new education plan for our members which said to people, 'We're not going to tell you what you should do as a local officer. What do you think you should do as a local officer?' I kept going. 'Well, John. Well, I can't.' 'What?' 'I can't say.' In other words, I had to teach a whole new way. I had to—everyone teaches, everyone learn—is a popular education, often something I've heard. Rick, Rick Arnold and Bev Burns, I think were their names. They worked for the Justice Institute in Toronto. Again, popular education. We just delved right into that. I then was teaching out at—instructing at Harrison. Well, that's not how some of the other unions taught their shop stewards. You would—the former model for a basic education course for a shop steward is: You just start reading them the constitution and then you comment on different sections. I would—I had an exercise called "20 Questions" where I picked little questions out of our Constitution that I would ask, like who's on the executive committee or something like that. I assigned different questions at different tables. I would say, 'All right, you got 15 minutes. Get the answers to the questions.' You debrief the questions. People have engaged. They've found the answers. They haven't fallen asleep. I did that and I also had flip charts. People go, 'What's that weird thing you're using?' I would write things. I would post stuff on the walls. I did role play. I think I had lots to do with changing the way our trade unionists are educated in British Columbia and maybe, I don't know, not in Canada, but certainly I'll take British Columbia.

**KN** [00:33:49] That sounds very positive. Now, you've alluded several times so far to your involvement in the NDP. Clearly, you were involved in a variety of ways, but most particularly you became president.

**PP** [00:34:02] (Laughter) President, a variety of ways, yeah. President.

**KN** [00:34:04] And while you were working for the BCGEU.

**PP** [00:34:08] Yeah.

**KN** [00:34:08] Can you talk about how you saw those two connected in the relationship?

**PP** [00:34:13] Sure can. So, Ken, if I might, I'm just going to also say I was vice-president of the federal party. Audrey McLaughlin—while I supported Dave Barrett, then Audrey became leader. We know what trade unionists do. That's the way it goes. The decision was made. Yeah, maybe we had a position in caucus, but now here we are defending. I was there and then—I'm trying to think I'm pretty sure I had to resign the federal position when I was provincial—anyway, so I had lots NDP involvement. It's where I'm going on all that. I was provincial council delegate at different points and stuff.

**PP** [00:34:57] When the NDP became government in '92, I was approached by the former president, Ian Aikenhead, because everybody's going to government. All the good people that could have then assumed the role of president of the NDP were all in government.



Again, I—you know, Ken, I might have mentioned this already, I really didn't seek many of the things that I have been in, or presidents of, or on boards of, or—I didn't. I was plucked and asked to do things. I guess that's some credit to people who saw the purple hair and the mouth and the person that could represent I don't know, but I get kept being asked to do things. I was approached to be president of the NDP. I was scared to death again. Oh, my gosh. You know, so I'd been at union conventions, but as a staff person in the BCGEU in the levels that I was at, I really wasn't basically speaking from mikes or doing things like that—and there I was. It was—it certainly put the BCGEU in a place that I think was very progressive. It put me into difficulties from time to time, though, with my colleagues who were really mad that the damn government wasn't home support workers. There were home support workers represented by another union, UFCW [United Food and Commercial Workers' Union] and that guy, their union rep, was an MLA, and so it wasn't easy. It's not easy to be president of a party in power.

**PP** [00:36:47] You're asking about the relationship with BCGEU. I certainly got our position over there in Victoria because people would listen to me, but it's almost like I know our NDP government is so careful about conflicts of interests and things like that, might have put me at a disadvantage. I don't know, or our workers. I don't know. I, of course, continue to defend—well, it's interesting when you're on the light and dark side of the moon at the same time, you know, you're kind of boiling, but then you're also—so I am. I did all that over all those years. There were various scandals with [Mike] Harcourt. There was this Sam Wagar guy that was a Wiccan that ran for, was running for nomination. Harcourt tells me to fix it. Robin Blencoe was dismissed from government, from caucus, and every—I mean, because he was harassing, sexually harassing his workers. Various of my colleagues, Sharon Prescott and others were involved with me in that one. I got sent out to fix it. The Nanaimo Commonwealth scandal. There I was—Jordana my daughter, my little daughter, she'd go, 'It's Vaughn Palmer Mom,' and so I'd have to go talk to Vaughn Palmer. Or, I'd go, (runs hand across throat) so she'd go, 'She's not here.' Anyway, I was on the National, you know, I had to get me in the Airbus scandal that time, Brian Mulroney's Airbus scandal. I'd get up 3:00 a.m., go downtown, you know, be on the national news for this stuff. I was—my little face was out there. Yeah. I think I've done it with BCGEU. It was difficult, I think, to be president of the NDP and be at BCGEU. But John Shields supported me every step of the way. Yeah.

**KN** [00:38:38] Just one more question related to your working at the GEU. You reflect back upon those 30 years, what would you identify as the highlight or highlights of that whole experience? Also, maybe you could talk a bit about what you found the most challenging during your time at the GEU all those areas.

**PP** [00:39:00] You sort of suggested I might get this question, so I've done a little thinking about it. Highlights. Well, you know, Ken, I would be driving along somewhere, going north to service workers in, you know, Prince George or something. Had a union car. You're called upon at a moment's notice to go wherever when you're in a union car and you're a staff rep working for the BCGEU. I followed big old trucks, semi trucks along the Hope Princeton when the Coquihalla wasn't open in a blinding snowstorm. I kept close to the trucks. You could see the tail lights because I had to get to a meeting in Kelowna. I remember that one time. Then I would be coming along different highways on a beautiful sunny day, and I would go, 'I'm getting paid for this job. I'm getting paid.' You believe you're changing the world. John Fryer when I first came up, it was almost Camelot-like BCGEU. We were going to change the world. We were a public sector union. We went for beers every Friday at the Villa Hotel. You were—you felt like you're changing the world and you're a part of a huge movement. I guess that being pushed in the deep end of the

pool and having to do things and gain skills that I never thought I had. The challenges I think I've alluded to a little bit with all the things that came at me with the strikes, with the—those were both bitter and sweet, you know. I mean, obviously I was gaining experience and learning things and exercising my abilities, but, oh boy, oh boy, were they hard. I would say that would be the same thing. That's BCGEU. That's NDP. I—yeah, it's been—it was a difficult number—my career was not easy. (laughter)

**KN** [00:40:56] I was speaking of which at some event talk about your running for the president of the BC Federation Labour. You did that before you retired. Can you talk about that?

**PP** [00:41:11] Sure can. Ken Georgetti approached me to run for president of the BC Fed. I went to John Shields, and he had heard about it, you know, because he was—he, Jack Munro, and Ken, of course, were quite—worked quite closely together at the BC Fed. Different other people came up to me. Like, there's this guy named Russ Pratt, and he was a deputy minister in government. I forget this was so funny, Ken, because somebody said, 'Oh, you hired Pratt to do.' Then they go, 'That's brilliant.' They thought it was me, and it wasn't. It was this Russ Pratt. So, Russ Pratt said, 'Oh, I hear you're going to run for president of the Fed. I was—you know, it was really crazy. All kinds of people were supporting me. Then as the trade union movement is very Machiavellian, from time to time, different things come into play. In the end, Jim Sinclair was successful, and I made it unanimous, as we all do. Oh, the one thing, though, to tell you is that in the end, at one point, I—okay, I'm a little a little hazy here whether there was ever a possibility for me to run at the convention, I don't think so, because Ken was still wanted to be prez of the B.C. Fed going on then to run for president of the CLC [Canadian Labour Congress]. I think nothing happened there, but then he resigned afterwards as president of the Fed, and then it was an executive council meeting. That would be 50 people. When you get down to the trade union leaders, it's all fascinating. If BCGEU had organized somewhere where the IWA, or was an IWA's operating engineers actually, they were mad because what do you doin' that's our territory. We had bridges too. They had bridges. There were some wrongs that people were using, I think to not vote for Patrice. Very, very close in the end. I almost won—two votes at the B.C. Fed except council. Fascinatingly, that's the way the cookie crumbles, and that's what happened. I'll just sort of leave it at that. It was a tough time, though. That was really tough. Yeah.

**KN** [00:43:30] Interestingly, you're here at the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre, and you actually served on the board of the BC Labour Heritage Centre from 2007 to 2009. What do you remember from that time? What was happening?

**PP** [00:43:43] Well, first of all, I—Jack Munro and the IWA supported me for president of the Fed, by the way, and Steelworkers [USW (United Steelworkers) Canada] did too. It was fascinating the way that thing broke down. Jack was still the guy that most of us were scared of and the bombastic Jack Munro, but there was a such a gentle side to Jack, and I sort of got to know that I think when I came here. I'm at the Labour Heritage Centre now, right. He also wrote me a little note when I became president of the NDP and congratulated me and stuff like that. We were at that point trying to figure out who we were and what we could do and how we would do it. The new convention centre was being built, so that was huge project initiative that we were looking at. How do we put some labour history down there? Of course, the beauty of what you guys have done and what Rod Mickleburgh and Geoff Meggs, and you know, just the work of the labour heritage notes all throughout our convention centre, you know, is just wonderful. We were doing that. We just, I— you know what? I'm a little foggy. That's the big project for sure. Yeah. We were

all doing different pieces of that, and probably there were other things, but it's sort of escaping me.

**KN** [00:45:13] That's the one that stands out?

**PP** [00:45:14] It's the one that stands out.

**KN** [00:45:15] Thank you. You also notably not only served on the board for a time of the Vancity Credit Union, but you also chaired the board.

**PP** [00:45:28] Certainly did.

**KN** [00:45:29] Can you talk a bit about that particular experience.

**PP** [00:45:32] You know, Ken, I think I was the only woman on the Labour Heritage Board.

**KN** [00:45:35] At the time?

**PP** [00:45:35] Yep.

**KN** [00:45:37] Could well be.

**PP** [00:45:37] I think I was. Others have certainly come. And I know Joey's chair, but I think I was the only woman. Yeah. Invited by Jack and Mervyn Van Steinberg to join. I think that was it. Anyway, one more time the only woman in the room. Um, sorry, your question. Just a—

**KN** [00:45:52] Vancity Credit Union.

**PP** [00:45:54] Vancity. Yeah, alrighty. When I ran for president of the Fed, didn't get that. I then did a little work with Vancouver, with the City of Vancouver prior to 2010 Olympics coming. That was really interesting. It was during that time, I guess I did some work with Translink as well because of my care with disability, and I was working in that not-for-profit disability movement a lot. I got called on in different places for my Rolodex, for my political ability to talk to people and to organize things, and that would have been the Vancouver Foundation one for sure—err, sorry, the City of Vancouver one for sure.

**PP** [00:46:38] There was a thing called the Accessible Initiatives for Cities and Communities with Sam Sullivan and Tim Louis. He had been on the board of Vancity, and, of course, Sam was sort of on the other side of Tim in terms of political. Both of them moved and seconded a motion that Vancouver and British Columbia would be the most accessible place in the damn world, and they were going to do it prior to 2010. I did all that. Maybe that's where my reputation, as well as trade union, as well as not-for-profit. So, I was approached again. 'Patrice run for the Board of Vancity.' I go, 'I don't know anything about finances. Gosh, are you kidding? Vancity I'm a member. Absolutely, of course. But whoa.' I am—the Action Team was a group that was sort of Bob Williams and others. I put that together to get people elected that were progressive on the board of Vancity and keep control of our credit union, and so that swung into place. Phone calls. It was—like I thought I was in a political campaign because that's how we did it in those days. Got elected to Vancity Board. Dave Mowat was still the CEO there. I served one year as a sort of a regular member. Year two, I was elected vice-chair. That's the other thing that seemed to happen to me. Again, the mouth, who knows? I kept getting elected to things.

**PP** [00:48:10] The position in those early couple of years before Dave left—just trying again get some dates here. When the financial crisis happened, we hired Tamara Vrooman, and Tamara would have been the deputy minister for finance in government. Her credentials weren't as accepted by some members of our board because she was just a government employee. What does she know? She's bureaucratic. She's never done banking. She doesn't know anything. I defended her. I defended her very vociferously because I knew what you do in government. She was finance. She also helped in the settlement just prior to the Olympics with all the trade unions that were— she's an unbelievably fabulous woman. I really like her. I remain friends with her today. She's at the airport authority now. And so Vancity. Hiring Tamara Vrooman, then changing the financial world with the changing with the financial crisis. We and others throughout the financial world were in disarray and in horror for a long time. Tamara had to build us all—build that all back up. The regulator got involved. We had a person that got involved in saying that we're—since we are a critical financial institution in Canada, we cannot be so weird that we elect our board, and we have people campaigning and standing out in front of branches like, whoa, that's just a little too over-the-top. You can't do that. There she was pointing to various parts of the Financial Institutions Act and different things like that. We had to amend and change the way we elected directors. After that happened, you could only represent yourself in front of a branch. You could stand in front of a branch and pick which one you're going to do on Saturday and that's it. You— phone banks. We didn't have phone banks anymore. You had to cut all that political stuff. We changed, and I had to lead us through that. That was really, really hard. That was really hard. Lots of people were not happy with it—the lefties. I'm kind of speechless because it was a really tough time. There was a really tough time. Also, as chair of the Vancity board, again, because I had people that were not happy, did not think I was militant enough or left enough and went after me a lot. There you go. I think I'll—.

**KN** [00:51:07] Okay.

**PP** [00:51:08] It was tough, and I also had to learn finances, didn't I? I had to learn how things worked and what to do. We had different crises at different times, events, city where the banking machines went out on a long weekend and lots of stuff that went on at Vancity. Again, when you're sitting in that big chair, it's like, lots going on.

**PP** [00:51:33] But then you also speak everywhere. That was another thing that I found interesting. I won [Association of] Women in Finance awards. Here I am. I said, 'Do you know my sordid past? You guys, do you understand who I am?' They did, and that, again, was what put checks in a bunch of columns for me, I guess. Trade unionist, a single mom of a kid with disability, Vancity. I was a keynote speaker. Tons of places. That's where I developed what I learned way back in 1987 with the Governor-General's leadership Conference, I went. We're having a big reunion this year in Ottawa, by the way, 40 year reunion for the Governor-General's. Jean Sauvé was, I mean, a long time ago, 1987. Anyway, I started to understand that all parts of our society contribute, and all parts they're not bad guys necessarily. On the board of the United Way, I can remember one time I opened a meeting, I was chair of the board of the United Way, Lower Mainland. I said, brothers and sisters. I go, 'I'm sorry. I forgot where I was.' Now, I knew where I was, but I said that and I went, 'Oh. Oh. Oh.' This guy, Art Reitmayer, who was CEO of BCTV, or whatever, you know, and always we hated it. We'd turn on the news, we go, 'Oh my God, what's what is BCTV saying?' (Was it BCTV?) Anyway, and I said, 'You know, Art, in the end, we both believe the world should look the same. There should be no homeless in downtown Vancouver. Everybody should have a place to live, but we just think there's

different ways to get there.' That would be with my left friends and I'm saying that, but folks at the BC Fed that would say, 'We need the revolution now.' I go, 'No, I think we should be on the joint committee and write a minority report.' That was the way I sort of handled things. I got recognised all over the place, Vancouver Foundation, United Way, and I chaired the Four Pillars Committee with the Downtown Eastside and safe injection sites and things like that. Like I sort of was there in those days. I've been there, man. I've been everywhere, man. Whatever that song is.

**KN** [00:53:52] Including actually getting involved in founding the Canadian Association for Williams Syndrome. Now what exactly was that and what does it involve?

**PP** [00:54:01] Yeah, so that's my kid, Ken. Jordana Rose Pratt, born on December 14th, 1978, in Kelowna, had something called Williams Syndrome, hard to diagnose in that one in 20,000 births. No second kid in any family. It appears to be the accident of sort of fertilization in the egg and all that good stuff. Williams Syndrome kids all over the world, every race. There was Canadian Association for Williams Syndrome in the U.S., which was quite active and in Canada. One of our parents had gone down to the United States to—they're driving down, I think, a freeway in L.A. and it said something, welcome Williams Syndrome kids or something. They pulled in and went to a Williams Syndrome conference, came back, and we then started to work together to establish one in Canada. I was—I got the charitable tax number and filled out all the forms and did that. That's long ago when you could get charitable tax numbers for not-for-profits. They're harder now. Put the constitution and bylaws together of course, or whatever we called it. Jordana and I were sometimes on little road shows. We went and spoke to teachers assistants' conferences. Jordana used to go into her elementary school and talk to the principal and the guidance counsellors about Williams Syndrome because she'd be right beside me, and we'd be doing little speeches. Williams Syndrome is a genetic disorder, as I've said, but no second kid in the family. Parents appear to have intact genes. They have this friendly, talkative personality. They have developmental delays. Jordana has various physical issues, but she's just a charming young woman. She did stand up comedy for a while. Stand Up for Mental Health was one of the programs that some guys were putting together. She did a little class, learned how to do stand up comedy. She tells great jokes about her mother. Oh, my God. We started the Williams Syndrome Association, contact with people all over the world. I was the chair of it. That sort of where you wanted to go? Okay.

**KN** [00:56:21] That's good. I'm just wondering Patrice if there's anything else you would like to say about your time working in the B.C. labour movement? Anything at all?

**PP** [00:56:31] You know, fraught with peril. Wonderful. Awful. I learned I had to sometimes go hibernate and recover and then come back. I was in things, Ken, both political and well political (hand quotes), so that would be union and politics where you'd be on a team with somebody working in a nomination battle, you'd lose, and dirty tricks were played throughout. The next day, you'd be on the same team, or you would be on the team with a guy that you couldn't stand working in another campaign, and you'd be calling him brother and you'd be having beers with him. I learned how to be resilient. I learned how to deal with ups and downs of life. I got opportunities that I could—I've travelled all over, both with the credit union, the co-op movement. You never mentioned that I was chair of the Canadian Co-op [Cooperative] Association as well. Yes. I don't know whether that's anywhere, but I was chair of the Canadian Co-op Association. Vancity put me on to the co-op board, so I did that. An unbelievable career and that's why I am having trouble even talking to you, because when I started to look through all my files and everything, I found so many remembrances. Some, of course good and some not. As I said, PTSD sometimes

because those were the ones where I'd have to go recover, but then the most amazing opportunities and the people. Tamara Vrooman was pretty funny one time. She said to me because she also knew Carole Taylor and was friends with her. She said, 'Between you and Carole Taylor, I know everybody,' because I knew the whole mid to left. People go, 'Oh yeah, I've heard of Patrice Pratt,' or 'I know them,' or whatever. It's been an amazing career and amazing time in my life.

**KN** [00:58:31] I'm just wondering, given all that, whether you have any words of wisdom for someone who's just becoming active in a union and discovering history [unclear] what's going on?

**PP** [00:58:40] Young women. Ken, I think I'm going to write a memoir. I've been talking about that for years and years and years, and now I sort of have time to do it—but what a formidable task. I'm just going, 'Oh, my gosh.' Then again, going through things for this interview and for possibility of doing this memoir thing. Whoa. I always like to talk to young women. You know, I'm finding interestingly, young men seem to want to talk to me about stuff, too. I don't know. I'm that senator-elder-thing-person that people think, 'Oh, let's see what Patrice has to say.' People ask me all the time to be their references, so there's some respect or something there, which is good. I tell the story about how I was afraid to stand up and say my name. I tell the story, Ken, when I was at a CLC convention, and often you have to stand up. You have to go up steps and there's a little platform. My knees were knocking. My knees were—I thought that was a funny expression. 'Oh, your knees knocked. Ha Ha.' My knees were knocking—like it really happened. I tell that to young women, young men or to people, I go, 'Hey, I wasn't always like this. No, I wasn't.' You're brought forward because there's a message from the heart. There's something you really care about, you have to say. I used to also, I would speak at a microphone at a convention, and I would leave, and I would not remember what I said. It was almost like protecting myself. You know, to have amnesia after I spoke. If I had said something really stupid or dumb, I didn't remember it. I never—I can read a speech, and I had to read speeches for various positions I held, but I just make like little baby cryptic notes and then just blab. Then half that problem is I don't remember what I said, but—so that's it. I would tell people, you too can do it because I don't have any major education. You just got to have in the heart and in the gut—and then you go.

**KN** [01:00:45] Okay. Given that you were in the Labour Heritage Centre, and you understand something about union history, why do you think it's important for young union activists today to know something about the history of their union and also about the history of the union movement in general?

**PP** [01:01:02] There were times where in the BCGEU's various reorganizations where young folks or people that were against the particular administration and were working on another campaign would do things that I would go, 'Why are you doing that? Like, why are you doing it that way? Why?' It is critically important for people to see how things were done. History repeats itself. If something didn't work in the way that it was done, you need to somehow change that and do it better. There is a learning circle that I used to teach whenever I was doing the education programs and things at Harrison and with our own union. You come up with an idea, you got people in the room. I always, by the way, I led differently. I would not—I would be a democratic leader more than others. I respected what everybody said. I wanted to listen to everybody. Maybe my kid had a childhood disability. Maybe that did it. I don't know. I wasn't afraid of the people in the Downtown Eastside at all. I would go talk to people. I still do today. You need to see how things were done. This would be the history of the trade union movement and the BCGEU. You need to go: 'Okay.

Wasn't that successful? Was it successful? How can we change it?' It's that learning spiral. Then you do it. You complete, then you start again.

**PP** [01:02:30] You know, there's just—there's wisdom in our elders. There's wisdom in the way we did things sometimes. We should learn, and then we don't have to do everything obviously the same. Of course not. That we'd be silly. The technology now today is like stunning, and so there are different tools. The good old organizing, you know, I remember I worked really closely with my friend Sharon Prescott all the time and she'd go, 'Are we going to hit the phones?' I go, 'Yes, we're hitting the phones.' I still do that today. Even though I could send a message to somebody, I pick up the phone and call them. I did that with you Ken. Remember I said, 'Ken, I just want to talk?' You talk any time. There's certain things that we might have lost today that I think were very effective and would still be effective. Those are the kind of things we should learn from and look at and educate ourselves and labour histories is just doing such a wonderful job at that.