

Interview: John Bowman (JB)

Interviewer: Phil Legg (PL)

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Transcription: Cathy Walker

PL [00:00:06] Okay, John Bowman, thank you so much for spending some time with us on the BC Labour History Project that the Heritage Centre is doing. You've had a really interesting career in the labour movement and we'd like to talk a little bit about that, but before we do, why don't you just tell us about John Bowman, the early years.

JB [00:00:27] I was born in Ontario. My father worked in the service and for General Motors of Canada. He was a mechanic originally and then sort of moved into the service echelons of the corporation. He moved us around for various jobs and we moved, that's how we ended up in Winnipeg. I basically grew up in Winnipeg. My parents didn't have that much money when we first got there, so we lived in the north end of Winnipeg, which is the working class, surrounded by Ukrainian people, Ukrainian workers. It was a great place to grow up. Kids all played together. Nobody knew we were poor. I had no idea till much later that there was another world of people that had different things. We'd run around, ran wild around the neighbourhood. My parents never had any idea where I was, and people just watched over each other and it was a great place to grow up. I went there.

JB [00:01:32] My parents eventually got transferred back to Ontario, but by that time I was in university at the University of Winnipeg. I stayed and they all moved back to Ontario. I was in a four year Bachelor of Arts program at the University of Winnipeg in downtown Winnipeg. I took a liking to history and specifically labour history, so I started taking a bunch of courses from profs who were--they had a couple of profs there who'd written a number of labour history books. I started there, plus they had all the papers—a lot of the papers from the One Big Union and Winnipeg General Strike were in that library that were in that university. I was looking at them and writing some essays from those papers, so I developed an interest in unions.

JB [00:02:27] Then my second year I started to get involved in the weekly newspaper that the student union put out and decided that maybe what I would like to do is be a journalist. I took a lot of courses in journalism and wrote a ton of articles and wrote a bunch of articles about unions, about labour disputes and strikes and go out on picket lines. I met people from unions at that juncture. By the third year I was in university, I was the editor of the paper, which was pretty much a full time job, plus taking a full course load for my third and fourth year. I still have nightmares about missing classes and missing papers from those years because it was totally insane. The editors before me typically only took one or two courses and did the thing, but I wanted to get out of university. I didn't want to be there for longer than I needed to be.

JB [00:03:32] We went through that and I finished up there with a four year degree, then continued into journalism, worked for a paper that we were just putting out for high schools, being through the Association of Student Councils. They wanted to take a stab at putting out a newspaper and distributing in the high schools, which was a very difficult situation because in those days high schools did not want any political issues to be raised. They did not want that newspaper to be distributed in their place. We also wanted to, we did some training of journalists, too. We brought in kids who were working on high school

papers and had discussions about a lot of issues that I don't think the high school really wanted to be discussed. That was interesting.

JB [00:04:26] After a year there, I also did some work for Canadian University Press, which is the network of student papers as their bureau chief operating through the telex system, sending stories all across Canada through the CNCP Telex Service, which was a real innovation in that time frame, writing, doing that for a while.

JB [00:04:55] I got to know a lot of the people in CAIMAW because there was a famous strike in Winnipeg at the Griffin Steel Foundry that lasted the better part of two years. Lots of strikebreakers--the company tried to operate with strikebreakers. This was a foundry that made wheels for trains. It was a rough place to work, fabricating steel and doing all that kind of stuff. The issue was compulsory overtime. The employer had been not hiring enough staff and expecting people to work overtime. They had provisions in their collective agreement so they could force people to work overtime and that became the issue in the strike. The employer did not want to get rid of that. They were out on strike and then they tried to run the plant with strikebreakers and bussed them in. I was there every morning for months, this was while I was working at the university and the editor. We came every morning and there'd be people arrested and full pitched battles with the police. The whole bit that you get when you bring strikebreakers into a plant, a lot of creative things. At first they went in their own cars, but after a lot of creative things were done to those cars, you did not see any more cars. Then they went to buses. They brought buses. The police would all gather at the time when the buses come in and there's lots of tussling and violence. Because I was partly there for the newspaper, I was in the middle of it taking pictures which the police did not appreciate. I was amazed that I never got arrested because a lot of people got arrested during that dispute. I got told off many times, but not arrested.

JB [00:06:47] That was my direct contact with CAIMAW. That's how that started. I got to know the people there. Then one day they offered me a job to come west, come here in Vancouver to edit their newspaper. These were the days when they were in a pitched battle with the United Steelworkers. I had a laugh when I came in here. For membership, the Steelworkers, of course, was a much larger organization. They had well-developed communications and news media. CAIMAW, as you know, was always a very small organization with minimal staff and didn't really have any—what they wanted to do was start putting out a regular newspaper, develop some more expertise in putting out materials for campaigns. It fit within my interests and skill set. I didn't really know at the time whether I wanted to go and work for a union. I can remember the interview and I said, you say some things that are pretty blunt when you're a young student. I remember being in the interview and they were telling me what they wanted me to do. I said, Well, I'm interested, but you're not asking me to lie for you, right? I asked them that question point blank. You're not asking me to lie because I'm not going to. If you're looking for somebody who is just going to put out, make stuff up out of whole cloth to sell your organization, don't hire me. I'm not interested in doing that. In retrospect, I thought I probably could have been a little less blunt but anyway, they actually liked that. They thought it was—Jess Succamore, who I think you already had. He came out from B.C. and then Pat McEvoy was the regional vice-president in Winnipeg at the time, who I already knew quite well. I think Peter Cameron came out too. I think they were out for perhaps another purpose, and just fit in the interview. It was them and so they hired me. Then I came out here to a completely different place. It took a while to get adjusted to that and then started working, putting out their newspaper regularly and of course getting involved in various campaigns.

PL [00:09:26] Any particular disputes that were front and centre for you when you first started?

JB [00:09:33] I was there for that big Kenworth strike. I can't remember how long that was over the women in the data processing who were organized into the union. We wanted to bring their wages up so they were more in line with the production workers who we already had. That plant was always a very militant operation. The workers basically ran that plant. It was an example of old time industrial unionism. The employer did something that they didn't like, all of a sudden, the number of trucks that came out in an hour would plummet dramatically. That was the way the plant was run and so they had periodic disputes over time. This one ended up being quite a lengthy one because the employer had a big office. We'd just organized the data processing workers. We were allowed to do that. The B.C. Board never would have let us do that in the modern era, but then they did. They let us organize that and employer could see all the other non-union office workers there and they didn't want to make any big wage increase for those seven or eight data processing. This is old time data processing where they're all using the old time computers and cards. They put us out for a long time. We were out seven, eight months, I think maybe. A lot of interesting things went on during that dispute. They didn't really try to run. They tried to run the plant with foremen, but they didn't bring in, they would never dream of bringing strikebreakers into that place. It was long drawn out. We eventually got something that got some significant improvements for those workers. But they never forgave us for that strike and eventually they closed the plant a number of years later and then consolidated their production in the United States. The reality is they probably, with modern technology, didn't need as many plants as what they had. We were first on the chopping block because of the union militancy in there.

JB [00:12:00] That's one I can remember. There was a lot of disputes going on in those days. Every year we would have two or three usually.

PL [00:12:13] That were some mining certs that were also big ones, Endako and places like that, where you had really significant battles going on. Mining is a different animal.

JB [00:12:27] Yeah, we had battles on two fronts. We had battles with the Steelworkers and we had battles with the employers. One of the things we were trying to do there, which at the time was revolutionary, was to try and get workers who worked for the same company to strike together and do things together, sometimes legally, sometimes illegally, to force the employer to give a better offer in settlement. For example, Placer was one of the big mining companies here. We had a couple of their operations in Endako and Gibraltar. The Steelworkers had one in Craigmont. We'd try and get everybody to go together. One went out, the other two would. One of the things was we implemented an emergency assessment plan. If the guys went out at Gibraltar, immediately the dues went up an extra hour at Endako. The entirety of that extra hour went to the strike, and vice versa. We tried to do that with Craigmont. We wanted to bring the Steelworkers in but they obviously had hard feelings about the fact that we took both of those other mines from the Steelworkers. They weren't in the mood to do any kind of, which was unfortunate because of course, it means that one of the three mines was not involved and was working while the other two were out, so we couldn't fully achieve what we were trying to get across. That was where we tried secondary picketing. We would also go and try and shut down the other mines. We had limited support from Craigmont. They would agree to go out for a day or two illegally, but we would do the picketing and they would just stay out. The other mine, of course, we would go and shut them down for longer. We got in a lot of legal

issues about that because it wasn't really permitted under the Code. Those are the kind of things we tried.

JB [00:14:40] What we were trying to do, is try and build a broader sense of solidarity from workers who worked for the same employer and do that wherever we could. We tried it in some other situations, too. Unfortunately, because of the way the legal structure is for certification, that's really discouraged. It's kind of unfortunate because when you think about it, if unions were ever able to function that way, I think we would be a lot more powerful and stronger in terms of these strikes where you see people just being left out for months and years, meanwhile all the other unionized operations around. We did this not just in B.C. In Kenworth, our guys would go to Quebec and picket and shut down the Ste. Therese, Quebec Kenworth plant. When those guys in Quebec went out, they came over and they shut down our plant. We did cross-province shutdowns, also all illegal. It was again we having courage and those guys over in Quebec were not in our union obviously they were in CSN I believe, so we were trying to do that.

PL [00:15:57] In the case of the mining sector, did your agreements expire all at the same time?

JB [00:16:06] Yeah, we got there eventually. They didn't originally, the original ones we took over from the Steelworkers. We did put our two together eventually so that they did expire. The employer resisted that. I think that was after a strike we managed to get them. They were close. They may not have been exactly, but they were within a few months of each other with that same idea in mind. The employers were very resistant to that.

PL [00:16:39] Other issues in the sector around safety and those kinds of--was that part of, did that factor into some of your campaign work?

JB [00:16:49] Oh, yes. We were very, you probably have interviewed Cathy Walker who was there. Cathy was kind of one of the main leaders of the labour movement in terms of health and safety. In fact, I got involved because one of my initial jobs there, besides putting out the newspaper, was handling all the WCB appeals. I took over all that from Cathy and there was a lot of them. Presenting the hearings, that's where I first got into presenting evidence at hearings was before the Review Board and the Compensation Commissioners on the appeal level. Then I ended up moving over to the Labour Board and doing the same thing, a little bit different, but the same kind of, that's where I learned about how to put witnesses on, how to present evidence, how to do all that stuff. I was a bit involved in that end of the safety stuff. We definitely made a point in our materials of emphasizing all the work that we did. Originally, when we were doing WCB appeals, hardly any unions were doing that. Most unions were just not, they didn't have people to do it. People were told to do it themselves or go and find a lawyer or whatever. We were one of the first ones that actually had somebody on staff trained and did the appeals for people. It was a lot of time and energy to do that.

PL [00:18:22] It created sort of a subclass of skills within the union.

JB [00:18:27] Yes. It served us well because then I was able to apply those skills then to being almost a full time labour—essentially functioning as an almost full time labour quasi lawyer at the Labour Relations Board, just handling huge numbers of cases. That was a big advantage I thought, for us because I was also doing organizing and doing that job. You could pick out the employers when you were organizing, you could pick out the employers who were going to be problems very early on. The fact that I was able to do all

the litigation means we weren't running over to lawyers constantly every time we wanted to do something. I wasn't having to go and say to my boss, Well, we're going to run up another \$10,000 legal bill here with this employer. I had the complete authority to just go and say to the employer, Look, anything you do that is contrary to the Code, you should know you're going to be down at the Board. Don't even think that it's not going to happen. That's what we'd have to do with some of these employers. I would just file everything. If you looked the wrong way at one of our people, I'd file a complaint because eventually they're paying. It pissed them off tremendously that they're paying lawyers for everything. They see me sitting across from the pit from them. We did pretty well at the Board with a lot of these cases because they were guilty. It was a really good thing.

JB [00:20:07] One thing when I was an organizer, I was kind of encouraging other unions. You really should get out of this habit of thinking you got to hire lawyers to do all this work because by doing that, you're running your expenses up and the effect is you don't really go after these employers in the new certifications who are testing. They're testing to see how much they can get away with. Many of them are like that. They want to know what they can get away with. It's got to cost them. If it doesn't cost them, they will keep doing it and eventually they erode the union base, so you can't get a first collective agreement or you get a crappy first collective agreement and you don't survive in the long run. Whereas if you can get that employer thinking, well, I got to be careful here, I got to be careful because I'm going to get another \$10,000 legal bill here. I noticed with a number of our employers, ones that started out really bad, they kind of saw the light after a little while. They could see this is costing me too much money to be in litigation with the union constantly. Then they start, not because they're good people necessarily, but because it's money. That's the only thing these guys understand is money, what it costs them.

PL [00:21:26] I can imagine too that, the employers are not stupid in the sense that they can see themselves becoming captive to the legal help that they're getting. And so a lawyer's going to suggest all sorts of do this, do this, do this, do this. Oh by the way, every time you do this, do this, do this, it's adding to an already a big bill.

JB [00:21:45] That's right. Some of these bills that these guys would be paying were just phenomenal. They'd be all pissed and complain to me about it. I'd say, well, you know what you need to do, don't get involved in litigation. It's not like we want to get involved. I got better things to do. I would rather be out organizing and doing other things than sitting at the Labour Board doing multiple day hearings. To me, that's kind of part of organizing, is having the resources in-house to police those employers.

JB [00:22:24] Most unions don't see it that way and they end up going out to outside lawyers. They don't have the faith in their own people to do the job. I agree, not everyone can do it. There's going to be some staff that are not going to be suited to the detail, fine detail work of doing hearings and all that. But people can do it. You've got to identify them and train them. My training consisted of going to a whole bunch of Labour Board hearings and watching. I just watched what the lawyers would do on both sides, ours and the others. I'd watch carefully how they presented the cases, and then I'd copy them.

PL [00:23:05] It's kind of one word.

JB [00:23:11] There's certain things like cross examination that you got to do a fair bit of it before you—but I think that's true of lawyers, too. You could tell a beginner lawyer from an experienced lawyer in how they conduct the case. It was a good experience and yeah, I enjoyed that work.

PL [00:23:34] In terms of organizing and when you were with CAIMAW, were there particular sectors that you guys were interested in?

JB [00:23:43] There was, but there was a lot of them because we were always open to wanting to be more than just a typical manufacturing industrial union. We got, I can't remember the order--we merged with the union that was in the White Spot and Kentucky Fried Chicken and had a few other units, which was called FASWOC. We merged with them and brought in all of those people. Then of course, we got into a big battle with the Local 40 and brought and took a bunch of hotels from them back in the early eighties and organized a bunch of hotels too. We established a footprint in that field. Then of course, through mergers, we're bringing in airline workers, we're bringing in railway workers, those all came in basically through mergers. We're trying to look at expanding once we were in there, expanding in those so we did some organizing in the airline field. Cascade Aerospace was one of our big campaigns here. So in trucking, we brought in a bunch of trucking through CBRT, the merger. Now we're into the trucking side and got involved in all the container trucking, which was a very interesting experience.

PL [00:25:14] Containers off the port.

JB [00:25:15] Yes. We were very involved in that because they had some organized by the Teamsters, but generally the workers were not happy with the Teamsters. We ended up deciding to take that on. It was very illuminating, shall we say, experience, but we organized a lot of them and then we ended up with the whole thing with the master agreement that the government imposed.

PL [00:25:47] My recollection was when there was a group of container truck drivers who were not organized, and struck. I remember this because Jim Sinclair, who I was working for at the time, got deeply involved in that one. Is that roughly around the same time that you guys were organizing?

JB [00:26:08] That's exactly when we came in. When we came in was right after that strike because they'd struck but they didn't have any union. There was a couple of the subgroups that were in the Teamsters, but the majority of them were non-union. We'd had some discussions with them and they said we want to have a longer term organization and we want to set up a union and we don't want it to be the Teamsters. We got in there and we had a number of Indo-Canadian members, we had Lamber Sidhu who I always worked closely with for many years, the Indo-Canadian organizer. We had some inroads into that community with its vast majority, Indo-Canadian community. We organized a bunch of them and got some conditions established. It's a struggle for a union to represent those workers because of the endemic undercutting that goes on in that industry.

PL [00:27:22] And the fact that the port would not follow through on the licensing.

JB [00:27:28] That hurt us, although I don't know what the solution is. The problem always is as soon as the collective agreements are signed or the minimum standards are signed, people start making deals with the employers to work for less. A lot of the businesses are also owned by Indo-Canadian people. They know the workers. There's all these connections going on and it's really hard to maintain whatever the standard is that you're trying to set. Yeah, because the undercutting starts the minute that the ink is dry. We needed a really effective way of punishing the companies. Then the issue comes, what happens to the drivers? You punish the company and kick them out of the port. What

about all those drivers? There was differing opinions about what should happen with those drivers. It's a really tough and I've not kept in touch with what has happened in modern times with that industry. I don't know if they've been successful in maintaining the rates that the government established.

PL [00:28:59] It's come through ebbs and flows. Isn't that about it? What I found most interesting initially when Jim got involved was that because they were not union, they couldn't use the force of injunction to stop them from blocking the port. Which I thought was, this was a moment you know just think.

JB [00:29:21] Yes. It just shows you how.

PL [00:29:25] Workers have power but there's been a contradiction of once you organize, you have a different set of handcuffs on.

JB [00:29:35] Yes. They were able to see that. I don't know. It was an interesting, very interesting experience working with those groups.

PL [00:29:49] Let me go back a bit and let's talk about the discussions that led to joining the CAW or coming into this.

JB [00:30:03] While we were really proud of the union that we had, the trends and industrial relations in the union side were for unions to get bigger. I think that we reached the realization that we couldn't just continue on as a relatively small organization forever. There would be a risk if we did that at some point we'd run into serious financial troubles, and then have to go and make a merger out of a position of weakness, which we've also seen happen. A decision was made that we would explore merging with a larger union. It really wasn't a long list of ones we would look at because our criteria were pretty clear. We wanted a union that was a Canadian union and one that would had a history of democratic leadership. It had to be an independent Canadian union. It was a fairly small, a pretty small list. The CAW seemed like the natural fit for us. They were a little more industrial base than what we were, but they're merging with all these different unions and bringing in different types of workers. They were becoming a broader-based union. They were the obvious choice for us. We discussed it with the membership at a referendum or conference. I think it was a referendum vote first, decided at a conference, then a referendum and was passed overwhelmingly and we came into the CAW. It was definitely different for us to come in. Now suddenly we're thrust into the Canadian Labour Congress and B.C. Federation of Labour, who were not our friends for most of our—

PL [00:32:27] Adult life.

JB [00:32:29] Union life. We still had memories of the Fed passing out those leaflets saying 'the strike-happy people at CAIMAW' and they put them out at all our workplaces or a lot of our workplaces. It was when Tom Fox was there, he put it out and they had all these stats showing how many strikes that CAIMAW had. We all just thought at the time, isn't this a sign of what is wrong with this labour movement that the house of labour would put out a bulletin to all the members complaining about a union for having too many strikes? Like, really? That's terrible, apparently. They put this thing out and we had a good laugh about it. That was the one thing about the merger that we did not want. We did not want to be in the Canadian Labour Congress or the B.C. Fed. We'd seen too many times how they became a vehicle for taking away radical action rather than encouraging it and trying to control anything.

JB [00:33:42] A great one of the examples that happened not that long after we merged that I just laughed at was you mentioned before about the Organizing Institute. Some of us organizers decided we're going to get together and just talk about organizing. We had one or two meetings and it was just organizers from different affiliates. I was very in favour of it because one thing I had noticed is that organizers don't tend to sit around together and talk about their campaigns and what they're doing. There's all this stupidity about I don't want to tell anybody about what organizing campaigns were doing and all this crap, which I never thought was a smart thing. I thought, why don't organizers get together and talk about what they're doing and what we can do to help them. If you're organizing a place that somebody else has tried and not succeeded on, maybe they have some info that they can pass on. Why don't we approach this more as a thing where we can help each other. We had a couple of good meetings, talked about those kind of things and Labour Board decisions of interest, things of that nature.

JB [00:34:52] Then I get the call from the Fed. Really what it is, is we want to control those meetings. We want to control it. Out of all that comes this big organizing federation and the classes, which weren't a bad idea. Training people to be organizers is not a bad idea, but it's just that now it became a meeting that everybody was supposed to come to every month and it wasn't the same. It wasn't the same as what I was hoping it would be, which is people just getting together and talking. People come or don't come. People who are not interested, don't want to do things with their unions, they don't come. But now everybody shows up because it's a Fed thing. Everybody comes and they have to send somebody and so we go there. Then we had the organizing federation, the training things which I was an instructor at, and again, a good idea to bring people in for training because it requires training. The only problem with it of course is you do the training and then there's no ongoing—you don't get together with these people on an ongoing basis to talk about what's going on, because of course it's all too secretive and nobody wants anybody to know what is going on. We didn't do much of that, which is unfortunate because I think training is only the first step. You get out there and you start organizing, there's a lot of other things that you need to learn and it's just too bad that we couldn't have had more of an informal kind of group approach to that. It did happen, of course, on individual basis. I know a few organizers in certain unions and we'd talk about stuff, the GEU. We've had some discussions with them and they were doing organizing and certain unions but it was interesting. It basically unfolded as we expected it would.

PL [00:37:20] Part of your working career has been on the administrative side in the labour boards. Talk a little bit about that, how that happened.

JB [00:37:32] I got a call from one of our union, Bob Chernecki, who's assistant to Buzz Hargrove, saying that they got an opening. The Federal Board picks members from the labour side and the union side, and those union side appointments are typically sort of informally given to unions. The CAW technically has one of the three spots. CAW is probably one of the biggest federal unions in terms of numbers out there. The person they had put in actually didn't really want to do the job. I think he changed his mind and didn't do it, so they were looking for somebody to do it and called me. It fit perfectly for me because I had already been working in the Board for ages putting cases to the Board. I also had been a part-time member at the B.C. Board, but that never worked because the B.C. Board didn't really believe in a member system. They really wanted just to have vice-chairs, single vice-chairs deciding all the cases so it was kind of tokenism. We had a bunch of part time union and a bunch of part time employer people, but we never felt part of the Board because we weren't involved in it. I said, yeah. My kids were just grown up.

We were actually thinking of making a move somewhere for a few years just to go somewhere different. That was another factor. You had to go to Ottawa to do the job. You cannot do the job from elsewhere, unless you're in Quebec. Then they ignore all those rules, but elsewhere you had to leave so we had moved to Ottawa.

JB [00:39:29] We moved there and took the job. It was very eye-opening to me. Having been in a system where there's full-time labour and employer people who are actually given a role to play and sit in on, on all the cases virtually, how much better it was than the single person system that they had at the B.C. Board. So many times when we'd be sitting on cases and the vice-chairs, they'd have varying amounts of labour relations experience. The Federal Board tends to hire a fair amount of vice-chairs who are a bit light on actual labour relations experience. They're more political appointments. They're lawyers, but they're not necessarily even labour lawyers, so they hire them. So many times we'd be in hearings and they'd be off on some total tangent that would have been a disaster if they had have gone there. The two wingers would sit down and say, No, no, this is not how it works in the workplace. This is what we need. This is what we need to look at if you're going to do something. It happened quite regularly. I just thought this is really the whole point of the system of having people from the labour and the employer side of labour relations is so you have people on those panels who actually know what it's like to handle grievances, to deal with industrial relations issues in the workplace. So often with a single vice-chair model, you've got people there who have no clue. They don't know, even the ones who specialize in labour law, they still haven't worked in a unionized workplace. They still haven't been involved in any shop floor industrial relations. They had their theories about how things should work but they're not based on being there.

JB [00:41:35] I was really impressed with how much influence we had. We had a lot of influence on how decisions were rendered at the Board. It was also interesting how much in common we tended to have with the employer side people, too. Most cases that you hear, the evidence takes you to the conclusion. At most there's very few cases that are so close that you have to really think about which way you're going to fall. The vast majority of the cases, the evidence takes you one way or the other. We were almost always in agreement with the employer side person. I think I did two dissents there when I was there in six years. It showed me really what the value was of having full-time wingers who are part of the system. Unfortunately, the whole nature of the adjudication has gone exactly the opposite direction into single, whether it be arbitrations or labour boards. It's all gone to single person panels for efficiency and all of that stuff. But you really lose something when you don't have people sitting on those panels who actually have lived the life in the trenches of industrial relations.

PL [00:43:18] It's a system that loads up a lot of power on to a single, one spot. And God help you if that spot is not well-schooled in what's going on in the real world.

JB [00:43:37] It was good. I enjoyed the time there and then I came back here and I bounced back running the regional office for the Board here. Then I even took some work with them as an officer because now the Board, Federal Board now runs the non-union terminations now under the Federal Board. That's a whole deluge of cases which they don't have, of course did not prepare for, have no staff to deal with. I was an officer in there and it was fascinating. It's fascinating there because under the Federal Code, the standards are exactly the same as for unionized workplace. It's now just and reasonable cause standard for termination in non-union federal workplaces, which I think is still news to a lot of employers. The weird thing about it is, it's the same standard, but there's no union. There's no union there so the parties are kind of in the dark trying to figure out what

they're doing. As an officer trying to settle a lot of these cases, it was very interesting because you're dealing with employees who don't really know what their rights are and employers who don't really know what they're doing. It was quite something to deal with. You help a lot of people out, work out some settlements that worked out well for both parties. That's a whole new thing that the Federal Board is doing, which is interesting.

PL [00:45:19] Talk a little bit about the challenges that the labour movement writ large is facing in terms of organizing. One of the things you hear an awful lot about is that given labour market conditions generally, this should be a bit of a sweet spot in terms of organizing. The question is, is it? If it isn't, do we have to be different?

JB [00:45:49] I have some theories on the latter point. I should tell you that I don't really keep up with what the modern success rate of certifications and stuff like that. I couldn't tell you now how many certs are being issued from the B.C. Board in the last few years. I don't know that. What I observed over all the years of working in the union was that we began to move to a system where—when I first started in the union in '78, when we were organizing, the organizing would be done largely internally by the workers. You'd have a staff person, you'd meet with them, give them cards and give them some guidance. But the vast bulk of the organizing would be done by the workers in the plants, signing their co-workers up and meeting and giving you the cards. That was the original way we did most organizing. Not a ton of staff from the union and most of the work being done in the plant. One of the good things about that system was that you're already laying the groundwork for workers to participate in the union after the certification because they've already started. They've already started talking to their co-workers, talking about things that they're looking for. Should the union come in, why they want a union and you're laying the groundwork for some of them to participate in the collective bargaining process and shop stewards and all of the infrastructure that you need to keep a union.

JB [00:47:34] What I noticed that started to develop over the period of years is we started to get into more and more situations where we'd meet with workers who didn't know any of their co-workers very well, didn't have any sense really of what the issues were with other people. They had their own issues that they could tell you about but didn't have real, a feel for the workplace, particularly in terms of where the other workers were at about this whole issue, hadn't really discussed the issue of unionization with hardly anybody. Where that leads is to us as a union then having to have more staff on the outside trying to do the organizing because we're now going door to door and signing people up and we're now the ones that are the initial people that are approaching the worker by phone or however in signing. It's now no longer a workplace-based campaign, it's now based in an office with some staff running it. Maybe, you're talking to your initial contacts, depending on your assessment of those contacts as to whether they're going to blab everything to somebody else. You may be talking to them, but it's not a worker-driven process now. It's a staff-driven process.

JB [00:49:09] That's very much how organizing tended to become more and more, while I was there, we're putting more and more resources in, more and more staff into organizing. It's because, a lot of workplaces, workers don't hang out with each other anymore. The initial ages of organizing when I was first there, first starting, workers would hang out with other workers. They might go to the bar after, they might go whatever, they'd go to social events together. People would sort of know their co-workers and in the course of conversations, unions might come up and they'd talk about it. That kind of all went and now you're dealing with most workplaces now, workers don't know each other that well and maybe not even hardly at all. They don't have those conversations. They're afraid to

have that conversation about unionization because they don't know what's a worker going to say. Is the worker going to go to the boss and tell them they had that conversation? It became more staff driven. Then it becomes who's got the most money to throw at it, because it's very, as soon as you move to anything that's staff driven, the costs of organizing rise exponentially. You've got to have all these people on the payroll and they're going out there and you've got to train them, you've got to supervise them, you've got to do all that stuff. It became a much, a bit more a more question of cost.

JB [00:50:55] What you started to see more, especially in an automatic certification scenario, is you'd organize workplaces with the cards, you'd get the cert, and then nobody wants to do anything. Nobody wants to be on the bargaining committee, nobody wants to be associated with the union publicly because you've done all this stuff privately. All has been confidentially so nobody wants to do anything. Now you're trying to dredge a committee up which may end up not being the best people that you could have on the committee, where it's whoever volunteers. You get a committee and then people start, if it's a service sector employer, they start leaving because of the natural turnover. Typically the ones who leave are the ones who were involved in the organizing because they weren't happy to be there in the first place. They're all gone before you even are getting to the first collective agreement. You'd have a lot of things where you either not get a first collective agreement or you get not a very good first collective agreement because you didn't have the troops. You were scared. You were totally afraid to take them on strike because you have no sense of whether there's any strength in the bargaining unit or not. You could have a strike and nobody show up at the picket line. It became a different system that kind of reflects the broader world of less community. Really, unions are based on communities. Having a community in the workplace of people who knew each other and could do things together. When that fell apart, as you said, it's fallen apart in broader society with less community. Wherever you look, it makes it harder, makes it tremendously harder to organize because you now don't have a community. You're now trying to build a community that didn't exist, getting people to come together and do things together and trust each other. It's a massively bigger project in the world today to organize than what it used to be and much more expensive. That's one of the things.

JB [00:53:13] Do I have theories about things that need to be done? Yes, I think that unions are really on the wrong, wrong wavelength when they put so much focus on things like automatic certification. Personally, I could care less about automatic certification. I honestly think if we're really trying to build something, we are probably better off having a vote and building around the vote and saying to workers, look, you are going to come, you're going to have to vote and you're going to have to organize that vote to win for us to get in there. I think in those situations you at least are starting to build something. You win the vote, then you can move from there to moving to collective bargaining. All the secretiveness and cloak and daggerism of card automatic certification doesn't build anything. Really, it's very hard to build anything because of the nature of the process. You get all these lame certifications that don't really mean anything.

JB [00:54:17] I wonder when I look, of course I'm familiar with what's going on with Starbucks down in the States. I look at that and I'm thinking, what is the strategy here? What are they doing? All these random certifications all over the place, where are they going? I don't know. I'm not there, I don't know what the strategy is. I haven't spoken with them. I know the way these workplaces are, having organized Starbucks myself. I know the way those workplaces are and they're very tough, very difficult to maintain—the constant turnover of people, very hard to maintain a community in there.

JB [00:55:01] The thing I think the labour movement should be doing and doesn't do, is fighting for access. I think the single biggest thing we could do legally if we could achieve this, and if the labour movement would ever get on side with it, is fighting for access to workplaces. By access I mean we'd go into those workplaces and we'd post whatever we want on their bulletin boards about unions, about what we're doing, encouraging people to join. By access, I mean we go into that lunch room and we can talk to people on their breaks without the employer's permission. We tell them, I'm fine with giving them notice, we tell them we're going to go in. We go in and we talk to people on their breaks. We poster, we have an area and we post. What that would do, if over time, if unions organized properly around this, you'd build a presence in a workplace so we are not seen as the foreign body that comes out and hands leaflets out like some Jehovah's Witnesses at the corner or some group like that. We're coming from outside and handing--that's the image we have now is we're outside. We're some invasive species that's trying to disrupt their workplace and come in and the employers cultivate that to the max. Meanwhile, the employer's sitting there in the office. He's right there. He's got the full, all the advantages of supervision, day to day contact. It's a total mismatch between the two sides. Totally.

JB [00:56:40] We need to change that. That's what we need to do. We need to get it so there's more of a culture that we are insiders, too. We're not out on the street. I think if we could do that, nobody's ever done it as far as I know, no jurisdiction has ever implemented that kind of thing, and the employers will not accept that easily. But that to me would be way better than automatic certification because it gives you a chance to try and build a culture of us not being outside, us not being foreign bodies, it'd be normal to have a union and interact with the union. There'd be problems with it. We'd have to come up with totally new strategies of doing things but I'd much rather be doing that than what we're doing now, which is to me, it's a process that's tilted against us.

PL [00:57:40] Don't want to go too far, but I'm reminded of the argument around or the discussion around sectoral bargaining. The Starbucks example is a good one because if you're talking about organizing, is the organizing a model that has to reflect the corporate structure that you're dealing with. The barista is a barista is a barista. What you're trying to do is establish a Starbucks-wide wage scale, benefits, whatever. Does that fit in with your thesis around access and kind of the workplace kind of thing?

JB [00:58:33] Certainly I'm not opposed to sectoral bargaining. We actually fought for that a fair bit within CAIMAW to try and get, we almost had it because I remember I think it was in a proposed Labour Code one year time and the NDP got cold feet and pulled it. I'm not opposed to it. It could be a good thing, but I think it's a very different thing than access. There's a lot of complexities with sectoral bargaining, which I think is one of the reasons why it never, the NDP backed off it. That is how do you set what the terms and conditions are for sectoral bargaining? In a way, there's sectoral wages now. It's not bargaining, but there's sectoral, all the Starbucks baristas have a standard set of wages and benefits. The benefits of all the other baristas, I don't know how they compare, but they're probably not tremendously different than what Starbucks pays. Where do you set the wage so that it becomes attractive for people to come to the union? If you're just setting it at something that's very slightly above what is being paid now, I'm not sure that it's going to be attractive enough to bring in the additional workers that you want to come into the union. It would definitely make it easier for the union to achieve collective agreements. It would achieve that purpose because you're coming in, you've already got the collective agreement. You don't have to go through all that process. Then you can focus on other things to build the union, so I'm not opposed to it. I think it's a useful idea. It would be interesting to see how it worked. I think one of the concerns we had was that a bad union could come in to a sector

and set up a bad sectoral agreement that then could be said to be the sectoral agreement, and then everybody else is stuck with that agreement. I guess that's the concern I have is how do you, who sets that sectoral process?

JB [01:01:15] It would certainly make it easier to get to the collective agreement stage. I wouldn't oppose it, but I think I would prefer still the access because I just think that that has the more promising long-term approach, benefits to trying to change the culture, which is what we have to do if we're going to build unionism.

PL [01:01:46] Very good. Actually a good place to end. Thanks for your time. It's been enlightening.

JB [01:01:52] Thank you.

PL [01:01:53] I really enjoyed it.