

## Ep. 26 – Lenkurt Electric: Turning the Tide

### Transcript by Patricia Wejr

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:08] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that shines a light on BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we revisit a bitter wildcat strike nearly 60 years ago that had a profound impact on the BC labour movement. Several top union leaders went to jail, and the heavy-handed intervention of the international union accelerated a move to Canadian unions. The dispute erupted at a plant in Burnaby called Lenkurt Electric in 1966. We will hear from Ian McDonald, author of a forthcoming book about the Lenkurt strike and his firebrand union dad, Les McDonald, and from strike participant Jess Succamore, who went on to play a major role in the independent Canadian union movement. As a special bonus, Bill Hood has written the song just for this podcast, Lenkurt Electric: Turning the Tide, which is performed by his band the Gram Partisans. We hope you like it as much as we do.

#### **Music: 'Lenkurt Electric: Turning the Tide' performed by the Gram Partisans**

[00:01:28] Do doo do doo do, do doo do doo do, do doo do doo doo do. On Lougheed Highway just before Bainbridge, there was a smackdown at Lenkurt Electric the end of April 1966. They fired all the workers, made a mess to get fixed. The contract was ending, they were bargaining hard, but their American union wouldn't push very far. An overtime ban was just taking effect. Most workers were women, gettin' little respect. Lenkurt Electric, I remember it well. Hundreds of picketers givin' them hell. Lenkurt Electric a step on the way to a better tomorrow, strong union day.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:02:44] In the 1960s, most union members in BC belonged to unions with their headquarters and top leadership based in the United States. These international unions weren't an issue for most BC locals, but sometimes there were problems. Big problems. None more so than at Lenkurt Electric, a telecommunications equipment manufacturing plant based in Burnaby. Most of the plant workers were women, members of Local 213 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The IBEW had a long progressive history in BC dating back to 1901, particularly local 213. But the local's progressive approach often rubbed international leaders of the union the wrong way. That hostility boiled over at Lenkurt. Ian McDonald fills in some of the background that led to the wildcat walkout.

**Ian McDonald** [00:03:46] So what's the dynamic inside the Lenkurt Electric plant? There's about 400 workers, like I said, who belong to 213, many of them women. Meanwhile, there's a couple of men who work in the metal workshop, and the metal shop supervisor is a fellow by the name of Jess Succamore. Part of the problem with understanding Lenkurt is that things had broken down recently in Local 213. The manufacturing representative to the union, John Morrison, had just been suspended for slander against the international representative, Jack Ross. So I gotta go backwards to explain why there's a vacuum in terms of the power relationship in the union. So Collins Radio was a Texas outfit, and they'd sent up supervisor people to do inspection and install radio equipment in the mountains, the towers surrounding the Lower Mainland. But they'd been caught by IBEW workers who say, who are you guys? This is a union job. Well, we're from Texas. Jack Ross said, well, no, they're allowed to do it. I gave them permission because they're all supervisors. You don't have to be members of the IBEW. Morrison had exploded on him and Ross had suspended him for three years for slander. So that meant there was no official representative from the manufacturing section of Local 213 to Local 213. And so who gets appointed is a future mayor of Burnaby. His name is Tom Constable. He gets

appointed as the main representative of the manufacturing section, but he's a rookie. Doesn't know what the ins and outs are.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:05:38] Ian mentioned Jess Succamore. A sheetmetal worker from England, he emigrated to Canada in 1952, working at a variety of jobs before landing at Phillips Cable, which also happened to be a Local 213 plant. A long strike there in 1962 was an eye-opener for Succamore, making him question how strong big unions actually were since the strikers did not receive a dime in strike pay from the International. A few years later, Succamore worked briefly at Lenkurt, left, and then he got a call from a Lenkurt foreman in 1966.

**Jess Succamore** [00:06:18] I get this phone call and he said, how's things going? I said, oh pretty good. Not too bad. No complaints, you know. He said -- I'm thinking why the hell would Wally me? He'd hardly ever talked to me when I was in there, the bloody place, you know. He said, have you ever thought about coming back here? I said, no, not really. Which I had, it was amazing. I said, why? He said, well, he says, I've got a position he said, that you might be interested in. I said, oh, yeah, what's that? He says -- I said, well, I remember saying, aren't you in contract negotiations? Oh yeah, he says, but don't worry, you wouldn't be in that. He said I want you to come back as a supervisor in a metal shop. I was back there only for a few weeks when the bloody dispute took place. And all I knew about it was that there was a foofaraw coming. If there was a strike, there was a strike. I'd been through it before. I didn't -- I wasn't involved emotionally or any other way. It took place, so I thought, I'll get a job someplace else. That's what I thought. And it. Things turned out it changed my life completely.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:07:36] The women workers at Lenkurt were angered by the International's firing of their business agent, John Morrison. They responded by electing an even tougher shop steward committee. Ian McDonald says negotiations for a new contract were difficult.

**Ian McDonald** [00:07:52] Chuck Hunter, the president of the Lenkurt Electric Company, had decided that the only way to keep quotas at the level they were supposed to be at was by forcing people to do overtime. Otherwise they'd be penalized through the contract they'd signed with their customers. And he especially leaned on the women workers. Now, a lot of them were single mums. And, you know, Jess Succamore describes very well, that he saw women in tears, crying. They didn't know what to do because it's not as if they could decline the overtime. They'd lose their jobs as well if they did. And then Chuck Hunter decides to go away to a conference in Harrison Hot Springs. His vice-president, a fellow by the name of Mark Swails takes over, and he's much more sympathetic. He decides, okay, no more overtime until the new contract. And so Hunter comes back, reimposes the overtime. Problems. So the local union, Succamore, but especially the new shop steward -- his name is George Brown, he's a Scotsman -- decides that we have to do something.

**Jess Succamore** [00:09:11] That really got me going. I was mad. I could have told them to shove it and gone and got another job someplace else. It didn't bother me. But what happened is when they started to fight, I thought, I'm not going to let them down. I'll stay with them. So that's how I got on the hook there. One thing led to another, led to another.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:09:30] What it led to was workers walking off the job. Ian McDonald.

**Ian McDonald** [00:09:36] So they decide to have a study session in the parking lot to discuss the overtime, the reimposition of the overtime by Chuck Hunter and in order to make sure that the union wasn't involved, Succamore and Brown were meeting with Swails in a meeting room and the workers walk out. So it made it look like it was magic that it just happened. It was spontaneous, when in fact, of course it wasn't. But it looks spontaneous. They go into the parking lot. They're supposed to have a couple of speakers and have open mic and then go back to work after an hour or two. They get out there. And because Succamore and Brown were in a room with the vice-president, they get out there just as somebody else -- and we still don't know who it was -- takes the microphone and yells, let's go down to the union hall. And everybody decamped down to the union hall rather than going back to work.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:10:37] At this point, they were on their own. Les McDonald, Ian's father, and other local IBEW executive members had been away at a union meeting in Winnipeg.

**Ian McDonald** [00:10:47] So they decide to go down to the union hall. Well, the main movers and shakers are away in Winnipeg. What to do? And so you have the people who would later on become movers and shakers, people like Jim Kinnaird, who was the head of the inside wiring section at the time. They calm down everybody, but okay, you don't want to go back to work. Don't go back to work. Succamore meets the plane April 29th with the four delegates from Local 213 at Vancouver airport, says we got a big problem, right? Oh my goodness, what to do? What to do? My dad was on the plane. So they decided they are going to have another meeting, they have a meeting with the workers and everybody from right-wingers like Angus MacDonald to left-wingers like Les McDonald to just, you know, straight trade union guys like Art O'Keeffe, who were militant, you know, not afraid of a good fight. No, we're not going back in.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:11:54] The company decided to play hardball.

**Ian McDonald** [00:11:57] Well, Hunter was, he was American. And he was what was described as a bull of the woods kind of guy, hated unions. And he thought he had -- and he was right -- 213 over a barrel. And he said, yeah, the workers that are out -- there's 265 of them that are out -- they've got one day to get back in. But you know, when they come back, they have to reapply for their jobs. So seven of them go back. Which leaves 257 still out. What does Hunter do? He immediately puts an ad in the Vancouver Sun for jobs at Lenkurt Electric. 1300 people apply for jobs. So they've got more than enough replacement workers to come in. Meanwhile, Les McDonald had gone out to see the plant. There were no picket lines, or one or two. It was disorganized. And, you know, Dad hated the fact that it was so badly organized to, you know, 'til the day he died. It bothered him. So he comes back, starts to organize some of the women. We're going to leaflet this place, that place in Vancouver, let everyone know that there's an official strike on, and we've got to get the BC Fed and the Vancouver & District Labour Council involved as well.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:22] The dispute turned into a cause celeb. Outraged by the company's hard-nosed attitude, large numbers of union leaders and rank and file members from other unions joined the fired workers' picket line, defying a court injunction against picketing at the plant.

**Ian McDonald** [00:13:40] And they decide of course, they need to shut down Lenkurt. Massive picket lines at the three entrances to the plant. So, who shows up? Well, you know all the who's who of the left in Vancouver at the time show up. They're issued by

representatives of the legal system with injunctions. When they're read out there's coughing fits so you can't hear them. They accidentally on purpose smack them out of the person's hands. They tromp on them. Doesn't work. But replacement worker scabs are coming in, so we have to... what are we going to do? We have to close entrances. Les McDonald's apprentice at the time, his name was Ernie Fulton. Ernie -- this is '66 -- Ernie would become the light heavyweight wrestling champion of Canada and represent Canada at the world championships in '69. He's a big guy. And he's a tough guy, right? So I'm gonna read Ernie's quote that he gave to me in an interview way back when: "Les came to see me and said, we're going to have to break the line the cops have made to herd the scabs in. So he recruited some of the bigger guys like me and Tom Clarke, vice-president of IWA Local 1-217, another big guy. The plan was to distract two of the cops and walk them back in the opposite direction. Tom and I would walk together and at a prearranged signal, the people in front of us would all step aside, and we would run at the cops and form a spearhead, with all the other people behind us. Then we would surge across the entrance and block it. It seemed like a good idea. Things ran according to plan. With the people stepped aside, we ran at the cops. I tackled one of them around the waist, and Tom tackled the guy next to him. What happened after, I don't really know, because the four of us tumbled into a ditch. I turned around and as I went down, I could see all the other people surging across the entrance and pushing the cops aside. I thought to myself, well, we've accomplished what we set out to do. Now I can try to keep myself out of jail. But instead of helping his guy up like I did, Tom Clarke started punching the shit out of him. So the cop I was with turned around and the two of them arrested Clark. I walked away and joined the picket line."

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:15:56] It was a wild day. Adding to the acrimony were charges that plainclothes RCMP officers were in the crowd acting as agent provocateurs. There were numerous arrests. Among those hauled away was Paddy Neale, president of the Vancouver & District Labour Council and later a Member of Parliament for Vancouver East.

**Music: 'Lenkurt Electric: Turning the Tide' performed by the Gram Partisans**

[00:16:18] So then they got an injunction like company's do, and they hoped the police would help get the scabs through. But they didn't count on the pushback they got, and the hundreds more workers who showed up and fought. Well, now the whole BC Fed and the VDLC would not let this go. They would not let it be. So some went to jail, many others got fined for daring to walk that brave picket line. Lenkurt Electric, I remember it well. Hundreds of picketers giving them hell. Lenkurt Electric a step on the way to a better tomorrow. Strong union day. Well you won't be alone when the fighting gets rough. And the help that you get will be always enough. I promise I'll be there right by your side. Brothers and sisters, turning the tide.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:17:49] It's hard to imagine how tough it was for unions in those days. Labour leaders regularly went to jail for defying court injunctions against picketing. They were known as ex-parte injunctions issued at one-sided court hearings without any advance notice to the union or regard for the issues that prompted the strike. That's what happened at Lenkurt. It was a time of almost constant labour warfare, and unions rarely fought on their own. Labour councils and the BC Federation of Labour were on the line, too, working hard to support unions and solidify respect for their picket lines. Meanwhile, at Lenkurt, Local 213 representatives tried to meet with the company, but Chuck Hunter would have nothing to do with them. That brought in the International. Ian McDonald.

**Ian McDonald** [00:18:43] And now what happens is the International office of the IBEW gets involved and they're very conservative. So they told Art O'Keefe, business manager of 213, you've got to get the workers back. He refuses. They immediately suspend him and they appoint Angus MacDonald. Now there's going to be three McDonald's in place here. Angus MacDonald, Les McDonald and James MacDonald, the Supreme Court judge that presides over the trial of the Lenkurt strikers. So, Angus MacDonald gets appointed business manager, in order to try to solve the problem of Lenkurt. And he orders -- he wants the girls to go back. The women refuse to go back. There are, as soon as it's announced that Angus MacDonald is the new business manager, Art O'Keefe has been suspended -- the militants are not happy. So there's a meeting of the executive board to discuss what to do -- of the remaining executive board members of Local 213. And it is crashed by some of the strikers. Walter Pooghkay, the husband of Donna Pookhay, he, Jess Succamore, Les McDonald and a bunch of others crashed the meeting. And a good old-fashioned donnybrook breaks out between the the militant, mostly left wing strikers, and the executive board members. There's Angus MacDonald gets punched out, two broken ribs. Jack Ross, the International officer representing the IBEW in British Columbia gets a fat lip. So then what do they do? They decide that they are going to occupy the union hall. And so they changed the locks. Angus MacDonald tries to get back in with the police, and the police goes, no, this is an internal union matter. We're not helping you out there. We don't want to get involved in this. So he's out. So they occupy the union hall for a week. And Dad gave out several sleeping bags. You know, he died of Alzheimer's and one of his memories, his last sentient memories, is that he was always disappointed that his favorite sleeping bag didn't come back, after the occupation. So of course, the union [IBEW International] in turn, goes to the BC Supreme Court to get an injunction. And it gets appealed, but they lose. They lose and they have to leave. The union hall, in fact, belonged to the International office, it did not belong to Local 213. Then things go downhill from there. There's a mass meeting of of Local 213, over 1000 workers are there. So the meeting gets taken over by the strikers because the executive board wouldn't let Art O'Keefe speak. They take it over, they jump on the stage, get control of the mic. The executive walks out. Art O'Keefe gets to say his... what are they going to do? They're caught. Because Lenkurt refuses to negotiate. They're trying to bring replacement workers in, scab workers in, the cops are on their side, the provincial government's on their side, Supreme Court judges are on the company side. It's a losing proposition. So they have to try to make good out of a very bad situation. And so they have a negotiating committee that's made up of the strikers representatives, including my father, Les. But it's refused a meeting with Lenkurt. They then redo it, and they have conservative reps, including Jack Ross on the new, four-member negotiating group. That group is accepted by Chuck Hunter. They negotiate basically the same agreement that had been rejected a month earlier by the strikers. Meanwhile, the 257, now 258 suspended members of 213, they can go back, but they have to go back and individually renegotiate their entry back onto the Lenkurt workforce. 181 do so. The rest do not, especially the shop stewards, no way, they're out of work.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:23:07] On May 28th, Lenkurt employees voted to return to work, but 75 of the strikers were not allowed back, including all those on the shop steward committee. The International then handed out its own punishment. Art O'Keefe was suspended for 15 years. Tom Constable was fired as business agent and suspended for three years. Les McDonald, Jess Succamore and George Brown were suspended by the IBEW for 30, 25 and 15 years, respectively. The suspensions meant they could no longer work at any operation where the IBEW was certified. Finally, it was the turn of the courts. 15 workers were fined a total of \$3,100 for defying a court injunction. Paddy Neale and Tom Clarke were sentenced to six months in jail. Art O'Keefe got four months, while Jeff

Power of the Boilermakers Union was sent to jail for three months. The Lenkurt strike was a turning point for those dissatisfied with the lack of Canadian autonomy in some international unions. Shortly after the IBEW brass announced the suspensions, those who were suspended and others who were not rehired by Lenkurt held a meeting at the Boilermakers Hall. Jess Succamore said what happened changed his life.

**Jess Succamore** [00:24:38] Well, it certainly did because what happened is circumstances and events, changes which have been recorded, Ian has recorded them quite well, is that I got involved there. And then, like the catalyst was that when the International moved in and usurped the power of the labour movement to support the workers in that issue, the collusion of the government and the union headquarters with the employer and using the court and all that. It was the invasiveness of it, you know, the injustice of the situation got me involved. I could have still then said screw that and walked away. When the betrayal came, it was Ian's father, Les McDonald who stood up at the meeting and said, you know, he gave a really eloquent speech, he was a great speaker. And he talked about the need for having our own bloody union controlled by the workers and all that. And then, calling on my memory of the old Canadian Seamen's Union guys, and having been aware that the union had been smashed. And a little bit about the Ironworkers being smashed. I didn't know a lot but I knew that the pieces were starting to formulate. What he said made complete sense to me. And I've never been a flag-waving nationalist. I'm a true internationalist. I abhor nationalism for the sake of nationalism. But I do recognize that we have to have a country if we're going to participate in things on an equal footing with everybody not looking down at or looking up at anybody. And one thing I like about Canada is just what my dad had taught me. Nobody's any better than you but you're not better than anybody else.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:26:40] By the end of the year, there was a new Canadian union for workers to join. The Canadian Electrical Workers, with Jess Succamore and George Brown taking leading roles. The union constitution highlighted rank and file control, and paying officers no more than the top wage earned by a union member. The founding document said this is a union made in Canada by Canadians, and only Canadian workers can change it. The CEW later turned into CAIMAW that fought against international unions for more than 20 years until merging with the Canadian Auto Workers, now Unifor. While the mainstream labour movement hated its raiding activities, there's no doubt that CAIMAW and other independent Canadian unions were a catalyst in the drive for more Canadian autonomy within international unions, and many Canadian members went on to sever ties completely from their international union. These dramatic events way back in 1966, played a big, big role in all that. Nor should we forget that four labour leaders went to jail just for being on a picket line. And they were not the last to do so until the NDP government of Dave Barrett ended the court's involvement in picketing once and for all, in 1973.

**Music: 'Lenkurt Electric: Turning the Tide' performed by the Gram Partisans**

[00:28:06] Lenkurt Electric I remember it well, hundreds of picketers giving them hell. Lenkurt Electric a step on the way to a better tomorrow, strong union day. To a better tomorrow, strong union day.

**Theme music: 'Hold the Fort'** [00:28:39] Hold the fort for we are coming, union hearts be strong...

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:28:48] We hope you enjoyed our look back at the historic wildcat strike at Lenkurt Electric. Thanks, as always to other members of the podcast collective,

Donna Sacuta of the BC Labor Heritage Center, Patricia Wejr for research and the interview with Ian McDonald and John Mabbutt, who produced the podcast and made sure everything sounded just right. Sean Griffin and Ian McDonald interviewed Jess Succamore in February of 2018. Plus, a special shout out to the Gram Partisans and Bill Hood, who wrote and performed the song you've heard during the podcast: Lenkurt Electric: Turning the Tide. Last but not least, Ian McDonald's book 'The Red Baron of IBEW Local 213, Les McDonald, Union Politics and the 1966 Wildcat strike at Lenkurt Electric' will be published later this year by Athabasca University Press. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.

**Theme music: 'Hold the Fort'** [00:29:54] ... side by side, we'll battle onward, victory will come.