

## Ep 6 – AUCE Achieves Full Maternity Benefits 1974

### Transcript by Patricia Wejr

**Bailey Garden** [00:00:05] Welcome to another episode of On the Line, stories of BC workers, a podcast that aims to bring British Columbia's rich labour heritage to light. I'm your guest host Bailey Garden, producer of On the Line and Project Manager at the BC Labour Heritage Centre. In 1974, years before other Canadian unions won full maternity leave benefits in collective agreements, the Association of University and College Employees, also known as AUCE Local One at the University of BC, made history. In its first collective agreement, UBC clerical and library workers achieved contract language that provided fully funded maternity leave for their members. It was a breakthrough not just for workers at UBC, but for families across the country. This is their story.

**Bailey Garden** [00:01:08] March is recognized in North America as Women's History Month. The 1970s are well known as a time of liberation for women, with increasing awareness of issues of sexism and feminist organizations growing in popularity. This was no different in British Columbia. Community organizations such as the Vancouver Rape Relief Society, Canada's first crisis centre of its kind, or labour organizations such as the Service Office and Retail Workers of Canada, better known as SORWUC, were formed largely by young people with feminism at the heart of their principles. For workers in my generation, that is the millennial generation, those born 1981 through 1996, many of the feminist achievements of the 1970s have simply been a given in our lifetimes. When I became a parent in 2018, I was guaranteed 15 weeks of paid maternity leave through employment insurance benefits by the federal government after giving birth, with an additional 35 weeks of paid parental leave that can be shared or split between each parent, calculated as approximately 55% of your regular weekly wages to a maximum amount of just over \$500. Many collective agreements for union workers and even contracts for non-union workers cover the difference on this percentage, ensuring that new parents in Canada receive anywhere from 70 to 100% of their regular working wages while on paid leave. Many of us in this generation do not stop to consider that it was our parents who were the first to have these sort of guarantees when starting a family. In 1981, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers won members across Canada 17 weeks of paid maternity leave after a 42 day strike, which helped to mainstream the concept of longer periods of leave than those provided through employment insurance benefits. Some labour history enthusiasts believe that a 1979 achievement by Quebec's Common Front, representing government, education and health workers, was the only instance of negotiated paid maternity leave before a CUPW strike. But in fact, UBC clerical and library workers led the way for maternity benefits here in British Columbia in 1974.

**Bailey Garden** [00:03:11] First, some background. Work leave for new mothers was first introduced in Canada when British Columbia introduced the Maternity Protection Act of 1921. This legislation allowed women to take a limited leave of absence before and after giving birth and outlawed dismissing women for these absences. A new mother was also permitted 30 minutes twice a day to nurse her child while at work. Employers not abiding by the legislation were subject to hefty fines. It doesn't sound particularly progressive by today's standards, but at the time it was the only legislation of its kind in Canada and it remained so for many years. With the introduction of the Federal Unemployment Insurance Act in 1940, now known as Employment Insurance or EI, maternity leave, as we currently understand it, was not included until decades later. The modern concept was first introduced in BC in 1966, and five years later the Canada Labour Code was amended. Under provisions to unemployment insurance in 1971, mothers with at least 20 weeks of insurable earnings could claim up to 15 weeks of benefits through the unemployment

insurance. Coverage included two-thirds of your regular pay up to \$100 a week. This represented a departure from provincially administered maternity leave to the federally regulated system that we know today. Before this change, a new mother would have to have quit work or return to work quickly if her family depended on her income. The positive results were evident. At the beginning of the 1960s, just over 30% of women aged 20 to 30 participated in the Canadian workforce, and by the end of the 1970s, that doubled to just over 60%. In 2017, it was reported that over 70% of Canadian mothers with children under age five are working. Janet Judd, a former postal worker, reflected on what it was like as a working single mother in BC prior to the introduction of maternity leave in an interview with oral historian Sara Diamond.

**Janet Judd** [00:05:03] Yes, I had eight children to support on my own and no money to do it with, so that's why I went to work there in the first place. This is most important of all. I was pregnant when I first started in the post office and I was so afraid they were going to find out about it because there were a lot of miserable women and men there that really didn't want me there, period. Well, it was probably because I was the only Black person there and probably because I'm very big at the mouth. I mean, I will tell anybody anything, any time and I don't back up. But at any rate, the supervisor, the head supervisor on the floor, asked me if I was pregnant and I told them no, because I knew if I said that I was, they would fire me. And I couldn't afford you know, I mean, I couldn't afford not to work because I had, you know, all the kids to feed. So needless to say, I worked and I was making a final dispatch in the morning shortly before 8:00. And I could feel the labour pain starting and about two hours after I left the job my baby was born in General Hospital. My doctor was very, very, very kind about it and I said please, don't send this medical report in until you have to. I said they're going to be asking you for it right off the bat. I said just take your time. I said don't send it in until I'm back at work. So when I did come back after having baby and they started giving me some static about, well you could have been hurt and you could have -- I said, yes, I could have been a lot of things I said and my kids could have been hungry. They finally established it for us, like after I had my baby, they gave us the same type of maternity leave as they had in some other branch of civil service. I don't know what it was, but anyway, you were required to quit. I think in your seventh month you had to quit, whether you felt well or not, you had to quit. And I realized that, you know, nowadays that the women have a choice, that they can work until they [want]. And oh yes, I think you weren't allowed to come back until the baby was until a month after or something like that. Because I remember after Angel was born, I think I went back to work about two weeks. They made the decision. They knew, you know.

**Bailey Garden** [00:07:21] The clerical and library workers at the University of British Columbia did not set out to revolutionize or popularize this relatively new concept of maternity leave in their very first collective agreement. As the Association of Union and College Employees, they were simply trying to organize themselves into a union that reflected their own principles, with the issue of pay equity at the top of their minds. The workers were almost entirely young women working in clerical occupations. The 1960s and 70s were a time when employment in the public sector was expanding and women were joining unions in large numbers. This new membership changed the face of the Canadian labour movement and greatly influenced the types of issues that were being brought to the bargaining table. Other unions had already tried unsuccessfully to organize the UBC staff in the past. Multiple scattered work sites worked against the earlier organizing drives. AUCE insisted it was a different kind of union -- independent, democratic, transparent and consensus-based. Its constitution included equal pay for equal work as the first objective of the Association. In 2018, the members of the current iteration of this Association, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 2950,

representing library, clerical and theatre workers at UBC, began a history project to commemorate the formation of AUCE Local 1 in 1973 and 1974. This included the digitization of 43 boxes of archival material, including textual records, photographs, pins and one audio cassette, and conducting their own oral history interviews with five of the founding members of the union. The project culminated with the launch of a video featuring these interviews titled 'A Union for Working Women at UBC, AUCE 1' produced by Julius Fisher of Working TV, along with the installation of a bronze plaque commissioned by the BC Labour Heritage Centre. The founding activists of AUCE were a feisty group of young workers who were determined to organize themselves into an explicitly feminist union.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:09:25] I remember the librarians who were in the faculty and I remember a librarian coming up and he says, well you're going to make almost as much money as me. And I said, yeah! [musical interlude]

**Sussanne Lester** [00:09:56] My name is Sussanne Lester, and I worked as a library assistant at the Koerner Library at the University of British Columbia. I began working at UBC in 1969. I was one of the organizers that won union certification for nearly 1200 library and clerical workers in 1974.

**Ian Mackenzie** [00:10:17] Well, the '70s, as we recall, was a period of political ferment, right? And you have to think back in those days with nostalgia, since we seem to be in a period of profound reaction...

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:10:32] Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem. They were becoming household names.

**Ian Mackenzie** [00:10:35] Everything was way to the left. I mean, even the government, even the university administration was to the left compared to nowadays.

**Bailey Garden** [00:10:41] Those are the voices of Ian McKenzie and Jackie Ainsworth.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:10:45] So, you know, there was a lot of women's liberation talk in general in the public. That certainly affected us for sure, in your early 20s.

**Ian Mackenzie** [00:10:55] You're a bunch of kids. And I mean, I was just a boy. I mean, we're all young people, mostly women. They just didn't take us seriously.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:11:01] Yeah. We were all in our early 20s.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:11:03] It was so important to us. I mean, we were going to change the world.

**Bailey Garden** [00:11:07] Emerald Murphy was another founding member of AUCE Local One. along with Sussanne Lester and Jackie Ainsworth, she describes those early motivations to join.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:11:21] I was working at the law school. I was working in a hut from World War Two with another woman, Elise. We were both secretaries. You're each working for three profs and it was this tiny little hut. Most of the time there was no heat. There was no bathroom.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:11:38] Some of the women who'd worked there for ten years got two weeks vacation and some women working in another department had been there for five years and they got three weeks vacation.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:11:45] It was really pretty awful working conditions.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:11:48] And when I first started working in the library, the stack attendants made two levels higher wages. So I applied for a job as a stack attendants. He said well, no, we don't hire women as stack attendants. So I said well, why are they paid so much higher than we are? And he just looked at me. He said, well because men won't work for those wages.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:12:07] Equal pay was always just a huge issue. It was sort of right there in our face, you know, janitors that were making like twice as much as our departmental secretaries sometimes.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:12:19] Inflation was going absolutely rampant and our piddly wages were not at all. We couldn't pay the rent. And I had seen so many injustices in terms of pay. I just had to get involved in a union. By the summer of 1973, there had been three unsuccessful drives to organize the nearly 1200 mostly female clerical and library workers at UBC.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:12:48] Jean and I were all enthusiastic, let's do this. And the activists were just so tired. It was difficult to get people ten people to want to try one more time.

**Bailey Garden** [00:13:01] The roots of AUCE Local 1 can be found in the late 1960s socialist feminist Vancouver Women's Caucus at Simon Fraser University and its offshoot the Working Women's Association, or WWA. The WWA was critical of the existing trade union movement for what it perceived as its failure to address the issues of working women. It offered seminars to women on union organizing, which were attended by several workers who went on to organize AUCE, including Jean Rands and Jackie Ainsworth. A new provincial labour code passed by BC's first NDP government elected in 1972, made union organizing easier for all workers. One of the things the new NDP Labour Code did was obligate non-union employers to provide contact numbers for all of their workers if a union requested them. This provision would have been useful for the organizers at UBC, but unfortunately the Labour Code didn't come into effect until October of 1973, a month after the union was certified. The next voice you're going to hear is Jean Rands, one of the leaders of the union and a mentor to many of the younger members.

**Jean Rands** [00:14:06] We managed to start over again and launched what turned out to be the successful organizing drive, which we launched in the fall of '73.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:14:17] We spent that summer writing the Constitution and bylaws. I just really wanted to be involved in trying to organize it. Independent, feminist, you know.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:14:28] As organizers, we emphasized that AUCE was a different union. It was committed to democracy, transparency and consensus-based decision making. It was independent and would control its own affairs. AUCE offices were all library or clerical workers on campus. Its constitution would prevent high paid, unresponsive bureaucracy. Union officials would be elected with strict term limits and pay limits.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:14:58] We had no idea how many were in the bargaining unit. And we were so nervous trying to figure out whether or not we were going to have, you know, the right percentage, 45% to apply. And I'm sitting in the union office during my lunch hour and this woman comes rushing in. Red hair, she says you won't believe it. You won't believe it. I'm like, who are you? Well, my name's Heather McNeil. I came out here to help you organize the union. I've just been working there a week. I'm in the finance payroll department. She said you won't believe what they did. They accidentally ran two copies of the payroll list, and they didn't want to give it to anybody to rip it up because everybody's like, they don't know who's in the union. So I'm new and they thought, she doesn't know what she's doing. And they gave it to me! [laughter] I was like, oh, no, this woman is totally a spy. If I take that she's going to... And I said like, well, where is it? She said well, I ripped it in half and I started ripping it in half. It was one of those, you know those... I started ripping it in half. And so then they walked away. So I put it in my backpack. I'm like, oh. So that's actually how we figured out how many were in the bargaining unit. Plus, we had everybody's, all their information. And we started going to their homes. During the organizing drive, we actually went to people's homes. And we had all these phone numbers.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:16:41] About 30 volunteer organizers signed up new members before work, afterward and on coffee and lunch break. Organizers divided the campus into 12 divisions based on geography and department.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:16:52] Twelve divisions, and then each division had a representative on the Executive.

**Ian Mackenzie** [00:16:57] There was no centralized power. We had to all get together and we had to reach a consensus collectively.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:17:03] Just before Christmas, AUCE applied to the Labour Board for certification with 630 signed membership cards. We then began membership meetings to ratify demands for bargaining. These meetings proved to be a powerful organizing tool.

**Jean Rands** [00:17:17] The meetings were mostly in fairly bigish lecture theatres. Some of them were as many as 300 or 350 people, even though they were outside working hours.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:17:29] We had divided up all the contract into different subject areas. Every single contract demand that we made in a subject area had been researched and passed by the membership as a contract demand. So it wasn't something that, you know, those of us on the bargaining committee just came up with one day. I remember Sussanne doing the mat leave and she did all the research. She looked at collective agreements across the country, what we needed, what we wanted. And every single one of those subjects was debated, in some cases for more than one meeting and in some cases several meetings before the membership agreed on, this is this is going to be the contract amount on this subject area.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:18:13] Because by the time it came for a vote on whether or not we wanted to join the union, we know hundreds of people had attended those meetings to discuss contract demands. And that was such a great organizing tool.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:18:26] In those days, you didn't talk about how much money you made. I mean, that was kind of the social no-no. People I remember at UBC were very, you know, well, I have a prestigious job working for the chair of this department or

whatever. But it took those meetings to say, well, this is what I'm making, what are you making? You know, and then all finding that we were making...

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:18:49] The injustices there came to light.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:18:54] For that first collective agreement, we really ran the university into the ground in terms of bargaining because they just came, they were just there, unprepared. They didn't put anything on the table. So we just, you know, ran with it, right. And we would decide which issues we were going to discuss on which days and who was going to say what.

**Ian Mackenzie** [00:19:15] In a way, we kind of had it sort of easy. I mean, like the first union contract, it turns out that the management was actually a pushover, right?

**Sussanne Lester** [00:19:25] Well, but we knew that. That's true. They had no human resources though. They had this Colonel McLean, and he was no leftist. His mindset was, you know, women are ladies and are treated a certain way and behave a certain way, and none of us behaved that way at all.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:19:40] Well, ladies or children.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:19:42] Yes, yes, yes.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:19:43] But you're right, Ian. I think we just totally, they were totally off guard. I mean, they were stunned. When I think of, you know, they were just in a bit of shock the way we talked to them at the bargaining table. And honestly, we didn't know what we could do either, that, you know, the wildcat or the walkout. I mean, it was the first time I felt our power.

**Bailey Garden** [00:20:11] At a special membership meeting on May 1st, 1974, it was agreed that fully funded maternity leave would be one of the bargaining demands. It read: "no employee should lose her job or seniority in case of pregnancy. She should collect the benefits of the maternity's provision of the Unemployment Act, plus the difference of these benefits and her monthly salary from the university upon return to work". Again, every bargaining proposal required approval from the general membership. The more information that came to light during these meetings, the more solidarity that the workers built with each other. Even older members of the clerical and library workers were on board, leading to a walkout in the registrar's office and ultimately a teach-in session.

**Sussanne Lester** [00:20:51] Blue-rinse matrons from the registrar's office, they walked because they were reading that stuff that Al Marsden had noted, that we had all noted, what the university administrators were saying about the clerical workers, that we were working for pin money. Our husbands were profs. You know, it was a privilege for us to have a job, all those things. And then at the wildcat, I mean, people were, they had these leaflets like, you know, somebody who had been working in a department for a department head for 25 years. And they're being, you know, characterized as working for pin money. And there were no pensions for women at the time, for clerical workers. None. And it just like the straw that broke the camel's back. And you could see the steam coming out of their ears. And these older ladies, they were staying out.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:21:47] It started with the fact that in negotiations we were going nowhere. The university kept saying no, no, we're not going to agree to this. We're not going to agree to that. And then they were just basically stunning us.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:21:59] We finally said, we want a wage offer from you, from the university.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:22:05] \$35 a month is what they offered.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:22:09] What I remember was that it was lower than the SFU wage increase that they had just gotten, with no union. And so we were so angry after all those negotiation sessions and trying to explain to them why we needed, around our demands. And I remember we caucused and we were all like, we need to cut off negotiations. And I remember people saying, well how do we do that? And talking about how it was, we had seen it on TV where they walk out of negotiations. And so I remember we sent yourself, Emerald, and a couple other people back into the room, and saying we're walking out of negotiations and we need to talk to our membership. And we called for a a study session, a union meeting and study session the next day to inform our membership of what was going on and...

**Emerald Murphy** [00:23:14] And to take direction from the members.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:23:16] Yes. And that we would take a vote and perhaps we should spend the afternoon just reviewing our contract.

**Jean Rands** [00:23:24] And then the next morning, the university sent out a memo to everybody saying that if we had a study session for two hours in the middle of the day, that would be an unlawful strike and the university would take appropriate action.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:23:43] Meanwhile, we're running around leafleting, saying come to the Student Union Building at noon to hear what's going on, and that we will be taking a vote about whether or not we should go back to work. So, yeah, people had a choice to make all right.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:24:00] And the vote was just, it was just a show of hands. But I don't remember ever seeing anybody who voted against.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:24:06] It was just hundreds of women. And we spent the first hour listening to folks come up to the microphone to speak.

**Jean Rands** [00:24:15] And so all these people who -- mostly women -- who had mostly never spoken at a large meeting at all, ever or at any meeting, were speaking to what we felt was at least 900 people.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:24:36] Both the Vancouver Sun and The Province, the day after our contract was signed, both of them had editorials that were just vicious to the university for signing a contract with an average wage increase of 54%. Five-four.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:24:58] We were the highest paid clerical workers, I think, in the province.

**Bailey Garden** [00:25:02] When the first AUCE contract was agreed to in September of 1974, in addition to all of these significant victories, the groundbreaking maternity leave provision was included. "Number eight, maternity leave: in case of pregnancy, a continuing and sessional employee shall not lose seniority entitlements. She shall receive the benefits of the maternity provision of the Unemployment Insurance Act. Upon return to work, the employee shall be reinstated in her former position and the employer shall pay the difference for the benefits received and the employee's monthly salary". In 1977, the Unemployment Insurance Commission investigated AUCE maternity leave provisions. They viewed the top-up that women received under their contracts as an overpayment and began the process of forcing union members to repay the federal government all extra moneys received. The federal courts disagreed and ruled in the union's favour. In 1985, AUCE Local 1 joined the Canadian Union of Public Employees, also known as CUPE, and the local is now known as CUPE 2950, which includes theatre workers alongside clerical and library members at UBC. During the 40 years since AUCE was formed, the union organizers have reflected on how they achieved such an important victory with relative ease. Buoyed by the successful organizing drive, the cohesion of union members and extensive research, the union came to the bargaining table much more prepared than management.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:26:29] It gave me a foundation of confidence in terms of being able to research something and being on solid ground. And I mean, at the time I had no formal education. It also really, really gave me an education about working collaboratively with other people, you know, and learning to trust other people and really trust their judgement.

**Jackie Ainsworth** [00:26:54] Working collectively and working on a basis of consensus, in my opinion, 100% of the time is the best way to do it, the smartest way to do it, the right way to do it.

**Emerald Murphy** [00:27:08] I remember Jean always saying that the democracy is right. That whatever the membership decides, that's it. And that was a good lesson for me to learn.

**Ian Mackenzie** [00:27:22] By the way, I mean, you should know this. You really were one of my mentors. I watched you very carefully, and I really learned how you dealt with people, how you dealt with decision making, and I really admired you for that. And I still do.

**Jean Rands** [00:27:35] For me, the experience with AUCE at UBC was really to prove that we could do it. We believed we could do it. And we, you know, we understood the basis of the women's movement and the argument that we know our own jobs, we are the experts in our own oppression, as we used to say. But, for myself anyway, I don't think I really believed it until I went through the experience at UBC.

**Bailey Garden** [00:28:31] Years before it was achieved on a federal level, the members of AUCE Local 1 led the way for full maternity and eventually parental benefits. Workers starting their families today have much to thank them for, and the story of their amazing first agreement should be remembered. We hope that you agree. Our thanks to CUPE 2950 for their permission to feature clips from their 2018 video, 'A Union for Working Women at UBC' produced by Julius Fisher of Working TV. You can learn more about this moment in women's labour history by visiting our website at [labourheritagecentre.ca/AUCE](http://labourheritagecentre.ca/AUCE). As always, thanks to the Labour Radio Podcast Network for including us among so many fantastic shows about labour and working people. You can find other shows on the network with the hashtag Labor Radio Pod and that's Labor



with no 'u' as our American comrades spell it. Thanks for listening to the special Women's History Month episode of On the Line. On behalf of the podcast team, Rod Mickleburgh and Patricia Wejr, I'm your guest host, Bailey Garden. We'll see you next time, On the Line.

**Theme music: 'Hold the Fort'** [00:29:36]