SP FC 3803 U54 N_5-11-trk1 and 2 Bob Smeal.mp3
Interview conducted September 8, 1964
Transcribed by Donna Sacuta (November 2024)

Bob Smeal [00:00:00] You went strictly, depending on the ability of your parents, you went strictly out to work. I went to work when I was 15. It wasn't considered desirable, but it wasn't considered unusual. There were all kinds of kids riding the rods at 14, 15 years old, younger than that. I took off on the rods when I was 14. 1934.

Interviewer [00:00:25] This wasn't really going to work, was it?

Bob Smeal [00:00:29] Let's say this, that we were looking for work. Wasn't a skylark, oh no, we were looking for work. We had to eat. Your parents could hardly afford to feed you.

Interviewer [00:00:43] What year was that?

Bob Smeal [00:00:45] Which one?

Interviewer [00:00:46] Well, when you left. When you were 14.

Bob Smeal [00:00:49] 1934.

Interviewer [00:00:51] 1934. I have a number of questions here, specifically on the unemployed organizations. You were single then, so were you --

Bob Smeal [00:01:11] Mine was all connected with the single unemployed organizations.

Interviewer [00:01:14] Which one were you in, if any?

Bob Smeal [00:01:18] Well, I was in all of them from 1935 to 1938, end of 1938.

Interviewer [00:01:27] Well there were a large number of organizations. What were they called, the ones here?

Bob Smeal [00:01:32] Well, there was the Single Unemployed Protective Association, S.U.P.A .as it was known as, the Relief Camp Project Workers' Union. The—I'm trying to think of the name, I can't remember. I think the organization that organized the On to Ottawa Trek was the SUPA, the Single Unemployed Protective Association, if I remember correctly. My memory gets a little hazy now as to the names in that particular era, because I was just a sort of rank-and-file member then, pretty rank-and-file too, I was pretty young, not knowing too much about it all. I'm pretty sure that—I have to check back. I have to think about this. It was the SUPA In 1935. The SUPA Went along until about 1936, it became the Relief Camp Project Workers' Union, changed its name.

Interviewer [00:02:44] What type of organizations were they? How organized, how formally were they organized?

Bob Smeal [00:02:53] Well, you had a membership card and they had a hall down at 60 Cordova Street West, which is now a parking lot, but it was quite a large hall. Periodically, from time to time on certain issues, they would call meetings and organize demonstrations. Meetings used to go on just about every day of the week, when they were in full swing on one subject or another, on one scheme. They were fairly well organized.

Interviewer [00:03:35] Did they have full-time, well (laughs) I guess a lot of people weren't—

Bob Smeal [00:03:41] Well they were full-time to the extent that they had a secretary who drew, I think, a little bit above what his relief would provide.

Interviewer [00:04:03] Did they have the office at this building?

Bob Smeal [00:04:04] Yeah.

Interviewer [00:04:07] Cordova Street? So they were pretty well a going concern, right?

Bob Smeal [00:04:09] Oh yeah.

Interviewer [00:04:10] What about the meetings? What were they about? Was it political?

Bob Smeal [00:04:15] Well, they were organizing various protests, demonstrations, delegations, all these kinds of things, you know.

Interviewer [00:04:28] Now, what about the affiliations of this? Was it affiliated to anybody?

Bob Smeal [00:04:37] No.

Interviewer [00:04:38] But what about informal connections, were there communist connections?

Bob Smeal [00:04:44] Very strong. Communist Party control.

Interviewer [00:04:50] Just by the leadership or how?

Bob Smeal [00:04:53] By leadership. The Communist Party gave the impetus to it and I think you must remember that in those days, an awful lot of people in the unemployed were sympathetic to communism. If they weren't members of the Communist Party, they had nothing to lose. The story can be repeated in other places in the world today. After all, when you're scrounging around and not eating for days on end, democracy as we call it doesn't mean very much to you. It was that simple.

Interviewer [00:05:29] This was pretty well known at the time, was it, by the guys in the organization?

Bob Smeal [00:05:37] Well, I would say that it was pretty well known. I don't think that it was—

Interviewer [00:05:43] You knew.

Bob Smeal [00:05:43] Oh, I knew, sure.

Interviewer [00:05:45] Well at least you knew.

Bob Smeal [00:05:48] That isn't to say that we agreed with everything the Communists did.

Interviewer [00:05:56] Did you go on this trek to Ottawa? How was that?

Bob Smeal [00:06:04] Well, I can't go into too much of the details of it because I wasn't the leader of it. I was too young. It was organized, of course, because the relief camps, the twenty-cent-a-day camps, which were run on the basis of an army lines, were closed down. The unemployed were forced back into the cities. Then the theme of the Communists at that time and it was all over the world, or all over North America at least, was do treks to the capitals of the countries. This happened in the United States, this happened here. This was organized by the unemployed or by the Communist Party. The leadership was given by the Communist Party, and it was organized in 1935 to protest the conditions of the unemployed. The unemployed, the single unemployed were particularly mobile. The method of traveling from one place to another was by a freight train. I can't go into the details of how it was organized because I wasn't in that area.

Interviewer [00:07:18] Have you read this book of memoirs by Liversedge?

Bob Smeal [00:07:22] No.

Interviewer [00:07:22] There's a book out on it, which you might pick up.

Bob Smeal [00:07:25] Where is it?

Interviewer [00:07:29] At Communist Party headquarters (laughs). Yeah, they've got about ten copies left, for about $0.75. You might look at it and see what you think of that. Anyway, in Regina they get stopped. Were you in any of the fights at that time?

Bob Smeal [00:07:53] Yeah.

Interviewer [00:07:56] It was unprovoked, was it? I mean, what do you remember of this?

Bob Smeal [00:08:02] Well, we were told that when we came off the freight in Regina, and we were all as the name was in those days "jumbled up" camping there, you might say, put it mildly. There were a number of interviews with Arthur Evans, with the police, and we started to march down, I can't remember the street in Regina now, so long ago. But the first thing you know, we saw the RCMP coming the other way. We kept on going and then the shooting started. We didn't stick around that long when the shooting started I can assure you.

Interviewer [00:09:07] Then you packed up?

Bob Smeal [00:09:07] They sent us back home. They sent us back home.

Interviewer [00:09:10] There's some suggestion that the Trotskyist groups split off and went on to Ottawa. Do you know anything about that? They kept on going apparently.

Bob Smeal [00:09:23] Well, the ones that I think that went. I think if anybody went to Ottawa, they were strictly an unorganized, disorganized group. There was no organization as such that went to Ottawa to my knowledge. There was really no organized movement going on to Ottawa to my knowledge anyway. At least I have no knowledge of it. The first time I ever heard of it.

Interviewer [00:09:53] What was the effect of the Regina riots or whatever it was, on you personally?

Bob Smeal [00:10:01] How do you mean?

Interviewer [00:10:01] Well, I mean, did it affect your political thinking?

Bob Smeal [00:10:19] Up until that time I had not had, because I was so young, I have not formulated too much in the way of political thinking. The association with various people at that time, started to crystallize my political thinking. Before that, I had no concept of politics. I certainly wasn't raised in a working-class background. It wasn't until after that when I came back to Vancouver that I got associated with people of left-wing tendencies and I started to think politically.

Interviewer [00:11:04] So you think it had some effect on you?

Bob Smeal [00:11:08] I don't think the Regina riot in itself had any effect on me politically. I suppose it was part of the thing. I think the fact that I was going damn hungry had an effect on me more than anything else.

Interviewer [00:11:27] I was wondering what exactly was the purpose of the unemployed organization?

Bob Smeal [00:11:43] Well, apart from the fact it was part of the communist philosophy, the idea of the communist, or the unemployed organization was to bring to the attention of

the public the plight of the unemployed. You can put it in those words. There were all sorts of political revolutionary motives behind it as far as the Communists were concerned. It was essentially to draw the unemployed into an organization, which would be a organization which would bring to the general public the plight of the single unemployed.

Interviewer [00:12:34] Do you feel it was successful in that?

Bob Smeal [00:12:37] Oh yes, very successful I would say. The results weren't successful, but to a great extent of providing what in those days was the slogan, "Work and Wages". The question of bringing the terrible conditions the unemployed were under to the public was very successful.

Interviewer [00:13:10] What other activities did you personally take part in, this organization?

Bob Smeal [00:13:21] Which one?

Interviewer [00:13:24] Any of the unemployed organizations.

Bob Smeal [00:13:28] Well, after the Regina Trek, the unemployed organizations didn't do very much until, I'd say the fall of 1936, when the provincial government established relief camps here in the province of British Columbia on the rate of $0.30 an hour minus your board. These camps were set up to primarily make parks in the province of British Columbia. Many of the parks that you go to today were done by the unemployed. Now, you were only sent to camp about, for about six weeks at a time, and your $0.30 an hour was held back. You were given so much of what you'd earned when you left camp. I can't remember the percentage now, but I think it was around 40 percent in cash and the rest was held back in the form of vouchers which were given to you, which you cashed every week at the post office at the rate of $4 a week, which was really a method of working for relief. That's essentially what it was. Well, in the fall of 1936, I presume at the initiation of the Communists, the SUPA went out of existence. The Relief Camp Project Workers' Union was formed and they organized in the camps. The basis of the organization was to have the camps for longer periods than the six weeks to do away with this work-for-relief, to jack the wage up to the minimum wage of British Columbia, which at that time was $0.40 an hour by law, but the government was working the people for $0.30 an hour, to improve conditions in the camps. I presume these were at least the major objectives of the organization. Well, some of the camps, the conditions were pretty bad in them, and there was a series of strikes and unrest in the camps because of the method of the way the government was doing it. The principle that they did, was probably one of the best ones they had, they at least were doing something constructive, but the method of payment, the method of working for relief were pretty unsatisfactory. If you didn't go to work in the camp, you were cut off relief. Relief at that time was $3.05 a week for your room and meals, $2 for meals for a week and $0.15 a night for your bed. If you were called out, when you went to the relief office you were sent out to the camp. If you didn't go to the camp, then you were cut off relief, it was just that simple. I became active first of all, in the camp at Youbou, where I became the camp secretary. We had some trouble with the camp

foreman there over various conditions. The camp closed down and in the spring of 1937 (phone rings in background, typing and female voice) and no relief, the relief was cut off in the summertime. This is essentially the way the relief worked. It was relief during the winter, in the summer you fended for yourself. You took anything going. Well, of course, this was pretty unsatisfactory, because there was not much work in the summertime, too. Then the unemployed organization then started to what was known as "tin can". We had had approval from the city council in Vancouver to hold a Tag Day, which was pretty successful and netted quite a few thousand dollars for the unemployed organization. Then we made another application and we were turned down. So we went out and did it illegally and the boys were thrown in jail. During 1937, there were quite a few people, including myself, who spent anywhere from two to three months in Oakalla for the charge was obstructing police officer. It wasn't the charge of begging on the street. It was a charge of obstructing. This went on during the period of 1937. The camps opened up again in the fall of 1937 and the same procedure went forward in 1937 and 1938, which culminated in the post office sit-down, the Art Gallery, and Hotel Georgia in 1938. The whole reason for those, apart from the philosophical reasons that may have been involved, was the fact that during the summer months or during the spring-summer months, there was no relief whatsoever. If you worked in these camps during the wintertime, you got a few months, a few weeks ahead on what you earned and after that you were cut off. There was nothing. You were left to fend for yourself, and I do mean you were fending for yourself. If you couldn't find a job somewhere and there were very few jobs, you just [unclear]. It was just that simple. So in 1937, in the fall of 1937 I was involved in a strike at a camp at Englishman River over the food in the camp. I was fired from the camp after this. It wasn't a strike, we just had a march on the cookhouse one morning and told the cook we weren't very happy and he retreated into the bush with his cleaver in his hand and thought we were going to, I guess, were going to string him up to a tree. I guess that's what he thought because he was sure a pretty scared cook. About two hours, three hours later there was a delegation from the Forestry Department from Victoria arrived and a number of us were fired from the camp right there and then. We came back into Vancouver and we were put out tin-canning. That's when I was thrown into Oakalla. On my release, the unemployed organization was going pretty full tilt and that's when the post office, Art Gallery, Hotel Georgia sit-down was organized.

Interviewer [00:20:52] Might as well go on to that.

Bob Smeal [00:20:58] What do you want to know about that? I know all about this because I was in the leadership of this.

Interviewer [00:21:07] You were? Well, I wanted to know who organized this thing and how spontaneous was it and how, was it spontaneous or?

Bob Smeal [00:21:20] No, it wasn't spontaneous. It was pretty well organized by the executive of the Relief Camp Project Workers' Union. It was developed over a period of months, this strategy. The rank-and-file unemployed, there were only a very few people knew what we were going to do. In fact it was just a handful. The unemployed themselves didn't know what we were going to do. We participated daily. We had daily meetings for I'd

say almost months, maybe longer than that now, ahead. Each meeting would culminate in a march through the city and it would be anywhere from 500 to 1,000 men involved in the march. We had so much that we couldn't handle the meetings at 60 Cordova. We used to have to hold two meetings, one at 60 Cordova and one at the old hall above Gore and Hastings. I can't even remember whose hall it was now, but there was a hall there. We used to organize and we had this thing broken down so there were divisions, leaders in every division responsible for the conduct of their group. It was like a small army. The parades were all properly disciplined and there were section leaders and there were division leaders, and it was a pretty well-organized army. This went on for a period of over a month at least, with parades through town and we'd tie up traffic all over town. This was our everyday method of protesting. We just marched through the intersections and the traffic. This would be in April and May of 1938. In June, one day it was decided in the executive that we were going to make a more formal type of protest. I can't remember the reasons now, but it was decided that the post office was one place we would sitdown. The Art Gallery was another. Why, I never could figure out, the Hotel Georgia was selected as the third. We started off on a march on the morning and it was about the first of June. I can't remember the dates now about the first of June. The leaders marched down the street, three different divisions employed, and they were met at three different places. They started off on their usual daily march, and each division was led into a place that was selected to go to. Well, I was in, there were two, no all actually there were four divisions. There were two divisions, one into the post office, one division went into the Hotel Georgia and the other division went into the Art Gallery and sat down. Now, the rank-and-file didn't know anything that was going on, but when they were told, when they got in there and they were told, they just sat down. They were that well-disciplined. Well, about two days later, three days later, and I wasn't in on this part of the negotiations, because my area was strictly in the post office, the Hotel Georgia paid us, and I can't even remember the sum now, but it was a considerable amount of money to us in those days to get the hell out, which we accepted because we had to feed the troops. This was a matter of feeding them. So we stayed in the Art Gallery and the post office for 30 days when we were evicted by the police. I was arrested and thrown into the jug and beaten up and thrown into the jug. So were a few more of the leaders and a few more of the rank-and-file. I was kept in the jug for about 5 or 6 days and I was charged with inciting to riot I believe. The charge was dismissed in court. Brodie, who was also a division leader in the post office along with myself, he was put into hospital. He was never charged. He was badly beaten up by the police. He was rubber-hosed. If you want to look at some interesting pictures, you should get the picture of the Vancouver Sun on the morning of the day after that, because the [unclear] was there when the police were rubber-hosing us on the street, clubbing us on the street. Our crime being that we had sat in the post office for 30 days.

Interviewer [00:26:52] This is really punitive beating wasn't it?

Bob Smeal [00:26:56] Yeah.

Interviewer [00:26:57] It wasn't to keep order, it was just to?

Bob Smeal [00:27:04] On the Sunday morning we knew that sooner or later something would happen. We had it pretty well organized. About 5:30 in the morning I was woken up by one of the guards that we had, said that the police, the RCMP are moving into the back of the post office. So we got up and we woke everybody up and said there was something going on. About, I'm going to say about 6:30, an RCMP officer stood up, came over the wickets, you know, in the old post office over there, stood up on the wickets from the other side and said that we had, I think, 30 minutes to vacate the premises. So we duly called a meeting and decided that we weren't going to leave. In half an hour the tear gas came over the wickets and the RCMP charged out of the elevators and over the wickets with their clubs swinging. The tear gas went and it was pretty much of a melee. We weren't armed at all. We had nothing. The windows were broken primarily to get air because of the tear gas and to find an escape route because there was only two doors in the post office. When the guys were trying to get out and when the clubs were swinging and as we got out the door, the city police were lined up each side of the door beating the guys as they came out. Just rubber-hosing them or clubbing them with night clubs, you know. Of course, the guys started to spread out along the street. I don't know who started it yet, and I'll never know to this day, but somebody started smashing windows, smashed all the windows down each side of Hastings Street, right down as far as Woodward's. I went out the bottom door. I was one of the last ones out and I was pretty young and pretty fast runner and I went out through and nobody hit me. Two or three policemen charged after me, one on a horse, and I ran down by the C.P.R. station and along in front of that building, which used to be Kelly Douglas down Water Street, going like [laughs]. They couldn't catch me. I went down, well they started catch up to me down Water Street and I ducked out on the C.P.R. tracks and they wouldn't follow me. So I went down a block on the C.P.R. tracks and I came out on Abbott. As I came up on Abbott I could hear the windows breaking at Woodward's store. So I ran up along the Woodward's store and first thing I know there was a prowler car after me, a city police prowler car. I went up behind Pender Street, up along the, under Georgia Viaduct, and these policemen going after me and I running and I came to the dead end. There was nowhere to go. There was False Creek and I was arrested and taken down to the city bucket. As a matter of fact, as a result of all this, I got pneumonia, tear gas pneumonia, and I ended up in the end, I ended up in Vancouver General. So that in a very brief was what happened. The Art Gallery, the boys, we knew that if there was going to be trouble, and we had already agreed that in the Art Gallery there would be no destruction whatsoever. That was, you know, at any time. I mean, not that we had planned. We were not going to let those, you know, it was always agreed that there would be no mutilation of the art. This was our real key was the Art Gallery, because that's what they were afraid we were going to do. I think one of the reasons why they hadn't moved on us earlier because they thought that we would probably mutilate the art in the Art Gallery.

Interviewer [00:31:40] How successful was this whole thing, did it get you anywhere? The post office, the sit-down?

Bob Smeal [00:31:54] How successful was it?

Interviewer [00:31:54] Well, I mean, did it get you relief or any attention?

Bob Smeal [00:32:00] No. Well, it got lots of attention. I think the relief camps opened up maybe a little bit earlier, probably in September, rather than later on in November. I can't remember any direct results of this that immediately put anything in the hands of the unemployed. No.

Interviewer [00:32:27] Who were the leaders of this?

Bob Smeal [00:32:40] Well, the leaders were divided into what I would consider two groups. The members of the Communist Party, who really were instrumental in organizing this, did not go into the post office or Art Gallery. They left us (laughs) young bucks to carry that out. The leaders of the unemployed, that is in the Art Gallery and the post office, there was Steve Brodie, Jack Lucas who now works for the Teamsters, myself, a guy by the name of Webster, I've never seen again, a fellow by the name of Harris who was in the Art Gallery, and that would be about it. Then there were a number of people outside. Fellow by name of John Matts, which was not his correct name because I seen him later under another name now. A fellow by the name of Ernie Cumber, who I've never seen again. A guy by name of Doc Campbell, who I understand is up in the interior. I've never seen him, but other people have seen him. Bobby Jackson, who is in, he's not into 217, he's barred from membership in 217 because he's a communist. He's been working in one of the local mills under 217's jurisdiction. He was very active. That would be about it.

Interviewer [00:34:33] Brodie, he's the one that's most often mentioned.

Bob Smeal [00:34:38] Brodie. Brodie was the leader of Division One in the post office. Brodie was the guy who seemed to get the attention from the press, but I wouldn't say that he was a leader above all anybody else. He was merely made so by the press. He was merely the division leader of Division One in the post office. There were two divisions in there.

Interviewer [00:35:09] You were in the other division?

Bob Smeal [00:35:10] There were two division leaders of each division. There was Brodie and Webster in Division One, and myself and Lucas in Division Two. Brodie was the guy who got the eye of the press. He used to, I think, and you must remember it was a long time ago, your memory gets pretty hazy on these details. I remember correctly, he was elected by the division leaders as the public relations voice, the one guy who spoke publicly on behalf of the unemployed in the post office itself. That's where Brodie got the reputation as being a leader, but he was only one of four who were in there.

Interviewer [00:36:07] This money you collected all went to, it was handed out as your own form of relief. Did it go to the organization or where did it go?

Bob Smeal [00:36:19] It went to the organization and was supplemented by donations by the public who were pretty sympathetic to us. They used to come down to the post office and drop money in the box we had in the doorway. We ate two meals a day, one in the

post office. This used to be a salad made up by women, who I think were largely organized by the Party, but who were sympathetic and made up a green salad every day. Then we had by the money we collected, we used to have one meal a day down at Harold Winch's fish and chip shop down on Hastings. We used to have to take out a group, send them down to eat, bring them back, send another group down. This went on all through the day. You had one meal of fish and chips and you'd send down a 40-minute time. One would be going down, one would be coming back, one would be eating. All of us had somebody out eating all the time at the post office, but we always had somebody in. The Art Gallery the same way. We used to march around to eat.

Interviewer [00:37:57] What was the effect on the single unemployed of the demonstration?

Bob Smeal [00:38:05] After? Well, it was no longer an effective organization after that. It seemed to (interruption to order coffee) It was no longer an effective organization after that.

Interviewer [00:38:38] Why? Was it demoralized?

Bob Smeal [00:38:42] Well, essentially, I would say that probably would be so. Many of the fellows dropped out. I dropped out of the picture because I was a pretty sick boy. Then there was— The relief camps were reinstated, I think, in September. I'm just going strictly by guess now, were kept on until probably March of the following year, which was 1939. Then in 1939 of course, the war broke out which.

Interviewer [00:39:30] Solved.

Bob Smeal [00:39:32] An end to unemployment. I can't remember any activities of the unemployed organization in the winter of 1938.

Interviewer [00:39:54] Do you have any anecdotes about this, particularly the post office sit-down?

Bob Smeal [00:40:12] I suppose I have over time. We used to do—the city police had some provocation. We had very little to do and we used to make up songs which we used to sit outside the post office in the evening and sing, a few of us. The police were always around the post office but used to stay across the other side of the street and we used to sing songs such as— At that time somebody had stolen $1,500 bail out of the City police safe. We made up a song, "Who Stole the Bail?" and we used to sit and sing it to the police across the street. I don't imagine this endeared us to the police too much. I won't say that was enough provocation for them to start beating the guys on the head with rubber hoses, but we used to needle the police because frankly, we were on one side of the fence and the police were on the other. We weren't very chummy, certainly not as far as the RCMP was concerned, because the RCMP were known up and down the land to beat guys up for riding freight trains. Turned dogs loose on them, you know. Talk about dogs now, the dogs were still in evidence in those days and police dogs were turned on

guys for the crime of riding a freight train. I have seen myself guys being beaten on top of a boxcar by a Mountie with a riding, you know, one of these loaded riding crops that they have with a whip on one end and the club on the other. So we were pretty hostile to the police always. The police were regarded as an agent of the state. We were antagonistic and we never left any stone unturned if we thought we could needle the police. I suppose there are many anecdotes. I used to be able to think of them, and I haven't thought about it for years. I remember that we got so many donations for the post office of clothing and things, I became better dressed than I had for years. In the morning of the riot, of course, all I had on was a shirt and pair of pants. And when I got out of jail the next Thursday, all my nice clothing was gone. It had been cleaned up and thrown out, and I was back to my shirt and a pair of pants again (laughs) because everything we had was in the post office. We were living there, after all you slept right on the floor and you had your clothing all in a little kit bag or gunny sack or something like that, and it was gone. I suppose if I thought over a period of time of peculiar things happen, I suppose I could think of some. It was pretty serious to us, of course, at that time. I suppose we had some humourous moments. I suppose the thing in the public was the smell in the post office of 500 men, unwashed men, laying down there for 30 days. As much as we tried, no provision anywhere for anybody to take a bath. I guess the post office got pretty high in the mornings. As a matter of fact, I talked to George Currie, conciliation officer down here who was in the building, and he said it was terrible in the mornings to go in there. I can't think of any particularly humorous.

Interviewer [00:44:13] There's been some suggestion that whenever there was a fight the Communist leaders wouldn't be around.

Bob Smeal [00:44:25] That's true. Well, then they see what they did was, and I can tell you who you were, the people who masterminded these things. But when it came down to sitting down in the post office, the fellows like myself, Brodie, Harris, were the guys that went in and all the good staunch members of the executive of the Party and the unemployed fraction, I think they called it, unemployed fraction, were out. They were not involved. That doesn't say there weren't Communists in the post office. I'm talking about those who were in leadership. Of course, there's another thing that happened, of course, that I was in the periphery of at least. It was after the Sunday morning a bunch of us were thrown in jail and the Communist Party organized a great great protest meeting in Powell Street grounds for the afternoon. It was a tremendous mob turned up because the people in Vancouver were, by and large pretty sympathetic. I don't know how many thousand people turned up to Powell Street grounds, but the Party boys started to whip them up. Harold Winch was there and they started to move from Powell Street grounds over to the police station, ostensibly, I suppose, to protest the imprisonment of us guys in the bucket. Well, things were pretty tense because it would just take something and the mob would have charged the police station and taken us out. The police were prepared. Harold saw this and Foster's car, Chief Foster the police officer, the Chief of Police was the car was parked outside the police station. Harold, from what I'm told, because I was inside and I couldn't see out, got up on top of the car and made probably one of the most important speeches Harold ever made. Because if Harold hadn't of calmed that crowd down, there would have been blood and guts to spill in Vancouver because the police would have

come out shooting and I don't know where the thing would have gone from there. It could have been what the Communists wanted, a small revolution started. I mean, the climate was just that ripe in Vancouver for revolution. Let's not kid ourselves, it was pretty bad. That mob was going to move in on the police station and once they did that, I guess the police would have fired and there would have been another major riot in Vancouver. I am not too sure that if it had of been then that riot wouldn't have gone to all proportions. The mood of the people, the mood of the whole population was one almost revolutionary. I mean, this was not only the unemployed. This was the hundreds of married unemployed, hundreds of guys working for $0.25 an hour, you know, hundreds who weren't even classified as unemployed. They were just scrounging for a living. You have to appreciate this climate. I mean, most people today, unless they experienced that situation, just can't appreciate, you appreciate it in the remote sense, but the degradation of humanity was so bad that people just had nothing to lose. When I hear people yacking off about communism and all the rest of it in the world, I can appreciate why the people in an underdeveloped country number are not that damned concerned about democracy or freedom in general. They think about filling up their ankles and their belly, and that's exactly the way we thought about it. Democracy, freedom and all these high-souding words didn't mean a goddamn thing to us, not a damn thing. The fact is that if you ate once every three days, you were lucky. It was just that bad. I existed on what was known as "coffee-ands". Two doughnuts and a coffee for a nickel. For days we existed on that. Our relief was $2 a week to eat meals in restaurants and $0.15 a night for bed. Even in depression it was pretty bad standard of living. So nobody had anything to lose. Why not? I wouldn't say that we warred with the communists, fellows like Brodie, myself. Wouldn't say we warred with them. I don't think we were basically unsympathetic. We were quite sympathetic. We just agreed, disagreed on tactics, that's all. We weren't Trotskyites. We were just, I don't know what the hell we were. (laughter) Damned if I know. I think basically why we weren't members of the Party was we were just young bucks and we wouldn't accept the discipline of the Party. But I can't say that philosophically we were any disagreement with them. Probably we're more of an anarchist than anything else, you know.

Interviewer [00:50:06] Was there much attempt made to sign you up?

Bob Smeal [00:50:08] Oh yeah, sure. Oh yeah, sure. Matter of fact, I attended two or three Party meetings and I would have joined the Party except that I got into a violent argument with the secretary, a guy by the name of Matts at one meeting and walked out. That was the end of my—oh, yes there were all kinds of— The party meetings that I attended, we used to attend them. I'll tell you where they used to be, down in the old Ukrainian Temple down here, back in—oh, I don't know if it's still there now, but it was back of Pender and down in Dunlevy, somewhere down in there. It was the Ukrainian, that was where the Communists used to hold their meetings, the Party used to hold their meetings. They had an office up on the corner of Beatty and Hastings, up in that block across from the Dominion Bank building, that old building there. Fergus McKeen was the secretary of the Party at that time, Fergie McKeen. Oh yeah, sure, they recruited. They were recruiting all the time focusing on the unemployed and unemployed movement. It was pretty fertile ground for them.

Interviewer [00:51:35] How did they? Did they do any propaganda work inside or how did they go about this?

Bob Smeal [00:51:44] Oh yes, yes. At the unemployed hall you could buy all the Communist literature, pamphlets you wanted. At all their meetings they made sure that their Party members were— I was probably one of the very few who got to be in a position at the meetings of leadership, who wasn't a member of the Party. I think maybe they did that because of two factors. I wasn't a member, and secondly, I was a good chairman. That's where I learned my chairmanship ability was in the unemployed days. They used to elect the chairman at every meeting. It wasn't the president. The chairman was elected every meeting, and it seemed that I got to be the chairman of all the meetings because I think that I had a knack for controlling, for running meetings. All the key speeches, but I was told—and of course I went along with it fine— I mean, it was all rigged up ahead of time that I was to recognize at a certain time, recognize Ernie Cumber, recognize John Matts, or recognize Doc Campbell. I saw nothing wrong with this. I mean, it was okay with me, and they were good speakers. Let's face it, they were positive, they knew where they were going. The Party fraction had cleared all this before and it was done at the right time. I was all for it, nothing wrong with me having the Party organizing things. Somebody had to organize them. Now, you asked me a question the other day, affiliation with trade unions. I remember going on a delegation to—

Interviewer [00:53:31] I was going to ask you that as a matter of fact.

Bob Smeal [00:53:31] to the Trades and Labor Council when old what's his name out here, was the president of the local Trades and Labor Council, Bengough. A delegation went pleading for affiliation with the unemployed movement which was rejected by the Trades and Labor Council. I suppose it was rejected on two grounds, if I can remember. One, that they needed the Trades and Labor Council knew the political leanings of the leadership of the unemployed. Secondly, it wasn't a trade union, it wasn't a working group. This problem has come up since the war right here, the question of organizing. This is where we went against, and I think largely on my influence, to a point to my influence. The Congress took the position that they could not organize the unemployed, and we bucked over that position in B.C. and said, "Well, if we don't, there are other people who will do. So we will undertake the leadership." But this was, again, not in accordance with Congress policy, because I can remember very distinctly the trade union movement in Vancouver, nothing to do with the unemployed. Oh yes, you'd get all sorts of sympathetic resolutions passed, biased resolutions passed and protests to the government that they better do something, but nothing else.

Interviewer [00:55:13] What about money? No money?

Bob Smeal [00:55:16] To my knowledge. Now, I doubt very much if there was any money ever contributed by the trade union movement. Now, I can be wrong, but I never—

Interviewer [00:55:31] They might have taken a collection.

Bob Smeal [00:55:32] As a matter of fact, I don't know of anybody contributing money to us. I mean, we had to scrounge our own. Talking about money, you want to hear humorous anecdotes. We held one of these unofficial Tag Days, and we put out about 500 men with tin cans on every corner and we collected, it was a Saturday night, we collected about $12,000 all day. We counted this in the hall down at Cordova, but it was all in nickels, dimes and maybe quarters, but mostly nickels and dimes and it was a huge bag of money. We never thought about what we're going to do with this, I mean in the sense of keeping it. We knew what we were going to do with it, but we had to keep it somewhere. So, Jesus, "What the hell are we going to do this? It's 11:00 at night." So it was decided that we would, after some thought, take it up the police station and have it put in their safe for safekeeping. So I'm in charge of this 12,000 bucks, (laughter) a great big bag, so I get a bodyguard to go up from 60 Cordova right up Cordova Street and escort it up. So I went in the door packing this big, big bag of money and my bodyguard stayed outside and they figured, "Well it's in there," and so they disappeared. I wait and I plunked this down on the counter and the police say, "Very sorry, but because of this $1,500 bail episode that I was explaining to you earlier we can't take it. So I said, "Well jeepers, I don't know what I'm going to do now." So I pick up the bag and out I go expecting to pick up my bodyguard, they're not there. There's me sitting at Cordova Street at midnight with $12,000 (laughs) in a big sack. "What do I do now?" Not knowing where to go. So I bravely, and I do mean bravely, (laughs) walked down Hastings Street carrying this bag. In those days for $12,000 they would have killed me right on the spot. I think, "Holy Jesus, the hall is closed up. Everybody's left the hall. Where do I go from here? "Holy Jesus, what am I going to do? I'm not going to take this with me. I can't pack this around all night." So I just thought, the old Pennsylvania Hotel across from the BC Electric down there. I don't know if they still call it the Pennsylvania or not. So I walked in the lobby there and I said to the night clerk, I said, "Can I put this bag in the safe?" He says, "What is it?" So I told him and he said, "Okay." We put it in the safe. I tell you, (laughs) I was a pretty scared boy for a few minutes.

Interviewer [00:58:52] That's what they did in Regina too, didn't they? Is this a standard procedure?

Bob Smeal [00:58:58] Yeah. Standard procedure, tin canning.

Interviewer [00:59:01] No, I mean getting the money in the RCMP.

Bob Smeal [00:59:06] Well I don't know what they did in Regina, but this was the first time we'd ever done it there because usually when we made collections before we made provision for security in some way, you know? I can't even remember if we put it in a bank, you know, collect $10,000 or something, collection and then distributed it to the unemployed at, oh, I forget now, $0.40 or $0.50 a day, something like that in relief. Then we had another system going and raising money called a bumming sheet.

Interviewer [00:59:48] What's that?

Bob Smeal [00:59:50] We'd issue a mimeographed sheet and the guys would go out every morning around houses asking for donations to the unemployed. The bugger he used to keep most of it. (laughs) It was an awful racket. I know one guy made a damn good living at this. A lot of guys turned it in. The guys would go out with the bumming sheets. Then we had the beer parlours. I used to do this. We used to go out and tin-can the beer parlours and I'd make a speech. I've made a speech in every beer parlour in this town. We just walk into a beer parlour and make a speech on behalf of the unemployed. You'd have 10 guys with you and they'd just go around to all the tables with tin cans. We used to collect enough to keep the boys going that way. We used to do that all through the winter. Every night we'd go around the beer parlours.

Interviewer [01:00:46] Bringing you back to support from labour, and this is one of the questions I had. Was this the only attempt you made to affiliate to?

Bob Smeal [01:00:52] Well I think there had been previous attempts, but I had no— I think there had been many previous attempts, but it's the only one I have personal knowledge of.

Interviewer [01:01:04] Did you not get any help like using their halls or anything like this?

Bob Smeal [01:01:14] Now that doesn't say that certain individual unions weren't pretty sympathetic and probably did contribute. No, I can't remember. The only thing I can remember, and you must remember it was pretty damn close to 30 years ago now. The only real incident I can remember is going up to the Trades and Labor Council and making, I think Doc Campbell made the speech in front of them for affiliation with them and it was rejected. Now, I presume that there were many—don't forget, the unions weren't very strong. They were essentially limited to craft unions. Not very strong in themselves. I don't imagine they had much money. They certainly didn't have much power. There was virtually no industrial unions in existence at the time. The CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) was just coming into existence. I don't think they'd even got here by that time. I doubt very much if it had got here. There could have been unions who gave money, but I don't know. I mean, those details I couldn't remember.

Interviewer [01:02:46] Were most of the members about your age, teenagers?

Bob Smeal [01:02:52] No, there were a number of teenagers, but (phone rings) there were all—there were old men, there was no particular group. Many old men were in the post office, many war veterans in there. One of the things that did happen, I can remember, there was the second day in the post office, the Legion advised all their war veterans not to participate in this, and some left on the advice of the Legion.

Interviewer [01:03:19] Many?

Bob Smeal [01:03:22] I don't think there were many, no, but I do recall having a discussion with two or three of them over the fact that the Legion had told them not to

partake in these demonstrations. I think that maybe, to my recollection, maybe two or three did leave, that would be all.

Interviewer [01:03:42] Did you get much help from the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation)? Was there any tie up there at all?

Bob Smeal [01:03:55] Well, I can't say. I can't say. (typing in background) To us you see, and to me at that particular time, as strange as it may seem, and I think to many of us, there was very little difference between the CCF and the Communist Party. That may sound hard to imagine, but most of us were pretty naive politically. We knew something was wrong in the country, at least myself, I didn't regard the CCF and the Communist Party as being too much different. Now it's possible. I don't recall any direct dealings with the CCF at that time or direct organization by the CCF. Now, there could have been. Let me qualify that, there could have been. The organization that I know, that I was directly concerned with was organized by the Communist Party. Now, you take the women's auxiliary that they arranged to feed us in the post office, responsible for collecting vegetables and food and whatnot, I know was organized by the Communist Party, but could have had many, many CCFers in it because it was a front organization. I think I'd have to leave that question to somebody who was more vitally concerned with that than me. Like Harold, or somebody like Harold could give you more detail, but I have no knowledge of it. I do know that the Communist Party was.

Interviewer [01:05:51] Well, there was a Council of the Unemployed with the various organizations represented on it. Grant MacNeill talked about that. Do you know anything of that?

Bob Smeal [01:06:06] Well, this would be married unemployed, single unemployed. This was out of my— I don't recall. Now, wait a minute. The night I got out of jail there was a meeting held at the Moose Hall down on Burrard Street, and I was sent up as a speaker from the unemployed. I just got out of jail, and I was a pretty sick boy. I had pneumonia and didn't know it. Next morning, I went to hospital. I only went to this meeting and I was sent up to speak, scared to death. The place was packed. It was about 5,000 in the hall and they had loudspeakers out. Burrard Street was plugged. On the platform was Harold and Ferguson McKeen and Christ, who else? I think Grant was there. I can't remember all, I remember Harold and I remember Fergie McKeen of the Communist Party. I made a speech and I don't even know what I said, yet, but every time I opened my mouth, there was a great clapping. I was just a kid, you know. (laughs) Holy Christ, I talked to the unemployed, in hundreds, but this was a mob. Holy Jesus and was sick to boot. It seemed to me that that was organized by the Unemployed Council, that meeting, that protest meeting, I can't remember who else was on the platform, but I do remember Harold and Fergie McKeen speaking and myself, and there were a number of other people, but I can't remember who they were at the time. It was a tremendous meeting, but it was one of the good old working-class meetings and everybody said, "Yeah, terrible thing," but that's about all there was to it. The next day I went to hospital, so I lost track of just exactly what was going on at the time. Actually, it was that night I went to hospital.

Interviewer [01:08:18] You personally, I guess, did you go on to the War after?

Bob Smeal [01:08:25] Yeah.

Interviewer [01:08:26] And then you got involved. How did you get involved in unions like you are now?

Bob Smeal [01:08:31] Well, of course, I was pretty socially conscious by this time. I always took an interest because of my background and because partly because of the exposure to the Communist Party and their propaganda, which was not limited merely to unemployed. I read all their stuff. I got quite a grounding in basic Marxist philosophy, I would say. When I got out of the—of course, you joined the Forces because they cut us off relief. The first thing that happened, you were on relief in 1939, war was declared and they cut us off. I can remember there was no question of philosophy or patriotism or anything else. It was just a question, we figured we were going to be drafted anyway and there was no relief, we might as well go and join up. What the hell. We weren't patriotically inclined [unclear] to fight the capitalist war or the phony war. It was just a matter of economic circumstance. After all, if you been kicking around this country for a number of years and going from hand to mouth or sleeping in boxcars or anywhere you could. Eating "coffee-ands" to exist, even the prospect of three meals a day and some clothes in the army or the navy was pretty appealing. It was just that simple. I didn't want to join the army. Most of my friends joined the First Division and I joined the navy. All my friends that I kicked around with were in that First Division of the Seaforths and didn't come back again. Then, of course, after the war, I came out and I got a job and I immediately became interested in the conditions and from there on, I kept going.

Interviewer [01:10:32] You must have spent about six years in this.

Bob Smeal [01:10:41] Four, four and a half, something like that.

Interviewer [01:10:45] I'm just wondering what kind of personal life a young unemployed would lead in the late 1930s. What I meant is, for instance, at that age, people go out with girls. This is very personal, but what I meant is, did you get entirely cut off any kind of?

Bob Smeal [01:11:18] Personal relationships?

Interviewer [01:11:21] Yeah, or anything. I mean, young people do in their teens.

Bob Smeal [01:11:26] Yes, pretty well. When you're unemployed, when you are living like we did, the opportunity to meet girls was pretty limited because you were living down on Skid Row or in that area. You had virtually no money. Any money you had went to fill your stomach. Secondly, to put some clothes on your back. I can remember going around this town virtually in my bare feet. My shoes and I had no money with which to repair my shoes. You must remember that relief in those days in that area was $3.05 a week, was given you in vouchers. Two dollars for meals, which if you took it down to one of the Chinese cafes, would give you $2.25 on a meal ticket. For $2.00, they give you $2.25,

which would allow you two $0.15 cent meals a day and $0.15 a week for tobacco, which bought you one package of tobacco and one package of papers. You were allowed $0.15 a night for bed. This did not allow for any personal, you couldn't repair your shoes, you couldn't buy shaving soap, you couldn't buy razor blades, you couldn't buy any clothes at all. There was nothing. You got these things by using your wits or by if you could possibly supplement your income in some other way. This obviously didn't lead you to conducting a social life. Then, of course, many of us got involved, you might call almost the revolutionary fervor of this thing, and we devoted all our time to it. This excluded anything else. That doesn't say that from time to time, we wouldn't get involved with some girl who came from somewhat similar circumstances or who was sympathetic to us, because there were women and girls and families who we met through these activities who were sympathetic. But it certainly didn't lead, as I said earlier, when you first came in, there was no such a thing as being a teenager for us. There was no life. You came right out of school and you came into the hard facts of society that says that you had to eat. What instigated these protests was the inadequacy of relief but secondly, the fact that it only went on for probably four or five months of the year and the rest of the year, you were left to your own devices, which involved riding the rods all over the country looking for work under any circumstances. I suppose that things didn't have the significance at that age that they would have now. The internal politics of the situation didn't interest me to the degree it would have done now. If I had been involved in the situation, because I hadn't had the experience and hadn't had the background to differentiate between all the forces that were at work in this area that I would now because of the experience I've had. This the unfortunate part of trying to assess the whole thing is that to me, and to most of us at that time, this was just a matter of a great protest with us. We weren't involved in any social movement. We weren't particularly interested in philosophies, be they socialist or communist at the time. Although I'd say that most of us were sympathetic to a revolution. Obviously. As I said earlier, and I think probably what I said earlier is true, that I don't think many of us youngsters cared to differentiate or did differentiate between the CCF and the Communist Party. Things were too immediate, too desperate for us to be involved in philosophy. When you're not eating for days on end, you’re not primarily interested in any high blown ideals. You're interested in filling up your stomach and the immediate concern is that immediate need not—

Interviewer [01:16:22] What did you do for work during the summer?

Bob Smeal [01:16:28] Well, we would in the springtime the annual exodus on the freight trains would take place up into the interior or down to the prairie. Most of the unemployed would rely on the harvest to supplement their income, either the harvest on the prairie or fruit-picking in the valley, or haying. I got a job in the summer truck driving. I picked apples in the fall, which would just make me enough money to buy a new outfit of clothes to last me through the winter when the relief came due. Pretty generally, that's about what the unemployed did. They just moved around in great herds on freight trains looking for employment in areas where they felt there was some. The problem was that you would hear a rumour in Vancouver that the employer, the farmers in Kamloops were looking for all kinds of men to go haying and that night there would be 300 men take off on a freight

train and descend on Kamloops looking for one job haying. This was one of the problems. This was the way we supplemented our income.

Interviewer [01:18:04] So you really did, you went out and looked for work during the summer.

Bob Smeal [01:18:11] Oh and in the winter.

Interviewer [01:18:12] The winter, too?

Bob Smeal [01:18:13] You used to hear the politicians and the members of the clergy, other people, the press say, "Trouble with these unemployed is they won't work." But I stood myself in a lineup of I'd say probably 500 men outside of the old slave market, as we used to call it, which is now the Labor Relations Board on Dunsmuir. Now on Dunsmuir, which used to be the Labor Exchange or Labor Market at that time. It was the hiring hall. It would start to snow at 10:00 at night. The City of Vancouver was paying $0.40 an hour for shoveling snow and the line would start forming at 10:00 at night. I would stand there all night until 8:00 in the morning to get a job snow shoveling at $0.40 an hour. I have stood there myself in a line-up that extended over two city blocks long all night. Then at 6:00 in the morning half the snow turned to rain. We stood all night for nothing. And they said we didn't want to work. I have been out in the snow, to shovel snow in Vancouver in a pair of Oxfords with snow up to my knees, soaking wet to get $0.40 an hour and had to wait three weeks for my six-hour cheque. $2.40, and they said we didn't want to work.

Interviewer [01:19:48] This still went around, people said that they didn't want to work?

Bob Smeal [01:19:52] Oh yeah, this is true. Any time there was any rumour of a job, now, sure, there was always a certain amount of unemployed who who didn't want to work. They didn't want to work at the wages that were going. I mean, they didn't want to go into a sawmill where a guy was supposed to be getting $0.40 an hour and was only getting $0.30 and say, "All right, I'll work for that wage for $0.20." Which is what these people meant by work. They wanted to go around and undercut some other guy. There were many unemployed who would sooner starve than do that. Now, there was always what you call a minor percentage of unemployed who didn't want to work. That's true right now. It's been always true in our society of a group who didn't want to work. But I can show you the evidence of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of men who would stand all night. If you ever stood all night in the snow, I can assure you it's a most unpleasant thing because you're almost frozen, to get a job shoveling snow at $0.40 an hour, and hundreds of them do it.

Interviewer [01:21:07] This is another thing now. Was there much done to keep unemployed from scabbing on strikes? Do you remember any of this?

Bob Smeal [01:21:25] There were no strikes to my knowledge. There were very few strikes. There was a strike in the lumber industry in 1936, if I were to recall rightly, but there were no major strikes. Let me tell you that a strike in that time would have been, was

almost suicide because there were all kinds of men who would have gone to work during a strike, and I can understand the reason why.

Interviewer [01:21:52] Yeah.

Bob Smeal [01:21:53] I can understand. In those days. I can't understand that now. There's all sorts of unemployment insurance, at least enough to at least, I won't say unemployment insurance or social assistance is going to, it's considerably better than nothing. In those days, it was nothing. When you've gone for three or four days without eating and you lose any consciousness, of any responsibility to yourself or your fellow man. You're an animal. Just basic. Now, the question is, I often talk about to people who went, "how'd you go through this stage." If you and I decided tomorrow we weren't going to eat until Saturday, we could do it if we had to. That's not hard.

Interviewer [01:22:50] You know you'd eat on Sunday.

Bob Smeal [01:22:52] I know that on Saturday I'm going to eat. But the dreadful thing about being unemployed in these days was that you didn't know when you were going to eat next. It was just that simple. You just didn't know. That was the demoralizing thing about it was that it wasn't a question of going hungry for two or three days without a meal. It was a question of, "When am I going to eat? How am I going to eat?" If I got a meal two days later, three days later, "When would I get my next one?" You can only go along that so long and the basic requirement of existence comes out and you wouldn't care if you scabbed. I don't know whether I would have done, but I'm sure that I wouldn't have blamed anybody under those circumstances if they had of done. It's just that simple. You can’t relate an ideal to the needs of the human body in that respect. We shouldn't have gone to work for $0.30 an hour, the unemployed, when the minimum wage was $0.40. But we were damn glad to get it. We were glad to get three meals a day. Nobody can understand that unless you went through the situation. When you start walking around the City of Vancouver in the middle of the winter with soles out of your shoes and I mean, literally, and no way to replace them. When you are sleeping in a boxcar, wrapped up in newspapers, in brown paper to keep warm. You do this night after night, you can't wash, you can't eat, you can't do anything else. It's every man for himself. It's just that simple.

Interviewer [01:24:52] Well, I think that's about all there is. Unless you have any more.

Bob Smeal [01:24:58] Well, I probably can think of a lot more things.

Interviewer [01:25:00] Well, if you can give me a ring. I'd better put down this is Bob Smeal, and what's the date today? The eighth of September 1964.