

Interview: Deborah Bourque (DB)

Interviewer: Blair Redlin (BR)

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Transcription: Patricia Wejr

BR [00:00:05] Good afternoon, Deborah. It's nice to see you.

DB [00:00:07] Hi Blair.

BR [00:00:09] Thanks for agreeing to do this interview with the BC Labour Heritage Center. So I'll just get underway and we'll have a conversation about your many contributions to the labour movement, both nationally and in B.C. But first, could you tell us about where you grew up, what your family did for work, and your family's background? Was it a working-class household, that kind of thing?

DB [00:00:36] Yeah, I grew up in a working-class household. I was born in Nova Scotia, and my dad was in the Navy, and Mum raised five kids, and ran Joan's Beauty Salon in her home while wearing stilettos at the same time. Well, he was away at sea for months at a time. They were both Liberal supporters, and they felt that Liberals were good for the military, it was that kind of family. And then eventually we moved to New Brunswick.

BR [00:01:14] Did your family speak both English and French?

DB [00:01:17] Well, my father was francophone but Mum was anglophone and she didn't—and he was away most of the time, so we didn't learn French. Sorry, I have to take my glasses off here. So, we didn't speak French in the home. When we visited his family in Rogersville, it was the only real exposure we got to French. I did learn some before I became president of the union though.

BR [00:01:47] You did learn some.

DB [00:01:49] Well, you sort of had to in CUPW.

BR [00:01:52] Right, definitely in a national union. Probably helped that you had that background or that you'd heard it growing up. When did you start working for Canada Post?

DB [00:02:05] I started working for Canada Post in October, 1974. I was 19 and I celebrated my first anniversary going on strike, October, 1975.

BR [00:02:18] (laughter)

DB [00:02:19] It was a nice way to celebrate. So I started working at the post office, my boyfriend was the chief steward at the time, so he encouraged me to apply, and I did.

BR [00:02:30] Were you working inside or?

DB [00:02:32] Yeah, I was working inside, started out on the midnight shift and eventually got a job on the counters. They don't have as many of those jobs anymore in the post office.

BR [00:02:48] And then, you talked about your boyfriend being involved with the union, is that one of the entrees to Canadian Union of Postal Workers? Why did you start becoming involved with CUPW?

DB [00:03:00] Oh, it was definitely the boyfriend. My family, I had no experience with unions before that. I had worked for Irving Oil and I'd worked in a bank, so I didn't know anything about unions. So yeah, the first union meeting that I was able to attend, I was still on probation, but there was a vacant position on the executive. It was sort of an at-large and nobody seemed to want it. So he sort of gave me the nudge and said, 'why don't you run for that?' I said, 'okay'. I did. And so I held a number of local positions. I was grievance officer and I was involved in the local Labour Council representing the Local. And yeah, it was a good time to get involved in the union. The union was doing lots of good stuff. Things were changing. We were going into the whole phase of automation. There was all kinds of challenges around that. And exciting progress was being made by the union.

BR [00:04:03] I remember that in the '70s, it was an exciting time. And then you started to take on, after some years, some time of doing that, some national positions with CUPW. What motivated you to do that and what happened there?

DB [00:04:23] Well, I had been getting quite involved regionally in the union, the various union structures. And it was a time when a lot of women were getting more involved. We were talking about feminism, we were talking both sexual harassment and things like that. So I was quite involved in the regional structures. And of course, all the positions were held by men in the region and there was a lot of experienced activists. So I didn't see any, you know, any space for me in terms of working full-time for the union there. And, you know I was quite happy what I was doing. But then there was a position that came up at National, and that was a temporary union rep position in the grievance department. And it was appointed. And someone said, 'oh, why don't you just apply for it and just show that you're interested' because I didn't know many people at National office. And so I did, and then I got a phone call at work and was asked if I could come to Ottawa for six months. And so I did. And what was interesting about that, if it wasn't for Jean-Claude Parrot, that never would have happened because there was myself and a brother from Saskatoon that were in the running for that. And he had a lot of experience. He had worked with grievances more than I did, and Jean-Claude decided that it was time to have a woman at National office from the membership. So they appointed me and I was way over my head for a long time, but I was young and I was a quick learner.

BR [00:06:03] Of course, Jean-Claude Parrot was the long-time president of CUPW those days. Very, very progressive, well-known figure.

DB [00:06:12] Oh, he was a great president. He was great president, I learned a lot from Jean-Claude.

BR [00:06:21] What was the sequence, what were the roles that you took on that eventually led to you becoming the National president?

DB [00:06:30] OK, after the six months, the position became an elected position. So I ran for that at convention and I got elected. So I handled English language grievances, put them through to arbitration and things like that. And it was a nightmare because we were, Canada Post was firing like 900 people a month, right? And union activists. There was 50,000 grievances in the system and I was processing all the English language ones. So

when we got really involved in campaigns around organizing cleaners and stopping privatization and contracting out, I was asked to lead a campaign around protecting public postal service. So I jumped out of the grievance department and got into that. So I did that just as we were going into the free trade election in 1988. So that was very exciting and I did that until—that was in '88. Oh and then in 1990 at the convention I ran for Third National Vice-president. It was a new position on the executive responsible for organizing, membership mobilization, coalition work, labour movement work, communications. It was a fabulous job. And I got elected for that and I think I won that one by 17 votes and I realized it's a lot better to win by 17 votes than to lose by 17 votes. But yeah, so I did that. I was a vice-president, national vice-president for 12 years and so then it was in 2002 that I got elected as national president.

BR [00:08:36] What motivated you to run for that and do that? What was the story about that election?

DB [00:08:44] I just felt that I was ready. I was ready, I had played a really high profile leadership role in the union. I had done a lot of work at the national level with the CLC [Canadian Labour Congress], with the various coalitions and I had worked with every local across the country. And I had files with the employer, consultation files, so I knew my way around the collective agreement. And I'd seen a lot of men running, you know, running for positions in the union. And I thought it was time that there was a woman national president. You know, we had always talked within the union, oh yeah, there'll be a woman national president at some point. And I just thought, well, why not me and I'm ready? And I mean, I loved the union, right? I grew up in the union. I learned to be a socialist in the union, I learned to be a feminist in the union. You know, I loved the membership. I loved every day that I worked on behalf of the membership and I had been doing it for quite a while, well since 1983. And I thought like I've got a lot of experience under my belt. I can do this. I think I was a good president and I loved every minute of that, too.

BR [00:10:05] Was that a contested election, or a—

DB [00:10:09] No, no one ran against me for that one. Yeah, I was acclaimed.

BR [00:10:17] Okay, fantastic. So you enjoyed being president then, obviously. What were some of the highlights and gains you made while being president?

DB [00:10:29] Well, we negotiated two pretty good collective agreements under my leadership, without a strike. And we continued to—I thought that I continued to play an important role in terms of the coalition movement and our solidarity work. But for me, I felt that I represented the membership well and everything. I did good media work. I know the members loved my media work when I was president of the union. And letter carriers liked my media work, that sort of warmed them up a bit to me. But, oh I lost my train of thought. Oh, the best thing I think that came—and this started before I became president, but it really happened during the negotiations when I was president. And that was the organizing of the rural and suburban mail couriers and getting voluntary recognition for those members. As I said, I had started that work in, oh, around 1995 I guess, with organizing—

DB [00:11:47] You know, there's 5,000 workers across the country that didn't have any rights to collective bargaining. They didn't have any rights under the Canada Labour Code. And they were specifically prevented by the Canada Post Act from joining a union for the purposes of collective bargaining. So it seemed like a challenge to us so we decided we'd give it a try. So we sent out a letter cold to an old mailing list that the previous group of

workers that had tried to organize had. It's a couple hundred people and we got a huge response from people wanting to work with us to try and see what we could do to improve their working lives. And then it went to convention. We got a 10-year commitment, a million bucks a year to organize them. The membership was really excited about it. And so we made a commitment to these workers that we were in for the long haul. We looked at different ways of organizing. We organized them into their own little organization first. Oh, that sounded patronizing, didn't it? Their own organization. And we provided resources and support and they functioned as their own executive. We sent them out on the road, paired up with internal postal workers and letter carriers, traditional members, and they did all the organizing. And when it was time, because we were really clear with them, we said, once you get the right to collective bargaining, you may want to join CUPW, you may want to form your own union, you may wanna go for it with another union. But we'll still all be better off because 5,000 workers will get better wages and working conditions. We get 5,000 new members. We eliminate the employer's cheap labour strategy of using, you know, exploited workers against our traditional members. So we would be good either way with that. And when it was time, when they were ready and they felt that the members were ready to sign cards with CUPW, they told us that. And then we signed them up and the rest is history.

BR [00:14:14] Did you require, was an amendment to the Canada Post Act required?

DB [00:14:20] No. We tried that, but we did some lobbying. Pat Martin, when he was the MP from Winnipeg, he tabled a private member's bill to get them collective bargaining rights, and it only failed by a couple of votes. And we got more petitions read on behalf of rural route mail couriers from hundreds and hundreds of communities all across the country. Every day they were reading more signatures, calling for collective bargaining rights and justice for rural route mail couriers. It's a big story. I'm probably telling you too much about this.

BR [00:15:10] I think it's a fascinating story. So where we were heading to is whether it actually required a change to the law or not.

DB [00:15:19] Oh, right. And I think it became clear to me at one point, because I had been in this for the long haul. It was a few years while I was vice-president and then as president. And it became clear to me at one point that the only way we were going to get them collective bargaining rights is if someone had the right to strike. So, you know, because we were lobbying our buns off, right? We were lobbying all the time, we were filing legal challenge, we filed a NAFTA complaint. We had been doing everything. And it just struck me that it was going to require a strike, or someone having the right to strike. So we basically told Andre Ouellet, who was the CEO of Canada Post at the time, that here's what our plan was. And I laid out all the legal challenges, all the strategies, all the campaigns, all the tactics. And I said, so you can either do this the easy way or you can do it the hard way. And the easy for you to do it is voluntary recognition when we move into negotiations. Because otherwise, we've got deep pockets. We're committed to this, right, for the long term. We have a convention mandate. I think at that time we were going into bargaining and we had resolutions from every region in the country calling for recognition of rural route mail couriers.

BR [00:16:53] And so it happened. That's fantastic. And those workers are still represented today, right?

DB [00:16:58] Oh yes, and now they have pay equity. They've won pay equity. That was a long struggle because we were able to, in our first collective agreement, we got them voluntary recognition. The employer set—it was an eight-year collective agreement for them with reopeners every couple of years and a set amount of money. It was, I don't know, millions of dollars, right? Huge, huge money for the corporation. And every re-opener, we'd get to negotiate how that money was allocated. So what we first started doing, because there was huge wage discrepancies, because people had to put their routes out for tender and they had to bid on the routes and they have to bid lower to keep the routes, right? So the wage disparities were all over the place and no one was making minimum wage. But there weren't a lot of jobs for women in rural communities and these were largely women. But in any case, what we used to do is we used to, in the early days of the reopeners, we would take a percentage of the money that we had for that re-opener and we'd give that percentage to bring up the rates of the lowest paid workers and the rest of the money would go to everyone. Because we had to bring people up because it was just—one, they were so far away from the letter carrier salary but there was so much wage discrepancies within the unit.

BR [00:18:31] Internally. Yeah, that's all a huge victory, I think.

DB [00:18:38] Well, it really was. It was a huge victory.

BR [00:18:44] So can I take us back to a bit, you alluded to this earlier, to the '90s and early 2000s, that there was a lot of coalition work by unions like CUPW and coalitions like the Action Canada Network and the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives. Why do you think that was important and do you have any stories to share about those campaigns or recollections?

DB [00:19:09] Oh, well, that was an incredibly exciting time in Canada. And the Action Canada Network was actually the Pro-Canada Network first, and then the CCPA, as you said, and the Council of Canadians. And the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, they came up with that, A Time to Stand Together, A Time for Social Solidarity and it was all about the dignity of labour and the need for solidarity and a social movement really.

DB [00:19:46] So we were going into bargaining and we were looking at a strike and this was around I think going into the '80s. No it was a later strike, maybe the '87 strike. But they were bound and determined to probably scab us. So Geoff Bickerton and I were having lunch with Tony Clarke, and Tony came up with this idea that we sign solidarity pacts with different groups and different organizations. So we tossed this around and we figured, because we were fighting for jobs in the community, we were fighting for decent paying jobs, we were fighting to keep rural post offices open. You know, we were fighting for things in our communities. We actually had a document called "Our Commitment to the Communities" at that time. But we signed solidarity pacts with the Action Canada Network, with the National Farmers Union, with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty [OCAP], Rural Dignity. And I'm missing somebody.

DB [00:21:00] So, for example, with OCAP, we committed to fight for decent jobs in our communities, and OCAP and John Clarke committed to talk to their members and encourage them not to be used by Canada Post as scabs if we went on strike. With the Rural Dignity and the Farmers Union, again, we committed to keep rural post offices open and fight for decent jobs in communities. And, you know, they committed to support us during our strike. And it was the start of a really good relationship with the coalition movements across the country, then encouraging our locals to get involved.

DB [00:21:44] I really think that the support, and it wasn't just around bargaining, it wasn't just about our collective agreement. It was about building that public support, that widespread support for a national public postal service, right? Because we were under such attack at that time. Canada Post wanted to close 5,000 postal outlets across the country, mostly in rural communities. And they did close, they closed about a thousand of them, but we kept so many of them open by doing that work in the communities and by working with other organizations. It works because there's been studies that show that even when—you know, nobody likes a monopoly when people have the right to strike right, so but even when we would go on strike, during our strikes people would still support our right to strike in Canada Post, you know, the public surveys. And that wasn't an accident, that was deliberate work in our communities and then with the coalitions. And working with the coalitions, I mean, our members don't just work in the workplace. They're not just labour, they live in, they access our health care, they live in our communities. Their kids go to our schools, right? We have to look after our members outside of the workplace as well as in the workplace.

BR [00:23:13] That's great. I myself was involved with some of that work in those days, and I think it's so important for labour, but it was funny, it was sometimes controversial at CLC conventions and otherwise, whether there should be that. Any recollections of debating about the merits of coalition work?

DB [00:23:34] Oh my God. I think it was, it was either Jack Munro or Ken Georgetti that turned his back on me at the, when I was speaking at a BC Fed mic, when I was talking about coalition building. I think it was Munro that turned his back on me. But yeah, it was controversial. I think even Bob White yelled at me on some committee once. Well, because coalitions were seen as a threat to the NDP. Which is kind of crazy, but that's where some, you know, the "pink paper" crowd were. Remember that crowd in Ontario? But yeah, the unions that were really, really the NDP-centered ones, they saw the coalitions as a threat, I guess, taking resources that would normally go to the NDP.

BR [00:24:28] And there was a private sector, public sector kind of division about it.

DB [00:24:31] Oh, yeah.

BR [00:24:33] I worked with Canadian Union of Public Employees, very supportive of the NDP, but also very supportive of coalitions.

DB [00:24:43] Yes, and it was really the public sector unions that, and CAW, CAW was supportive of the coalition work.

BR [00:24:53] And through a lot of work, it became more understood and supported in the House of Labour.

DB [00:25:01] Yes, yes. And that's some of the work that I got to do around the CLC conventions, too, was I was on the Public Sector Committee at the CLC, and so I'd get on the convention committees that were working on the policy papers and the policy resolutions and that. So we got to do a lot of work around coalitions at that level.

BR [00:25:27] The relations between the CLC and CUPW, I guess I'm not necessarily asking about relations, but the partnership between them, do you have any recollections of your involvement with the CLC?

DB [00:25:46] CUPW's relationship with the Congress had its ups and downs over the years. I think Dennis McDermott once referred to us as the cancer on the labour movement.

BR [00:25:56] Oh dear.

DB [00:25:56] But things got better with Shirley Carr and Bob White, of course, and then Jean-Claude got on the CLC Executive Council. And love us or hate us in the CLC, CUPW, we were always good soldiers, right? Like whatever campaigns, we'd fight like hell for progressive policy at the convention and campaigns and stuff. And we were never happy with the CLC, they never went far enough for us. But we'd do whatever they asked us to do. We'd be involved in whatever campaigns, whatever they asked us to do, other than publicly support the NDP and financially support the NDP, but we'd do anything. So we were good soldiers. So that and, I mean, once Jean-Claude got on the executive, the relationship got quite a lot better, and Bob and Nancy, you know, and—

BR [00:26:54] And you were an officer too, right, of the Congress when you were president?

DB [00:26:59] Yes.

BR [00:27:03] And I think you told me earlier, you co-chaired the Action Caucus for a period of time at Congress, at convention?

DB [00:27:10] In the '80s and early '90s, I guess, when we were still fighting to get progressive policy at the CLC, right? And, you know, there were various caucuses. We weren't the first one around the CLC. There was the, I forget, there was a left caucus, there was another caucus. But it was, you know, we were able to pull progressives from all the unions who couldn't necessarily, their own unions weren't necessarily struggling for these things, but they could come together and those of us who had leadership support could carry a certain ball, right. And you know we had access to the policy papers before they hit the floor and things like that. So we knew what issues we were going to have to fight on. And that's what we'd talk about at the Action Caucus. And then there came a time when it was only CUPW and maybe a few HEU people at the Action Caucus, because we had got all the policies that we had fought for. They were all CLC policy, you know, and so the problem was they weren't always acted on, but we couldn't do much more with policy. We had sort of petered out, I guess.

BR [00:28:32] Well, it's inevitable. I mean, you don't meet just to meet. What was the leadership of Canada Post like when you were at CUPW? How does it compare to the post office management today, do you think?

DB [00:28:50] Well, I mean, there were various eras within Canada Post. Canada Post management in the early days when I was there in the '70s, they were mostly, at least line management were all former military. And so you had that sort of attitude from supervision on the work floor, things weren't great on the work floor and it was a government department. Canada Postal service, government postal service. And it wasn't until the early '80s that it became a crown corporation. And then, you know, the management structure changed. We could negotiate different things and we weren't being run necessarily by the government. Oh I had a point I was going to make there.

BR [00:30:03] Maybe about the management at Canada Post that you were working on?

DB [00:30:07] I mean there was the Michael Warren years, they weren't so bad, but there was the Don Lander years. They were the years where they were firing stewards by the hundreds just so that you know they'd scare the rest of the membership and get the activists out of the work floor. And then there was the privatizing management where they were contracting out everything that moved. And so it went through various phases. We went through years of terrible workplace harassment. The members just suffered awfully. It was harassment for being sick, and it was just terrible. And we went through years where we couldn't get a collective agreement without being legislated back to work, right? The employer would stall and stall and stall because they knew they could legislate us back to work, the government would do it. So our negotiations for a while were taking, you know, three years to negotiate a collective agreement. You know, people liked the retro cheques but like you were back at it again, right?

DB [00:31:23] So things were very difficult in the post office for decades, you know? And once Crown Corporation, it got better and we realized, I mean, this was a big issue of controversy within the CUPW because people wanted us to always—like people didn't realize that the right to strike, we were just hanging on to it by the edge because they could legislate us back to work. And Liberal governments did it and Conservative governments did it, right? And they knew they could rely on that. And there was a certain part of the membership, because once that happened, there's nothing worse than having your right to strike taken away. And then, you know, you never get the rollbacks back, what you lose, you can only try again the next time. The first time the employer legislated us back to work (which was in the '70s), they put Jean-Claude Parrot in jail because he instructed us to defy the legislation. And we did. And then because they ruled our strike was illegal after only seven days. So they jailed him. And so the next time we went on strike, they legislated us back, but they knew that the leadership was prepared to go to jail, so they couldn't use that on us. So they structured legislation that would have basically put the union into trusteeship.

DB [00:33:07] Any shop steward, any union leader that had counselled the membership to defy legislation would lose their right to hold office in the union for 10 years. It was the worst draconian stuff you'd ever seen. We knew every time we went on strike, we knew we had the membership with us, we had the public with us. The issues were righteous issues. We knew all of that, but we also knew that a vote in the House of Commons could take away our right to strike. And we knew if we defied the legislation, there was people who thought this is going to be our cycle if we don't ever defy the legislation. And there's a logic to that. But then there's a reality. What happens when people start getting arrested on the picket line? When people start losing their homes? You know, like put the union under trusteeship. It was never seen as practical. And I mean, I was big on strategy and mobilization, and we had great minds in the union who knew how to do this kind of stuff. And we could never come up with how we were gonna ever protect the membership and defy legislation, you know. The membership had so much to lose.

DB [00:34:33] But fortunately, we were usually able to do really well at binding arbitration, because once we'd get legislated back to work, they'd make us go to binding arbitration. So we'd fight over who the arbitrators were, and we'd do our best to get good arbitrators, fair arbitrators. And then we'd make our cases and we would drag arbitrators across the country to meet with members and see workplaces. We would bring members in to make presentations at negotiations. We'd bring in folks from our coalition partners to make presentations before the arbitrator. And we were usually able to prevent the most

egregious rollbacks by doing that. We hired really good lawyers and we had really good researchers and people really knew how to make the arguments at the table.

BR [00:35:29] Fantastic. Yeah, it was a long, long struggle. Wasn't it CUPW, the slogan, "The struggle continues", wasn't that?

DB [00:35:37] The struggle sure does continue. Still, I wouldn't want to be president of the CUPW these days. They've got a huge struggle.

BR [00:35:47] That's right, but when you were president, there were no national strikes, and yet your union made good gains. What were some of the debates with the union about that and how they were resolved?

DB [00:36:02] Well, when we got the voluntary recognition for the rural route mail couriers—

BR [00:36:17] When you were national president and there were no strikes but you made good gains.

DB [00:36:25] We used to have fights about what was a rollback and what wasn't a rollback, right? What's a rollback or concession or what's just a change in order to get a collective agreement. And that can get kind of complicated but there was always people in the union that thought we could do better if we went on strike. And they were probably right if we had the right to strike. If we could have maintained a strike, they were probably right at the time, but it just wasn't gonna happen.

DB [00:37:01] And also a big controversy when we got the voluntary recognition for the rural route mail couriers is Canada Post had some major rollbacks on the table, and they knew how much we wanted the rural route mail couriers to come into the bargaining unit. And it was a primary, it was a demand that was really supported across the board, across the whole country, right? Because people didn't think we'd have to give anything up. And we hoped we didn't, like we hoped that we could just, you know, force it through, but what we ended up doing—Canada Post wanted to eliminate our severance pay. We had really good severance pay. And my argument was severance pay never created or protected one job. So Canada Post wanted to get rid of our severance pay. So what we finally ended up agreeing is we would convert the severance pay to longevity pay that once workers reached a certain age, they would get an extra couple of cents an hour moving forward, right? Which, when you crunch the numbers, worked out to a lot more than the severance pay worked out to. But still, we agreed to that in order to get voluntary recognition for the rural route mail couriers. We also got a whole bunch of parcels contracts back in and a whole bunch of things in that collective agreement. But people considered this a major rollback. Even though the money, the figures worked out so that it was worth more to individual workers. So there was a huge controversy around that. People thought we could have gone on strike and got the rural route mail couriers. But the fact that we were ready to negotiate on the severance pay and that we had the right to strike and were prepared to use it was why we got the rural route mail couriers.

BR [00:39:14] Which is a big long-term gain for the union.

DB [00:39:19] Huge!

BR [00:39:19] And for those workers.

DB [00:39:21] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Canada Post was moving all the new mail delivery to rural route mail couriers. Of course, no decent wages, no benefits whatsoever. They had to find their own replacements. I mean, workers, they couldn't go to their parent's funeral without coming in and sorting out the route before the funeral, right? Anyway, those workers got justice. That's a huge, good news story. And one of the best things I think CUPW has ever done. And CUPW has done a lot of good things over the years.

BR [00:40:03] Yeah, that's for sure. These days, currently, things are kind of tough for the postal service and for Canada Post, losing lots of money and the recent strike ended up in long-term mediation. Do you have any thoughts about the current situation of Canada Post and CUPW? Any reflections on the current situation?

DB [00:40:32] Well, I know some of my friends, my old friends from CUPW, we talk about this quite a lot, right? We're all retired now and, you know, I don't know what the answer is. I know that Canada Post is in big trouble. I mean, we all know why, nobody uses the mail anymore. I mean parcels, people still, parcels are going through the roof, but there's competition in parcels. I recently heard when they were talking about getting rid of the provincial trade barriers, I think they had the exclusive privilege was on the table, like Canada Post has the exclusive right to deliver letter mail in communities all across the country. And people were talking about eliminating that as a way to ease the interprovincial trade barriers. So like everything is fraught with danger in the post office these days, I don't know what the answers are. I mean, obviously, expanded services, different services, finding ways to create jobs. There's, you know, postal banking. There's been some success in that area. Certainly other countries have been in postal banking for decades. And there's things like, the alert system where letter carriers going door-to-door will check in on seniors. Well, there is so much—you've got a national infrastructure, you've got representation in thousands of communities across the country. If you look at a public service with that kind of structure, like surely there's other things, other services that Canada Post could provide.

BR [00:42:27] That sounds like the answer, absolutely. I would agree with you that there needs to be more creativity by their management about how to branch out.

DB [00:42:35] Oh, but that's always been a struggle. Even when they were most open, when we were actually getting some jobs, we had this service expansion and job creation committee. And we would do all these pilot projects in the counters and the retail outlets and things like that, creating jobs and services that people really liked. But it was fighting tooth and nail to get them to create a couple of jobs here and there. Because they see it as their domain, right? They're the boss. Yeah, it's their turf, who are we to tell them how to run the post office?

BR [00:43:13] Got to open their minds about different types of modern services that they can provide.

DB [00:43:19] Oh, God, if it wasn't like—I will say this about management throughout my entire career at Canada Post and in CUPW is that if it wasn't for CUPW, there wouldn't be a post office today because, you know, they were largely ineffective and incompetent, right? And they were slow to change. And there was a big shift to turn around and there was all kinds of resistance and then there was political interference. But I mean, people used to say, you think you run the post office, but yeah, we do. We really do, not the employer.

BR [00:44:02] That's great. So, switching gears now, after eight years as president of CUPW, you left that position and in 2008 you moved here to B.C. and you took a job as the Coordinator of Policy and Planning with the Hospital Employees Union. What was that job about and what motivated you to make that move and when did you do it? Tell us about that time in the HEU.

DB [00:44:29] Now, full disclosure here, I was actually defeated in 2008.

BR [00:44:34] Oh, I see. Okay.

DB [00:44:37] I wish I'd had the option, and I think I had done two terms from 2002 to 2008, two three-year terms as president. And I think part of it was, you know, a bit of a backlash around the collective agreement and the severance pay and all of that. So I was defeated in 2008. It was the first national election I had lost since 1983. So, as my father said, I had a good run. But in any case, and then as if I'm not the luckiest girl on the planet, someone sent me—because I was at a loss. I had just lost, as I said, the first election since I was in my 20s and I was at loose ends. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't think I wanted to go back and sort mail, but then someone gave me a copy of a job posting at HEU. And Judy Darcy was out there as Secretary Business Manager. So it was a pretty vague job description as Coordinator of Policy and Planning, so I picked up the phone and I called Judy, and I asked her what the job was all about. So she gets all excited. It was a new position, there really wasn't much more she could tell me than what was in the posting, but I thought about it and I sat down and I worked up a resume and I thought yeah, this would be really interesting. You know, a chance to help shape this position and I probably wouldn't be there long. I was in my 50s, but you know it seemed like something new and exciting and an opportunity. So I said, yeah, I'll do it, and I moved out to BC.

BR [00:46:38] That's great.

DB [00:46:40] Yeah, it was interesting. Well, I mean, I knew HEU and I had always admired HEU, right? They were a lot like CUPW, except for their affection for the NDP, but they were a lot like CUPW. They were a left union, a social justice union, you know, a fighting union that really represented their membership. I've always liked their leadership. So it seemed like a pretty good fit. I guess I hadn't anticipated how hard it was at my age to learn an entire new industry. And healthcare is complicated, especially in BC. But yeah, so the Provincial Executive Committee approved me and I went out to their convention in 2008 and then I moved out there in early 2009. And I got to work, I guess my main responsibility was working with the Provincial Executive, providing support for them, their committees and things like that. And it was a new position, it was sort of shaping as we went, you know.

BR [00:47:56] What was your favourite work that you did in that position?

DB [00:48:00] Oh, I loved the Living Wage campaign. We had a whole bunch of these. This committee made up almost entirely of Filipino women and they were all cleaners or food service workers. And they were the ones that were always getting contracted out and they didn't make, they made very little money. And it was a joy to work with them. They were just, they were fearless. The first time I ever met them, I was sitting in on a meeting that they were having with the health authority, a vice-president, or someone. And they were just fearless, these women with these tiny little voices. And they'd be just articulating their case so well. And we'd put them up in front of crowds. We'd send them to

conventions. They used to table at farmers' markets all during the summer. They were a great group to work with and it was just such a great campaign. And then we got to work with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives around the Living Wage campaign and got to do that work.

BR [00:49:12] And all of that work, during the time of the Campbell Liberals and the Christy Clark Liberals, when there was a change of government here, there was like momentum that you were building, I think, through that campaign that eventually led to bringing those workers back into the public service and restoring their wage levels. You know, because of the constant pressure that they weren't getting a living wage.

DB [00:49:42] Oh, and the contract flipping, it was just—I mean, that's how they kept their wages so low is every time that they'd sign a collective agreement, HEU would organize them, negotiate a collective agreement. They'd flip the contract, fire all the workers, hire back the ones they wanted to. And then you'd start all over again, you'd have to reorganize them. And I mean some people, I met people at various HEU conventions that had been organized like three or four times by HEU because they had been flipped that many times.

DB [00:50:24] I mean I tend to mock, because CUPW had a very different relationship with the NDP than HEU did. We would give qualified support at election time. We wouldn't give a cent to the NDP ever, right? I think we eventually started giving them organizers because we felt that that was training our people to be good organizers. But the work that they did, I never went to so many NDP fundraisers in my life as I did when I was with HEU. But the support that HEU gave to the NDP and the amount of time that HEU activists and those workers spent with the NDP, that was the reason why the NDP moved on that. I wasn't surprised. I was really, really thrilled, but I would have been really, really disgusted if it hadn't happened, because Adrian Dix knows this stuff so well, right? And it was the NDP that fought against it when they only had two people in the legislature, you know? So yeah, I understand why HEU had that relationship with the NDP, right? And it served them well.

BR [00:51:48] Adrian Dix was certainly familiar with the file when he was Health Minister and motivated to move on it.

DB [00:51:55] His mother was a healthcare worker.

BR [00:52:00] Right. What other areas of staffing or other areas did you lead when you were in that position at HEU?

DB [00:52:08] Well, I was responsible for the research department, the education department, and the communications department. The directors of those three departments reported to me. But really, they were all experienced directors. The departments, they were really, really highly skilled, like some of the best researchers, communications folks, you know, educators that I've ever seen, right? They're in HEU. And so I didn't have to, like they didn't take up a lot of my time. Most of my time was spent working with the provincial executive. Geoff Bickerton came out and we had him work with me and we developed proposals and recommendations, a report on the roles and responsibilities of the provincial executive, made a whole bunch of positive changes to the structure. That was one thing I got to work on was in that position. And we also did an equity review leading up to one of our conventions about where we surveyed our members. We had focus groups and mail-in surveys, getting a sense of where our members were in terms of where they were in racialized or marginalized groups, where

they where in terms of leadership because, I mean HEU has a huge Filipino membership, huge. And so we wanted to see where they were, in terms of participation in the union, support for the union, everywhere from union meetings to being on the executive. And it was a really, really good report and we presented that to one of the conventions.

BR [00:54:08] Great. Another thing that was going on during that time when you were there was these raids on HEU members by the BC Nurses' Union. Can you reflect on that or tell us any stories about?

DB [00:54:19] It was a terrible thing. I mean, yeah, that was a horrible time for HEU and for the members. I mean I've never been raided before and it was just terrible. And it took so much of the union's resources and the union's attention around that time, because the NU seemed to have wads of money to throw around, and they were in the workplaces and they were talking to the LPNs all the time, right, and making all these outrageous offers to them, and we were trying to negotiate on behalf of our other members and we were constantly fighting these raids. We had to book members off, we had to strike committees, and we went into bargaining. And we are the traditional— the other members, the rest of the members of HEU got a collective agreement that impacted their vacation days. I forget the details of it, but they gave up part of their vacation days to give a bigger wage increase to the LPNs who then went to the BCNU anyway. It was terrible.

BR [00:55:49] It's what everybody says about raiding, right? Like when unions are dedicating their resources to fighting each other, then it's—

DB [00:55:59] Oh yeah, I mean it's not like employers are just giving you a break when you're otherwise occupied, right? They see it as an opportunity to swoop in, do bad stuff to you. But yeah, no, that was an awful raid. And HEU's got the best organizers I've ever seen, you know, and they just unleashed these organizers to work with, you know, supportive LPNs. And they ran a really good campaign, but the LPNs saw their own interests above being part of the union, or they saw that their interests would be better served financially. And many of them really didn't like being in the same union as cleaners and cooks, right? Let's be honest.

BR [00:56:54] A lot of unions have to grapple with that, you know, they represent different classification levels.

DB [00:57:00] Oh, yes. It was interesting at HEU, they had the—the smallest group in CUPW's bargaining unit was the trades. Same as in the HEU in healthcare. Highest wages. And they're like the biggest complainers on the planet and like trades, god love them. They're, I mean, the same in any union, they take up a whole bunch of time and energy, right? And they all say they could do better in the private sector.

BR [00:57:41] I guess that's an option.

DB [00:57:44] Not if you're part of one big union. They used to think they could just leave HEU or leave CUPW and go, mm, no, you can't.

BR [00:57:54] That's right.

DB [00:57:55] Yeah, I really enjoyed my time at HEU. It was a joy to work with Judy Darcy, it was a joy to work with Bonnie Pearson, and it was interesting to see a union totally different with so much in common with CUPW, but totally different. Because everyone who

worked full time at CUPW, nationally or regionally, except for clerical staff, IT, and translators, came from the membership, they were postal workers, right? The opposite in HEU, all the reps were staff, the secretary business manager was hired and sort of played the role that the president plays in most other unions, you know? So it was a very different experience and I must say it opened my eyes. I was part of the old—you have to be democratic and nobody gets to work for the union that isn't a postal worker or hasn't done their time in the workplace. And it was really democratic and it meant that we developed skills really quickly with our members because we plucked them out of the workplace, put them into an office and they'd be filing grievances, they'd be running education seminars, they'd be hiring staff, you know? You learn pretty quick when you do that.

DB [00:59:26] But the leadership at HEU, there was only two, the President and the Financial Secretary, were the only two that came from the membership. Everyone else was staff. And I mean, it has its advantages, but it also, what I found with the executive is the PE [Provincial Executive] they saw the wages and the working conditions that the staff had and the roles that the staff got to play that they themselves weren't able to play. So, you know, it could have created huge—there was always little frictions around that. And we tried to address some of that with the report that we did that I worked with Geoff on to look at their roles and responsibilities. But it also made me see, coming from the opposite, that there's a role for staff. Like we elect everybody, not everybody's born to be an organizer, but we elect our organizing officer, right? Not everybody's got a fine legal mind, but we take people out of the post office, give them a couple of weeks training and we expect them to argue arbitrations. There are probably jobs that are well suited to staff rather than taking members off the work floor.

BR [01:00:55] That's interesting. That's a very interesting contrast of the two approaches.

DB [01:01:01] I mean, both have their strengths.

BR [01:01:07] Unions in different cultures and traditions and situations, different employers, you know, it all evolves, right, over time.

DB [01:01:15] Yeah, it was a nice experience and I'm really grateful that I got to do it because I had lived in the postal union. I knew everything about the postal industry, like boring stuff that nobody would ever want to hear that I gotta get out of my head sometime. But, you know, to be able to experience a new industry, a new union culture, you know, a different union structure. It was a really wonderful opportunity. And I'm grateful I had it.

BR [01:01:51] We're all happy you were here. Well, when did you finish up with that?

DB [01:01:56] I retired in 2015.

BR [01:01:59] 2015. And then you moved back to New Brunswick.

DB [01:02:01] Yeah, in late 2019, just before the pandemic.

BR [01:02:08] I see. So what advice do you have for younger activists getting started in the labour movement today?

DB [01:02:14] Oh, hang on tight! Well, we dodged a big bullet with the federal election, I think. Not a huge bullet, because the jury's out for me on Carney, but I'm glad he won. Great NDP losses, though. Peter Julian lost. I can't believe that. Anyway, I would just say

that have patience with your unions. Leaderships are still you know, older, as I look around a lot of unions now, that's changing. But don't leave it up to the people who have been there forever. Like the people that have been there forever have got to step aside and make room for younger activists and younger activists have to demand those places. They have to demand their role in the union. Not the day they enter the workplace. I mean, you get involved, you support the union and like work for the union and young people can bring something very important to the union. I don't know, we grew up in different times and I think it'd be really interesting. I wish I was a fly on the wall, or I could see the unions 30 years from now, see what's going on. But young activists have got a really important role to play, you know? There's a tendency if, I mean, not everyone wants to go to a union meeting. Union meetings can be really boring, right? Not everyone wants to be a shop steward, but how do we make our unions more welcoming for and, you know, more opportunities for members to participate in the union, to bring that useful activism. You know, the climate activism that younger folks are so passionate about, to bring that into our unions. We just have to make the space.

BR [01:04:35] And be determined to do it, like make a decision.

BR [01:04:38] Absolutely. Yeah, it's got to be conscious. It's not going to happen by accident. Like women took our places in the union, we didn't just wait for it to happen, but we did it through structural changes. We formed women's committees at all levels of the union, we developed funding, special women's education. You know, unions have been doing this and it's worked. When I was president of the union, oh, this was a great time to be a woman president of the union. Judy Darcy was president of CUPE, Nicole Turmel was president of PSAC. Charlene Stewart was president of SEIU. You had Kathleen Connors from the BC Nurses'— or the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions. It was like women in leadership, like crazy, right? And now I don't know. I think Charlene Stuart's not president anymore. I don't know where the women presidents are, the women leadership.

BR [01:05:40] At the Congress, anyway.

DB [01:05:43] Oh, yes, at the Congress, absolutely at the Congress.

BR [01:05:48] At the BC Fed.

DB [01:05:51] Oh, at Unifor, Lana Payne. She's amazing, eh?

BR [01:06:00] So that's a good suggestion is sort of look at how women made space for being leaders in unions and young people need to adopt similar kinds of things.

DB [01:06:12] Yeah, at some point we just said like people who have power have got to be prepared to step aside so that other people can can grow and can perform and so members can see themselves represented in their unions, that they're not all white guys, with all due respect to white guys, you know?

BR [01:06:40] Okay, well that's a great discussion. Thanks so much for this, Deborah.