

Interview: Fred Wilson (FW)

Interviewer: Carmela Allevato (CA)

Date: May 6, 2025

Location: Burnaby, BC via web conferencing

Transcription: Cathy Walker

CA [00:00:05] It's May 6th, 2025, and I'm going to be interviewing Fred Wilson, who now lives in Ottawa, therefore this is being recorded and it's an interview online. I'm Carmela Allevato and I am conducting the interview on behalf of the BC Labour Heritage Centre Oral History Program. Good morning, Fred.

FW [00:00:31] Hello, Carmela.

CA [00:00:34] Fred, I know quite a bit about your life, and you've shared quite a bit of it in preparation for this. We'll get into it shortly, but I see two main themes in this interview. One is first, your work directly with the labour movement, but also, and I think even more importantly, Fred is the work that you've done in the social justice movement and outside of directly within, as a member of a trade union, for example, supporting the trade union movement. If you want to tell us about your early years, where were you born, what was your family like, how did you get first politicized and then involved in the labour movement?

FW [00:01:30] I was born in Vancouver. I'm a Vancouver boy, 1951, so you can do the math on that. A working-class family. My father was a labourer and a warehouse worker. My mother was a janitor who cleaned office buildings and banks. I can remember as a kid running around the banks on her big polisher. It was like my ride. It's how I had fun as a kid. We moved around a lot because we were a relatively poor family. I recall living in at least five houses in Vancouver as a young boy, spent a little bit of time in Regina when my father was unemployed, and then we finally landed in East Vancouver. That's really where my life started to be stabilized. I went to Lord Selkirk Elementary School and then on to Gladstone High School. That's where my life began during those years as a teenager. My father wasn't political, and he didn't speak to me very much at all about politics, but he was a strong union member. By the time I was in my middle teens, I kind of figured that out.

FW [00:03:04] Another important thing was my father's father, my grandfather was an Irish Orangeman. I found out by osmosis when I was in my teens, that he was like a lot of Orangemen, a racist. I remember being repelled by this revelation and it made a big impact on me. That was coming together with a lot of things that were happening in the 1960s, 1968, I was 17 years old at the time. We can all remember 1968, Kent State, the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement in the United States. I can remember being aware of all of that.

FW [00:04:04] It was about that time, I can't give you the exact time, but I would have been most likely 18 years old when a friend of mine, Phillip Rankin, who we both know, invited me to come to the Rankin household. I remember him saying, Fred, I want you to come to the house and a guy's going to talk to you and just shut up and listen.

CA [00:04:33] Classic Phil Rankin.

FW [00:04:35] Yeah. It turned out that who walked into the room was Ben Swankey, who I believe has already been interviewed on the BC Labour History Project, if not him himself about him. Ben, of course, was an outstanding labour educator, writer and mentor to

many, not just to me, but I remember him talking in his calm and patient way about history, politics, ideology. I think we had maybe two sessions or maybe three sessions with Ben. That's really where I shaped my kind of worldview, if you could call it that, as a socialist. Of course, I'd say that I've changed my opinion about a lot of things over the years as one should. Unlike, Pierre Poilievre who said the other day that his views are completely unchanged on everything since he was 20 years old or something like that. We should change our views on everything or on lots of things but I'd have to say though, that the fundamentals of that kind of orientation that we got from Ben has remained with me. Yes, it's always been kind of my North Star.

CA [00:06:08] Then you joined the YCL or the Young Communist League as a result of meeting Ben.

FW [00:06:16] Yes, I'm not sure that's a direct result of meeting Ben, but as I became more politicized, yes, I did end up joining the YCL and was quite active in the YCL for a few years and even went to Toronto. For a very, very brief period of time had the title of General Secretary of the YCL of Canada. That's another story. It was a mistake. I flew off to Toronto. I was advised, most people were encouraging me to go. One person was advising me not to go, and that was, maybe we'll talk about him a bit later, Tom McEwen, who himself is a legendary figure in Canadian labour history. He said, 'I don't know, you should think about this. Don't go.' But too many people were urging me to go and I went to Toronto and did that for a year. Then after one year, I left but at least I did meet and marry Pat. Well, I brought her back.

CA [00:07:25] Tell me about your years at the Pacific Tribune, because that happened in the 70s or 80s, right, in the 80s.

FW [00:07:36] Yes, my years at the Tribune were really the foundations of my education as a labour activist, and also where I learned my career skills as a writer and researcher and journalist that really took me through the rest of my life in the labour movement. I still think about taking, answering that call. When I was offered a job at the Tribune, I was at Vancouver City College completing my second year at Vancouver City College. I got a call from the Tribune. They offered me a job. It was likely my single biggest mistake in my life to not carry through on my post-secondary education. On the other hand going to the Tribune was, as I said, the beginning of my life in the labour movement and my education really as a labour activist. I learned how to write there and to become a journalist. I was mentored and taught how to write by Sean Griffin, a wonderfully talented author, English major. I remember at that time, one of my first jobs as a young writer at the Tribune was I was sent off to cover the Vancouver & District Labour Council meetings.

CA [00:09:16] Tell us about that.

FW [00:09:19] It was a very different scene than anything you could imagine today. First of all, the Labour Council met in those days every two weeks, not every month or every three months, I think, which sometimes would meet these days, but it was every two weeks the Labour Council met. They met in the IWA hall on Commercial Drive. It had a big hall downstairs. Every two weeks. Every meeting was packed. There was a press table at the back, and there were always press people there. I was sitting there alongside radio, and Vancouver Sun and Vancouver Province reporters.

FW [00:10:00] What made it different was that all of the most important labour leaders in the country, or in the province, and in Vancouver, would come to the Labour Council

meeting. Every two-week meetings there were forums for them to sound off on the issues of the day and to debate each other. There were huge debates. Leading the kind of the establishment group or the mainstream group was the president of the Labour Council, Syd Thompson. I don't know if Syd has had his labour history yet done by the project, but he had this huge booming voice. We used to say you measured Syd's militancy in decibels. Homer Stevens would come, he was president of the Fisherman's Union, Bill Stewart, the president of the Marine Workers, a strong voice there, Jack Phillips, who was in those days, the director of CUPE in British Columbia. These were all the leaders of the left.

FW [00:11:09] I was completely starry-eyed and soaked it all in, big learning experience for me. I should just say one other thing about the Tribune is that's where I also acquired an interest in and a certain knowledge of labour history because the Trib was full of labour history. I mean it was living labour history. The two editors of the Tribune had been Tom McEwen who had been the General Secretary of the Workers' Unity League during the 1930s, and Maurice Rush, of course, who had been himself a youth activist in the unemployed movements of the 1930s and was considered by many to be the father and gentleman of the communist movement of the day. They had been the editors of the Tribune. The Tribune was a political paper, but it was widely read in the labour movement. Almost every union in British Columbia had a subscription to the Pacific Tribune. We wrote labour stories, the same as others. We were members of the Newspaper Guild. I was a member of the Legislative Press Gallery. I was at and spent some time there around Solidarity, maybe we'll come back to that.

FW [00:12:53] I also started to write labour history. A couple of times a year we would write labour history and so I was able to write, for example, I met Harold Pritchett.

CA [00:13:04] Who was Harold Pritchett?

FW [00:13:06] Harold was the first president of the IWA. He was the president of the BC Federation of Labour. When the Cold War broke out in 1948 and the Taft-Hartley Act was enacted, Harold was told that he couldn't go into the United States. The international headquarters of the IWA was in Oregon, I believe, or maybe Washington, but anyways, Harold couldn't cross the border. That led to the famous or infamous decision that was to try to organize a break from the International Union, which failed and resulted in the blacklisting of all of those left-wing leaders of the IWA for many years. Harold told me that he always opposed that decision. I got to write his history, learned a lot from him. I remember writing a feature-length story on the Battle of Ballantyne Pier, the 1935 Longshore Strike. The Tribune years, I look back on very fondly. They were growing years for me. I was a kid growing up in a very political environment and learning as I went.

CA [00:14:39] Great. You already told us about Toronto. When you came back from Toronto in 1976, what did you do? What were you involved in?

FW [00:14:54] In 1976, when I came back from Toronto, as I mentioned, Pat and I, I met Pat when she was a candidate for City Council in Ward 2 of Toronto. I was working for her. We had a whirlwind romance and we got married in Toronto. That was 49 years ago. As soon as we came back to Vancouver, I went back to work at the Tribune, not really knowing how long I would stay there, but I went back to work there. That's when I started to be the city hall reporter for the Trib. That became my main journalism assignment. Pat became immediately involved in civic affairs. Two years later, Pat was elected on the same day as Libby Davies to the Vancouver Park Board for COPE. By being city hall

reporter for the Tribune, I met Bruce Ericksen and through Bruce, Libby Davies, and so on, became very involved in COPE. For the next 20, 25 years you could say that COPE was our political centre of gravity in Vancouver.

CA [00:16:26] COPE is the Coalition or was the Committee of Progressive Electors.

FW [00:16:31] Yes, COPE was the Committee of Progressive Electors, exactly. For me, my work in COPE, though, it should be stressed, was always an extension. I always saw it as an extension of the labour movement.

CA [00:16:49] Why is that, Fred?

FW [00:16:52] Because it was labour politics and that's how we approached it, always as first and foremost. COPE was labour politics and alternatively I was the communications director and the campaign manager for over 20 years in every election. COPE was an extension of the labour movement, and it was our labour politics. COPE was founded by the Vancouver & District Labour Council in 1968 by Frank Kennedy, who was at the time the chair of the Municipal Affairs Committee of the Labour Council. It was founded to be labour's voice in Vancouver politics and it actually was.

FW [00:17:40] Many of the candidates, I would say, over the majority of the candidate were trade unionists for many, many years. The education wing that ran for school board, they were all BCTF activists, or the vast majority of them were. Some were educators from UBC and Simon Fraser University, but most of them were BCTF activists. Of course at the centre of the alliance was CUPE Local 1004 that we worked with daily. Being a COPE activist in those days meant you were constantly in touch with CUPE and those activists in Vancouver, Dave Long, Norbert MacKenzie.

FW [00:18:40] The other fulcrum that the Labour Council provided was the unity slate that made it possible to elect people in Vancouver. When COPE was founded in 1968, for the first several years, there was a very intense rivalry with the Vancouver Area Council of the NDP at the time. For several elections in a row, COPE would run a full slate of candidates, so did the NDP run a full slate of candidates. Mind you, there were NDPers in COPE. From its formation, there were always progressive New Democrats that were members of COPE, but the NDP area council was unwilling at the time to work with COPE because it also included some people from the Communist Party. That went on for two or three elections. We were always calling for a unity approach.

FW [00:19:52] Finally, the Labour Council brokered that deal by creating what was called the Unity Slate. The Unity Slate was basically just a 'you vote at' card that had a designated number of COPE candidates and NDP candidates. That was when we started to win elections. It was courtesy of the Labour Council. I can remember Jim Quail and I meeting with Ron Wickstrom and Glen Clark to negotiate how many seats or how many positions each of us would have on the Unity slate. Of course, that was before Glen was a provincial politician. He was still a business agent for the Ironworkers when we were doing that.

CA [00:20:54] Tell us about the period in the 80s with Operation Solidarity and your role in that.

FW [00:21:07] Solidarity changed a lot of things and for some good reasons, and also some—I think that we're still trying to, the labour movement in British Columbia, I would

say even though I say so from afar now, I think it's still not really gotten over the way Solidarity was undone. I think the legacy of that period will carry on for a long time.

FW [00:21:36] To set the scene, it was 1983. I was a reporter for the Pacific Tribune. As I mentioned, I was the member of the Provincial Press Gallery at the Legislature in Victoria. The Labour Council had, at the time, set up a worker action centre in the UFAWU hall and the coordinator was a young activist named Kim Zander. She was quite a firebrand and the Labour Council Action Centre was a real source of activism.

FW [00:22:21] There was a budget coming down and George Hewison said 'You know, this is going to be important'. George was an officer of the UFAWU at the time. It was agreed that I would go off to Victoria to cover the budget. George called a meeting of unions and social groups to come to a meeting at the UFAWU hall for the next day after the budget. We had no idea that when we did this, that it would be the 26 bills attacking all of labour and civil society. Of course, they knew all about it before I got back from Victoria, because it was such a huge event. The next day I brought back my report on what had happened. Of course, everybody already knew. That day, the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition was formed. Women Against the Budget, I think, was formed that day and a bunch of other groups.

FW [00:23:45] It was actually not for about a week later that the BC Fed brought together Operation Solidarity. Then about two weeks later the Solidarity Coalition was formed. The Lower Mainland Budget Coalition was basically the Lower Mainland—although it was never said so formally, it was the Lower Mainland expression of the Solidarity Coalition.

CA [00:24:14] Fred, you kept referring to the UFAWU, can you tell us what that acronym stands for?

FW [00:24:23] That was the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, which had been historically, it had been thrown out of the Canadian Labour Congress along with the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers and UE, but it had made its way back into the Congress, as had UE. Some parts of the Mine Mill never did return.

CA [00:24:58] There were big marches that were organized by Operation Solidarity but I want you to tell us about what you did, that you and a group of others did while there was a bit of a break in between marches.

FW [00:25:20] I think you're talking about the pizza guerillas.

CA [00:25:22] Yes.

FW [00:25:27] The pizza guerrillas. The big marches, the movement started in July. I think July the 7th was the date of the 26 bills, then Operation Solidarity formed and we started to have the first big marches in Vancouver. I remember the big march into Empire Stadium. I think that was in August. Fifty thousand people marched into Empire Stadium led by the firefighters with their bagpipes. That was when we knew that there was something really big, that unprecedented that was taking place, the numbers of people in the street and the demand of the movement to undo these 26 bills. The formation of what you could only call an extra-parliamentary opposition to a government that had basically replaced the official opposition, which seemed to be impotent.

FW [00:26:40] I remember we went to Victoria. I think it was the third big demonstration, and Dave Barrett came out. I think we were 15 or 20,000 strong in Victoria. Dave Barrett came out and said, 'You've come in peace, now go in peace.' That was sort of the answer, but what the business of what the Coalition and Operation Solidarity was about was these 26 bills have to be stopped. We remember the billboards, 'First they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew' and so on. We were very clear about what those bills represented that our goal was to defeat those bills or to bring the government down.

FW [00:27:34] Solidarity continued to gather strength, but by the end of the summer, September-ish, some of the big marches were over, and a bit of a doldrum had set in. That's when the group of us thought that we needed to do something to keep action alive. It was clear that there wasn't going to be another big march in the near future so we came up with the idea of occupy the provincial cabinet offices in downtown Vancouver, in Robson Square. As a matter of fact, it was Jim Quail and I who went down to Robson Square one day and found the cabinet offices, because we didn't know exactly where they were, went in and actually were able to walk into the offices without anybody stopping us. We said, okay, fine. We just said, thank you. We brought some pamphlets we left or something like that.

FW [00:28:47] A few weeks later, I believe there were about 80 of us that one morning walked in and occupied the cabinet offices. They were made up of activists from most of the major unions at the time, BCGEU activists, Fishermen's activists, Hospital Employee Union activists, Carpenter activists, also community people, DERA activists were there, some women's activists. We walked in and took over and told the Social Credit officials there to leave. And they left. I think we were there for about, just over a day. I think maybe 36 hours or something like that. That evening when we were there, although there were police outside, nobody tried to break down the doors and remove us. That evening, Jack Gerow, who was the Secretary Business Manager of the Hospital Employees' Union, showed up with boxes and boxes of pizza to feed us. I believe it was Jack Munro of the IWA who was not impressed with what we were doing and wanted to belittle us. I think he told the newspaper, he called us the 'pizza guerillas' which we became known as. We walked out the next day and had a big rally outside with about five to 7,000 people. That was one of our contributions to the Solidarity Movement.

CA [00:30:50] Can we move on then to when you left the Communist Party and what went on after that?

FW [00:31:00] Can I just make one other point before we go on Carmela? I don't think you can talk about Solidarity without talking about how it ended.

CA [00:31:15] Your perspective on how it ended.

FW [00:31:20] First of all, in my own life, Solidarity was the first leadership role that I was asked to play. It was not a leadership role in Operation Solidarity or the Coalition per se, but I became, for that brief time, the floor leader for the CP [Communist Party] members of the Coalition. Through that, I got to know Art Kube quite well. Art was an old-school trade unionist who knew how the left worked. He knew what my role was. He would stay in regular contact with me, as he did with everybody that were all of the components of the Coalition, to make sure that everybody was sort of in the corral.

FW [00:32:13] When Jack Munro went to Kelowna and signed the Kelowna Accord basically to shut the movement down, let's just say, it was very divisive. The Lower

Mainland Budget Coalition was totally opposed to it. I told Art we were totally opposed to it. I regret to this day what happened to him because he was sort of pushed aside. That was when they brought in Ken Georgetti. The main purpose of bringing in Ken Georgetti from Trail at that time was to make sure that Operation Solidarity or the Solidarity Coalition would not happen again. And indeed it didn't. Oh, yes, I should mention one other thing.

CA [00:33:13] Historical correction. Are you going to do that? Is that what you are going to do?

FW [00:33:17] Yes, a historical correction. About two years ago, I think about two years ago there was a story in The Georgia Straight. The story in The Georgia Straight was based on that somebody had done a freedom of information request and had gotten RCMP files on Operation Solidarity. In this story about the RCMP surveillance of Operation Solidarity they reported that there was a meeting in a restaurant on Broadway between Fred Wilson of the Communist Party and Larry Kuehn, the president of the BC Teachers' Federation where we were discussing a general strike which of course is a very silly idea that that would have been taking place. We were not discussing this. Whoever these RCMP officers were who were sitting at a table got it completely screwed up or they just made it up. I don't know. We were actually talking about the occupation of the cabinet offices. I was just, as a courtesy, letting Larry know as we did to all the union leaders, so that everybody knew what was happening, what was going to take place. I've been looking for the way to set the record straight on that, and not let that hang out there in the archives of The Georgia Straight.

CA [00:35:05] Alright, and here it is. Thank you for taking us back to how Operation Solidarity ended. I think that was really important to cover that. All right, 1990s.

FW [00:35:19] Yes, leaving the party. A lot of people left the Communist Party in 1990 and 1991. It happened all around the world. It happened in Canada. My analysis is that, which was clear to me at the time, that something fundamental had changed. I remember talking with my comrades and colleagues at the times that there's nothing in the books that we've been reading that suggested that something like this would happen. Something had happened that contradicted a lot of what had been some sort of benchmarks for our political outlook. There had been a change.

FW [00:36:20] Later, when I look back on it, it came together for me in reading Eric Hobsbawm's book, [The Age of Extremes:] The Short 20th Century, which he said started in 1917 in the shadow of the Russian Revolution and ended really in 1990 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. I think that was really the case. It meant that there was a period of politics that was defined by that geopolitical order that I was a part of, but it ended abruptly. It was clear to me that people on the left had to adjust to that new reality. It didn't mean abandoning a lot of values, but it was time to move on because we were not going to recreate that former reality again, so I did move on. Not only am I not a member of the Communist Party, I'm one of a handful of people who can never be a member of the Communist Party because we all signed documents to that effect. We left the party, moved on, and that would be over 30 years ago.

CA [00:37:51] It was during that period that first you worked with the Trade Union Research Bureau and then went on staff at the BC Nurses' Union. Do you want to talk about some of the highlights of that period?

FW [00:38:07] Soon after I left the party and the Tribune also, that work, I started to do freelance work and eventually was hired as an associate at the Trade Union Research Bureau. I think that would have been 1991 or 1992. That was a very interesting time. The Trade Union Research Bureau, for people listening that don't know about it, was very interesting, a unique organization in BC labour history. It was the de facto research department for a lot of mid-size trade unions and an associate research department, even for some much larger unions.

FW [00:39:03] About that time, I think it was in 1992, was the Baigent-Ready-Roper labour law review. Working that through the Trade Union Research Bureau, I think I wrote three of the submissions to the labour law review. I did the Carpenters' submission, I did the Labour Council submission and I did the BC Nurses' Union submission. Prior to that, I had done a review—the BC Nurses' Union had had some internal difficulties over governance structures. They wanted a review of their governance structures and their constitutional mandates. They turned to the Trade Union Research Bureau to prepare a report on that. That's when I first met Anne Harvey and Debra and then wrote their submission to the labour law review. After that, they asked me to come and work for them, which I did. In the meantime, I had been waiting to get another phone call because I had been working with the Canadian Paperworkers' Union as well, and had been doing education and communications work for them. I was very close to Norm McClellan, who was their Western Region Director—but the CEP [Communication, Energy, and Paperworkers' Union] was being formed. The unions that were party to the formation of the CEP, that would have been the Paperworkers' Union, the Energy and Chemical and the Communication Workers, they decided to have a hiring freeze. I wasn't quite sure when that would end, so I accepted Debra McPherson and Ann Harvey's offer to go to work for the BC Nurses' Union. I'm glad I did. It was another big learning experience for me. Carmela, you were, by that time, the general secretary of the HEU.

CA [00:41:34] I want to say Fred, I am so glad you did because in 1993, the idea to have the health accord came from you. You were part of the tri-union committee so I think healthcare workers owe you a debt of gratitude for coming up with that.

FW [00:41:56] Yes I did.

CA [00:42:01] You ended up working for the CEP, right? You were parked for a brief period in healthcare at the Nurses' Union, but ultimately you ended at the CEP. Can you tell us, give us some of the highlights of your time at the CEP?

FW [00:42:20] Yes, after the tragic death of Norm McClellan, who was a great, just a great leader, Brian Payne became the leader of the CEP in Western Canada. The Western Region Vice President was his title. He called me and said that he wanted me to go to work at the CEP. I was quite happy at the BC Nurses' Union, but I knew as soon as I got the call from Brian that it was the CEP where I should be. I went to work at the CEP office, which was on Pender Street, just at the edge of Stanley Park there. The rest of my history starts from that point. I was hired as a national representative. I was the first national representative hired by the CEP after they were formed. I don't have card number one of seniority because everybody else had them, but if they did, if there was a seniority list from that date on, I would have that number one position. It was still, though, for me, I was still learning every day with new experiences. I think I was doing communications and policy work and backup representing workers. I didn't service locals, but I would whenever there was—I did have to negotiate from time to time. I did a lot of workers' compensation

appeals and stuff like that around the edges while I also did the policy, communications and campaign stuff. I was doing a little bit of everything.

FW [00:44:24] I think my first big experience was I went off to support the strike in Port Alberni. I believe it would have been 1993 or 1994, an amazing strike where we had over 600 people at the pulp mill, pulp and paper mill in Port Alberni. They decided to go on strike to stop a non-union contractor from coming into the mill. For years it had been that only unionized contractors were allowed to come into pulp and paper mills and do maintenance work. The employers, this was part of the whole anti-union construction thrust in British Columbia from Pennyfarthing on where they were trying to break the Building Trades. Part of that now was they wanted to bring non-union contractors into pulp and paper mills to do the maintenance work that the Building Trades had been doing. Our members said, no, these guys aren't coming in.

FW [00:45:36] This particular contractor had a contract with one of those, I think it was called CCWU [Carpenters and Construction Workers Union] or something, one of what we called 'rat unions', which was a phenomenon in the day where they would have kind of employer-based unions so that they could pretend that they were unionized. It was before there was a kind of a Christian Labour Association model. This was even before that. Our guys said, no, they're not coming in and we're going to make it a strike issue. They did make it strike issue and they were on strike for, I believe, 80 days—60 days over that issue, which had really nothing to do with their own working conditions, but rather with solidarity with the Building Trades. There was a big camp. I remember the Roadkill Cafe, which was a big open air kitchen where all the people at the camp, because the Building Trades all came and were camping out in their trailers. There were demonstrations every day and music and eventually it was ended.

FW [00:46:50] Brian Payne had the job of ending it. That was the first time I saw Brian Payne use his creativity as a brilliant trade union strategist. He had to end this strike and it seemed like there was no way out of it. The company said, you can't stop us from hiring these non-union contractors. The union said, well, but you can't bring them here so Brian came up with a negotiation of what was called the code of ethics, which was the first of its kind. I don't think it's ever been repeated. It said basically that when these non-union contractors came on site, they'd have to pay dues to the union. If a contractor had ever crossed a picket line, they were then illeg—if they crossed a picket line in the past or in the future, they could never work, they were not an eligible contractor in the mill. The building trades didn't like it. They said we'd sold them out, but I do note that for the next 20 years they waived the code of ethics in the face of contractors many, many times.

CA [00:48:08] Another project I understand you were involved in was as a CEP representative to the Commission on Resources and Environment or CORE, which dealt with the 'War in the Woods'. What was your role in that process?

FW [00:48:25] Brian asked me to represent the union on the CORE committee. There was a CORE committee and that was sort of a provincial CORE committee that worked with Murray Rankin, who was in charge of the consultation process around the Commission on Resources and Environment. To explain what that was, the environmentalists said British Columbia had to move to 12% protected areas. The environmental movement at Clayoquot Sound was demanding an end to old growth logging and wanted large set asides of old growth forest. The government said, and this was the 'War in the Woods', the government said we are going to legislate, this was actually Mike Harcourt at the time, said, 'We're going to actually legislate 12%. If the industry, communities and unions

through the CORE process can agree on how we're going to do that, then we will take your recommendations through your stakeholder committees and legislate that. If you fail to do that we will legislate ourselves the 12%.' That's what CORE was about.

FW [00:49:51] I was on the main committee representing the union. It was a very important time for me. I was there to represent the union and also to play, I guess you could say, a middle road between the industry, between the environmentalists on one side, the industry on the other side, and the IWA which believed that the environmentalists were their sworn enemies. I was playing the middle role in trying to bring that together. It was during those years that I developed, that's really where I started, 30 years in labour environmentalism was during that period of time, working with Greenpeace and developing a more environmentalist approach to resource policies.

CA [00:50:58] You also had a role in the Treaty Negotiations Advisory Committee [TNAC] on behalf of CEP.

FW [00:51:05] Yeah, that was another middle road following the Nisga'a settlement, which was not part of TNAC. First was the Nisga'a settlement. The British Columbia decided and the federal government had a process to try to revive treaty negotiations and to kind of repeat the Nisga'a settlement in other places, basically mostly around municipal type governance structures. That went on for two or three years. No new treaties were ever negotiated, although we tried hard and the governments tried hard and the First Nations tried hard.

FW [00:51:54] My job—I was a member of the Treaty Negotiation Advisory Committee, representing the union. I was one of, I think, three trade unionists there. I remember Cliff Stainsby from the BCGEU was also there and there was one other person I can't remember who it was from labour. Basically our job there was simply to—the industry demanded, I remember Michael Hunter the head of the Fisheries Council famously said at one of these meetings 'We need a final solution to the issue of Aboriginal rights'. Of course, and we just had to say, 'Excuse me, excuse us, that is an abhorrent idea', trying to remind people that Aboriginal rights was in development because every couple of years, the Supreme Court of Canada would advance Aboriginal title and rights a little bit further. Why would a First Nations negotiator negotiate all that away? That's why we never really did, were not able to negotiate another Nisga'a because of that, the government and the industry demanding like a final, they didn't use that word only in that way that Hunter did, but they wanted a kind of a giving up of all future rights. That's why no treaties were signed.

CA [00:53:33] You talked to us a little bit about the work that you did in the CEP early in your time there. Can you tell us about some of the other strikes that you were involved in during your time at the CEP?

FW [00:53:48] Yes, certainly. Can I just back up just a second? I want to mention one other thing I didn't mention before, which I thought was quite important in my work in the forest sector in the war of the woods. I think it's apropos to today, because it's very relevant to the trade war that we're facing right now. The war of the woods had an external component to it because while we were trying to sort out sustainable logging practices and set asides and biodiversity in British Columbia, the United States was also attacking the softwood lumber industry with tariffs. The Americans held the view that the entire British Columbia forest industry was subsidized because we had public ownership of our lands, of our forest lands, that in itself was a subsidy that could not hold, in their opinion.

FW [00:55:07] During that era, I can't remember if it was Mike Harcourt or by that time it was Glen, but one of the most important initiatives that the NDP government was able to do during that whole period was the creation of Forest Renewal BC, which was actually a stroke of genius in my opinion and fit what was needed at the time. What they did was they said that we were going to put a surtax on. A surtax would be applied to the stumpage fees that were paid by the forest companies (stumpage fees being the right to cut public timber), and it was volume-based. The more timber you cut, the more stumpage fees you pay. The Americans said they're way too low because they've been subsidized, none of which was true. In any event, the government said, no, we will apply a surcharge to it. The money that was collected through the surcharge funded a new crown corporation.

FW [00:56:22] That new crown corporation had five mandates and committees, one of which was Indigenous participation and Indigenous rights in the forest sector. Another one was on environment. Another one was on silviculture and forest reforestation and another committee was workforce. I was on the workforce committee of Forest Renewal British Columbia. That was an amazing experience where we were able to get—I used to have a cheque, a picture of a cheque for \$3 million on my office wall which was the largest-ever training program in the pulp and paper industry in British Columbia. We did literacy programs, and we did a program called JUMP, Joint Union Management Program. It was an amazing training program. I learned a ton of stuff by doing that.

FW [00:57:26] We also had the Forest Worker Transition Program where 16,000 forest workers were able to get extended EI and unlimited tuition fees to retrain out of the industry. There was only one other time when that was done and that was by the Steelworkers in the steel industry for a very brief period of time. It was the so-called CSTE program. The Steelworkers were able to get extended unemployment insurance and to be able to go to school while you were on unemployment, getting unemployment insurance. We were able to do that again, which was, to my knowledge, the last time it was done. Sixteen thousand people became long haul truck drivers, went to school and became lawyers, became travel agents, became a multitude of things.

FW [00:58:36] I learned an awful lot about what so-called worker transition is about in that period because as it turns out, worker transition is just a lot more complicated than trying to figure out what somebody is doing now and their job is gone. You just try and take their existing skills and say, we'll point you in that direction, where there usually it's a dead end. I just wanted to mention that was another—I'm quite disappointed in that it is so taken for granted that there will never again be a Forest Renewal BC. It's a great part of British Columbia history and of labour history. Anyways. Sorry for that diversion.

CA [00:59:25] That's very important. As you said, it's very timely and topical given what we're facing from Trump and the people south of the border.

FW [00:59:37] Yes. About the strikes I would say that my view of what the labour movement needs to do, what its strengths and weaknesses are and what it needs to do to become a majority movement for real worker power, were shaped in the 1990s in British Columbia around the dual force things of first the labour law review that took place and my experience in the CEP where we had the three big industry strikes with Fletcher Challenge.

FW [01:00:22] It requires a minute to just to set this up, to explain the context. I'll come back to the labour law part of it in a minute. In British Columbia, the forest industry that I

came into, in pulp and paper, had an industry agreement. That meant that an industry agreement covering two unions, the CEP and the PPWC, and about 12,000 members in I believe 16 pulp mills across the province, could be somewhere about 16 pulp mills. Everybody had an identical collective agreement, negotiated once with the employer association. The IWA at the time had a similar agreement, an industry agreement. The employers one day just decided that it's over. The union said, no, it's not over. We've had this for 50 years.

FW [01:01:40] We decided to take a strike vote. The employers went to the Labour Relations Board and said, you can't do that because there's an obscure part of the Labour Code that says that you cannot take a matter of bargaining format to impasse. This became known as the Northwood decision because it was Northwood Pulp and Paper that took this decision. It was a huge turning point in British Columbia labour law. BC Federation of Labour lawyer representing us along with us was John Baigent, who of course was the founding chair of the BC Labour Relations Board, argued, pointed out that, of course, the right to strike over a matter like this was always meant, was always kind of fundamental to what British Columbia labour law should be. However, the chair of the board was Stan Lanyon, who was appointed by the NDP, was a former labour lawyer himself. Stan Lanyon, who wrote the Northwood decision, sided with the companies and said no, you cannot take a strike vote and hence 50 years of industry bargaining came to an end.

FW [01:03:14] I relate this to the labour law part of it because during the labour law review, that's when I became interested in, learned most of what I know today about labour law during that earlier period. We were already arguing for sectoralism and sectoral bargaining in 1992. The Building Trades, of course, already had a form of sectoral bargaining through the industry construction agreement. So it was clear, if labour was going to build itself into a majority movement and move ahead of new conditions, it needed broader-based bargaining. However, the NDP-appointed board chair said that one of the most important institutions of your broader-based bargaining is illegal.

FW [01:04:23] At the end of that labour law review process, the NDP government said, you want sectoralism. There was the famous Baigent-Ready proposal for sectoralism, for workers in smaller bargaining units. But the NDP government said, no, you can't have both that and anti-scab legislation. You're going to have to choose one of them, so you're going to have to choose between the fundamental right to strike and not face scabbing, or you're going to have to choose sectoralism. The BC Federation of Labour had a historic meeting and said we choose anti-scab law because broader-based bargaining, sectoral bargaining as proposed by Baigent and Ready, would jeopardize some of our union jurisdictions and so they chose the anti-scab law. Historic mistake, in my opinion.

FW [01:05:31] What I learned from that was that the labour movement made the wrong decision about the organizing and representational models. The government both shut down industry bargaining and asked the labour movement to choose, make a Hobson's choice between two fundamental rights. It seemed to me clear that both we needed political change and union renewal.

FW [01:06:07] What happened then was the Northwood decision then led to three industry strikes in a row. Brian Payne, again, picked up the pieces and created a pattern bargaining system with the PPWC, where you would pick one target company, negotiate an agreement, and then replicate that agreement in all of the other companies, which was the only legal option open to us. Fletcher Challenge was the target company. The first year it

was a short strike. The second year I think it was six weeks. I think, it was two weeks and then six weeks and then the third strike was nine months. Nine months and the industry was, they were ready for a nine-month strike and they told us that. The strike issues at that time were trades flexibility and continuous operations. This was a day when workers would still go on strike in order not to have to work on Christmas and a lot of, it was work ownership and work rules issues as opposed to wages and benefits, which were already very good.

FW [01:07:46] What the union did, knowing that it was going into a very large struggle that was going to last a long time, they created what we then did about another, I think another seven or eight times in the CEP created a supplementary strike fund where all of the workers that followed the pattern would pay weekly or bi-weekly according to how their paychecks went. They would pay weekly or biweekly into a supplementary fund so that if the workers that were at the pattern company had to go on strike, their strike pay would be supplemented. In the case of Fletcher Challenge, there were about 2,400 people on strike. The union gave them \$200 a week. The other, I think it was 9,000 people in the Fletcher Challenge world paid more money so that those workers got \$500 a week on strike. That's how they lasted nine months. So, without going on too long—

FW [01:09:11] To me, these were some really important conclusions. One that we worked into all of the union's slogans and speeches for the next decade or more was don't finish what you can't start. It was the big principle and fundamentally all of those solidarity in a pattern bargaining strike has to involve everybody who benefits from it. We did that later in energy, and we did that two or three times more in the paper sector and at least three or four times in the energy sector, similar sorts of structures.

FW [01:10:05] It also shaped my views on how the labour movement has to change because when you get involved in these generational struggles where everything's on the line, capital is making its move against labour, against worker rights, does the union have the will, the capacity, the determination to step up and do whatever is required? My conclusion was some unions do, a lot of unions don't. It's not that they're bad unions. It's just that they don't, they have to make, they will find the settlement that matches their capacity to fight. If you have a large part of the labour movement, especially the private sector labour movement without that determination or that capacity, a lot of smaller unions, in my view, over time, that becomes part of the problem. The answer to that is that you have to build that capacity. It can be built through having larger unions or having bargaining relationships in which the smaller and bigger unions work together.

CA [01:11:38] I want to move now to the period when you worked for Brian Payne when he became president of the National CEP so we're looking at the 2000s. In particular if you want to share with us the work that CEP did in the anti-globalization movement and your role in that.

FW [01:12:06] Sure. Around about 2000, Brian by this time had moved on to Ottawa to become the national president of the CEP. It wasn't long after, he called me and asked if I would go to Ottawa to work as his assistant. We made a family decision and we did that. It worked because Pat was just stepping down from her term at Vancouver City Council. Our girls, who were French immersion kids, wanted to go to university in Quebec, into Montreal. All of those stars aligned and I went to Ottawa to become Brian's assistant at the CEP office. For the next 15 years, I did just about everything that assistants to presidents do. It was quite wide-ranging. The CEP was one of those unions that had an undersized

national office in relationship to what some of the other unions would have, which meant that you had to take on more files because there just wasn't enough people to do them all.

FW [01:13:31] It was also the years of the anti-globalization movement that you mentioned. Just before going to Ottawa, I remember the Battle in Seattle where I went with my daughter who had left high school on a high school strike to participate in all of that. Very soon, I should say that when I arrived in Ottawa, I was recruited to the board of the Council of Canadians by Maude Barlow who became a political mentor and leader. I spent 15 years on the board of the Council of Canadians with the support of the union. Both Brian and Dave Coles after him always knew that it was considered a union assignment for me to work on the board of the Council of Canadians. It was a coalition arrangement between the union and the council on all of these issues, including anti-globalization.

FW [01:14:48] We went to the, I can remember vividly, the big Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting in Quebec City, when the labour movement sent thousands of people to Quebec City. The international summit took place on the Plains of Abraham up there and the police barricaded all of the bottom. The labour movement was going to take a walk around the outskirts, a big parade. There must have been I think 15-20,000 people there but a number of us including the CEP and a number of others decided to leave the parade and march up to where the barricades were. We spent the day there being tear gassed, but also a very, very big learning experience for all of our activists who did that. Because until you have been at a fence and seen the police and the army in riot gear on the other side punting tear gas pellets at you all day long, you really haven't learned about the course of forces of the state. It was a very important time. I remember Svend Robinson. I remember meeting Svend up there. He had just gotten shot with a rubber bullet in the leg and was limping away. Yeah, very, very important time. That was about that time I had my office raided. We went to, there was a WTO meeting in.

CA [01:16:36] WTO, the World Trade Organization.

FW [01:16:37] The World Trade Organization was having a meeting in Cancun. It wasn't going to be a big protest like the others, but we went too, so we were going to go to Cancun. About five days before Brian Payne and I were going to represent the union at Cancun, and about five days before, the office had a burglary. It was one of those offices that had the kind of the false ceiling. The burglar came into the office through the false ceiling and into my office where the door was locked, broke into my desk and took my laptop and left but nothing else was stolen in the office. That was my little moment there.

FW [01:17:35] I should mention Montebello while I've got stories. Then there was the Three Amigos Summit, which was the Canada, United States, Mexico, the tri-national, whatever it was called. They had a meeting at Montebello. Again, the union—by this time, Dave Coles was the president of the union—we marched with the Council of Canadians into Montebello where there were riot police on both sides of the street. We had a petition and Maude Barlow and Joel Harden from the CLC were at the front wanting to give the petition to the two presidents and the prime minister. They said no. By that time it was starting to get a bit edgy and there was pushing and shoving. Dave Coles saw this guy with a mask, pushing and shoving and he said, 'You're a cop. I think you're cop.' To make a long story short, a few minutes later people started chanting, 'You are a cop, you are a cop.' He started to run away. Sure enough, the police opened up their barricade and he ran behind them. It turned out later that the whole thing had been filmed by a Council of Canadian activist by the name of Paul Manly, who later became a Member of Parliament. Paul's video shoot caught the boot of the guy moving in, and it turned out it was a Surete

de Quebec official boot. Later they had to acknowledge, yes, we did have an agent provocateur there. These were all memorable events from the anti-globalization movement.

CA [01:19:35] I want to move to the creation of Unifor and the new union project and your role in that.

FW [01:19:50] Dave Coles and I—

CA [01:19:59] Just to explain who Dave Coles is.

FW [01:20:03] Dave Coles was the Western Region Vice President of CEP, who succeeded Brian Payne as National Union President.

CA [01:20:14] He was a union leader here in British Columbia.

FW [01:20:18] Yeah, he had been a CPU organizer and then he became the— and was an organizer until he became the vice president of the CEP in Western Canada.

CA [01:20:28] And then president of the CEP.

FW [01:20:35] To set the scene for that more properly, the Harper government had, this was 2011. The Harper government had just come off two minority governments and in 2011 they'd got the majority government. The NDP became the official opposition in 2011. This was a difficult time for a lot of us on the left in the labour movement. The NDP couldn't be happier. They had the orange wave. In their view, it was sunny skies ahead. In our view, we were happy to see NDP gains, but a Harper majority government, there was storm clouds ahead and nothing but storm clouds ahead.

FW [01:21:38] The CLC held an executive board meeting to sift through the entrails of the federal election. Ken Lewenza and Dave Coles were sitting beside each other and they were not happy with the outcome of the election nor did they share the optimism that some of the others in the room had. They started, they said, 'Something different needs to happen. This is not good, something different needs to happen.' Dave Coles said, 'What do you mean by that?' Ken said, 'Well, I don't know, what you mean?' Coles said, 'How about a new union?' Or I don't know, maybe Lewenza said, 'How about the new union?' 'Well, okay.'

FW [01:22:35] That's about as far as they took it until Dave called me and Ken called Jim Stanford and we were told to meet and we were told to have a meeting in Toronto. We did. We met at the Sheraton Hotel and said, 'Okay, what are we going to do?' Jim thought that the mission was that CEP was going to join CAW. I said, 'No, it's not the way I understand it, Jim.' He said, 'Oh, okay,' so he had to call Ken. Ken said, 'No, it is not that they are joining us. We are going to talk about a new union.' Jim came back and said, 'Wow, we are talking about a new union.' That was the beginning of Unifor. Actually, there were some earlier discussions about the idea of a new union between CEP and CAW that had taken place in Quebec but I'll leave that as an aside. People interested in that part, they can read my book.

FW [01:23:46] The first thing that Jim and I did was we started to think about all of the components about what would be involved in the making of a new union. Where would you start? It's not a merger. Where would you start? The first thing we have to do is make a

case that can be discussed and shared because so far at that point the discussion had only been between basically between Ken Lewenza and Dave Coles and even most of the leadership of either union didn't even know about it yet.

FW [01:24:25] We decided that we would write a paper, a brief paper that would make the case and we wrote something called A Moment of Truth which basically said if the labour movement doesn't change, it will die. We set out the reasons for that and that there needed to be change in the labour movement in a whole number of different ways. It needed a spark to do that. It called for the creation of a new union. The Moment of Truth then was circulated and discussed, condemned by some, supported by others, made its way into the Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail.

FW [01:25:12] There was a meeting of the two unions and we decided to create a process to create a new union. The process was called the New Union Project. It was made up of 16 people, eight from CEP, eight from the CAW. There were four facilitators, Jim and myself, the principal facilitators. There were actually six facilitators. We had two others from the CEP and two from the CAW side. That took two years. We brainstormed why a new union, what's a new union, how would it be different? We wrote a new constitution, developed new policies. Then on 2013, Unifor was—Labour Day, 2013, we founded the new union.

CA [01:26:19] That's great. You stayed on for a time? Until you retired, right?

FW [01:26:26] Yes, I stayed on. By that time, I had three years to retirement or until I was 65. I knew the deal. The culture in the CAW and in the CEP was that you retired when you were 65. We knew the law had changed, that you couldn't force people to retire but both unions had a strong culture that when you're at 65 or very, very close to that, it's time for you to go from full-time work. I knew that was going to happen, but I wanted to stay on and see this new union through.

FW [01:27:07] It was unclear what I was going to do in the new union because the structure of the new union had three national officers and some assistants. What the assistants did, this was one of the few areas of the new union that borrowed more heavily from the CAW model. Most people think or are led to believe that most of the model of the new union came directly from the CAW. That's not true at all. That's not true at all. In fact they had to change their system way more than the CEP had to change its system. I could tell you many, many ways in which that was the case.

FW [01:27:49] One way in which it was the case was that these assistants to the president, their primary function was to coordinate and lead bargaining in different sectors. That was not what I was doing at CEP, although I was staff to all the national bargaining committees at CEP. It wasn't primarily what I did, and it's not what I wanted to do either, frankly. I remember asking Jerry Dias, 'Well, what am I going to do?' He said, 'Keep on doing what you're doing now.' The position was created of the Director of Strategic Planning, a name that I did not like, but that's what it was. It was that name that when something screwed up and somebody said, 'What happened?' 'Well, go ask the director of strategic planning.' I did that for three years. What it was, was part of the proposal for the new union.

FW [01:29:04] Part of the proposal for the new union was that the new union would have to be led by a strategic planning process. This planning process meant that all of the elected officers regionally and nationally, there wasn't all that many of them, there were

five, there were about eight of them. That's all there were. Then all of the senior staff, heads of almost all the departments of the union would meet every six weeks to operationalize the decisions of the board and to prepare proposals and ideas that would go to the executive board. For three years, at first, Jim and I co-chaired that and then Jim left the union to pursue bigger and better things that he's been doing ever since. Then it was just me. We had this group meet every six weeks for those three years, and then I retired.

CA [01:30:15] Just one question before we leave Unifor and move to your retirement. Do you think that the union has fulfilled the goals that you had at its creation?

FW [01:30:34] Yeah, it's the big question. I would say it has partially achieved its goals at creation. It's a glass half full, as I always put it. The first thing I would say is that people say it wasn't a new union, just a merger of old unions. That's factually wrong. It is a new union. It has an extensive set of foundational policies and documents from mandate principle to ways of working. Very extensive. I would say it's the only large private sector union in Canada today that has such a collection of mandates and foundational principles that have been written in the modern era.

FW [01:31:27] There're a lot of unions that have some things that are somewhat similar, but they're many, many decades old. In some cases, constitutions that are almost a century old. This is the only new union, large new union created in the 21st century, for sure, and most likely back until, I don't know, NUPGE [National Union of Public and Government Employees] might be the biggest union created, back in the 1980s or something like that.

FW [01:31:57] All of this new thinking that we did in those two years are still there. It's not all that—the union's only 10 years old. It's in the DNA of the union. It's there. Whenever I think about what hasn't yet been accomplished, I try to remember that, this foundation that was created. Whenever the union gets in trouble, as it did recently over the Jerry Dias affair, it instinctively goes back to those foundational documents. Why are we here? What are we doing? And so on. I feel good about that. In terms of what it has created, one of the purposes of the union was to create a powerful organization that was a union with political and economic power that the labour movement just did not have prior to 2013. That was an explicit goal. I would say arguably that was done. That was done.

FW [01:33:12] I witnessed it and I could compare it to where, I could compare the resources and the power of the new union with where—CEP was not a weak union and I can compare the two and there is no comparison. Political power and influence in an unprecedented way. One of the problems with it led to the Dias affair, I guess you could say, is that you can set out to create a union with this kind of power and you might achieve it. One of the lessons I would take away is that you then have to pay attention to what you do with that power and how you manage the individuals that have such a power and influence. How you maintain leadership and fidelity to principle when you have that much power?

FW [01:34:18] One of the arguments and debates that took place within the union two years ago was that we need to settle this matter internally. We shouldn't be washing our laundry in the pages of the Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail and in news conferences. Of course, it was way too late for that because it was all out there anyways. In fact, if a union wants to wield real political power such that it's going to have an influence on the shape of our country and the direction of our country what goes with the turf is that the

country is going to be interested in what goes on in the union. There is no doing your laundry internally. You've got to be able to deal with this in an open and transparent and public way. I would say yes. On the political power part, yes.

FW [01:35:18] On the economic power, partially. In the auto sector, I remember early on in my early days in the labour movement, we talked about collective bargaining had to extend beyond wages and conditions, wages and benefits, and go to investment. A working class program had to not only negotiate working conditions but also investment itself to take on capital. Unifor negotiated investment. I've never seen that happen before. Eight billion dollars of investment in the auto industry. That was unprecedented. Organizing growth? No. We started the union with 315,000 members. We lost a lot of members during COVID, but the union now is bigger than it was when it started, but not nearly as big as it should be.

FW [01:36:26] Our proposal to have members of the union who are not in traditional bargaining units exists, but it's very small. It's very small but it does exist, and it is the only union in Canada for whom members of a community chapter are full members of the union. That still exists but it's very small. What I learned from that is that it's harder to organize people that are not in traditional workplaces. It's harder to organize them than it is for people in traditional workplaces, much harder.

CA [01:37:15] I want to talk about your retirement. What are you doing now, Fred?

FW [01:37:20] What am I doing now? Well, a lot. After I retired, I, of course, took a break but it wasn't long before I was asked to, if I would lend a hand to various union projects. The union left the Canadian Labour Congress in 2014. That's another story, the Canadian Labour Congress. We don't have time for it today, but that's another story. The union left the Canadian—and the defeat of Ken Georgetti, which was a personal, very personal moment for me. Just leave it there.

CA [01:38:13] You mean Ken Georgetti as president of the CLC?

FW [01:38:18] Yes, the election. I was on Hassan's campaign committee. Shortly after that, a union, a left-wing union in the United States, the United Electrical Workers, their Canadian part of it had years before joined the CAW. They came to the union's convention, I believe it would have been 2016. They came to the 2016 convention and they said, we want a relationship with this union, with your union. What are we going to do about it? The officers asked myself and Peter Kennedy, who had been the secretary treasurer and had recently retired, to work with the UE to discuss a new relationship. We created a group called the North American Solidarity Project. The North American Solidarity Project was Unifor, and in the United States, it was the UE, the National Nurses United, the National Organization of American Nurses, the Longshoremen's Union, and another smaller utility union, the Utility Workers of America. What all those unions had in common with the exception of the utility workers was that they were not members of the AFL-CIO and all of them considered themselves to be progressive unions.

FW [01:40:04] We spent a lot of time thinking about, it was sort of taking the new union project about what we meant by union renewal in Canada and started to think about union renewal on a larger scale, if not a global scale, at least on a North American scale. We spent a lot, and that was very fulfilling work and relationship building. We did a lot of thinking about what it means, what union renewal means, looking at representational models. Most unions, if you took the non-union, the majority non-union working class and

you just took them as they are and brought them into most of our unions today into our existing structures, it would bankrupt those unions because of the existing representational model and structure which is workplace-based and requiring that kind of level of service in professionals. We looked at all these kinds of different things. COVID interrupted the work of that very hopeful organization, although the relationships remain.

FW [01:41:40] As we were coming out of COVID, I got involved in another project, which is the renegotiation of CUSMA, or of the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA created CUSMA. One of the differences between the new NAFTA or what we call CUSMA was the writing of a labour chapter into the body of the agreement for the first time establishing freedom of association and union rights, not as a side agreement, but as a core principle of the trade agreement. In other words, the violation of freedom of association would be a violation, would be a trade violation. To do that, they had to, the big thing there was the Mexican situation because in Mexico, most of the unions were what we call protection unions, employer dominated unions. There was a great gap between freedom of association, genuine freedom of association in that situation in Mexico.

FW [01:42:54] AMLO [Andrés Manuel López Obrador] was elected in Mexico and he launched a labour reform. Simultaneously with that, the Canadian and American governments agreed to fund projects to support freedom of association in Mexico. The union asked me to join in a project called the Mexico Workers' Rights Action Project, which we did in conjunction with the independent unions in Mexico. This project got funding from the federal government. With this funding and working with our Mexican comrades, and they are, we opened six workers' centres across Mexico, as well as a national workers' centre, and hired Mexican activists and staff. They have organized thousands of workers and have become really important players on the Mexican labour scene. I continue working with the Mexico Workers' Rights Project and I have a title called the Chairperson of the International Advisory Committee, which means I go to the meetings and tell them what great work they're doing.

CA [01:44:35] Fred, we're coming to the end of this amazing interview. I've learned a lot about you, even though I've known you for many years. Can you just leave us with your thoughts about union renewal? What can unions do over the next period to get stronger and better?

FW [01:45:03] I've mentioned some of that already, but maybe I'll just go back over it again. I came to the conclusion, the labour movement is not about to collapse tomorrow, but it's not growing either. Private sector union density in Canada continues to decline every year. In the United States, notably, even during the Biden administration, the union movement shrunk in the United States. It shrunk, it didn't get bigger, even though everybody was talking about the explosion of worker rights, the public opinion polls showing the majority of people supporting unions. During the Biden years, the union movement shrunk. In Canada, every time the Stats Can produces a new statement, public sector unionism will be about stable and grows and it increases, it goes up and down according to privatizations and more funding. But on the private side, it continues to decline. It's right now at about 15% of private sector workers in Canada have a union.

FW [01:46:25] We now apparently live in the age of de-alignment, where working class people are distancing themselves from their traditional political choices. Why? There's a whole bunch of reasons why but you require another whole interview or whatever. One reason why is that, of course, 85% of private sector workers never hear the views, visions, perspectives, policies of the labour movement. There's a huge problem there. The big

conclusion I've come to from especially the last 25 years or 20 years in working in Ottawa where I've been more closely associated with central labour bodies and national unions, is that a very, very large percentage of the labour leadership just aren't too concerned about this situation because they see a relative stability, a relative stability that's not affecting their leadership. They're still negotiating contracts, union leaders are still retiring with their pension plans intact and so on. There is not an urgency.

FW [01:48:08] One of the most important things I did during my three years in Toronto, working as strategic planning director of the union, was I had the opportunity to work with a great, brilliant labour lawyer, Lewis Gottheil. He and I and Jim Stanford were collaborators on writing our submissions for labour law reform in Ontario, which we gave to the Changing Workplaces Review Commission in Ontario that was set up by the Kathleen Wynne government. We were the only major private sector union to promote a sectoral strategy. The Ontario Federation of Labour at first wanted nothing to do with it. It was a replay of Baigent Ready from 1992. It was almost like a replay. However, two of the commissioners liked our proposal and we ended up having quite intensive discussions about sectoralism. Famously, one of those commissioners said in the report, that under the current model it is practically impossible for the majority of non-union workers to ever achieve collective bargaining rights. Yes, is labour kind of whistling past the graveyard?

FW [01:50:03] One of the things, although I left Vancouver City College to go to work for the Tribune, one of my delights in the afterwards is I now work quite a lot now with labour academics at the University of Montreal and I attend a lot of academic conferences. In fact, we're going to an academic conference in just a couple of weeks in Toronto where we have a paper we're delivering. Labour scholars in Canada have already been writing, have been long writing about union renewal. They put out various scenarios.

FW [01:50:50] One that stuck in my mind was that the future of labour, if nothing changes, is that it will sort of gradually decline as legacy industries decline and the larger non-union working class evolves around it. That's one scenario, which is the one that seems to be now happening, is the main thing that's happening. Another scenario is that its weakening political influence will lead to a more immediate and catastrophic kind of withdrawal of rights and linked with an aggressive employer community. Could the labour movement won't have the collective capacity to stand up to a major challenge from capital and right-wing governments? That's another possibility if union decline continues.

FW [01:51:57] In my old age, I've come to the conclusions that union renewal is urgent, and that it's not about money and effort, it is about vision, policy. The majority of the labour movement, I think I see a certain shift now where more union leaders are taking sectoralism seriously. But in all of the recent labour law reform processes across Canada, with few exceptions, labour has not demanded labour law reforms. They think labour law reform is card check or a few things, maybe successor rights for contractors, this sort of thing.

FW [01:52:52] No real collective sense of we need to replace the Wagner Act model or reform fundamentally the Wagner Act model to include a larger working class. If they were going to do that, as I mentioned before, it forces them to look also at how we represent workers, our organizing models and so on. There really just isn't a lot going on in the labour movement about renewal. This whole subject of renewal is a boutique discussion amongst a certain part of the labour movement and some labour leaders, but not really mainstream. I'm very concerned about that, all of that, and I'm trying my best in my own way to contribute to that debate.

FW [01:53:49] I would add just one other thing, closely related to this in the policy field. I'm really concerned about where we're going, labour and environment is going. Climate change and the environment slipped off the agenda politically in the last five years. The labour movement did almost nothing to prevent that from happening. I wonder. I spent 30 years doing labour environmentalism and I've had many important relationships with, had many relationships with environmentalists. I should have mentioned before, I spent five years as a Greenpeace board member, not as a board member per se, but as a group that elects their board. I spent five years doing that. Those relationships today, I've never seen them—I think they're weaker now than they have been for a decade. That's another point where we're going to have to somehow marshal our resources and almost start over again in building trade union environmental networks.

CA [01:55:21] I'm not going to let you end on such a note, Fred. You've got to give us a more hopeful note. From your experience, have working people have risen to the challenges of their time?

FW [01:55:37] I believe yes, they have in that sense. Yes, I don't want to say I'm unhelpful. Maybe I'm maybe stressing my realism part of it. My optimism part of is that, I remember when discussing with some family and friends when Brian asked me to go to the CEP from the Nurses. Finally, after great debates, which finally came to the conclusion that given a modicum of democracy and opportunity, large numbers of working-class people will always be progressive and will take on the fight. Of course, that is true.

FW [01:56:29] One other thing I learned through my experience that whenever I hear a labour leader say we're getting out too far in front of the members, I think we've heard that said a few times, 'We're way out in front the members. We're going to lose them. We are going to lose them.' I've learned through my own experience to take that with a great big grain of salt. In my experience, what that almost inevitably means is that that person saying that is behind the members. They haven't figured out the politics, the communications or the strategic angles on the issue that we're dealing with, so they will immediately find solace in a few, in a minority of people who are opposed to union policy, that union policy.

FW [01:57:33] I always say, don't hide behind the members. Don't hide behind the members. If you're a leader, stand out in front of the members. When you do that, even if the issue is going into Fort McMurray and talking to oil sands workers about climate change. The leaders that I've seen that did that and stood up in front of them and talked to them, the members were there. The members they're always, I shouldn't say they're always there. They are most usually there if leaders perform that role. If leaders today say that we're going to change this labour movement, we're gonna do labour renewal, we are gonna change the face of the union, we're gonna bring more younger people forward, we're gonna have more gender diversity, we're gonna do all of those things, the members will be there.

CA [01:58:33] Thank you.

FW [01:58:35] Well, thank you, Carmela.