

Interview: Irene Lanzinger (IL)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
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Transcription: Jane Player

KN [00:00:05] We are here today to interview Irene Lanzinger, who was the president of the BCTF [BC Teachers' Federation] from 2007 to 2010 and president of BC Federation of Labour from 2014 to 2018. So, Irene, we'd like to start by having you tell us where you were born and in what year you were born.

IL [00:00:28] I was born in 1954 in Kelowna, British Columbia.

KN [00:00:32] And where did you essentially grow up, go to school, all that sort of stuff?

IL [00:00:36] I grew up there in Kelowna. I was there from 0 to 18, so I did all of my elementary and secondary school there. I went to a private Catholic school. My parents were immigrants from Austria and, you know, that was kind of what they knew. They were very recent immigrants. My mother arrived in Canada three weeks before I was born. So, I was just barely born in Canada. My sisters and my parents were all born in Austria. They put me in a Catholic school which, you know, later given my commitment to public education, I kind of thought, oh you know there you go, but you know that's what they did.

KN [00:01:17] So, you've told us a bit about your parents or your family. Were they involved in unions, or did they have progressive politics?

IL [00:01:24] No, not at all. My father was a mechanic when he first came to Canada. And then he became a businessman. He opened his own automotive shop. He became a car dealer. He was essentially a car salesman. And he was an American Motors dealer and then a Toyota dealer. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. She worked at home. And she did some of the books for the business early on, but the business became quite large. And so, I had an idyllic childhood. Three older sisters. I was the youngest of four girls. At one point when I was about five, we moved to a house on the lake, and we lived—out our front door onto the sand, into the Okanagan Lake. So, I'm quite a strong swimmer. I swam a lot, and I had kind and loving parents and three great sisters who I'm still very close to.

KN [00:02:28] What about your post-secondary education experience? Where did you go to university, and what did you major in? And were you involved in politics at university at all?

IL [00:02:38] I went to UBC [University of British Columbia] and did a science degree. My major was physics, and I was not at all involved in student politics, which is interesting because later on in my life at the Fed [BC Federation of Labour], we hired a lot of people from the student movement because they were very politically active. They knew how to organize campaigns. And I remember many wonderful people from the student movement, but I was not involved at all. I was a kind of brainy science kid, and that was my—I had a wonderful time socially at university. I met many friends, certainly went to The Pit a lot, and beer gardens. I wasn't, you know, socially awkward in that way, but I studied a lot and worked hard at school and got a degree in physics. Wasn't particularly planning to be a teacher, but I went off and was hired by the federal government to become a meteorologist, and I didn't really like the program. It was very competitive, and the end

result was really to be sent to a Canadian army base to forecast for army pilots essentially. And I remember during that year thinking, you know, I would really rather be a teacher. And so, I left that program partway through, came back and worked in Kelowna for a while and then went back and did my teacher training.

KN [00:04:04] Well, at some point you did a, as I understand it, a master's thesis and that dealt with feminist analysis of science. Can you talk about that early interest in women being involved in areas of work that were traditionally heavily dominated by men?

IL [00:04:22] Yeah, so when I finished my teacher training, I went to work in Abbotsford, and I worked in Abbotsford for three years. Then my husband, who was an ESL teacher, he and I went to Saudi Arabia to teach for four years. We had actually previously taught in Japan. So, the first place I taught was Japan. So, we went to Japan for two years, then Abbotsford for three years, and then we went Saudi Arabia for four years. So, we were very mobile as young teachers. And when we came back to Canada, we decided that Vancouver was where we wanted to live. And we moved to Vancouver. And I had one child at the time and then had a second. And then I decided to go do my master's degree, and my husband went off and got a job in Vancouver. And I, when my kids were little, enrolled in Simon Fraser, and I did my master's degree. And of course, there were very few women in my physics class. In fact, I was the only one in third- and fourth-year physics at UBC. And there was one other physics teacher in the province at the time. But there were only two of us. And so, I—.

KN [00:05:35] Two women?

IL [00:05:35] Two women, yeah, in the province teaching physics. And so, I decided to—that that would be the focus of my master's degree at Simon Fraser. So, I did a kind of feminist analysis of physics and the reason, you know, sort of articulated some of the social construct of science and the reasons why there are so few women in physics. Interestingly enough, it's not true of all countries in the world. I mean, there are countries where there are many women physicists, but Canada, North America and by-and-large the European countries do lag behind and continue to.

KN [00:06:19] Is there anything about those earlier work experiences that you had teaching in Japan, Saudi Arabia, or even in Abbotsford that stand out for you?

IL [00:06:28] Well, in Saudi Arabia—I mean, in Japan, we taught English at language schools, right? So, and we did—because we both had degrees, teaching degrees, we had a lot of opportunities. We taught for the foreign ministry. I taught in a women's college. We did quite a bit of work for the government. So, we had some great experiences in Japan over the two years we were there. I mean, in the end, it was just too crowded. You know, we—it wore you down after a while, and we lived in Tokyo. It was just packed with people all the time. And, so, we came back, and in Saudi Arabia, it was a very, of course, oppressive culture for women. And so that was a kind of interesting experience. But from a teaching perspective, it was excellent because I taught elementary school. I taught Grade 6 at first, and then I was a computer specialist in the K to six school. And I learned a lot from my colleagues who were elementary school, primary and intermediate school teachers. And I just thought that for me, that changed my way of teaching to be much more student-centered. You know, in secondary school, we get a degree in our specialty most of the time and then add on top of that a teaching degree. Whereas a primary teacher is a teacher from day one, right? They just really have to focus on the kids. I had so much admiration for my primary colleagues and the intermediate colleagues, and I

learned a lot from, you know, both the teachers and the students that I thought really made me a better teacher.

KN [00:08:24] Eventually, you ended up teaching in Vancouver and then got involved in your local and eventually became president. Do you want to talk a bit about that, how that all happened?

IL [00:08:35] Yeah, well, when I went to teach in Vancouver, it was 1990. I was just finishing up my master's—had just finished up my master's degree— and I got hired at McGee. I worked part time at first because I still had very young children, and we went on strike in '93. And that was, as strikes often are, a kind of education in the union and the bargaining process, and I was fascinated by the bargaining process. So, I volunteered for two things at my school. One was to be on the status of women committee, which now I'm sure has become a more progressive title like gender rights or something like that but—so, I volunteered to be on the status of women given my background and my master's thesis, and I also volunteered for the bargaining committee. And so, that—that was not the team, it was just the committee that consulted. And I just loved that. I was fascinated by the bargaining process. We got ordered back to work in '93, and I remember a huge meeting at the Coliseum. And I got up to speak and—because people had lost their faith in the bargaining process because we had been sent to arbitration, right? And I got up and made a speech about defending collective bargaining. And people just kind of identified me. I remember Lynne Sinclair from the BCTF coming up to me and saying, 'Wow, you know, that was great what you said.' And then people asked me to run for stuff. Ellen Smith, who was the president of the Federation at the time, phoned me up.

KN [00:10:14] Of the local.

IL [00:10:15] Of the local. Yeah, she was the president of the Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association. She phoned me up, and she said, 'I want you to run for the executive.' And I said, 'I haven't even been a staff rep,' you know. But she said, 'Oh, no, no. We really need you. And, you know, you've been on the bargaining committee.' So, she got me onto the executive. And then there was a race for first vice-president, which was a full-time position. I thought, you know, 'My kids are little. I'll do that one day, but not now.' And she phoned me up. She said, 'Irene, you have to run for first-vice president.' And I said, 'Well, Ellen, you know, I mean, I've only been on the executive for 10 minutes.' But the other people who were running were not acceptable to her. (laughter) So, she was a typical political activist who just completely drew me in. And to be honest, then I was, as I like to describe it, sucked into the vortex of union activism, and I never got out. You know, I just never got and never wanted to get out. I loved it. I loved the BCTF from the beginning. I loved the democratic processes. I loved the representative assembly and the AGM and the activism of locals. At the time, we had a kind of party politics system. I kinda loved that system, tried out most of the parties in the BCTF—and I'm a bit famous for that—but I really enjoyed it. And it's an interesting thing when I look back at my career of activism. And I've given this speech at women's conferences and said this to many women over many years. Every single thing I ever did, I more or less got talked into it by someone. So, I tell women not to wait for that, that if they want to do something to do it. But I also tell them to talk people into things because that's how we get people to do stuff. And I hope it's changing for women, but for the most part, many of us had to be talked into these things and convinced to do them before we thought we were ready to do them, which is part of the analysis of why we still have a society dominated by patriarchy. So, I took it as a responsibility to talk women into things or help them build their confidence. I taught for many years at the Summer Institute for Union Women, in leadership courses and other

courses to help women—public speaking—help women feel confident enough to take on roles.

KN [00:13:00] So, eventually, soon after, you became the president of the local of the Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association. Is there anything during your presidency that stands out for you in terms of [trails off]

IL [00:13:11] Yeah, I was president from '97 to 2000. There's a number of things I would say, but that was when we got the deal with the provincial government that gave us ratios for counselors and librarians and ESL teachers, gave us primary class sizes. But the process was not acceptable to the activists in the BCTF who were very keen on the process. So, the president at the time, Kit Krieger, basically made this deal with government. And I remember the controversy about that. And I came I think through that process to understand my union a lot better. It was an extremely good deal. I mean there was no question about that, and it brought millions and millions of dollars, probably hundreds of millions of dollars into the school system, but it had been kind of done behind closed doors without the normal engagement of members in the BCTF. I really learned something about bargaining and the importance of member involvement and activism in bargaining through that process. And I was convinced during that time to put my name in for chief negotiator. Someone else called me up. I thought, 'I'm going to apply for the provincial bargaining team,' but someone from the BCTF called me up and said, 'You should apply to be chief negotiator.' I thought, 'Well, I don't know if I'm really ready for that. I haven't really even been on a bargaining team yet'. But that was kinda how I got into it, was observing that bargaining process, and as I was still fascinated by bargaining, I really wanted to be a member of the team.

IL [00:15:01] The other thing I'll say about the work as local president is that I often looked back on that work and thought of that job as one of my favorites. And the reason was that the way the BCTF is set up, the local officers are by and large, in almost every local, the person who provides direct service to teachers in terms of enforcement of the collective agreement, advice around professional development issues, advice around pension issues, health and safety issues. So, you're what other unions would call a staff rep in the sense of giving that service to members who call up and need help. And I love that work. I really loved answering the phone with a teacher with a problem and being able to help them with that, whether it was saying, 'Yeah, you have protection under this for your collective agreement', or 'We don't have that in the collective agreement. But here's some things we might try to help you out with that.' Spent quite a bit of time settling disputes between teachers and doing conflict resolution, which also often came to the local. So, I love that work. I really enjoyed it. And it also led me to be part of the provincial bargaining team.

KN [00:16:22] So, you indicated that you had applied for the position of the chief negotiator for the collective agreement, and what happened then? Can you tell us? I know that you became a co-chief negotiator. This was the third round of provincial bargaining, and can you fill us in on what happened in that round in bargaining, including going up to the legislation and what happened there?

IL [00:16:55] So, provincial bargaining was imposed on teachers by an NDP government in 1993, and it never worked. And it never work very well in the 90s at all. And one of the reasons was that the employer—the government had set up an employers' association, the BC Public School Employers Association, BCPSEA as we called them for short— and their initial position was that every single provision we had bargained in local bargaining

was gone, what they called a clean slate, which was essentially stripping all of the things that we had fought so hard for between '88 and '93. We were very successful between '88 and '93, or many locals were. Not all locals, but the majority of locals did a very good job. We had tons of provisions that we had bargained, including class size provisions, health and safety provisions, posting and filling provisions. We had lots and lots of collective agreements that were quite good. You know, you always have a lot more to do, and we certainly had a lot more work to do. And the story was, and the narrative was, that local bargaining teams were outsmarting school boards. So, the government was not happy with that. They introduced provincial bargaining.

IL [00:18:13] And BCPSEA came to the table, presumably with the agreement of government, that they were starting from a clean slate. And of course, that was never acceptable to the BCTF. And so, for a couple of rounds, we ended up rolling over our collective agreement, and that was—rolled over all of the provisions that we had bargained locally. At the same time, I think there's an important historical piece to it, that is that the BC Principals' and Vice Principals' Association [BCVPVA] was actively lobbying government and calling for the removal of all our collective agreement provisions, getting rid of class size limits. They didn't—I mean, the actual association, they didn't like class size limits, too hard to schedule schools. So, we went to the table in 2000, and we faced this same, you know, intransigent employer. We had a lot of language on the table. We wanted to improve the provisions that we were—that we had. We, you know, but we just couldn't get anywhere with the government, well, with BCPSEA. And we tried and tried, and we kept going back to the table.

IL [00:19:32] Eventually, they brought in Stephen Kelleher to help us try and resolve the dispute. I remember having a skiing trip planned with my family over the Christmas break, and Kelleher calling us back in. I had to send my husband and kids off on their own, and I went back to the table to talk to Kelleher with the team. At one point I remember him saying to us—and so everything that BCPSEA had on the table, or the vast majority of what they had on table, was to take stuff away from us that we had already bargained. And of course that was never acceptable to us. It was stripping our collective agreement, and we said, 'No, we're not doing that.' And at one point, Kelleher got us together, it was late December, early January, and said, 'You know, the government is going to introduce legislation to take this away from you.' I don't know whether he said it quite that clearly, but that was his message. And so, 'You should agree to this because it'll be better if you work it out with the employer than to just have the government come in and wreak havoc on your collective agreement.' And you know, the BCTF is nothing if not principled, you know. And so we are always very, very principled and pretty idealistic in the BCTF. We said to Kelleher, 'We cannot do that. Our members would not stand for it, number one, and we don't believe in doing that. And we will not do it to ourselves. If the government's gonna do it us, so be it. But we are not doing it to ourselves.' I remember that conversation very clearly. And after that, nothing happened, and at the end of January, the government introduced legislation that stripped all of these provisions out of our collective agreement.

KN [00:21:27] And how did we respond, how did the BCTF respond?

IL [00:21:30] Well, the BCTF had a protest. We walked off the job, and David were Chudnovsky was the president at the time. David's line was—and it was a very good one—was this is not a one day protest. This is day one of the protest. And in fact, it was. We then engaged in, you know, well we then did a very interesting thing. That was 2001. Is that right, Ken, 2001? Or was it 2002?

KN [00:22:10] 2002.

IL [00:22:11] 2002. That was January 2002. I remember the devastation at the offices of the BCTF because there were people there who had been in field service, who had been presidents of locals. It was terrible. You know, we were devastated by it. But the protest helped, you know, because we got together with members from all over the province and we put a plan in place. And the BCTF is good for plans. And one of the things that we did, which I think—there were two things that we did that were really, really important. One was that we went out and we talked to our members. And we said to our members, we asked them this question: 'What are we going to do next time?' Because we have this government that is coming at us. Well, we did three things, really. We talked to our members. We said, 'What are we gonna do next time? What are we going to next time they legislate us?' And by and large, our members said, 'We're going to defy the legislation,' or 'We're gonna stand up to the government,' or some form of that. We said, 'Well, that will be illegal in the moment. I mean, we can challenge it in court, but in the moment it will be illegal because the legislation will be standing.' And our members were ready to defy legislation. And we found that out over the three years. We told people what the legal consequences were. Our lawyers hated the idea that we would defy legislation. They had dire predictions of us losing all our money, losing our building. But our members were ready to stand up to the government. And we spent two or three years talking to them about that. We put in place what we called the legislative response plan. So, that legislative response plan articulated what we were going to do if the government passed legislation again directed at us. And of course, the team got disbanded. I had been chief negotiator. The team got disbanded. We had another round of bargaining in there. But we—yeah, we went back to the table in 2005. And sure enough, we went on a partial strike in that round in 2005. I was on the team at the time, but not the chief negotiator. But I was second vice-president or —

KN [00:24:58] First-vice president.

IL [00:24:59] First vice-president. I was first vice-president of the BCTF by that time. I had run for second VP after leaving the bargaining team, and then first VP. Jinny [Sims] was the president. I was the first vice-president. Susan [Lambert] was the second vice-president. It was the first time we had three women in the top three offices. And we went to the table. We were on a partial strike where we were not supervising playgrounds. We were not doing report cards. We were meeting with parents. But we were teaching every day. We were in the classroom teaching and recording people's marks and kids marks and doing our regular jobs. And the government, before we even walked off the job, passed legislation to order us back to work, back to supervising playgrounds. And then we put in place or activated our legislative response plan. It was like they walked into a trap, really. Honestly, that's what it felt like. That's what it feels like in retrospect when I look at that sequence of events, that the government—we set a trap, and they walked into it. And so, the BCHF executive met that—I think it was like a Tuesday night. I was in Victoria to observe the legislature—the executive had sent me there to be in the legislature while this legislation passed because we suspected it was coming. And we had an executive meeting, and we decided to walk out on a full-scale strike on Friday, I think it was. And on Thursday night, that strike was ruled illegal by the Labour Board before we walked out. And we walked anyway. And that was the well-known 2005 illegal strike.

KN [00:26:51] So, we will get to that 2005 strike very soon. But before we do, I wanted to go back just during the period of time when you were first second vice and then first vice. The BCTF made the decision by member vote to become members of the BC Fed [BC

Federation of Labour] and subsequently the Canadian Labour Congress [CLC]. Can you talk about that a bit? Because I imagine you would have been at the first convention in 2003 that the teachers went to.

IL [00:27:24] Yes, I think that's an important part of the context of the strike and there's some very—I mean—there were people in the BCTF who wanted to join the BC Fed for a long time, so in the 90s there was several votes and several movements to join the BC Fed. But I think it really was when David became president and then followed by Neil Worboys. Those two people in leadership had a concerted campaign to become members of the BC Fed. That was one piece of it. The other piece of it was that Jim Sinclair was president of the BC Fed. He was a very well-known figure in the province, a progressive guy, well-liked by members of the BCTF. And Debra McPherson was president of the Nurses Union. And the nurses were members of BC Fed. And Debra and Jim joined this campaign we had and went around the province with the leadership of the BCTF talking about joining the Fed. And it was a kind of hilarious piece of the story that one of the major concerns of teachers was that we would be called out on a strike to support another union without having a vote. And, you know, Jim and Debra were able to reassure people on that front. Debra came from a union of professionals, very similar to teachers, you know, nurses, teachers. She was very down-to-earth and practical, and she kind of said, 'Get over yourself. You're workers like everybody else, as are nurses, and we're better off together, and we are stronger together, and you guys should join the Fed.' I think Debra was very persuasive. Jim was very persuasive and very well-liked, as I said. And eventually, that vote passed. Not by a lot, but it passed. And we joined the Fed, and then subsequently, three years later, we joined The Canadian Labour Congress.

IL [00:29:27] I went to the first convention. We had almost a full delegation, if not a full delegation, which was over a hundred teachers there. We all had t-shirts and we, you know, we were—and since that moment we walked into that convention, BCTF members have been very active, actively involved in the Fed, sitting on committees, going to convention, engaging with other unions, supporting other unions, and I think very good members of the Fed. At one point, someone said to me, 'You guys, you joined the Fed, and then you took over.' And I said, 'Yeah, yeah. Well, that's kind of who we are. That's what we do.' So, it was a great thing to join the Fed. And I think that it worked really well for teachers. Teachers were very proud of the fact that I got elected to full-time office at the Fed, which I'm sure will come up later. I remember people telling me, 'You should run. It will be so great if you were there,' and teachers were always very proud of that, and so am I. I think that it was a great kind of entry into the Fed, and it was the testament to how engaged teachers were in the broader labour movement. The kind of funny end of the story about teachers being concerned about people walking out in support of a union without a vote was that the members of the Fed did that, but they did it to support teachers in 2005 in our legal strike. So, actually the first instance of that was other unions supporting teachers.

KN [00:31:06] During the period of time that you were vice-president and then eventually president, when we were in the Canadian Labour Congress, you attended meetings of the Canadian Labour Congress and so forth. Can you talk about anything during that period of time that stands out for you about the CLC.

IL [00:31:22] The CLC. Well, it was interesting that, you know, the labour movement has a certain reputation and, you know, of these kind of strong and loud labour leaders, which is not really borne out in reality. I remember Jim telling me, because the BCTF went to the CLC representing the union and sat at the executive council from the beginning, it's a bit of

an anomaly, but it happened that way. I remember Jim telling me, 'Oh, you know, the Fed presidents sit along the back,' and I used to sit there with Jim and some of the other Fed presidents just around the corner. He said, 'Oh it'll be boring.' And then the first meeting I went to, the head of the Canadian Auto Workers, Buzz Hargrove, and Sharleen [Stewart] from SEIU got into this huge shouting match. And it was like the stereotype with people pounding on the table and shouting. And I thought, 'Well, Jim, that wasn't boring.' (laughter) But it really—I have to emphasize—was the exception rather than the rule. I mean, I think they were having—but there were big disputes. This was just a huge education for us about how unions operate. Because raiding was always a big issue and never an issue for the BCTF. We don't organize as a union, which is very unusual, and we don't raid, and the reason we don't organize is that we have compulsory membership in legislation, and we have never looked beyond those boundaries of our membership. But in other unions, you know, big issue for unions, bargaining, raiding, growing members. And those are big issues at the Fed. And it was a real education about how other unions operate, good and bad. And I got to observe the way unions engage in politics, both federally and provincially. And I think we have some things to learn there at the BCTF about the ways in which other unions get, you know, engage in politics and work with politicians to forward the cause of their members.

KN [00:33:36] Let's go back to the 2005 strike, which you sort of introduced in terms of happening as a result of the government again legislating. Initially, of course, the BCTF had taken the membership vote for a strike, and we were on, teachers were on this—

IL [00:33:58] Illegal strike, yup.

KN [00:34:00] —Action, and then, before walking out, could you tell us what happened then?

IL [00:34:08] You remember I talked about this legislative response plan that we had put in place in 2002, that one-day protest and then the executive got together and put in place a legislative response plan. That legislative response plan was the executive meeting making a recommendation to members and then members voting. So, in that period between Tuesday and Friday of that week when the legislation was introduced—legislation was introduced either Monday or Tuesday, I forget. And then the executive committee met on, I don't know, Monday night or it might've even been Tuesday night. But we had meetings in every local. And we, you know, people were ready, and we voted to go out on strike. And the vote was actually higher. It was like 89 for the legal strike and 91 for the illegal strike. And so, members did vote to go out on that, on that illegal strike. It was—they had votes Wednesday, I guess, Tuesday, Wednesday, and we went. We walked off on the Friday. Monday was a holiday. I think it was Thanksgiving. And so, the strike lasted 10 days. It ended on a Friday, but we had missed one Monday, which was Thanksgiving Day. And yeah, it was—I sometimes describe that as the longest 14 days of my life. It was tough. Yeah, it was tough, but it was very, very inspiring. And I remember at one time thinking, it's like we trained every member to talk to the media because the media would rush out to these picket lines and people would say the most amazing things.

IL [00:35:53] And you will remember this, Ken, but at one point, and of course it was an illegal strike. So, not only were we on strike with our members, out across the province, we were in court every day. And every day, the judge would issue some new thing. And at one—first of all, she said we couldn't spend any money on the strike. So, the Fed had to pay for the big rally we had in Victoria, which we had been planning to pay for, but the Fed, which has a lot—many, many fewer resources than the BCTF, had to bear the cost of that

rally. And then she ruled we couldn't pay our members strike pay. So, the media rushed out to the picket lines and interviewed our members about the strike pay. They interviewed a math teacher at Burnaby North. Her name was Natasha. And they said to her, 'Now, what do you think of this? The BCTF took you out on strike, and now they're not giving you strike pay.' She said, 'What do you mean the BCTF took me out on strike? I voted to go on strike. I am the BCTF.' And it was just the most inspiring moment of all. And of course, at the next—of course, we got buttons right away, 'I am the BCTF.' And we all used that in our election speech, the following AGM, that story. Natasha came to the AGM, the next AGM, so, she was our heroine.

IL [00:37:17] And then, you know, these things happened. I was driving to a picket line one morning and it was like early morning, 6:30, 7:00 o'clock. I had CBC radio on, and the interviewer was interviewing a person from the crown prosecutors, and the crown prosecutor said, 'Well, we have now decided and taken the position that if any of the leaders of the BCTF are charged for this illegal strike, we will not be able to prosecute them. It will be a conflict of interest for us, because the government had an obligation to meet an arbitration agreement for our salaries and benefits, and they reneged on that arbitration agreement, and so we have experienced a similar, you know, situation with the government as teachers, and we won't prosecute any teachers. They'll just have to find someone else to do it if they want to do that.' And I thought, 'Holy. My god, we've got the crown prosecutors on side. Like how much better can it get.' So, it was like—and, you know, Gordon Campbell was premier at the time. He was out of the country, I think, when we first walked out, and he kept expecting us to fold. And he kept expecting us to lose public support, and we never did. It was a very inspirational time, but it was very hard. You know, strikes are hard on leadership. Members get nervous. We were nervous about what was going to happen in court. And we were working long, long, long days and meeting a lot to make decisions about what happened next. And so, it was tough, but it was—you know, you just end up being so inspired by your members in those situations.

KN [00:39:08] Can you tell us a bit, Irene, about how the strike actually ended?

IL [00:39:11] Yes, I can. The government appointed Vince Ready about—you know, I forget the actual timeline. It must have been about day—so we had the one week and into the second weekend, and sometime in that second week of the strike, we started a meeting with Vince. And eventually, I forget the details of it, but I remember we did something that Vince didn't like. It was actually something I kind of disagreed with, but the executive committee had made this decision to put something out publicly or something. I can't remember quite what it was. But Vince decided overnight, about Wednesday of the second week, that he was going to issue recommendations, and he did. And they were far from perfect, those recommendations. They really didn't address the things that the BCTF wanted addressed. I mean, they had a few good things in them. They had some money for salary harmonization, which was a big thing of mine. I loved that. I had designed this harmonization scheme for salaries. And we had talked Vince into, well, he had put some of that money into the agreement. And I mean there's a round table on class size, you know, it's pretty wimpy.

IL [00:40:26] And we had a long, long debate at the BCTF executive committee about whether we would recommend those recommendations to our members. In the end we decided that we would. And people actually argued that we should just put them in front of our members without a recommendation pro or con, and I remember saying, 'No, you can't renege on your leadership responsibilities. Our members will want to know from us what we think.' So, we were quite reluctant about it, but we did recommend it—recommend

them to our members, and it passed. I remember the weekend, the second after 10 days had passed we went out that weekend to talk to our members about it. I went to the Okanagan and went to five or six meetings in the Okanagan to talk to members about the recommendations. You know, I mean our narrative—and it was the truth—was that they're not good enough but they're—they give us some things, and it's a starting ground. So, our members did accept those recommendations. I think it was 77 percent or something like that, yeah. We went back to work, and Premier Campbell wanted to meet on the Monday of the round table. I remember arguing that we should not go, but I lost that argument, and we did go to the roundtable on class size on Monday. A table which never produced a thing, honestly, as I had predicted, but anyway.

KN [00:42:03] So, one other thing I'd like you to perhaps comment on regarding the strike, and that was the support from the rest of the labour movement that happened during the strike.

IL [00:42:13] Yes, so as I mentioned, we had a number of strikes where other unions walked out in support of us. One in Victoria, one in the Kootenays. Some unions paid a high price for that. They were fined for walking out on essentially what was a wildcat strike. So, the labour movement really stepped up for us in that moment—in many ways. The walkouts for sure, which was, you know, a way of signaling to government that other unions supported us, and that people were going to support us. There was a huge rally in Victoria. Jim was everywhere on the picket lines with us and talking to our members and providing the Fed support. There was a whole host of things that happened in terms of the broader labour movement supporting teachers. I think that it really cemented the BCTF's participation in the federation of labour, that we felt so supported by other workers in the province, by other unions in the provinces, who not only gave us their moral support, but in many cases lost a day's pay because they walked off the job in support of us.

KN [00:43:34] So, soon after the strike, or a year after the strike, you actually became president of the BCTF in 2007 and remained in that position for three years. What do you see as the most significant issue that you dealt with or significant issues that you dealt with during that three-year period? Can you talk about that for a bit?

IL [00:43:55] Yeah, interestingly enough, after that tumultuous strike, it was a fairly peaceful time in the BCTF. Because we had—because the year after the strike, 2006, we got a five-year deal, and it was quite a good deal, salary-wise, and really it was like our strike in 2005 laid the groundwork for public sector bargaining, and many unions got good deals in that year. And so we had a five-year deal in 2006, and so I actually was president for a three-year period where there was no bargaining. The FSA [Foundation Skills Assessment] and testing was a big issue. The defense of public education, always a big issue. Funding for public education always a big issue. I remember most of the interviews that I did with—I mean, when you're president of the BCTF, you're called by the media all the time to comment on all kinds of things that relate to public education. So, you do a lot of media in that role. The most significant campaign that we had in that time was against standardized testing. That was a big campaign for teachers—very important educational issue. I remember being interviewed a lot on the FSA and standardized testing, yeah.

KN [00:45:19] Is that the FSA?

IL [00:45:21] The Foundation Skills Assessment test which was a standardized test given in Grades 4 and 7, I think. At one point in Grade 10 but I think they dropped the Grade 10

for provincial exams. So, the standardized testing was the Foundation Skills Assessment test but also the provincial exam program of the provincial government.

KN [00:45:44] So Irene, very shortly after completing your term as president of the BCTF, you ran for and were elected to the position of secretary- treasurer of the BC Federation of Labour. And in 2014, you were elected president of BCTF, the first woman—

IL [00:46:05] The BC Fed.

KN [00:46:10] The BC Fed, sorry. The first woman and the first teacher to be elected to that position. Can you talk a bit about the significance of those firsts?

IL [00:46:11] Yeah, I mean, I think I've talked a bit about how teachers kind of embraced the Fed when they became members. As BCTF members and the BCTF is—it's kind of part of our culture that when we do something we sort of jump all in, and we certainly did with the Fed. I also talked about how proud teachers were to have a teacher at the head of the Fed and to be secretary-treasurer and then president, you know, I met teachers all the time who were just so thrilled by that. So, I think that was really, really important. In terms of being the first woman, I thought that I had such interesting experiences in that regard, and I've had a chance to reflect on that quite a bit. And I was—you know, Jim was a big presence in the media. He was very active. He'd been president of the Fed for 20 years. He always did media interviews, if requested, and sought out media attention on particular issues. He was a wonderful advocate for workers. So, he was very well-known figure in the province. So, when I was elected president of the Fed, there was a media scrum. And people, you know, made a big deal about the fact that I was the first woman, and they asked me about being a role model, and they asked me if it was significant, which seems an interesting question. Of course, it's significant, and the role modeling thing is important. But what they didn't ask was why it took so long. And I thought that's really the important question. Like, it was 2014 when I became president of the Fed. The Fed had been around for a long, long time, and there had never been a woman president. And there had been a president of Canadian Labour Congress and a president of CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees] National. You know, there had been women in quite prominent labour roles. And I, you know, I also reflected on that. It was interesting that nobody asked that question, you know—why did it take so long? Jim was there 20 years, and Ken—

KN [00:48:33] Georgetti.

IL [00:48:34] Ken Georgetti, thank you—before him was there almost 20 years. So, two men had been in the position for 40 years. And I love Jim. I think he is a fabulous labour leader. Very fond of Ken as well. But one of my messages to people is that if we want women and other people from diverse backgrounds to take positions on, we have to make space. Making space is an important aspect of diversity in leadership. And so, I sometimes tell that story. I try not to tell it when Jim's around because I don't want to imply that he was not a wonderful leader because he was. But my message to all kinds of leaders, if you want diversity in leadership you have to make space. You have to make space for women. You have to make space for people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. You have to make space from people from different sexual orientations and gender backgrounds. We have to make space if we want diversity in leadership. I think that has been a problem in the labour movement, and it's one that I'm prepared to identify and talk about. But it was great. It was great to be the first woman. And now, so I was followed by Laird Cronk, who is a wonderful leader. And now we have a woman who is openly queer, gay woman leading the Fed. So, you know, gotta make space.

KN [00:50:05] So, while you were a full-time officer of the Fed, that's both as secretary-treasurer and then the four years as president, you were involved in a number of significant issues and campaigns, and I think you could talk a bit about them. Maybe we could start off with the occupation of the Coast Guard stations.

IL [00:50:23] Yes, I mean the federal government had closed Coast Guard stations, and we decided to take this on and we worked with the Public Service Alliance of Canada who represented people working in Coast Guard stations. This was a testament to Jim's brilliance as a leader. He really thought these things up, and he would come in every day with a new idea about what we should be doing. He had this idea of occupying the Coast Guard station to bring attention to this issue. And we did, yeah, we did. We just—we went up, and we had the guy who was the kind of staff rep for the Coast Guard go in. So, he was the union person, and he opened the bottom gate for us. There was a dock, and I don't know if he worked with anybody in the Coast Guard station or not, but so we just came up in a boat. We got the fishermen to take us. Jim had worked for the Fisherman's Union, and he was still very close with some of the fishermen down there, just by Granville Island, where you have the Fishermen's Wharf. They took us over in fishing boats, and we just got off the dock and walked up and occupied the Coast Guard station. And it was a great thing to do. It was just a very activist, you know, kind of peaceful protest kind of thing to do. And we more or less let them know that we would be there for 24 hours. We fully expected the police would show up and something would happen but in fact they just let us be because they knew we'd leave after 24 hours. It got a lot of media attention and brought to light that issue. I think it was a good example of how the Fed was able to take on these issues and bring attention to things that were important to workers. Those Coast Guard stations were important not only to the people who were losing their jobs, but they were important to fishermen. They were important to pleasure boaters. You know, they're important to paddle boarders, important to people who, you know, get into trouble in the water in any number of ways. So, you know, that was a great thing. That's one of my fondest memories of my time at the Fed.

IL [00:52:37] But there were other very, I mean, there were campaigns that were sort of more far-reaching and important. The minimum wage campaign always, which I loved because it was a testament to the Fed's fundamental principle of representing just not union workers, but all workers. And that's important because union workers have—they have a union to have a voice for them, to represent them, to look after them when they need help to bargain salaries and benefits for them. But workers who are non-union don't have that voice, and so the Fed has to be that voice. And that was a matter of some debate in the Fed, the extent to which the Fed worked on behalf of workers who were not in unions. The sort of more progressive left side of the Fed was always very keen on the Fed being the broader organizational representative of all workers or having campaigns that forwarded the cause of all workers. I was very much on that page, as was Jim. The minimum wage campaign was probably the best example of that. Of course, when we got an NDP government, we did get a government who was sympathetic on the issue of minimum wage. Now, every June, when the minimum wage goes up, I think, 'Great, you know, we did that,' and it's a great thing. Not as high as it should be—it should be a living wage. The minimum-wage campaign eventually has to be a living-wage campaign, where the minimum wage and the living wage come together, but we've made a lot of progress on that issue.

IL [00:54:21] The other thing that I think the Fed does extremely well, and that I was very proud of was health and safety advocacy. And Jim, again, was the leader that taught me

about this and that I learned a lot from. He was such a great advocate for the workers who were involved in a number of horrific farm worker tragedies. The women who died on the bus, for example, three women from Abbotsford who were farm workers. A bus that was overloaded, no seat belts, unsafe. There's now a memorial for them behind the library, and they have a memorial every year to honour those women and farm workers in general. It is a absolutely stunning, you know, 10 foot high statue. It's beautiful. So, I think that advocacy for workers, again, workers who don't have a voice, they're not union workers. The vast majority of farm workers are non-union and have a lot of health and safety issues. There were three mushroom farm workers who died in a confined space situation, and Jim was out there right away. The Fed remained an advocate on that issue. The daughter of one of the workers who was irreparably damaged by that—he didn't die but he was in a coma and non-responsive for the rest of his life—she now works at the Fed in the health and safety division. So, there are some great legacies of that health and safety work.

KN [00:55:58] Is there anything else about your time at the Fed that you care to mention?

IL [00:56:01] Well, those are the things that I remember. You know, some of the more direct work of the Fed is work that represents the union. So, we tried to coordinate public sector bargaining and largely unsuccessfully in terms of—one round, we were pretty successful at coordinating. We always coordinated information sharing and people communicating with each other. We never quite get to the Quebec model where you actually work together to bargain an agreement, but we just don't have the culture here for that. We certainly settled and worked on disputes between unions. There was often people fell into the kind of environment versus jobs divide, which is not helpful at all, and we managed to have a kind of protocol agreement to prevent us from doing that. So, that kind of more direct work with unions, making sure that they stick together, that they listen to each other, that we can resolve disputes through the Fed, help unions resolve disputes that they come up with. That's the kind of bread and butter work of the union, very important, and I loved it. It was really interesting, and it was fascinating for me coming from a union like the BCTF, which has its own very strong, unique culture, to see the different cultures of unions and the different ways that unions operate, to learn a lot more about organizing. Because organizing is a huge piece of the work of many unions—all unions in the province with the possible exception of the BCTF. So, organizing is really hard work and tough work, and I learned a lot about that at the Fed. We were able to put together an organizing institute to help unions organize better and do more organizing and lobby the provincial government. Of course, now that we have an NDP government, we have single step certification, which helps unions organize. That is so, so important because that's the way you grow the labour movement, is to organize. We have managed to sort of keep our percentage as population increases. We're organizing enough to stay at the same percentage. But we really need to go above the kind of 30-32 percent we have in the labour movement. Organizing was fascinating for me to learn about organizing and to help unions do that work better.

KN [00:58:31] After stepping down as the BC Fed President in 2018, you soon became active serving on a number of boards. Can you recount for us what boards you were involved in and any experience that you might have had there that you'd wish to mention?

IL [00:58:52] I have sat on a number of boards. Before I left the Fed, I was appointed to TransLink Screening Panel, which was fascinating. Kind of vets people for appointment to the TransLink Board and recommends people to the Mayor's Council. I really enjoyed that

work. Then when I left the Fed in 2018, I was appointed to the board of BC Hydro and the board the Community Savings Credit Union and loved both of those organizations.

IL [00:59:22] It was completely different work. Like the—Hydro is a completely different organization than any I've been part of before. Very well organized. I would argue a very good corporation. It is so important that—and you know, I used to joke to the people on the Hydro board that the only time I'd been to that Hydro building was at a protest in front of the building when we were fighting for public power. Remember when the liberals privatized a whole section of Hydro. We had a Keep Power Public campaign organized by the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] and MoveUP, who are the two unions there at Hydro. So, then I was actually walking into the building and going up to the 18th floor to the boardroom. But Hydro is a fascinating organization, and I love that work. Always, you know, was—honoured my background by asking the questions about whether the unions had been consulted and what the HR policies were, and you know, how are the workers feeling about this. But the two unionized groups of employees at the Fed, and I would argue the management and professional group that's non-union, they have a good employer at Hydro. Not that there aren't issues.

IL [01:00:32] But the work that I loved at Hydro and really enjoyed and saw a tremendous amount of progress in the six years I was on the board was the work around reconciliation with First Nations, and Hydro has a lot of work to do on that front. They have huge footprint on the land and a huge footprint in First Nations territories. We're building the Site C Dam, with a complex set of First Nations in that area, and they were really intent on making progress in advancing reconciliation with First Nations and repairing some of the damage done over many years when we were not as intent on reconciliation as we are now. So, that was amazing and fascinating work, and I think Hydro made a lot of progress in the six years I was there. Of course, the environmental stuff, the Clean BC Plan was always fascinating to me. I was very active on the green jobs front at the BC Fed, and so that work around electrifying the province, reducing our carbon footprint was fascinating to me. They were doing some interesting work on diversity and inclusion, which I think also I liked. So, a lot of good things happening at Hydro that I—it's not a perfect company by any stretch of the imagination, but one that is very, has very good values in my view. The fact that the profits are limited, because it's a public corporation, is excellent. They focus on customers as they should. So, I love that work.

IL [01:02:09] I love the little credit union I'm on. It really comes out of union credit unions. So, there's lots of union folks on the board. It's a very progressive, forward-thinking credit union that looks to use money for the power of good, and it's great work. Expanding into the Chinese community with a Chinese language brand, expanding into Persian community, and doing some great work in terms of diversity. The largest banker in the country for the cannabis industry. Cannabis industries and firms often have a difficult time with banking because of various stigmas, so Community Savings is a great credit union—funded our labour history book, which also comes from their deep attachment to the labour movement.

KN [01:03:03] Okay, is there anything else, Irene, that you would like to say about your involvement in the B.C. labour movement?

IL [01:03:11] Only that it's been a privilege. Honestly, I've loved it. It's just a great way to spend your life.

KN [01:03:19] Do you have any advice for young activists in the labour movement, particularly women, today, in dealing with all the problems that they're facing?

IL [01:03:28] Yeah, I think my basic advice to people is to say yes. Say yes to the opportunities that come to you. And seek out the things that you want to do, and don't be nervous about that. I think I've had the privilege of having great mentors and allies over the years. You among them Ken. You know, build that team of support around you. I think that's really important. I've always been very, very fortunate to have that—to have a great group of people to work with who shared my values, to have mentors who helped me along and gave me advice, people whose footsteps I followed in. For me, the BCTF was just a superb training ground in democracy and activism, in, you know, in following your values, right? So, yeah, take it on. That's my advice.

KN [01:04:29] Okay. Well, thank you—

IL [01:04:30] Keep up the fight, which is important. (laughter)

KN [01:04:32] Indeed. Thank you very much, Irene. I really appreciate that. That was fine words. We really appreciate it.

IL [01:04:37] Yes, thanks Ken, it's been a pleasure.