

**Interview: Stephanie Smith (SS)**  
**Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)**  
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**Transcription: Pete Smith**

**KN [00:00:05]** We're here this morning to interview Stephanie Smith, who was the President of the BC, what is now the BC General Employees' Union, formerly the BC Government and Services Union and she was president from 2014 to 2024. Today is April 9th 2025. Good morning Stephanie.

**SS [00:00:31]** Good morning, Ken.

**KN [00:00:34]** Can we begin by having you tell us where you were born and what year you were born.

**SS [00:00:40]** Sure. I was born in Montreal, Quebec, in June of 1964.

**KN [00:00:48]** And where did you do most of your growing up, particularly get your public school education?

**SS [00:00:53]** We moved quite a bit. My father had a number of different jobs, so lived in Quebec until I was five. We moved out here to BC. Lived here for a couple of years and then moved back east to Ontario. So we were in Ontario in different places until about 1978. So I was 14 and then my family packed up and immigrated to New Zealand in —I always say [in New Zealand accent] when I was fourteen [laughter] in 1978. I can't seem to say it any other way. And I spent two years in the schooling system there.

**KN [00:01:31]** Okay, that sounds quite interesting. Can you tell us a bit about your family? Were your parents union members or were they politically active people?

**SS [00:01:40]** No, actually. So when we were living here in British Columbia, my parents divorced and my father got custody of us, which was quite unusual as you can imagine in that time. My dad is from Northern Ireland, a very much a pull yourself up by the bootstraps kind of man. And no, we did not really discuss politics or the union world. So I used to wonder where on earth I got this sort of inkling to become a trade unionist, an activist. But throughout my schooling, and actually you can ask my parents, one of my catchphrases was always, "That's not fair". And I think that really drove me into it. But when I came back to Canada, reconnected with my mother, who had remained here after we have moved to New Zealand. Her family was very much involved in the union movement. When I met my uncles and my aunts, almost all of them were stewards or had some sort of position in a union. So I thought, okay, I wasn't found in a cabbage patch. I may have in fact had this genetically ingrained within me. My father was very socially progressive, very socially progressive. Was quite consciously anti-racist, anti-homophobic, very accepting of lifestyles, and again, treating people with dignity and respect. So I definitely got that from him as well. And my mother, she was a real activist too. Part of the feminist movement and anti-nuclear movement here in BC. So I guess I do come by it honestly.

**KN [00:03:27]** You mentioned that you lived in New Zealand for a while. Can you tell us a bit about that experience?

**SS** [00:03:32] Yes. You know, I always say that I'm Canadian by birth and very proudly Canadian, but I am Kiwi by choice. I love New Zealand. And moving there at 14, it was quite a formative time in my life. And as I said, it was a culture shock. I went from a very sort of progressive, loose high school in Orangeville, Ontario, you know, where we called our teacher Cookie. To New Zealand, where I wore a full uniform, had to have my hair tied up. We had head mistresses. It was an all-girls school, which was a completely new experience. And I was there, as I said, only for two years because the schooling in Canada apparently is much better than people give it credit for. So I whipped through high school in New Zealand and I ended up going to teachers' college when I was 16 years old. And it was sort of at teachers college that I really sort of came into contact with those sort of broader labor movement in New Zealand. After I graduated and started working in the system, it was a unionized childcare system. It was called kindergarten in New Zealand and it was preschool, what we would call preschool here. And you were a government employee. My paychecks came from the government. And I was part of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union at the time. It's Association now, I think. But it was Union when I was there. And as kindy teachers, our big campaign was wage parity with early elementary school teachers, because we did exactly the same sort of work. Our ratios were much higher. And we were treated very, very differently. So I kind of became a bit of an activist in New Zealand before I came back to Canada.

**KN** [00:05:29] Okay, so that partly answers the next question, but because you did gravitate early in your life towards fulfilling an interest in early childhood education, and so what helped shape this interest and how did it affect your employment choices? I mean, you've talked a bit about what happened in New Zealand, but subsequently.

**SS** [00:05:47] Yeah, I had always had an affinity for working with young children. Even in elementary school when I was in grade 8, I would volunteer in the kindergarten room. You know, people (I'm being really honest now), people always say, you know, they gravitate towards early childhood education because they love children and I did, obviously I did it for 30 years of my life. However, I also think it fulfilled my frustrated ambitions to be an actress, a singer, a performer, because I could do all of those things in that job. One child actually called me the singing-est teacher they'd ever had. But yeah, you know, you got to tap into your dramatic side, your artistic side, your creative side, and of course working with young children, you know, there's just such a purity in that work. They haven't quite learned how to lie and manipulate yet and very honest and their curiosity about the world and that was something I really, really loved.

**SS** [00:06:58] And so when I came back to Canada, I actually came back as a nanny. I had wanted to come back and reconnect with my mother and also see—was I going to live in Canada or was I going to stay in New Zealand? And New Zealand was going through a very reformatory time. You know, they had elected a very, very conservative government. That government was privatizing everything. Everything. Decimating the public service. And so I came back to Canada as a nanny. My father saw this advertisement in the newspaper for a New Zealand nanny and I thought, oh that's an opportunity to go back to Canada, live in Vancouver for a year and see what I wanted to do and I ended up not going back to New Zealand. I met the person I ended up marrying and having children with and I worked as a nanny for a number of years with different families and realized I wanted to get back into group licensed childcare. And again, my mother, it's amazing connections, how they can open doorways and how these things happen. And my mother worked at Langara and knew a woman who was the chair of a board of a not-for-profit group licensed childcare center in Vancouver. They were looking for a substitute teacher. I applied for that

job. I got that job and it ended up becoming permanent. And interestingly enough, it was a unionized childcare center, which in 1988 is when I began there, was pretty rare. And it was the BC Children's Services Union. And so just getting a job there was, again, this amazing I don't know if it was luck or serendipity or what it was, but it was how I got a unionized childcare job in Vancouver.

**KN** [00:09:07] You mentioned earlier in the interview that something that became actually a defining characteristic of your personal belief system and that's characterized by the expression: "That's not fair." Would you like to talk about this a bit and particularly how it might have eventually shaped your view of unions and how you saw that developing?

**SS** [00:09:32] Yes, so I was the only girl with four brothers. Both my parents married three times so I have a number of family connections and all brothers, interestingly enough. And so yes, I would often comment things from the perspective of, oh, how come they can do that and I can't, or at least they were told they could do that, and I was told I couldn't. It didn't mean I couldn't, it just meant I was told I couldn't. And when I became a member of the Children's Services Employees Union, as you can imagine, I was very surprised and actually really shocked that I had come from a system of organized, publicly funded preschool that was available to any child who wanted it. Any family who wanted it regardless of socioeconomic status. And I came to a system where it was parent fee funded. So you had to be able to afford to put your child in childcare. There was not a lot of government funding. It changed over the years. And it was not seen in the same light as early childhood education was in New Zealand. I mean, I went to a teacher's college. Here it was sort of seen as something that if you couldn't teach, that's what you did. You went into ECE [early childhood education].

**SS** [00:10:58] And so, again, I thought, well, that's not fair. You know, the years from zero to six are fundamentally the most important in a child's development. And so for me, fairness means respect, it means equity, it means, you know, inclusion. And so I became a shop steward with the Children's Services Employees Union. And then when we merged with the BCGEU (British Columbia Government Employees' Union), which I know we'll talk about a little bit more. I became a shop steward with the BCGEU and what was really interesting, that was sort of my first contact with a really large, large union, very diverse as well. Originally coming from strictly the public sector, but now much more broadened into what you could call the broader public sector and even the private sector in some cases. And for me the GEU was an organization that really reflected my values, those values of fairness, respect, equity, inclusion and so it felt like coming home and as I learned more and more about the broader labor movement, that's really what I embraced, and was pleased to see reflected.

**KN** [00:12:32] You became, actually became a member of BCGEU in 1994 and you've talked a bit about initial contact and involvement and how that looked. Can you talk a bit more about your re-involvement in the BCGEU?

**SS** [00:12:47] Yeah, so we merged. The Children's Services Employees Union realized that to really advance the issues that early childhood educators that they were representing were facing, that they needed to become a part of a broader, bigger union. And we looked at four different unions: Health Sciences Association of BC, Hospital Employees Union, CUPE-BC [Canadian Union of Public Employees -BC]. And the BCGEU, and spoiler alert, guess which one we went with. It came to a membership vote. So we as members voted which of these unions we wanted to merge with, and it was the BCGEU.

**SS** [00:13:31] And they were also going through a bit of a transformation at the time. So there are components within the BCGEU, and those are sort of both geographical but industrial divisions. So, for example: Component Five is all of your liquor distribution workers. So in the stores, the warehouse, that sort of thing. Component One is corrections and sheriffs. And they had a component called Component Four which was very broad. So it combined health services as well as community social services. And it was too big and so it's split into Component Four which remained health and then Component Three which became community social services which included childcare. So not only was I in a brand-new union, I was in a brand new component and they had their inaugural local elections and we elected a Local chair. And my co-workers, bless them, they knew I'd been a steward with the previous union and they sort of voluntold me to go to this meeting and find out now where is childcare going to fit within this huge union and I did. I went to that first meeting and clearly asked a number of questions and had a few ideas and the next thing I knew I was a member-at-large on the local executive.

**SS** [00:15:06] And I will say that BCGEU also did an amazing job in bringing childcare together in that inaugural sort of, in those opening days. We had a conference, we talked about our dream collective agreement, what it would look like to have a provincial child-care system, a unionized provincial child-care system. So I really appreciated that and I thought, yes, I can get involved and really it was a matter of saying yes when people asked me to do things. So started as a member-at-large, became the second vice of the local at some point and then I became the local chair and I was local chair for a number of years. Pardon me. And got on—as a local chair I sat on our provincial component executive and eventually in 2008 I became a member of our provincial executive, which is the governing body of our union between conventions. So that's with the president, the treasurer, the four vice-presidents at the time and all of the component chairs. There were twelve components, went down to eleven. And some of those components had a second representative based on their size. And I was the second representative for community social services.

**SS** [00:16:40] So we really got to see how decisions were made at that governing level for the betterment of our membership. And that's kind of, and then in 2011, I was encouraged to run for a full-time officer position. We have two of those, and that's the president and the treasurer, and I ran for treasurer in 2011 and was successful in that election. And so I served as treasurer of our union for three years, which I think was incredibly important. I came from a low-wage sector. You know, childcare is low wage. And I never, ever forgot when I was on union business, whose money it was I was spending, and that's workers' money. And so being treasurer, that again, really firmly ingrained that, and developing financial policies that broke down barriers for people to participate in their union. And then in 2014, when Darryl retired, Darryl Walker, I ran for the position of president. And I was successful in that as well.

**KN** [00:17:53] So is there anything that stands out for you during that from 2008 to 2014 when Darryl was president that you were on the executive and then a full-time officer? Anything that stands out in terms of issues or things that happened during that period of time?

**SS** [00:18:10] Well, we, it was a tough period, you know. I often, so George—John Shields was the president I came in under. And at the time there was an NDP [New Democratic Party] government. And even then we were going through some challenges. There were financial challenges and the NDP had made the decision that they were going to cut 3,000

public sector jobs. So my big, big first protest as a BCGEU member was actually against the NDP. And we were going through a sectoral bargaining, and we had a community social services strike, which was 12 weeks in length. So even from the very beginning, there were always challenges and issues.

**SS** [00:19:00] And then, of course, the Liberals came in, and there were two NDP MLAs left, Joy McPhail and Jenny Kwan. And so George's [Heyman] entire presidency was under the Liberal government, and that was a real fight back. And that continued through Darryl's presidency as well. You know, lots of constantly having to fight to maintain what we had gained as union workers. Interestingly enough, we were still growing. The BCGU continued to organize. Both George and Darryl, and our provincial executive (because all of the decisions are actually based with the provincial executive) we're very focused on organizing and bringing in union members, particularly in the broader public sector and my sector: community social services and childcare, community living, services for women, Indigenous services became a real priority as well.

**SS** [00:20:06] But one of the things that I heard from members, as an activist member myself, was they didn't really feel like their union was relevant to them. That it was this disembodied thing that operated out of Burnaby, even though we had Area Offices and we have Area Offices in every region. There wasn't the kind of connection that I felt with my union. And I really wanted to see that happen. I wanted people to say 'my union' not 'the union' like it was something completely separate from them. And it's one of the reasons why I ran for a full-time position, because I felt that that was something we could be doing much more actively, was really connecting with the members. And everybody has communities. And there's a variety of communities, you know, there's obviously the community that you live in, there's your family community, and then there are those other communities. Maybe you're really involved in sports, or you're really involved in a faith group, or some other social justice work that you do that you're connected with. Well, a union is a community too, and that's really what I saw kind of lacking was that feeling of community. You know, the BCGEU has always been a social justice union and fights not just for the betterment of their own members. Always that's the priority, but tangentially that improves community, that improves society, right? And that's, I thought we could do that a little bit better.

**KN** [00:22:02] Notably, when you were elected President in 2014, you were the first woman to be president of the BCGEU. Not only that, be elected president of a GEU, but additionally, and you were the first president that didn't come out of the direct government services area. Can you tell us a bit about why that was significant?

**SS** [00:22:24] Yes well on the woman part I'm always careful to say first elected woman. So the BCGEU has been around for over 100 years. In 1919 was the BC Government Employees Association was formed and during its life there was a woman president very briefly Joan Gower Gillatt. I know the Labour Heritage Center has done a great piece on Joan. She became president because the sitting president died in office and as the first-vice she became president. Unfortunately she was not elected to that executive position, quelle surprise, patriarchy. So it took almost a hundred years for it to happen.

**SS** [00:23:15] So yes, being the first woman elected was a very, I think, historical moment. And it happened, I think at just the right time as well. I mean the best time for it to happen would have been decades ago. The next best time was when it happened for me, 2014. And there were a lot of women being elected for the first time. We had the first female president of the BC Federation of Labour with Irene Lanzinger. We had, you know, the first

female president at the HEU [Hospital Employees Union] recently with Barb Nederpel. So these things sort of happened, but it looked almost like a domino effect, that there was a knock on that. And I don't want to take credit. I think there were other women activists who perhaps saw, I can do that. You know, because I really believe that we bring the innate skills necessary for leadership, whether it's in the labour movement, whether it is in government or industry. Women have these innate skills that are great. So yeah, it was a big deal.

**SS** [00:24:23] It was also a big deal not coming from direct government. Our membership is incredibly diverse, as I've said, in the BCGEU, so we sort of round out numbers and say potentially one-third direct government, or just over one-third direct government but over one-third is now in what we call the broader public service. So these are industries that still receive government funding, but they're administered through a third party, whether it's a health authority, whether it is a community social service agency, a crown corporation. And then we have strictly private enterprise as well, the casinos, financial institutions through VanCity and other credit unions. When I was treasurer, for the very first time in our history over 50% of our dues income was actually coming from non direct-government workers, and that was a seismic shift. And so I think there was recognition that having someone from the broader public sector, low-wage sector too (which is not to say everybody in the direct government is a high wage sector, they're not, let's be perfectly clear about that). But I think it brought a new perspective. Again, both around engaging with members and meeting members where they were, you know, taking the mountain to Muhammad. But also around the priorities and working with our provincial executive to address the priorities and the issues that our members were facing in all of the sectors and bringing that sort of universal, holistic look to everything.

**KN** [00:26:23] So Stephanie, when you were running for president and obviously got elected, you were running one of the parts of your campaign was what you called 12 by 12.

**SS** [00:26:35] Yes.

**KN** [00:26:35] And then you were elected, so you obviously worked on implementing whatever 12 by 12 was. Can you tell us a bit about what that meant and about its relationship to union member engagement?

**SS** [00:26:48] Absolutely. So we have twelve areas in the province. Our union historically mirrored government's division of the province in terms of the areas. So, we have twelve areas, which again it's a bit of inside baseball, but when you look at our components, so I said I'm from Component 3, which is community social services. I'm from Area 03, which is the Lower Mainland, So my local was 303. And I committed that within the first 12 months of my presidency that I would visit all 12 of our areas in the province and that I would make myself available to members in those 12 areas. So that included worksite visits, going to a ministry office on Haida Gwaii, perhaps visiting the liquor stores in Kimberley. But also holding events that people could bring their families, come and meet myself, other members of our provincial executive, other members of our senior leadership team.

**SS** [00:28:00] And so I did that. I went to all 12 areas. So as I said, I've been to Haida Gwaii and Prince Rupert and Terrace, to Fort Nelson in the northeast, and then of course all the way down to Cranbrook and Castlegar and all the way over to the Island, North Island as well. And just really trying to, again, put a face to [makes finger quotes] the union, that it is workers, you know, that I am a worker activist. Yes, I've taken on this

leadership role. However, I'm a worker, and so I want to hear from you as a worker where you want to see your union going, not just at convention, but between conventions. I want that line of dialog open and going all the time, both ways. Not just top down from headquarters in Burnaby out, but from every corner of the province in. And that those kinds of conversations inform what we do as a union to really try and improve working conditions, make your communities stronger, healthier, and more inclusive, and really ultimately let's change the world, you know? So it was always about building our internal capacity, getting our members engaged, ready to fight if they needed to fight. Connecting so they knew who each other were. But also building our external leverage. You know, being a powerhouse that drives public policy for the betterment of all workers, for the betterment of all families, whether that's around childcare, affordable housing, dealing with the toxic drug crisis, looking at pay equity, issues of inclusivity, issues of poverty. And again globally, you know, what are the issues globally that impact us locally that we need to be engaged in to, to organize, organize, organize, organize. That's what really it's always about.

**KN [00:30:30]** So you mentioned organizing in your final comment there and I wanted to ask you about that because for many years the BCGEU had a real focus on organizing, that is building the membership, increasing your size overall and stuff like that, involving more members in the union. Can you talk a bit about the development of a culture of collaboration in your union, particularly with respect to the relationship between staff and members?

**SS [00:31:01]** Yes. Organizing is an interesting term. When we say organizing, again, we sort of think of that external work that's done bringing the unorganized into the House of Labour. And the BCGEU is—we have member organizers, we have, obviously, our staff that are dedicated to organizing. And even before card check even before the one-step vote the BCGEU was doing unbelievable work in that arena and you know we saw our union grow. It's over 90,000 members now provincially and when I first became a member I think it was 60,000 or thereabouts. However, organizing also happens internally and so that was one of the things that our provincial executive—like how do you engage people to want to step up and be an activist, be a workplace leader, be the voice of their union in their work site? Because that's really where the work happens. And if you don't have that, you have nothing. I mean, I remember visiting, (this is terrible) but I remember visiting a childcare site where the staff thought they were having a meeting on whether or not they should join the BCGEU, and they were BCGEU members. And I went there and I was like, 'No, you're members. You did that a long time ago. You have a living collective agreement'. They weren't even aware that there was a collective agreement. The staff had changed over. There hadn't been, I guess, any reason for them to reach out for their union, not knowing they were part of the union.

**SS [00:32:54]** So one of the things that I said to the staff reps that I worked with, even when I was a Local Chair, is I said, 'Okay, look, I know we get these grievance reports and we see that site XYZ has 50 grievances filed on this, that, and the other thing'. I said 'That's great. That means they know they have a union. That means, they're using the tools that being a union member provides them to deal with worksite conflicts, or worksite issues, or issues around the collective agreement, safety and health.' I said 'I wanna know about the sites you haven't heard from in three years.' Like those are the sites I want to know about and I want start reaching out to, whether it's myself personally, whether it is my executive, whether it our staff reps, we need to be touching base all the time, even from places, because one of two things is happening. One, they're really doing great and

everything is hunky-dory, tickety-boo. Or like this other place, they don't even know they're part of the BCGEU and that's not okay.

**SS** [00:34:05] So our entire provincial executive really was focused on that, you know, and doing that outreach and we would move our PE meetings around the province and when we would be in a community, all of our component vice presidents, all of our executive team, all of our staff would go and do a blitz of the community in worksite visits. You have to work symbiotically with the paid staff. They should be workplace activists too, in my view, right? Staff reps, I mean, obviously you have specialized staff in various departments. It's a big organization. There's like over 400 staff. However, the whole focus needs to be, again, on those two things. Like when we're making decisions, is this going to increase our internal capacity? Are we building a labour movement within our union? Are we connecting? Are we engaging? And are we building that external leverage? Are we empowering people to make a difference, whether it's politically or at the work site or more broadly, like, are we empowering people to do that? And you can't do one in exclusivity of the other. You have to bring those things together. And the staff are a hugely integral part of that. You know, they're the ones that are there to support the activists when they need that additional support as a steward. I had five staff reps that I worked with in my local because my local was so large and diverse. I couldn't have done what I did without them. And so we're a member-driven union in that our members are the ones who identify what our issues are, what the priorities are going to be, how we develop our budget, whether through our finance committee, but it's our staff that help operationalize all of that. And so you can't do the two things separately.

**KN** [00:36:24] Okay, now we come to COVID.

**SS** [00:36:26] Oh.

**KN** [00:36:27] That pandemic, the COVID pandemic occurred during your presidency. Must have had a significant impact on your work. Can you tell us a bit about the effect the epidemic had upon the work of your members on a day-to-day basis, but also what the impact of COVID was on the functioning and operation of your union, both from a staff perspective and also from a governance or decision-making perspective? That's a lot of questions.

**SS** [00:36:53] It is, it is. Gosh, yeah.

**KN** [00:36:55] I can pick them up, it doesn't need to.

**SS** [00:36:57] Well, it's funny, now when I think about my presidency, I think of it in terms of Before COVID, 'BC', and After COVID, 'AC'. It was unbelievably impactful. So, in terms of the membership—so our members suffered all of the extremes that happened during the pandemic. We had those who were deemed as essential services, which is not to be confused with essential services when you're, you know bargaining those around a strike. That was arbitrarily decided by government, which services had to continue in a face-to-face capacity and obviously that impacted healthcare but it also impacted our liquor store workers. They were deemed an essential service, had to remain open. So we had that entire sector who were still dealing face-to-face, really at a time when nobody knew what the impacts health-wise were going to be and what was the proper extent of safety equipment. So there's that group.



**SS [00:38:16]** Then we had a group who were pivoted at a moment's notice to working remotely. So, you know, all of a sudden you have all of these workers who are setting up at home, probably without a home office that makes sense, you know, so on their dining room or kitchen tables with their children, their family members, their pets, all there. And how do we structure that in a way that... you know upholds their rights under a collective agreement that they remain safe but they're doing the work that their employer is directing them to do. You know we had employers who thought well because you're at home you can just work as long as I need you to rather than the actual hours you're scheduled. And you know if there was a power outage at the house—oh well we're not going to pay you for that time because you weren't working. Well no it doesn't quite work that way. So there was that.

**SS [00:39:18]** And then we had the group that were immediately laid off, and really that was our casinos members. You know, casinos just shut down. And so dealing with, okay, this is a layoff. So how do we continue to ensure that those members are being supported through now having lost their employment, lost their income? You know, we don't know how long this shutdown's going to be. We don't when they're going to go back. So it was astonishing, just, and the fact that it was happening globally, there was a surrealism to it. I don't know if people remember feeling that, but it was, it was just like, I can't believe this is happening.

**SS [00:40:10]** So yes, I am extremely proud of our union and its response to that crisis. You know, I want to give credit where credit is due. Our treasurer, Paul Finch, who really has his eye on what's happening globally, saw some things happening prior to our response here in Canada, pardon me, so, you know, One of the things we had to do was we canceled, even before we had to, we canceled a get-together that we were going to bring all the local chairs. We were going have a local chairs' assembly. And Paul came to us and the provincial executive and said, I think we need to cancel this. I just don't think it would be safe. And we did that. And then, of course, there was that dentist convention. And we were like, whew, OK. You know, getting masks to members before. That was kind of a thing. But knowing that there was a shortage potentially coming of personal protective equipment, PPE, and that unfolded. So we sent a mask to every single member that we had. We closed our offices and sent our staff to work remotely. That was a very tough decision to make. But we knew we needed to do that to protect our staff and to protect members.

**SS [00:41:41]** And we put together what we called the COVID Task Force, which was essentially our senior leadership team. So the four executive vice presidents, the treasurer, myself, and our four directors (now they're executive directors) they're our senior management team. And we, like, we're on the phone every day. Well, Zooming eventually, of course, 'cuz "yay Zoom", every single day. Debriefing about what we needed to do, what was happening in the various areas, who was being impacted, what were the crises that were, like the real fires that we needed to deal with, like MCFD [Ministry of Child and Family Development] offices that were ordered to remain open, but they wouldn't bring plexiglass in, or they wouldn't supply masks for their staff. And liquor stores, same thing, you know, like where do we need to? We set up drop boxes, email drop boxes around occupational health and safety, that members could just email that directly so it didn't get lost in a bunch of other email boxes. We had that one specifically set up for dealing with occupational health. My occupational health and safety team (I mean they're not mine, 'our' occupational health safety team) just were outstanding. You know, 20/20 hindsight, when I first became president, we had one Occupational Health and Safety staff rep. And as a provincial executive, I had said, 'You know, I hear all the time, this is a priority for

members, occupational health, and safety is a priority. I think we should look at budgeting to have one for every—' so we have 12 areas, but we have four regions so '—we need we need at least an Occupational Health and Safety rep for every region.' And we had put those into place prior to COVID. Whew.

**SS** [00:43:57] Obviously there was a lot of controversy that came out around COVID, you know mandatory vaccines, masking even became really controversial. I would say that our response was exemplary. And it absolutely changed everything on a go-forward basis. On the downs— well, there are a lot of downsides, but the member engagement piece really fell apart, obviously. And for our provincial executive and for our activists on the ground, it was exhausting. And so we lost—and when I say lost, yes, we lost some people to COVID. We lost a lot of people, tangentially, just simply being burnt out, particularly in our health care sectors. They were just flooded on a daily basis with crisis after crisis after crisis. Mental health became a real issue and I think we're still seeing the fallout of that, quite frankly. I think the world has seismically shifted.

**SS** [00:45:24] On the upside, it was really interesting to see workers who have always sort of laboured under this, you know, the jobs are created by the bosses. The bosses create the jobs. But it was the workers who kept the lights on and the wheels turning and the doors open. And workers started recognizing that. And I think we saw it reflected in the next rounds of bargaining. That workers saw their worth and knew how valuable they were. So yeah, it was a lot. It was a lot. And I think it's going to be very interesting in another 20 years' time, when historians are looking back at what was the impact of a global pandemic. You know, in these various areas, like labour, you know, how did that shift the labour movement as a whole? So, and I don't have the answer to that, but I know it made a big difference. And there are things we're still utilizing, you know, like Zoom meetings. Because weirdly enough, when you have people in Fort Nelson who wanna talk to people in Haida Gwaii, all of a sudden Zoom's actually not a bad way to do it. So, you know we had a convention that was virtual. Not as great as an in person, absolutely. However, made it really accessible for people, you know, who perhaps might not have been able to leave their families or their homes for five days. But yeah, I can sit at my dining room table and participate. So, you know there's a yin and a yang and I'm a bit of a Pollyanna. I tend to see the glass half full and silver linings to everything. It's really annoying. People get really mad at me for it. But yeah, if you'd said to me, do you wanna be president during a global pandemic? I might've had to think about it, but I did re-offer for the final term after it. So yes, I don't know what that says about me, but there you go.

**KN** [00:47:56] Okay, is there anything else about the COVID experience that stands out that you might want to mention?

**SS** [00:48:02] Oh gosh, um. No, I— yeah.

**KN** [00:48:10] You have referred to your union as a social justice union, and I know what it's looked upon as a social justice union. Can you talk a bit about some of the things that the union undertook while you were president that sort of is in sync with that idea?

**SS** [00:48:23] Yes, so as I said, when I first became a member of the BCGEU, there's a lot of interesting sort of stuff out there around labor unions and all those ridiculous myths. But one of those is that, oh, they only care about their own membership. And the GEU absolutely doesn't. I mean, starting right from John Shields you know and his really impactful work with Indigenous leadership and Indigenous communities, and George, his environmentalism, and all of those continuing on. But also, again, this "act locally but think

globally" kind of thing. So we have what—we have an International Solidarity Committee that has a budget. It's embedded within our Constitution. It's a per-cap amount per member that is put into this solidarity fund. It's the Diane L. Wood International Solidarity and Humanities Fund. And it's more than just sort of being an ATM. It really is about doing the research on the work that is being done in other countries and other jurisdictions to better workers' lives and really targeting that money in a very strategic way. Again, not to be a white savior, if I can use that term. But to empower working people in those countries to make a difference for themselves and their communities. So some of that work we've done is with the Stephen Lewis Foundation, with the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign. I was absolutely honored to go on two delegations to Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and see the impact of that work. So BCGEU funds went into building a brick and mortar building for six organizations that work on the betterment of grandmothers and their families in Uganda. You know, there's been incredible work done in that arena. You know the work we've done in the Philippines with CODEV. We do what are called strategic partnerships. So again, it's not us sort of coming in and saying this is what needs to be done, but we work in partnership with other social justice organizations that are already doing that work, and we can help augment it. But it's a partnership, it's not just, 'Oh, here's the cheque, off you go'. It's, okay, how do we get involved? How do you get involved in the issues of our members and support them? Because again, those things are interconnected, workers are connected globally.

**SS** [00:51:27] One of, one of the most impactful things that I participated in and I'm so deeply honoured to have been able to do this. We were the only union, only labor organization in Canada that did a submission to the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry. And again, that wasn't staff sitting in my office or me putting together a submission. We built this submission with our members. We went around the province, we held round tables where we brought members who worked in an Indigenous community and Indigenous BCGEU members together and said, what do you want to see in our submission through that trade union lens around workers and working conditions, but also in that broader social justice lens? Because I'm president, I was the official spokesperson and went to Ottawa to do that presentation. And, you know, sadly, the recommendations, of course, are not being implemented anywhere nearly as quickly as they should be, much like the 95 Calls to Action for Truth and Reconciliation. However, again, just so proud that that was something our members wanted to see their union doing and that we were able to facilitate that. And obviously, in retrospect, I think, gosh, I wish I'd actually stepped aside and given the role of the presentation to a member who is Indigenous. And what was really interesting is when I went there, there were a number of women who were there who were providing support for families who were testifying and for others. And I think five out of six of them were BCGEU members. And they ended up being with me while I did that presentation. And sorry, I always get verklempt when I think about it because it was just so powerful. So yeah, that's the kind of thing I'm talking about, right?

**SS** [00:53:55] Our affordable housing campaign. You know, we are never, as a labor movement, going to be able to negotiate wages, wage increases that keep up with the cost of living. With the cost, well, not the cost of living per se, but like the cost of housing specifically, the cost of childcare specifically. So how do we impact a worker's take-home pay? Let's reduce those things. When I think about families who can access the \$10 a day childcare, that's an immediate wage increase of over \$1,000 a month. That's money that can be now spent on other things. So we have to get involved in these broader campaigns to make the kind of impact that maybe we can't make at the bargaining table. So I think it's incumbent upon us as labour to do that.

**KN** [00:54:55] So, you did mention the bargaining table.

**SS** [00:54:58] Oh, yeah.

**KN** [00:54:59] And in 2022, your union was able to successfully negotiate a collective agreement that contained a substantive COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment) provision. Can you talk a bit about this achievement and what it meant for your members?

**SS** [00:55:15] Yeah, you know, Ken again, gosh, isn't hindsight a wonderful thing? [laughter] We heard very clearly— I mean, under the Liberals, I can't name how many rounds we went in with zeros, you know, or point fives or one point or, you know, one percent increases. And, and again, you know, post COVID, workers were saying, 'I'm essential, okay, time to pay me like I'm essential.' And it was this really interesting shift in attitude. And again, you know, our provincial executive was unbelievable in member engagement, our organizers went full out, and we had such an incredible strike vote that gave us a mandate to go back and push for something better than what the employer was willing to offer us at the time. And part of that had to include a couple of things. One, how do we address the low wage earners? Not just in direct government, but in all the sectoral tables. So, you know, I can give you an example. I mean, wildland firefighters. Critical, critical members of public safety and the work in our province. They are, or were, the lowest wage earners in direct government, as well as administrative professionals. They were considered Clerk 7's, you know, which made no sense. So the money they made was on overtime. And so we said, you know, how do we address those? So, you know bargaining is never a one-off event. It's not a seismic, boom, everything's done. It's always a building of. You build on what you built last time, you leapfrog, you go to the next one.

**SS** [00:57:18] The other thing we heard was rates of interest were out of control. When we started bargaining, they had just started doing this [gestures steep increase]. But we, again, our treasurer, Paul Finch, who really keeps his eyes on what's happening in the economy and globally. He just saw this projection. And so the bargaining committee heard from their members, clearly, that we had to have some inflationary protection because if we were gonna get a two percent and the rates of inflation were seven, then you're taking a wage cut. That's the bottom line. And so, yes, we said we wanted a cost of living adjustment. Now there is controversy around whether we said we wanted uncapped COLA. We wanted COLA. We wanted some recognition of cost of living adjustments and because of the strength of our membership and particularly the sacrifice of our members in the liquor stores and warehouse and the cannabis stores who went on the line for everybody else in the public service, we achieved that. We got a per hour increase. Now it was 25 cents, which is not a huge amount. However, 25 cents on \$20 an hour is a different percentage than 25 cents on \$25 an hour, and so it started a little bit to compress that difference. We got rid of some grids which automatically lifted people up and we got COLA. We got a recognition of COLA and so in both years of that provision it triggered because of the inflationary rates and we still fell a titch behind but we're talking basis point like tiny tiny not even a point-five percent behind the inflationary rates over the last four years. So while it was a difficult ratification and members only—in the direct government, they only ratified at 54 percent, which was a clear message both to us as their union, but also to government, that again, they saw themselves as deserving more.

**SS** [00:59:48] I'm very, very proud of that agreement. I know that's going to be a controversial statement to those who think I still didn't do a very good job. A reminder, it's a bargaining committee, it is not me who makes that final decision. As a matter of fact, I

don't even vote. One, because as Chair of the committee, you don't vote generally unless it's a tie. But secondly, I wasn't a direct government worker, so I wasn't community of interest so I couldn't vote on the collective agreement, right? So it was the bargaining committee's ultimate decision and I think they made the right one. And I cannot tell you the tables that I sat at after that across the country (and when I say tables I don't mean bargaining tables, I mean meeting tables), with our national union and its components right across the country from coast to coast, at the Canadian Labor Congress, unions that came up to us and said, how did you guys do that? Like how did you do it? And I think it's two things. One, who you elect matters. Vote. Who you elect matters, right? And two, the strength and the connectivity of your membership who are saying, yeah, we're willing to fight for this because we deserve it.

**SS** [01:01:11] And so we started seeing that impacting bargaining tables right across the country. We had phone calls from unions saying, look, we're going into bargaining, we'd love to meet with your organizing team, with your senior leadership, and talk about what you did to get what you got. Can you share with us? And it set a pattern for all the tables within the broader public sector, too. Community Health, you know, finally addressing some of the massive gaps between them and Facilities, Community Social Services, Community Social Service is my home component finally, finally closing that gap on Community Health, which was closing the gap on Facilities. So again, you see that progression and they're back in bargaining right now, as we know. Very, very difficult circumstances, globally, economically. And, you know, my wish is that they don't just maintain what was gained in the last round, but again, that they're able to build on it and to move that forward. So we shall see, we shall see.

**KN** [01:02:27] During your term, your time as BCGEU President, you maintained an active role in the BC Federation of Labour, sitting on the executive board there. So are there any specific issues or events regarding the BC Fed during the period of presidency that you might want to talk about?

**SS** [01:02:47] Oh, you know, the BC fed, I miss that table a lot, actually. [laughter] There are some such great people. You know, I first sat there with Irene, and, you know, again, I saw a bit of a shift there. At one point, I looked around the table, and I think the six largest unions in our province all had female presidents, women presidents, people who identified as women. And I was like 'Wow, awesome'. And then Laird [Cronk] became president. And I really enjoyed the direction that Laird took the Fed. Working on increasing minimum wage, improvements to occupational health and safety, which we were able to capitalize on, finally getting wildland firefighters, for example, recognized in the legislation for presumptive respiratory illness and cancers. You know, bringing the labour movement together, much more coordinated talks and conversations around bargaining, you know? How do we support each other? And we wouldn't, like I wanna be really honest, we wouldn't have achieved what we achieved in the last round of bargaining without the support of the other public sector unions and the private sector unions who came out and helped support us but who also were willing to, you know, pause on some of their stuff to let us do what we needed to do. And that was all coordinated through the Fed. And then of course, you know electing a worker-friendly government in 2017, even though it was such a nail-biter. Oh my God. You know, understanding that we have to be political. You can be non-partisan. It doesn't mean you're non-political. And so understanding that working people have to exercise their right at the ballot box because particularly for direct government, you're electing your employer. Right? Why wouldn't you want to elect one that's going to treat you nice? Well, better. Let's say better. Not nicely, but better. And so, yeah, there was lots going on. And again, the Fed also was starting to look at, okay, how

do we engage with workers outside of just the Lower Mainland? And a bit more of a focus on regional conferences and events. So, yeah. I enjoyed being at the Fed, for sure.

**KN** [01:05:29] So, are there any other issues at all that you, or events or developments that occur during your presidency you would like to talk about?

**SS** [01:05:41] Gosh, you know, it's hard to sort of pinpoint one specific thing. So much went on. So much growth, both in our membership numbers but in the labour movement as a whole too. You know, I, again, was really proud and honoured to represent NUPGE [National Union of Public and General Employees] at the Canadian Labour Congress, being on the Congress. Being a part of NUPGE, our national union, and helping steer that organization a little bit more into being a bit more proactive around labour rights, not just a think tank, which, you know, it did a great job of. But we saw it being more active in putting all of our components' rights in front of Ottawa, for example. You know, the outreach I've been able to do, like I've, I've been to the most amazing places in our province and I've met the most amazing people that make our province work every single day. I've been to every province in our country now. I have not been to the territories, I don't know what happened there, but I've been to every single province. You know, I've traveled internationally to represent our members on the international stage and to talk about their work internationally and to see how the work we've done here impacts those places. It's been a really amazing, amazing journey. And through it all, I like to think that now I'm still Stephanie, you know? Members, when I gave them my cell phone number, it's my cell phone number. Like, there was no blocked cell phone. I was on social media. They could message me through Facebook, through the dreaded X. Twitter. It was Twitter when I loved it, it's X now. But, you know, they could get a hold of me. I gave them my email address. It didn't just go to a presidential drop box somewhere, you know, where poor staff had to respond on my behalf. You know, I had an amazing senior leadership team in my provincial executive with my senior staff, all my staff. And again, not 'my' staff, but the staff who worked so hard to help the vision that I held of our union come together. So yeah, it was clearly a life-changing thing to have done and I'm glad it happened for me.

**KN** [01:08:34] Okay, we have one final question then, Stephanie.

**SS** [01:08:37] Okay.

**KN** [01:08:38] And I was just wondering whether you might have any advice for young union activists, particularly women, in respect to dealing with the many complex issues that are facing working people today?

**SS** [01:08:50] Yeah so my biggest piece of advice is trust that you have what you need to do it and say yes even when it's really scary. I would not have achieved anything that I achieved without the support and encouragement that was given to me, both by other union members and the staff team when I was asked to take something on that made my knee shake. I said okay. I said yes. I then learnt when to say no, [laughter] because I am not the poster child for life-work balance, believe you me. You know, it happened for me at the right time. But the advice I would give is: trust that you have—just by wanting to do it, you have what you need to do it and what you don't have, there are those around you who will support you in gaining that, and just do it. Get involved. Make a difference. Because I think the world and the shape that it's in right now, we need you. We need you to step up and to make the world a better place than it is right now, for sure.

**KN** [01:10:24] Okay, well thank you very much Stephanie, that was wonderful.

**SS** [01:10:27] Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.