Interview: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
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Transcription: Jane Player

KN [00:00:05] One experience you had while working at The Province, Rod, involved your role as a union member. You ended up playing a leading role in a major strike at the paper in 1984. Can you tell us about that experience and your role in it?

RM [00:00:19] Yeah, I was covered. It was weird. Anyway, I got involved in the Guild [Vancouver-New Westminster Newspaper Guild Local 115 TNG (The Newspaper Guild)]. In fact, that was the issue. I kind of misconstrued it a little bit. If I was a member of the Guild, I wasn't accused of being biased. When I got to have a role in the Guild executive, that's when people would say, 'Well, you're biased because you're pro-union and working on the Guild,' and I said, 'No, I believe I should be allowed to take an interest in the organization which controls my working conditions and wages. That's totally separate from the job I do as a reporter. Anyway, so I got involved in the Guild executive, not really in a leadership position. They had quite a conservative leadership at that time in the local Newspaper Guild. So, I was kind of on the outs with them.

RM [00:01:10] And then for the first time ever, Pacific Press announced layoffs at Pacific Press, which owned both the Sun and The Province. Very dubious, but anyway they did. So, you know, there was a very weak response by the Guild. Seventy-one or 73 people were being laid off, and this was unheard of, and, so it was a weak response by the Guild. And I thought, 'This is weak; we should fight back,' and so they said, 'Okay, big mouth, take it on.' They put me head of the layoff committee, and I had great ideas then. I was hot. And there'd been layoffs at The Globe and Mail, and The Globe and Mail Guild hired this accountant or something to prove that the layoffs weren't justified economically or something like that. There's more details to it, but that was the thrust of it. And I thought, 'Okay, let's hire this guy and challenge the layoffs on the basis of violating the collective agreement by laying off people for economic reasons rather than for automation or something that.' We had—it was very weak language in terms of—we had very strong language from the union's point of view on layoffs, because the company had agreed to them never thinking there'd be layoffs right, but there was suddenly that language. So, if we could prove they were economically just, that they were for economic reasons, we had more of a case to fight them, because we'd say, 'No you can't justify it. This is just layoffs for the purpose of layoffs.' So, we hired this guy, who didn't turn out to be that great, but anyway.

RM [00:02:51] But then I got this idea for a stunt. You know, we fired up the membership about it; we campaigned on it, and on the day that the layoffs were to take effect, I had them all come into work to report for work to show they were willing and able to work. And these are real people with faces and stuff. And I demanded a meeting with the guy that had laid them off, the human resources manager, the general manager, George Townsend. So, he was on the spot and the TV cameras were there. You know, they gathered in the lobby and interviewed a few of the people. I made a speech, you know. And up we went to Townsend's office and in we came. There were about 20 of them, right? And they all gathered around and, you know, I said, 'Mr. Townsend, these are the people that are being laid off. We just want to let you know they are willing and able to work at Pacific Press. They're not slacker people; they're real people with incomes and

stuff. These layoffs really hurt, and do you have anything to say to them?' 'Well, we're hoping we can'—but it was a good stunt, right? We compiled the layoff list, and we demanded that the company rehire them, and so on.

RM [00:04:02] And then there was the issue of seniority. Did seniority apply just to the Sun? Or did it apply to The Province? Or would there be a merged seniority because they were both all employees of Pacific Press? So, this was a big issue. Anyway, there's more to the story than that, but I became kind of prominent in the Guild because I'd played such a good role, (as he said modestly) as head of the layoff committee. So, I ended up being head of the bargaining committee as we approached a new contract. Oh, one last thing. We fought—we did fight the arbitration on the layoffs, and the great Bruce McColl was the arbitrator, later became a BC Supreme Court judge and died tragically young from cancer. We had a lot of fun. He knew me, so behind the scenes we had fun because we were calling the proceedings the Twilight Zone and stuff like that. Anyway, we had our economic guy, and we demanded the company open the books to see whether the layoffs were justified economically. And if you think Pacific Press was gonna open its books to the union, are you kidding me? So, they challenged that and said, 'It's our business,' and stuff. So, McColl had to make a ruling, and he ruled that the company had to open its books. And that was just fucking, that was just great because there's no way the company would open its books. So, we settled the arbitration, and they made some gestures toward the employees that had been laid off that they could try jobs in other parts of the company. You know, it was actually a pretty good settlement. And they agreed that seniority list would be merged between the Sun and The Province. So, it was your time with Pacific Press that counted, not your time either with the Sun or The Province. Merged seniority lists, that was a big deal.

RM [00:06:05] Anyway, so I became head of our bargaining committee for the 1984 collective agreement, and I'm thinking, 'God, I've covered negotiations from the outside all these years. Now I'm gonna get to see what it's like to actually be myself at the bargaining table and see what that's like.' At this point we are part of the Joint Council of Newspaper Unions with the craft unions. The Guild is part of it. So, we go in for our first session with George Townsend, and the first thing he says is for their opening statement, 'There will be no negotiations this year. We are prepared to make no layoffs but if you agree to a wage freeze. That's our position. No wage increase but there will no changes to the collective agreement.' [laughs] He walked out. That was it. So much for negotiations—unprecedented. They weren't even gonna to negotiate. They wanted us to sign this thing saying we agreed a no wage increase because this was a bit of a recessionary time. No wage increase and they wouldn't try to change the collective agreement, right? It was really a status quo. And very uncertain economic times. So, we're all sitting there, and we're nervous because the Guild—we had worked very hard at a bunch of demands that were non-monetary. I can't quite remember what they are at this point, but like on tech change and this and that, daycare, you know. They were non-monetary demands. They didn't, they weren't wage increases and that was what was big for us, not wage increases. But the craft unions were very militant. And they said—you know, they tried again with Townsend. Same positions. So, we said, 'Well we're going out on strike,' and out they went. When no unions were going on strike—no unions were getting any decent settlements—the craft unions just said, if I might, 'Fuck you, we're going out on strike.'.

RM [00:08:00] And the Guild membership was apoplectic because we didn't want a strike. We had non-monetary demands, and we could read the tea leaves about the economic uncertainties and so on, like anybody else. We voted against going out, but we were part of the joint council. But we protested the decision for them to go out. And our members

were—there were a lot of them were almost inclined to cross the picket line. So, we had to do a lot work to keep our members from crossing the picket line because they hated this strike. It was very hard to keep our members together and so on. And finally, we whined so much—and rightly, if I might support the Guild. The craft unions didn't care about our demands or anything like that, and they kicked us out of the Joint Council. So, we were on our own.

RM [00:08:54] The strike went on for about two or three months. And finally, the company bosses back East saying, 'What's this strike going on?' You know, 'We need this settled.' And they'd had some settlements back East and which were not that bad. But conditions in B.C., we had a real B.C. recession at that time. [laughs] The craft unions got this amazing settlement from the company of three-year contract of wage increases of five, five, and seven. It was unprecedented. It was the best contract negotiated in B.C. for years—years afterwards. So much for the company's attempt to hold us to a wage freeze. They ended up settling for five, five, and seven, which was beyond anybody's expectations. But these are the militant craft unions. They didn't care. You know, 'Up you to the company.' [gestures middle finger up] We're going out just the way we do in 1973. Economic uncertainty or no economic uncertainty.

RM [00:09:55] So, then the company, of course, made the same offer to us in the Guild because we were negotiating separately then. And they just said, 'Here's the agreement the craft unions signed. Sign here.' And we said, 'No, no. We have our issues. We're not just signing the craft union agreement. We want to negotiate our issues.' And the company said, 'No, no. You just have to sign here.' So, we thought, 'Well, we can't recommend acceptance of this agreement because it's a craft union agreement. It's not negotiated. There's no input from the Newspaper Guild.' So, we called a membership meeting. We expected our members to vote overwhelmingly for it because it was this huge wage increase, and we would have had to stay out on non-monetary issues. Plus, the summer was coming, which was a terrible time. You know, the company isn't going to settle during the summer, which is a down time anyway for them financially. So, we could have been out for another three months on non-monetary issues with five, five, and seven dancing in your heads, right? So, we expected the members to be rational. And, so but we said, 'Well, you know, we're very serious. We'd like to—it's a great settlement, but we can't recommend acceptance because it's not a Guild agreement.'.

RM [00:11:21] And then the membership just took off. There was these incredible speeches from the floor. 'We're standing up for ourselves as a union. We're not just following the craft unions. This is time for the Guild to be a union.' These amazing speeches, even from conservative members of the bargaining unit, the business reporters. The whole meeting just, 'Yeah! Yes!' [waving raised fist] [laughs] So, they voted to accept our recommendation, not to accept five, five, and seven. No one can believe it, you, know, it's still Southam, I think, or whatever. They say, 'What is going on in Vancouver that the weak-kneed Newspaper Guild is turning down five, five, and seven.' It's the funniest thing, after that meeting instead of us being fired up on the negotiating committee, we just look, 'We are screwed.' Like, our faces were long. I remember we called a meeting with the company. I heard from the company guys later said, 'God, it looked like you'd already lost the strike. You'd won this great victory, and you're all just looking like this [puts head down] because we figure, 'Now what?' Because we couldn't put any pressure on the company, and we were out for non-monetary demands. We had no leverage, you know, and we had to go back to work really. I mean, that was ridiculous with five, five and seven out there, and the summer approaching. But, you know, we'd taken our position. 'You have to negotiate with us.'

RM [00:12:54] And so, what happened was, the Guild leader from, the international leader, president in Washington had come in, Bill McLeman, who was from the Vancouver local and worked his way up to president. And he knew the lay of the land. He was actually a really good guy. And he was an older guy. And George Townsend, the guy I mentioned before, the general manager for the company was an older guy. And we're all these young guys. And he didn't feel comfortable with us. And so McLeman, bless his soul, unbeknownst to—no, I think he said, 'I'm just gonna phone George and just see if we can find a way out of this dispute.' So, he phones George and says, 'George, let's have coffee,' or something like that. And so, they had coffee and George Townsend, he didn't really give anything, but he did do a couple of things that addressed Guild positions, right, including putting a merged seniority list into the contract. So, there were a few little tiny things. We didn't budge them on our main issues, but we got something. And so, we went back a week later to the membership and said, 'Well, we think you should accept this because it's now a Guild agreement, right? And the vote was about 98 percent in favor of accepting. And you know what? It was so great. Because first of all we all got five, five and seven, which we had nothing to do with negotiating, but everybody went back to work and feeling good. Their heads were held high. They'd shown that they were a union, and the mood among the membership was so positive after this three-month strike they didn't want. Like, it was really terrific. I mean that was a great experience but I learned nothing about negotiations, which I'd hope to see it from the inside because there weren't any negotiations and it was the weirdest the way it all evolved. It was really quite an experience, and as I say, we ended up with the best contract in B.C. for like, I don't know, five or six years after that. It all evolved very strangely, but that was my experience as a union leader and last experience as a union leader.

KN [00:15:11] Okay, so, Rod, after leaving The Province in 1985 you tried your hand at TV reporting. First working for CBC National TV and then for CBC TV Vancouver. How did you take to doing that and what significant labour events do you recall covering during those experiences?

RM [00:15:32] Well, I quit The Province. I just, as I said, I didn't want to write investigative paragraphs [laughs] anymore because we were tab, right? That was my joke. Ken, you didn't laugh. Anyway, and I had no idea what I wanted to do next. I quit every job I ever had because there were always jobs in those days, you know, and I had a rep by then. I figured something will turn up, but I had no plans. But then The National, when people really watched The National—Knowlton Nash— they were looking for a labour reporter, and several of the people that were working there knew about me and knew I was a good labour reporter, and thought, 'Wow. Come on down and try out.' So, I went East worked on The National for a while on their desk and stuff like that, and then they said, 'Well, you're here to try out for our labour reporter job on TV.' And I knew nothing about TV. I was skeptical about it, and total wrong, instead of embracing it, I resisted it. Strangely enough that didn't work. I wasn't going to change TV. So, really, I was a bit of a flop.

RM [00:16:44] But I was still their labour reporter when there was a strike at Chrysler. The autoworkers went out with Bob White as the leader, and I was there, and so they assigned me to do the story. Luckily, they assigned me—they gave me a producer who knew what he was doing. He said, 'Look, go in the scrum and get this clip.' Do this, do that, and then do a stand up and you're fine. So, I had direction. And so, I was down there and the thing was I knew how negotiations worked. I could figure out that they'd gone on strike because the strike deadline had happened, had passed, and they didn't have a contract. So, they went out but they were still talking, and for me that indicated this could be a very short

strike, and that was reflected in my reports. So, my journalism was solid. I just wasn't very good on TV. I'd like to go back and see what my reports looked like. Meanwhile, the Toronto Star reporter who's supposed to know everybody, John Deverell, you know, and I'm competing against this guy that's covered labour for the Star and knows all the autoworker people, the leaders, Bob White, knows everybody. He was predicting a long strike, and I was thinking it's not going to be a long strike. And out of this, Bob White got an impression from my questions that I actually knew something about labour negotiations. This oddball guy, he kind of took a shine to me. So, anyway the negotiations were at the Westbury Hotel in Toronto and I thought—oh, and I was reporting for the Sunday—The National just started doing a Sunday National. Anyway, so I thought, 'Well on the Saturday, I'm off, but I'll go by, swing by the Westbury to see what's up.' So, I go by the Westbury, and just coming out of the lobby into a cab is Bob White. He's got his suit, you know, what do you call those things? Put your suit in a container, whatever you do. Anyway, you what I mean. And so, I said, 'Oh, hi, Bob. You're going down to see Lee Iacocca? Ha ha ha ha.' You know, who was the head of Chrysler at the time. It was a big name. And he laughed, 'Ha ha, ha.' And of course, it turned out he was going to see Lee Iacocca. And they hacked out a settlement, right? And I remember White, telling me afterwards, 'Holy fuck, when you saw me there, you know, I thought, 'Oh, what's he gonna do with that story?' But I didn't. I wasn't that much on top of things that I ran with it, right. But he said, 'God, I was really nervous that this story was gonna get out,' because he wanted it under top secrecy. And there's this reporter that had seen him getting into the cab as he headed out to see Lee Iacocca. But anyway, they did settle and I felt good about my reporting.

RM [00:19:51] But The National could tell I wasn't a natural, and so they sent me back to Vancouver to the farm team to see if I could get better at TV, and really for a long time I wasn't much better. You know, I fought it. I thought I don't want to do a two-minute item when I know so much. It's superficial and stuff like that. But over time, I got so that I could do it. I wasn't, I was never great. My read wasn't good, you know, et cetera, et cetera. It wasn't me. But, you know, there were a lot of things I enjoyed about it. Like, I enjoyed it being a different medium. I enjoyed that it was a team production. You worked with a cameraman, and you worked with an editor. I mean, I liked working with people, right? And so, that was good. And what's different between TV and newspapers? Pictures. And so, you know, the old thing is that you can write a great news story, but if there's a picture of a fire on TV, the picture of the fire on TV is going to win every time. And so, you could get really dramatic pictures to go with your story, which really enlivened the piece. You know, and it was great. They had great cameramen at the CBC. Then CBC was something in those days. And people started recognizing me on the street. Nobody ever recognized me on street despite of my long, glorious history as a labour reporter in print. But suddenly, 'Oh yeah, I saw your piece on TV,' you know. And so, you could really do something with a story, and I remember we set up this stunt once. So, I heard, you know, because my labour reporting was still solid. I mean, I was on top of stuff. There'd be scrums during big stories, and all the other reporters would let me handle—ask all the questions because they figured he knows, and he's got to get a clip, and he knows what to ask, right?

RM [00:21:59] So, I heard that there was this big IW—in fact, it was a huge IWA [International Woodworkers of America] strike on contracting out, which is a very significant dispute. I won't go into the details, but it was a big deal. And so, I got a tip from my friend Keith Bennett, FIR [Forest Industrial Relations], that he was gonna phone Jack Munro to see if anything could be worked out. They were really at loggerheads, because they'd always gotten along before, but their relationship became totally bitter during this strike. So, I asked Bennett, 'Well, can we get a shot of you making the phone call? We'd

be outside your office, but just shooting in to the office, right?' And he said, 'Oh, okay,' you know, 'no problem. It'll help your story,' or something like that. We didn't mike him or anything. It would just be a shot of him making the call. Unbeknownst to me (because I was down there to get that) somebody said, 'Well why don't we do Jack getting the phone-call?' And so, they sent another cameraman down there, and he miked Jack Munro, and Bennett didn't know this. I didn't know this, and there's Jack getting the phone call and being miked and filmed and stuff like that. And at the end, he sort of—because the whole thing when you're negotiating—who asks for a meeting, right? If you ask for the meeting you want to—you've got something to offer; if they ask, it's the other way around. So, who asked for the meeting. And so, Munro was expecting Bennett to ask for a meeting. So, then they had their conversation. Munro hangs up the phone—miked—and says, 'He didn't ask for a meeting!' Big grin on his face. And it was great TV, but Bennett felt really set up on that. He was furious, and his members say, 'Why did you agree to that stunt on TV with—?' This is a serious business. This looks like it was set up for TV. I eventually calmed things with him, but it was great TV, right, even though poor Keith Bennett really got sandbagged.

RM [00:24:05] Another time, like, they couldn't negotiate where they usually negotiated in the Waddington room at the Hotel Vancouver. And so, they were in this, at some hotel on Robson, I think the Blue Horizon, or what was it? And so, they're in this room, but under the bottom of the door there was this glass panel, right, and our cameraman got down there and shot through the glass door. You could see the negotiating table. You couldn't hear a thing but there's this shot of Munro—you know how big he is and tall—and he's on one of his rants. All the forest guys are sitting there like this with their heads down, and Munro's going at them like this, looking like this huge bear looming over them. And they kept running that shot on CBC because we had such a great shot. In fact, he refers to that shot in his memoirs about CBC running the shot over and over again, but that's what TV could do. You know, I was at a couple of violent picket lines. It's one thing to be at a violent picket line when you're working for a newspaper. You can describe it but nothing equals, you know, the actual pictures. Like when the police finally came at Kitimat, I was a print reporter. The TV shots would have been unbelievable, but they weren't there. But that showed you. So, I enjoyed all that. And, you know, as I say, I wasn't good at it. But anyway, I ended up leaving CBC after four years. And I liked the people I worked with, right? And somehow out of nowhere, I got hired by The Globe and Mail. It was again, one of those unbelievably lucky breaks that happened to me in my career.

KN [00:25:59] And you ended up working for them first in Toronto and then eventually in Vancouver for most of the time until you retired in 2013.

RM [00:26:07] I did.

KN [00:26:08] So, are there any experiences in working for The Globe that you want to share?

RM [00:26:11] Well, I have to say—there it was, I got so I could do TV. I asked for a leave of absence from CBC Vancouver so I could go to Paris for a year, and they said no. Big break. If they'd said yes, I might just have come back to Vancouver and just, you know, just continued to be a mediocre, not quite mediocre, but not great TV reporter. That would have been fine. But they said no, so I quit to go to Paris for a year. And out of nowhere, The Globe hired me. I still don't know why they hired me because they hardly hired anybody there. But for any reporter, their dream job is The Globe and Mail because they

believed in reporter power. They allowed reporters to write as they saw it— incredible— and to basically assign themselves to stories. It was great.

RM [00:27:06] But I remember—so, they assigned me arbitrarily to the health policy beat because they had a labour reporter. I'd never covered health policy but I took it on, and it turned out to be terrific. The point of this story was—I remember there—okay, I'm at The Globe, and I'm writing my very first story, and I remember thinking to myself, 'Oh yes, print.' I mean, that's me, I'm print. You know, I didn't mind TV. I got so I could do it, but I'm a print person. I love print. I love writing a story for print and being able to write a story, get the good quotes, and get a good lead, and provide information to people so they learn something from your story, and they want—I like the colorful details, you know? That's print. And that's what I am, I'm a print reporter, and I'll be a print reporter until the day I die. So, anyway, I just embraced being a health policy reporter. It was a challenge to me, but it was like a blank canvas. I learned stuff on the beat. You know, stuff I didn't know about. There were a lot of smart people that I learned stuff from on health policy. Who would have ever predicted I'd be a health policy reporter at The Globe? But I relished that chance, and it was a very good beat. I ended up as a co-winner of the Michener Award for public service journalism because our work on the tainted blood controversy with HIV working with André Picard. So, that was great and they appreciated it. 'Boy, good hire, this Mickleburgh guy.' I knew how to write for the front page too, and you know, I was a solid guy. And then Jan Wong, after all her years in China, decided that was it for her and the job was posted, and I decided to apply for it. And once again, somehow I stumbled into it. And I ended up covering China for four years for the The Globe, from '94 to '98. So, that wasn't too bad.

KN [00:29:24] Well, actually, in that world, being there for four years for The Globe, you actually got to interview Han Dongfang.

RM [00:29:32] Han Dongfang. Well, it was my first interview—

KN [00:29:34] An international advocate in China for workers' rights. How'd you pull that off?

RM [00:29:38] Well, Han Dongfang is a very interesting guy, because during Tiananmen Square, the students got all the publicity, right? I mean, Wang Dan and all these guys, and students protesting at Tiananmen Square. And there in a corner of Tiananmen Square was this guy that had set up a table with, 'We're the All-China Workers' Federation,' you know? He was a worker, and he thought there should be independent trade unions in China, which there of course were not, because it's the All-China Federation of Unions, all controlled by the government. And he thought there should be independent trade unions. And he was really—apart from all these students, he was a worker, and he had nothing in common with them, and they kind of ignored him. There he was, and, of course, he was criticizing the government and criticizing their grip on trade unions. So, he was speaking out. He was at Tiananmen Square, part of the protests. So, just before the tanks moved into Tiananmen Square, they got word that they were coming, or whatever, and he would have been arrested and stuff. He left, and just, you know, lit out for the territories or whatever it was. After a while, he found out that he was on their most wanted list for people that they wanted to—because he was more of a threat than the students were because he was interested in talking to workers, right? That's the last thing the Chinese government wanted to be independent. So, he heard he was on this most wanted list, so what did he do? He turned himself into the nearest police station. Said, 'Hi, I'm Han Dongfang. I'm on the wanted list,' and they're saying, 'what? Who is this guy? Really?

You're him? Why are you turning yourself in?' His position was, he didn't want to be humiliated by them searching him out somewhere and collaring him and trumpeting this great victory of nabbing Han Dongfang. So, he turned himself in.

RM [00:31:44] He ended up spending 22 months in jail, and then he got tuberculosis in prison. And there was this big move to free him. China was still trying to give itself a better image in the world, and they realized that a lot of these protesters are better off outside China than inside China. So, if they could find a face-saving way to get them to leave China, then they don't care that they're making rabble-rousing speeches in the U.S. They're not making them in China, right? So, he was allowed to get out of jail and went to the U.S. for treatment for his tuberculosis. So, he's treated and his health recovers. So, rather than stay in the U.S., he says, 'Well, I'm going back to China.' Like, can you imagine the audacity and the courage of him? So, he goes to Hong Kong, he goes to cross the border to go back to the China, the place that had arrested him and all these kinds of things where he wouldn't have had any freedom to operate. But he's a tough guy, right? And they don't let him in. They bar him from coming back to China, but it showed the character of the guy, right? So, he stayed in Hong Kong, it was still under British rule then. And he started advocating for workers in China from Hong Kong. He put out this China workers' bulletin, and all these aggrieved factory workers all knew about him in China. And he'd get all these stories about strikes in China, about poor working conditions, what was going on on the ground in China. Really, this bulletin was terrific and advocating for them.

RM [00:33:31] So, I knew about this guy, and so I just phoned him up and talked to him. We had a great time. He was living on one of the islands off, you know, the mainland of Hong Kong. We spent the afternoon there, walking around and talking. Of course, it was great for me and great for him because I knew labour, right? So, we had—it wasn't just that he was protesting the government, we could talk labour. He was big on health and safety. The terrible conditions in the Chinese coal mines and factories and all this kind of stuff. He wasn't like anti the government he was pro the workers. That's what I really liked about this guy. He was an advocate for the workers, and he was tough as nails. He's still there in Hong Kong in spite of the fact everything has changed in Hong Kong. They haven't arrested him. He's still putting out his bulletin as far as I know and advocating for workers. So, that was a real thrill to meet with Han Dongfang.

RM [00:34:33] I got to cover the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, which was a great story. And on day one of the hand over, when it was now under Chinese rule, all the democrats and everybody, they organized this big protest to show that you could still do this under Chinese rules. Great. Who was in the forefront of the march, there's Han Dongfang again. We were—you know, he said hi and talked to him again and all this kind of stuff. And I've got a great picture of my colleague talking to Han Dongfang. Say, you have media colleagues from the—she was from The Philadelphia Inquirer, and she loves that photo because she's got her notepad out and talking to Han Dongfang. He's quite a good-looking guy, right? And so, anyway, so yeah, you could sometimes bring your labour background into your beat. I'd do stories on how the unions in China are all run by the government but people are trying to change that and all this kind of stuff. I got to cover some amazing stories including a trip to North Korea which I won't tell you about but one day I might.

KN [00:35:46] Wow.

RM [00:35:47] And then I came back to Vancouver and my career dwindled, diminished.

KN [00:35:52] Well, after retiring, your career picked up, I think, because you were commissioned by the BC Labour Heritage Centre to write the definitive book on the history of the B.C. labour movement.

RM [00:36:04] You know I was, and—

KN [00:36:06] What can you tell us about that?

RM [00:36:08] I was, and I didn't know, when I retired in 2013—took the buyout—as Lucy said, my wife, 'It's like winning the Genius Grant, because you get'—I got 13 months' salary for doing nothing, right? So, anyway, I didn't really know what I was gonna do. I started writing a blog and stuff like that. I freelanced some labour stories and other stories, but— and then this, I heard about this, you know, the history of the B.C. labour movement, and I think Jim Sinclair or somebody encouraged me to apply, to write it. So, I did, and I was turned down. And I thought, 'Well, bugger you guys. I'm clearly the person to write this book, I'm sorry. But why am I turned down?' And so okay, you know, whatever. And then the guy they hired didn't work out. He got sick or something like that. And so, they were now really, they were desperate, I guess. And they asked me if I was still interested. And really, I wasn't, because I still had a chip on my shoulder, right? But I really did. The temptation was too great. I mean, as Lucy said, it's my legacy project, right? And I could use all the background I had in covering labour, my understanding of labour, my empathy for unions and working people. And I love history. And this is labour history. And so, I agreed to do it in spite of how pissed off I was. And the money was good, if I might. I was commissioned to do it and the salary was good. It still didn't compensate me for all the work I put into it, but it still was a good chunk of change, right? And, but it basically, it was far more of a challenge than I expected it to be. Like, I was overconfident, and it basically took over my life for two years, which was too bad in some ways because it interrupted my blog which was actually getting a following and stuff like that. As I say, it took over—I stopped freelancing pretty well and because there was just so much, and I realized how little I knew. I thought I knew B.C. labour history because you knew about Ginger Goodwin and stuff like that, but there was so much I didn't know, and nobody had written it. A lot it was original research that you had to do and figure it out. I mean, I had—it was a big advantage with my background in labour reporting to know what stories were good and what stories were not, you know, how to do it. But it was a lot of work and a lot writing.

RM [00:39:04] What I tried to do was make it a popular, readable history of the B.C. labour movement and tell—and stories. Like, that's always what I loved to do as a reporter was tell stories. Stories are the best. You know, not dry: 4,800 electrical workers voted 94 percent to— you know, what's the story? Like, why are they upset? Let's have a worker there telling me why he's upset and tell the stories, right? And labour, I mean, you don't get ordinary people involved in labour. They're colourful people. They're courageous people. They're willing to sacrifice, especially in the old days. What they sacrificed, you know, just to get better wages and working conditions. I mean, it's breathtaking. And one of the things I learned, which was a big surprise to me, was that—because you hear about these heroic labour struggles—but what I didn't realize is that the unions and the workers lost just about every single major strike. They couldn't win. They'd fight for two years as they did in Vancouver Island in a coal miner strike. Two years they were out on strike. They couldn't win because there was no legislation that guaranteed them collective bargaining rights. And if the employer didn't want to settle, they were hooped because the employer would hire strikebreakers; the strikebreakers would be protected by the police, by the militia, by the government, you know. And, who would get arrested if you tried to stop the strikebreakers? Of course the strikers would get arrested. So, you couldn't put pressure on

the companies. Eventually, the strike failed because the company—the company would even agree sometimes to improve wages or working conditions—but they wouldn't recognize the union, and they wouldn't sign a contract. Many of those early strikes were for just something as basic as union recognition. Recognition of the union. How much—how basic is that? And they wouldn't do it. And so, you know, my appreciation for those early trade union leaders—some gave their lives like Ginger Goodwin and a couple of other examples less well known who kept getting up off the mat after losing and losing and losing and losing and losing, they said 'We're going to fight again.' Finally, over time, not until the Second World War did they get collective bargaining rights enshrined in legislation. And then everything changed for the labour movement. That's when the great huge organizing drives took place. The industrial unions were all organized. Industrial unions became very, very powerful, and B.C. became this militant labour movement. But learning this early history and what those workers went through was an eye-opener. When you think you know it, you don't know it. When you see it strike after strike after strike, and, you know, tremendous movements.

RM [00:42:14] The story I loved the most was the On-to-Ottawa Trek. What a human story. I mean, that is as human and as dramatic—it's spellbinding. I still—this image of all—it's 11 o'clock at night in Vancouver, and all these guys clambering up the boxcars and heading out at the night, and they have no idea—because they're going to go to Ottawa to confront R.B. Bennett. Their demand for work and wages, and they don't have any idea what's ahead, but out they go into the night. And that image, I mean, it's just such an image, and the dramatic things that happen to them along the way until the strike was crushed in Regina. I mean, you can't beat stories like that.

RM [00:43:01] You know, the lumber handlers, the First Nations lumber handlers on forming a union in 1906 and joining the Wobblies, the Industrial Workers of the World, you know, these Indigenous people from the North Shore. And who did they affiliate with? The Wobblies. I mean, I just love that story. And this was another great eye-opener for me in writing this book is the role of Indigenous people in building the early B.C. economy. Who were B.C.'s first workers? It was Indigenous people. They were in the sawmills. They did some of the early mining. They did the fishing, you know, because they were the ones that were here. Nobody else was here. I mean, the great wave of settlers didn't happen until like the 1970s and the 1980s. So, if you look closely at these early industries, they are employing Indigenous people, and Indigenous people liked the work. They didn't mind. They weren't forced to do it, but they got wages. You know, they were traders, right? The trading nations. Our labour for wages, and wages can buy things, you know, better tools, better wood, better houses. You know, their potlatches became more affluent because they had more money. I mean, they were exploited. Let's be clear, they weren't paid well, but they were paid something, and they were glad to work, and this myth of the lazy Indian is just nuts. And then when you see it up close, industry by industry, the way the white racist government stripped them of their right to these jobs, you know, and made it difficult for them to work. You know, an industry—in trapping, you know, suddenly you needed a license—a trap line that you've trapped through generations. You go there one winter, and there's a white guy there saying, 'I've got a license. Sorry, goodbye.' And that just happened. Hunting—you could no longer hunt whenever you want. Suddenly, you were restricted in hunting. You had to have a license. Who was getting the licenses? White guys, you know. And all these things were happening in every industry.

RM [00:45:32] One of the—you know, they would work—they loved seasonal work so that they could go back to their villages during the winter and do all their dances and ceremonies and all. This was part of their rhythm of life, and that was fine. But then the

employers said, 'Oh, we want workers 12 months of the year.' So, who got those jobs? It wasn't the First Nations people, you know. And then, industry after industry that happened. And they were, you know, because—so, this terrible poverty and things that happened to First Nations peoples was actually a 20th century story. Because they were unable to work, they were shunted onto reserves, and the story of how that happened is terrible. But for, you know, for a large part of the 19th century they sort of held their own, and they were never assimilated. I mean, that was key. They never joined the white man's society. They maintained their traditions, you know. That was that was an eye-opener. In fact, you know, I wanted to write a lot more about that and everything that happened. My editor said, 'Rod, this is great but it's a labour history. Don't get sidetracked.' Because it was fascinating, right? And this book by John Lutz—what's it called? It starts with an M [Makúk : A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations], anyway, it means trade in in uh—that book was an eye opener to me. You know, Cook shows up in Nootka Cove and, you know, oh, there's the big white father coming, you know, this sort of thing. No, they weren't cowed at all. They rowed out, they paddled out to his boat and said, 'Let's trade,' you know. And they held their own with the trading with the Cook and all these guys. They were proud nations, and there were so many stories. So, you learn stuff writing the book too.

RM [00:47:31] And another thing I tried to—this was something I did on the labour beat, which not many labour reporters did, but it was always big for me—was health and safety, and the role of the Workers' Compensation Board. Because it's sometimes boring, so you couldn't always get stories about it in the paper process, you know. But whenever I could, I tried to do stories on health and safety and the Workers' Compensation Board. And because, you know, it's the whole thing. Okay, wages, working conditions, strikes, contracts, collective agreements, all that kind of stuff. Really important. But what could be more important than going to work in the morning and coming back at night safe and sound. I mean that trumps all those other things, and that's why health and safety is so pivotal. I tried when I could to write those stories and I tried to do that in the book too. You know, you look at most labour histories they don't usually talk about health and safely or they might say, 'Oh it's a terrible mine explosion.' But I tried to bring in the workers' compensation and the fight for better working conditions and so on because that was pivotal and to cover the industrial accidents that happened. Labour history is more than just strikes and contracts and organizing. It's also this, and I tried to reflect that in the book because I believed in it. You know, it was a great opportunity to be able to write that book, I must say. Again, a lucky guy, you know. I hope I did a good job, and I just learned so much, and I thank unions for the weekend or whatever that is. And you're reminded of how much we owe those early workers who sacrificed so much for the wages and benefits that we take for granted today, which we do. But they all had to be fought for. No employer said, 'Oh yeah, I'm going to be reasonable. I'm gonna give you the eight-hour day.' It had to be fought for. Overtime, it had to fought for. The rights to collective bargaining. It had the be fought for. They lost so many strikes fighting for that basic right. And it's something we can't imagine today. What they went through, and the sacrifices they made, and the courage they made, and loss after loss, and they still kept standing up. You know, they recognized the class struggle, in a way that's sort of disappeared today for all sorts of reasons. You know, the big industrial bargaining units have disappeared because, you know—The IWA when I was covering them had 50,000 members. Their negotiations were on the front page. Just negotiations before any strike. And there was a strike when the Steelworkers eventually represented the old IWA. They merged. And there was a strike they had about 15 or 16 years ago, and basically nobody covered it. I mean, you know, I'm thinking, 'This is an IWA strike, where's the coverage?' I did a story or two on it, but it just didn't pique any interest anymore.

KN [00:50:50] As a result of writing the book you got familiar with the BC Labour Heritage Centre and soon joined the board of the Labour Heritage Centre, and you also do regular podcasts on significant historical labour events as well as interviews for the Centre's oral history program, much like this interview.

RM [00:51:12] They're not as good though. [laughs]

KN [00:51:13] Can you comment on that for us?

RM [00:51:15] Well, you know, I have this abiding interest in labour history and bringing the stories to the fore and making sure they're preserved. I mean the demise of newspapers is a tragedy. Go back, how many historians when they're writing their books have relied on newspapers? Because the newspapers covered everything, and God, without newspapers writing, On The Line, nowhere. So, where are future historians gonna get their information? There's no newspapers. Well, and the newspapers that do exist are pale shadows of their former self, you know? And before, you could, if you were covering a—if you're going back to find out what happened in a strike, so you call up the Sun, you get the archives, and it's covered sort of every day. Now, they might cover the beginning of a strike—if it's significant enough, and maybe the end of it. There's nothing in between. I mean, you get no sense of what went on and who the leaders are or any of the events. I mean because there's no reporters. So, we're losing, you know, the history of what's going on today. I mean is people gonna look back at TikTok for what happened? I mean it's terrible. So, you try as much as you can. I don't know whether anybody will be interested in this in five years or whatever, but you put it on the record. So, you get to interview these people that took part in these struggles of the past, and it's preserved, it's there.

RM [00:52:47] We interviewed Vince Ready. Fantastic. What a life he's had, you know. Everybody knows he's Canada's most brilliant arbitrator, mediator, but he also was a union organizer for Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Union back in the day when it was a communist-led union. Vince wasn't a communist, but he was a young guy, and he was hired as an organizer. He narrowly escaped death in this terrible avalanche that happened up at the Cassiar [Granduc] Mine. All those things, there's Vince. So, we've got Vince on the record. Diana Kilmury, this incredible Teamster truck driver that, along with a small group of Vancouver dissidents, took on Ed Lawson and the Teamsters Union. She eventually rose to become an international vice president of the Teamsters Union—the truck driver from Vancouver. First of all, a woman truck driver. Like, what a story she is. So, we got her on the record, you know? And so, interviewing these people, plus I love hearing their stories. So, we have them on the record.

RM [00:53:53] Same with the podcast. It's a little different. And they're not really podcasts. We call it a podcast, because that's what they're called. They're more documentaries. Because you listen to a podcast and [makes the sound of snoring], you know, dramatic music, 'and then I phoned, so-and-so, and' da-da-da [mimics the sound of dramatic music], you know. We just put it together, the stories, and we got a great crew. Patricia Wejr does a fantastic job digging up interviews with people, because thank God a lot of these people have been interviewed in the past by people that realized this was significant history. Sara Diamond—done an unbelievable amount of interviews. So, there's still, there's a lot out there that's been done in the past, and we put those together for the podcast, and it doesn't have a huge— we haven't gone viral yet, but it's there. If you want to find something out, well maybe this podcast will show up in the AI search engine. So, and I enjoy it; it keeps me engaged, and I believe so much in labour history and preserving it

and the past. I've always loved history, not just labour history, all history. Who knows why? But I've got that, and so, I really love doing it, and I think it's important.

KN [00:55:13] So, as community newspapers across the country continue to fold, you have become a bit of a champion to preserve the newspaper.

RM [00:55:21] Yeah, I'm having a big impact.

KN [00:55:25] And you've commented on this a bit in respect to labour reporting, but can you comment on it generally in terms of the loss of the newspaper to communities and the broader society?

RM [00:55:38] You know, I'm not optimistic about where we're headed, for all sorts of reasons, and wind me up, and I'll go for an hour on why. But of all the things that are happening, the demise of newspapers is the arrow in my heart. I mean, this is what I've always been a newspaper man, you know, and because I believe in it. And my gospel was to provide people with information so they can make up their own minds about what's going on. People are less and less interested in that. They want opinions. They don't want news. They don't want information. They have short attention spans. They might look at a headline. Whereas newspapers at their best, like the Vernon News, they were part of the community. They helped keep the community together. They held local politicians accountable. If they saw something wrong in their community, they reported on it and in the larger cities. That's all gone, and nobody cares because they don't know what they don't see, right? And so, we are just losing so much with the demise of newspapers.

RM [00:56:46] I mean, I still like going through it in spite of how sad they are now, it's diminished. And you'll see a story, 'Oh, I didn't know that,' you know? But nobody does that anymore? It's doom scrolling, it's short attention spans, it's headlines, and then you yell about something. And what's happened on social media, with its control by the moguls? It's all, what makes you more money? A reasoned opinion or an angry opinion? And the anger is monetized, and that's how you get followers. You're reasonable over and over again. A couple of people might like something, but you're nowhere. You get angry about something, and I've noticed that because I'm on social media. Like, like, like. You know, or somebody will yell at you, and it's just—it's pathetic. It doesn't provide anybody with information. Young people have never read a newspaper, and they can't tell what's real or not real. All they know is what's on social media.

RM [00:57:47] The loss of newspapers, and I can't see it coming back, I just can't, unless it comes back in a small way. It's hard to even put into words how much we are losing with newspapers. Social media doesn't do it. You read, even for newspapers, their websites, you read differently online. You know, you browse, your attention span is shorter. There are all these good stories you're missing because all you're seeing is the stories that the website says are the most important, you know. You go on The Globe and Mail's website; you don't see their arts coverage unless you really make an attempt to find it. You don't see their great obituary. There's a really good obituary, you know. You see the latest news, and you might look at the headline, and that's all you do.

RM [00:58:34] Whereas in a newspaper, you're drawn into the story and you learn stuff. That's the thing about newspapers. You learn things. I still like learning things. I read The Globe's report on business now. I never used to. I condemned it. I hated the corporate media. All these bloody business reporters, blah, preserving capitalism. Now I read the Report on Business because I learn things. It's good, solid reporting that provides

information. Here we are drowning in all the information out there, and people are paying less and less attention to it. It's very, very sad. And I just see society spiraling downward. And, you know, you can't tell the difference between what's real and not real. Where are we at? And for all their faults, and God knows I dined out for 40 years describing the faults of the mainstream media, I can do it today. But if we lose the mainstream media, it's amazing—it's terrible what we lose, you know? And do we replace by Joe Rogan's podcast with 40 million followers? It's opinions. People want news (they don't really want news), but what they think is news that they agree with that makes them feel good. They don't want reporting on climate change, saying, you know, 'That's fucking woke people,' you know. Apologies for my language, by the way.

RM [01:00:06] Although, there's a small ray of hope. I just read—this is hilarious. I just read yesterday, and this is actually an idea that I had, cause I'm sort of at loose ends now cause I just finished up a big project. What am I going to do next? And I toy with the idea of going on TikTok, and as a grumpy old man, and telling young people about newspapers, right? Or, you know, reading something from the newspaper or something like that and kind of try to be endearing. So, you know, holding, this is a newspaper. I toy with the idea. Knowing me, I would never do it, but I toyed with that idea. So, what did I learn? There's a young woman, she's 22, on TikTok, and that's what she's doing. She's going through newspapers, looking for interesting stories and reading them out on TikTok. And she's getting kind of a following because young people don't know what a newspaper is. And that's the thing about newspapers, you turn the page, there's actually an interesting story there or not, but you know. So, she stole my idea, but she's 22 and knows how to do it and actually does it. So, that's kind of encouraging if—but I don't think newspapers are gonna come back the way vinyl came back. The economic model is broken because they depended on ad revenue, and the advertising isn't there. It's all gone online, right?

RM [01:01:35] And so, there's reader-supported publications, like The Tyee, and so on, and so that's all good. But they have points of view and they're in silos, you know. So, who reads The Tyee? People that agree with the viewpoint of The Tyee, which includes me. Where does that get us? And all these right-wing public, you know, who watches Fox News? The people that agree with Fox News. So, we've lost that great whatever-it's-called in the middle where you just get information and not points of view. I mean, you get some points of view, but I mean basically it's accountable information and stories and tells you what's going on. I mean, even the poor Vancouver Sun, they've got a decent city hall reporter in Dan Fumano. Well, I learn, still learn a lot about what's going on at City Hall by reading Dan Fumano. You know, I can't rely on social media and people belly-aching about what council did. I want information. He's a reporter. He provides what's goin' on, stories he thinks are important. And why people don't want that is sad, but they're just being—algorithms, the most evil thing that was ever created. It channels all the anger and the rage, you know, and I don't know how you fight back. I mean, the power of these, of Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk and Google, you know, which is now basically AI. I mean, we're in a position now where you just—see that, the Chicago Sun Times did a, you know, top summer reads for 2025. It was generated by AI, and it was all manufactured book titles. And it appeared in the Chicago Sun Times because it's cheaper to use AI than an actual reporter. And this is where we're at.

RM [01:03:29] We are losing so much, and again, if you lose something that you don't even know exists you don't feel any sense of loss. I'm sure lots of people mourn the demise of the horse, but it never bothered me because I don't remember the horse. Well, sort of, but you know the point I'm making. And so, as I say, I said it before, little did we know as we whined and complained, we were living through a golden age of journalism.

You know, the Vancouver Sun Newsroom had like a hundred reporters. Like, you go back and look at those Vancouver, they had 90 pages, you know, and so much, so many stories. You go back to say a copy of the Cranbrook Times for like 1938 and you find stuff about the community that's going on. They're a treasure, and that's all gone, you know. There are attempts to revive it, and it's not—there's still reporters out there, there's still people writing things, but it's all divided up. It's difficult to wind your way through that, and, of course, there are no labour reporters anymore. So, there we are; it's hard to be optimistic. And I just feel so blessed that I was able to be part of an era that was so great. I mean, I wish I was younger— well not entirely—but I was very, very lucky—very, very fortunate. It just—and I didn't—I've never been ambitious. Things just fell my way, right? So, I can't think of one thing I really wanted to do that I set out to do. It just happened.

KN [01:05:17] Okay, so we've sort of come towards the end of our interview, but I have one last question, and I just wondered if there was anything else that you would like to say about either your experience as a journalist or specifically about any aspect of labour history that you found particularly fascinating.

RM [01:05:36] Well, I can say one thing about labour reporting. Never dull, always fascinating. Thank God I didn't become a real estate reporter [laughs]. But I don't know, Ken. I mean, I could, as you're finding out, I can talk a lot, and there's stories that I could tell but I've talked a lot. I think—I hope I've given a—one thing I always tried to do wherever I was to have fun, you know. And at the Sun as the night labour reporter, it wasn't just that I was the night labour reporter which was great, but there was a camaraderie of nightside at the Vancouver Sun because we didn't have deadlines, right? So, the pressure was off. You still did your stories and your assignments but there was kibitzing, there was the Press Club across the street, you know, [laughs] so that would be, you know, we'd end up there sometimes. It was just, it was a real collective spirit, nightside. We had this wonderful editor who we called Mr. Nightside, who was the loveliest guy in the history of world, Bruce Smiley, and everybody just adored him. He was just such a decent, good person. And so, I got to be part of that. I mean, I didn't choose that, but there it was. And we put out the nightside news, like we just had fun, and we were young, right?

RM [01:07:05] But I remember my—so, my last shift at The Globe, at the Sun—I didn't want to be a five-year man, right? So, I gave my notice, you know, to fall about two weeks short of my fifth anniversary of being hired. And I was finding it like I was no—I felt like I in a rut because the job was now becoming easy for me. I could make one phone call and write the story, right? Because I just knew what was going on. I knew the players, blah, blah. So, I was young. So, my last shift, we had a party. Like, we brought in wine and food and you know, because it's celebrating my departure from the Sun. Which actually turned out to be the last such event ever because we were turned in by the security people seeing all this booze going up to the Sun newsroom. And, you know, people showed up, right, to say goodbye to Mickle. And, I got a lot of pictures from that night. I think I wore a CLC delegates' badge, and it's just a lot a fun. And the thing was, I had come across a scoop. And Construction Labour Relations Association and the Building Trades Union were in a contract dispute, and I had heard that they were meeting secretly out at UBC. So, we partied and partied and partied—had a quite a bit to drink. And about midnight or one a.m., whatever, I headed out to UBC to find out what was going on with these negotiations—to go out with one last scoop. And so, I got out there, and they were really surprised to see me because it was supposed to be top secret. 'What are you doing here Rod?' So, that was fun. I thought I was going to have a story because they were out there and stuff. And then I wandered into one of the rooms, and somebody had left behind a

copy of the employers' offer to the union [laughs]. So, not only did I have these top-secret negotiations, I had the copy of the employer's proposal to the unions. So, I came back to the office about 4 a.m., or 5 a.m., whatever it was, 6 a.m., and that day, it was the line story in the Vancouver Sun. So, my last day, I went out with this bang with a big scoop and a line story. And the best was, I put in for eight hours of overtime [laughter]. So, that was the fun you could have. Like, we had quite a great party that night in the newsroom. As they say, a note went out the next day or something, this is the end of that—because we did it quite often, right? And this great guy, Bruce Smiley, he had a corn roast. Like, he'd bring these big pots, and then you have a hot plate, you know, and all this corn, and we'd all have a corn roast at Sun nightside, you know. So, it was fun. I mean, I've had a really lucky career.

KN [01:10:07] Okay, well that's just great.

RM [01:10:09] And then there's this other time [laughter]—No, no. I'll stop now.

KN [01:10:14] Good. Okay, well thank you very much.