

Interview: Ken Novakowski (KN)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
Date: May 26, 2025
Location: Burnaby, B.C.
Transcription: Pete Smith

RM [00:00:05] Like things just kept happening in the 1980s. You ended up on the BCTF executive. And all of a sudden, B.C.'s premier was a guy named Bill Vander Zalm. And he introduced, the Socreds [Social Credit Party] introduced Bill's 19 and 20 in the legislature, which the BCTF [British Columbia Federation of Teachers] were outraged by and mounted a huge campaign, especially against Bill 19. Can you just tell us what those bills were about and how the campaign went?

KN [00:00:38] Yes, those bills—Bill 19 actually gave teachers the right to full collective bargaining, which you would have thought, well, finally. And yes, we felt that way finally. But also Bill 19 basically gutted the B.C. Labour Relations Code and put in structures that were clearly biased towards management rather than neutral. And so that was why we opposed it and the whole labour movement was opposing Bill 19. Bill 20 on the other hand, dealt with the College of Teachers. What they were going to do, the government was going to do, was to give teachers the right to select their own members to sit on this council that would have control over essentially what we viewed as the professional matters of teachers. And of course ever since its inception in 1917, we'd always viewed, and all our members did view, the BCTF as representing all of the professional, social, and economic issues and interests of teachers. Not just the economic issues. We saw it as a way to divide the BCTF. Divide teachers amongst the professionals and the unionists. So that's why we were opposed to the College of Teachers. Other aspects of societies had colleges and they actually lived with them or they were fine with them, or whatever, but we just didn't want one. We wanted the BCTF again to represent those interests. So we opposed it, and that was the one that a lot of people had trouble understanding. Why were we opposed to this legislation? We're getting full bargaining rights and we're getting a college of teachers. We should be happy. And maybe that's what Vander Zalm thought. But we weren't. We were quite opposed for the reasons I've said. We didn't want to see the BCTF split and we didn't see a setback to labour relations generally in the province, even though that same piece of legislation was giving us full bargaining rights. Those rights would be severely affected by the Bill 19, other aspects of Bill 19 that would change that. So we immediately organized a one day of protest on April 28th. Teachers went out across the province to—

RM [00:03:28] Just teachers.

KN [00:03:29] Just teachers. That was Elsie McMurphy. She was our president and she was really, really good. And sort of had a way of connecting with people that made her a very effective leader. And she also, at the same time we decided that we would go out on April 28th, there was a subsequent motion for us to join the general strike that was being called by the BC Federation of Labour for June 1st. And that was actually being opposed by a number of people at this representative assembly. I got up to the microphone and spoke. And the person after me moved the question and we prevailed. We were going out on June the 1st, too. And I think that's what teachers wanted to do.

RM [00:04:22] Did your speech make the big difference?

KN [00:04:24] It made a difference.

RM [00:04:24] What did you say?

KN [00:04:26] Well, I talked about we needed to be working together. Basically that's all I ever said in most situations was we need to work with people who are of like mind. We can't be isolated. So that was a significant step for us to participate in that one day general strike as well.

RM [00:04:52] And did you?

KN [00:04:53] We did, absolutely we did.

RM [00:04:54] And how many did everyone go?

KN [00:04:55] Everyone went out.

RM [00:04:57] So what was the mood like? I mean, this is all new for—this is a new BCTF, a new militant BCTF.

KN [00:05:01] It is, and it was actually very positive. And we had some divisions within the BCTF on the progressive side and we tried to iron those out, but basically we were opposed to the legislation and that was important.

RM [00:05:23] And is this when Vander Zalm took away compulsory membership in the BCTF?

KN [00:05:29] Yes, that was one of the other things that happened that we didn't like and we realized that we would have to do a sign up. A voluntary sign up of members if they wanted to join the BCTF.

RM [00:05:41] Before, a teacher was automatically a member of the BCTF.

KN [00:05:44] That's correct. Ever since 1948, it had been a statutory provision.

RM [00:05:48] And Vander Zalm took that away.

KN [00:05:51] Because it was a statutory provision, he could, and he did. And in retrospect, that was a good thing to do, because it meant that we had to organize and get the support of our own members, and we did, well over 95%. And that, in union circles, was viewed as unbelievable, because they get 55, 60 percent to sign up, they're happy.

RM [00:06:17] Vander Zalm was a prisoner of these people that said, oh, I get all these calls about people that don't want to be part of the BCTF. So they should have a choice.

KN [00:06:27] That's correct.

RM [00:06:29] And they did have a choice.

KN [00:06:31] That's right. They had a choice. And that was what we did in the next year, which was, again, I was elected local president in Langley, and so I had to run the campaign, first of all, to get the local to agree, because the legislation provided teachers

with a choice. They could become a union, and have full bargaining rights, including the right to strike, or they could remain an association, and have limited rights with no right to strike, just compulsory arbitration, as we've had for decades before. And again, I think Vander Zalm misread that. He thought a lot of teachers would go for the professional option.

RM [00:07:09] Because those are the people he'd hear from.

KN [00:07:11] Exactly.

RM [00:07:14] 'Bill, I can tell you in my staff room, they're all opposed to the BCTF.'

KN [00:07:18] Anyway, the net result on both of those was that we got 75 locals to vote in favor of the union option and we got over 95 percent sign up of individual members. It was a huge undertaking by the organization at the time. We mobilized every local, we mobilized every school. It was a reinventing, a rebuilding and a restructuring of the BCTF. And I was so excited to be there and part of that at that time. It was just really, really thrilling.

RM [00:07:55] Once again, repressive legislation acted as a catalyst for the union to become stronger.

KN [00:08:01] That's correct.

RM [00:08:02] Did the kind of, if I can put it, the right wing, were the progressives now in firm control of the BCTF?

KN [00:08:10] Yes, we had been by the time when Larry Keuhn got elected, basically, and the president before him. I think that's basically when Teacher Viewpoint had control, and then Pat Clark was Teacher Viewport, and Elsie McMurphy. When I ran for the executive, I was Teacher Viewpoint. But we had a difference of opinions, actually, with a number of people in Teacher Viewpoint. Because there were some who said, in Teacher Viewpoint, predominantly, said if you don't vote the union option, you can't be in the BCTF. If the locals decide not to, you're out. You're gone. And I didn't like that. I didn't think that was right. And neither did Elsie. And so we put forward the view that we will do everything we can to get locals to choose the union option, and we'll persuade them to, but we won't throw them out if they vote no. The BCTF is an umbrella organization. All teachers in B.C. belong to the BCTF and it would be a mistake to use that threat to try and get them to vote that way. The second difference that we seemed to have—

RM [00:09:36] Did anybody vote not to join?

KN [00:09:39] No, as it turned out, we did exactly that. Well, the story goes that, again, on another issue, I'm just going to mention the other issues: the college—the Viewpoint leadership was advocating that we boycott it, that we not take part in it and just let it be. And we said, no. We've got to run our candidates. We've gotta endorse BCTF candidates in all twenty zones, like BCTF'ers. And again, in the debates that happened at that time, we prevailed. When I say we, we actually formed another organization called Teachers for a United Federation because we had a split from Viewpoint.

RM [00:10:29] So you were being attacked from the left.

KN [00:10:31] That's right. So we had, no, we had a large segment of what was the left came with us, and then we got what was the more conservative thinking teachers also were supporting us. So we were quite broad in terms of our support, and we basically outnumbered them about three to one. So we had a special convention on the Thanksgiving weekend in the fall, a special AGM [Annual General Meeting], and we prevailed there. And we went on, as I said, to sign up 95% and every local in the province. And so we prevailed. And we also, in the following elections, when I was elected first vice, we swept the, Teachers for a United Federation, swept the polls.

RM [00:11:22] Did anybody oppose you for first vice?

KN [00:11:28] No. Oh yes, for first vice, I ran against a person who had been second vice before, who was still in Viewpoint and who I was formerly involved with. We actually lived together for a while, and the Vancouver Sun ran this big story. They once lived together, now they're fighting for control of the BCTF.

RM [00:11:59] Was that accurate?

KN [00:12:01] Well, it was—my daughter's reaction to us was 'Dad, this is tabloid!' And that's what I saw us do, but anyway.

RM [00:12:12] How did she feel about it?

KN [00:12:14] She liked Moira. She liked her so. It was hard for her.

RM [00:12:18] All right too much information maybe. So this meant though likely you were going to be president of the BCTF.

KN [00:12:25] Yeah.

RM [00:12:25] That was the tradition of first vice.

KN [00:12:26] Yeah.

RM [00:12:26] So you ran for president in what year?

KN [00:12:33] '89.

RM [00:12:33] And did anybody oppose you?

KN [00:12:35] No.

RM [00:12:35] OK. And this was still the Social Credit government.

KN [00:12:37] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:12:39] So a three-year term?

KN [00:12:41] Yeah. No, I ran every year for three years.

KN [00:12:43] Oh, you're only elected for a year?

RM [00:12:45] You're elected for year at a time. Boy those were the days. Democracy.

KN [00:12:47] You're elected for a year at at time.

RM [00:12:50] Okay, and did anybody oppose you at any point?

KN [00:12:53] Oh yeah, second year, third year, yeah.

KN [00:12:55] From the right or the left?

KN [00:12:57] I said, well, they call themselves the left, I thought we were the left. So it's a matter of interpretation as to who is left or what you describe as left. And one of the sad things is that in my third year— I can talk about the highlights of my three years. But the third year I had put together a task force on affiliations labour because from the first day I became a teacher.

RM [00:13:30] You mean the BC Federation of Labour?

KN [00:13:31] From the first day I became a teacher, I couldn't understand why teachers were not in the House of Labour. I always believed that they should be. And so I advocated that and I wanted us to take a member vote on the issue and I wanted the AGM to endorse and recommend to members that they join the BC Federation of Labour. And the usual opposition of the right, which included a lot of people who were in TUF [Teachers for a United Federation], but Viewpoint also opposed. And they said, well, we don't like the leadership. Well, I didn't like the leadership either but you don't change things from outside, you change them from within. And that was the biggest upset of my three years was that that was defeated by the so-called left and right coming together.

RM [00:14:28] So let me ask you about that and then we'll get into your highlights but so there you've had a lifetime of basically Waffle and all that of attacking from the left and there you are now in a leadership position and part of the elements opposing you were from the left. So who changed? Did you change? Or did the left change? Or was that uncomfortable? Thinking if you were younger you might have been part of them?

KN [00:14:51] No, I never did because I always thought that how you define yourself and how you see yourself is what's important and I always defined myself as being a very progressive person and still did. I didn't change. I mean, I just thought they were wrong. And that was, it wasn't a matter of left or right, they were just wrong. And for whatever reasons they took those positions, they did. They were wrong and I think that history has proven them wrong. History of the BCTF has proven them wrong. And so I never felt uncomfortable for a moment.

RM [00:15:35] Alright, so let's, as three years as president, what did you do? What happened?

KN [00:15:40] Well, actually the first year when I was vice president was the year when we negotiated our first round, 75 locals, our first-round of collective agreements, full collective bargaining. And that was exciting. Really exciting. Locals going on strike. We always had to be there. I was there, Elsie was there. Every local where that happened, and it was talking to teachers all over the province, and just, it was phenomenal. And in terms of my highlights, when I was president, it was the second round was a big highlight because a lot of things we didn't get in the first round, we got in the second round. But another highlight

was an unfortunate, again, an unfortunate piece of legislation by government, Bill 82, which was, again, a wage control on the public sector. It was devastating for us because we're, in addition to getting all this, all these other class size and preparation time and everything else in our collective agreements, grievance procedure, the whole thing we got good salary increases. And we continued to and that's when the government came down with this wage control. So I spent a lot of time organizing the entire public sector in opposition to Bill 82 and we made that a big issue in the upcoming provincial election and I think it's fair to say that we got more teachers involved in the '91 election than we had ever gotten in any election, including '72, involved.

RM [00:17:27] That's quite a claim, because as you know, teachers played a fundamental role in 1970s.

KN [00:17:32] And we played a fundamental role in 1991 as well, and it was because of that legislation. They gave us a reason to mobilize, and that was their mistake, and we did. And the public sector was there, too.

RM [00:17:53] So you finally had an NDP government.

KN [00:17:56] We did. Well, and I go back to when Bill 19 and 20 came in, the BCTF executive had seconded me for a month to work full-time with the NDP caucus in Victoria. So I got to know all of them and that's when I became particularly good friends with Glen Clark. And so when they were in government, I knew all these people and the Education Minister, the Minister of Finance—

RM [00:18:30] Who was education minister?

KN [00:18:30] Anita Hagen. And I knew Mike Harcourt.

RM [00:18:39] Did that help?

KN [00:18:40] Yeah, it did. It helped to know them. So as long as I was there—I know that Moe Sihota, who was the Minister of Labour at the time, had approached me at the BC Fed reception and said he wants to bring in provincial bargaining. I said, 'over my dead body.' So, it never happened until after I was gone. Unfortunately it did happen. I continued a friendship with, close friendship with Glen through all these years, yeah.

RM [00:19:24] What did you like about Glen Clark? Controversial figure.

KN [00:19:28] Well, controversial for the wrong reasons. I liked him because he was an East Vancouverite. He was from the working class, and he understood, he had a good education, and he understood things, I think, well. It's just things didn't happen right for him, and that's unfortunate. I think under different circumstances, he would have been an incredible premier, but just the way things turned out.

RM [00:20:05] I know that you touched on this, but one of the things that a lot in the BCTF were very bitter about the NDP was that they took away local bargaining rights and imposed province-wide bargaining on teachers. And you were opposed to that.

KN [00:20:22] Oh yeah, I was very opposed to it.

RM [00:20:23] Did you feel betrayed by the NDP?

KN [00:20:25] I did. When we were supporting the NDP in '91, I had written a letter to Mike Harcourt, who was the leader of the NDP, laying out a few things about the College of Teachers, maintaining local bargaining and so forth. And I got a letter back from him (which I still have a copy of, of course), in which he promised that they would not touch local bargaining, and they would change the College of Teachers to just have control over this and this, and very specific stuff. And they didn't live up to it. So I did feel a bit of a betrayal.

RM [00:21:14] From the government's point of view though, provincial bargaining made a lot of sense.

KN [00:21:20] In some respects I think so because they didn't have the kind of control that they wanted.

RM [00:21:25] Whip-saw is going on.

KN [00:21:27] Well, yeah, it did. And whip-saws continue to go on through all kinds of ways and means, but they saw that. The thing that they never really understood about teachers is, in those three years we were getting in our collective agreements what other workers that had for decades, other teachers in Canada had had for decades. So we got it all at once in three rounds of bargaining. But it was long overdue. So they never understood that perspective of where we were coming from. That finally we had a chance to do it and we were doing it. And I think that's what hurt. They could never really get into our heads and figure out where we were coming from, this generation of teachers who had been so long denied finally having the right to do what we were doing.

RM [00:22:30] When I talked to Jinny Sims, who of course led the illegal strike against the Campbell government, she was still bitter about the NDP taking away their local bargaining rights. She hasn't forgotten. Anyway, what I find amazing, and maybe I shouldn't, but so after all this time in the executive, good salary and I don't know, perks, but of course tremendous, tremendous work because that's the kind of guy you are as president, you went back to the classroom. Almost nobody does that in the BCTF and yet you went back to the classroom. Why did you do that?

KN [00:23:06] Well, I missed the classroom. And I had two fantastic years of teaching that were actually quite remarkable. I taught in a different school.

RM [00:23:22] Still in Langley?

KN [00:23:23] In Langley, of course. Just wonderful experiences over those two years. And one of the things I did, going back to teach, was I organized a district-wide conference for students, social studies students, across the district. So we had a lot of students at this conference. We organized it at Kwantlen College, and I got Tom Berger to be the keynote speaker. I had people like Gideon Rosenbluth speaking about the economy. I had Frances Bula speaking about journalism.

RM [00:24:07] Oh Frances.

KN [00:24:08] Yeah, and all kinds of people that I'd gotten to know in my life, in the BCTF and so forth, to come out. It was a fascinating experience for these students, and so many of them said that was the highlight of their education, but it's something that I always

wanted to do before but never had the chance, and that was one of the things I did during those two years.

RM [00:24:32] Now one of the things that of course is rewarding about teaching is that the students, as of course you point out, they're number one. And you got feedback from a lot of students over the years, didn't you?

KN [00:24:45] Yes, I did.

RM [00:24:46] Want to talk about that a bit?

KN [00:24:47] Well, it's one of the things that—

RM [00:24:49] Not all of them on the left.

KN [00:24:51] No, that's true. It's one of the things though that I found so rewarding about teaching is even students who knew my politics and disagreed with it respected me for what I was and what I was able to do in the classroom, I guess. I know when I was elected president of the BCTF I got some letters from former students who were just thrilled that I was there.

RM [00:25:22] That's rewarding.

KN [00:25:23] Very rewarding. That is actually the most rewarding thing about teaching, is the feedback you get after you're finished. And you run into them in the community, you run into them here or there. I know when I was doing an interview on CTV I think, the cameraman pulls up to me really close and he says, 'Hi Mr. Novakowski.' [laughter] Former student you know. Things like that. You run into them everywhere, you know everywhere. I go to the LEAF [West Coast LEAF] breakfast and Donna and I are sitting at a table where we don't know everybody so we're introducing ourselves and then the woman next to me said 'Were you teaching in Langley in 1974, teaching social studies?' 'Yeah.' 'I was in your class!. A lawyer.

RM [00:26:15] It's always Mr. Novakowski. My mother's a high school teacher and there she is she's just our mom and 'Hello Mrs. Mickelburgh.'

KN [00:26:23] Yeah, yeah, exactly.

RM [00:26:24] I'm going to get you to talk about one thing you've mentioned to me that dealt with the Spanish Civil War. And a student.

KN [00:26:35] Oh yeah, well that was in those two years when I was teaching at H.G. Stafford.

RM [00:26:41] Not many teachers would probably teach about the Spanish Civil War. Anyway, go ahead.

KN [00:26:45] Well, I was talking about the Spanish Civil War. I think this was in my History 12 class, actually. And one student, Shelly Knudsen, raises her hand and says, 'Sir, sir, I think my grandpa was involved in it.' I looked at her name, Knudsen. Well, Arne Knudsen? Yeah, it's amazing because he was still alive and both David Yorke and Al Cornes knew him through different means and talked to me about him and I didn't know

him but I certainly knew of him. It was just another fascinating little connection in Langley, you know, of all places to have that.

RM [00:27:36] Did he come into the class at all?

KN [00:27:37] He didn't, no, but—

RM [00:27:40] That's pretty cool.

KN [00:27:41] It is.

RM [00:27:44] And you specialized in Canadian history?

KN [00:27:46] Yes, but this was world history, this was History 12. But it was also part of Canadian history because you talked about the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. So I taught it in both.

RM [00:27:57] And then at some point you decided to go back to the BCTF. What happened?

KN [00:28:03] Elsie, who had been the executive director, we appointed her after she stepped down as president. And she came to me and said, we need you. And she wanted to hire me. And so she got me to apply for this job, which I did in what was called the Organizational Support Division. And very soon, I became director within a couple of months I was director and on a continuing appointment. Which meant that I wouldn't be teaching again.

RM [00:28:39] Was that hard?

KN [00:28:41] That was so hard you wouldn't believe it.

RM [00:28:49] You loved it, right? But you were also bloody good within the BCTF.

KN [00:28:56] Anyway—

RM [00:29:04] Did you like being the bossman?

KN [00:29:09] Well no.

RM [00:29:09] The executive director is pretty powerful.

KN [00:29:10] I wasn't executive director then. I was just director of my division. And it gave me a lot of opportunities to do different things, being a director. And that was good. That was very positive. And I could strike out and do new initiatives, which I did.

RM [00:29:31] You spent 10 years there as executive director.

KN [00:29:35] Yes, but before I was executive director, I was there from '94 to 2000, both as director of OSD (Organizational Support) and also I was director of bargaining in the second round of bargaining. That gave me the opportunity when I was the director of communications, which was OSD, to help shape the BCTF communications strategy. And also I felt that there was a real lacking, and I felt this when I was president of the BCTF

too, in terms of information and research on progressive ideas and things that we should be thinking about doing and so forth. So I organized a whole series of seminars at the BCTF where I would invite the rest of the public sector, the rest of the labour movement if they were interested, and community organizations to come. And we'd have these forums. We had a huge room where we could seat about 120 people and it was always full. And I brought in speakers from other parts of the country and we just really talked about all the issues that were important and gave people a lot of information and that led to my attempts to form an independent progressive think tank and research institute in B.C., and we got going on that really going well.

RM [00:31:14] It was a counterpoint to the Fraser Institute?

KN [00:31:17] That was one of the reasons because the Fraser Institute had so much influence and so much public media, we figured there was time for an alternative. I had these meetings that involved the rest of the labour movement, and I had huge, huge interest and community organizations—and there was still a bit of distrust between community and labour after Solidarity. So I had to deal with that. The BCTF itself seemed to be clean, if you like, in the sense that we weren't tainted with the—the president of the BC Federation of Labour at the time was Ken Georgetti and he didn't like this actually, what I was doing. And when it looked like we were going to launch what we called WISER, Western Institute for Social and Economic Research, he came out against it and told all the affiliates, no, you gotta get out. And that's what happened, except for CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees]. CUPE was the only affiliate that stayed in.

RM [00:32:25] Did they oppose it because it was independent, they didn't control it?

KN [00:32:30] I think it was because that largely that the control would be with the funders, basically who was funding it, they would be controlling it because they would have seats on the board. But it was just, I think, another voice and he felt that the labour's voice was the voice that the public should hear, not an independent think tank or a research institute. I couldn't disagree with him more. I thought the labour movement had a very important role to play in the public arena, and it should continue to play it. But it would help to have this independent voice that would be able to attract media attention as well as do important work that we could use at the bargaining table and in our work in our unions. So he prevailed, CUPE stayed with me and we had a very close relationship with them and the BCTF. And eventually, Marjorie Cohen, who was one of the people that I was working with, she was at SFU [Simon Fraser University], she brought along Duncan Cameron, who was the president of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives [CCPA]. And they proposed that we form a branch of the CCPA here in B.C. As Duncan said, they had the experience, they could hire the staff and they could get us going. And I says, we want to be autonomous. We don't want to do this. And he convinced me that we could be virtually autonomous within the structures. All we had to do is recognize that the CCPA board had the final say. So we accepted that because that wasn't gonna happen otherwise. Not with Georgetti's opposition. And so that's what happened. In 1997, we formed the B.C. Office of Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives.

RM [00:34:38] And it was really successful.

KN [00:34:40] Oh, it was very successful. We became incredibly successful. We raised more money in B.C. than virtually the rest of Canada, and we were very, very successful. We got broad support and lots of media attention, so we became a counter to the Fraser Institute for sure.

RM [00:35:04] Yeah, you basically blew them out of the water, really, in terms of media.

KN [00:35:08] I think so.

RM [00:35:11] I'm going to ask you one thing. You mentioned bargaining. There was a very controversial collective agreement that the BCTF signed late in the administration of the second NDP government, which basically accepted a wage freeze in return for negotiations on class size. Have I got that right?

KN [00:35:33] Not completely.

RM [00:35:35] But this was controversial, and it led to, I think it was Kit Krieger, who was the president who negotiated that, and this led to a huge, I don't know, fight back or opposition within the ranks of the BCTF, and he was bounced as president because of this collective agreement. Were you involved in that collective agreement? How do you look at it?

KN [00:35:58] I was very much involved in it, and let me tell you what happened. The first round of provincial bargaining, the government had set up an organization called the BC Public Schools Education Association, we called BCPC, and it represented school boards and school districts, and they had a government representative on there, but it was basically dominated by people elected by school boards, and they were the bargaining agents. And in the first round of bargaining, they took the position that everything that we had in our local agreements was gone. We're starting from scratch. We're going to form a provincial agreement, and we're just going to go. We said no. We went on strike for these. We fought for them. We've been waiting for that for 50 years and so forth we're not going to accept that and we want to keep them and use that as a starting point for where we're going negotiate from here on. And that became a really, a no solutions kind of situation.

KN [00:37:20] Eventually what the government did is they just continued our local agreements for the next two years in 1996 and said this is a transitional agreement and we have to work this out. In the meantime, the BCPC would not come off their position, which we saw as essentially stripping off everything that we'd gotten and starting on a clean slate, and we wouldn't accept that. And so in the second round, that's the same thing that's happened. And eventually, what the government did, Clark, I guess, Clark government, is they took BCPC out of there, and they negotiated directly with us. He appointed Tony Pennikett, who had been the premier of Yukon, a guy by the name of Russ Pratt, who was another professional negotiator. He wanted to negotiate directly with us an agreement. And we did. We negotiated an agreement. So it was not done by the system that had been set up by the NDP, but it was the NDP that set it up, it was a government that set up, and they were now changing it in terms of doing it this way because they wanted to get an agreement that we could work from in the future instead of having all this mess. And that's what happened.

KN [00:38:53] But part of it was that government was trying to also sell what they called the zero-zero-and-two, which was essentially no wage increase for the first two years and only two percent in the third year. Which was hard for us to take. We had come off a number of years of really good salaries. So the trade-off had to be worth it. And the trade off, in our view, the votes that were there, was worth it because it gave us class size numbers from one to three and then we could negotiate province-wide numbers for the remaining sectors in future negotiations. Which is a huge thing. But it also gave us, for the

first time ever, staffing ratios, which said whenever there are so many students, you will have a librarian. Whenever there's so many students, you will have a counselor. Whenever you have so many students, you will have a special needs teacher, etcetera, etcetera, and it was phenomenal. In terms of the breakthrough, it was an amazing breakthrough. So it was an incredible agreement and we ate the zero-zero-two in order to get this. And when you took the cost of all those improvements, and it was a hugely costly agreement, but the government felt they could sell it.

KN [00:40:23] Of course, BCPC or the trustees rejected it. And for the first time probably in history, the government imposed an agreement on the employer rather than on the workers. And they did that legislatively. And you're right, within the BCTF, that was immediately attacked as a the bad agreement. The zero-zero-two was bad. But when we had a public sector meeting with all of the public sector who were upset with the zero-zero-two, once we explained all the other stuff we had gotten with it and the cost of it, it was like nobody would even dream of getting that. And we got it because the government wanted to move forward. And they accepted that, but within the BCTF, it was just sold as a bad agreement and it was never really given the chance. But historically, it became the agreement that was stripped in 2002 for which we fought for 14 years to get back, and eventually did with the Supreme Court of Canada. But it was worth it.

RM [00:41:42] And you think that agreement was attacked unfairly?

KN [00:41:44] I do, I absolutely do, yeah.

RM [00:41:47] I won't name any names. So we know who we're talking about. And then one of the criticisms was they only negotiated directly with the government and local autonomy. But really, yeah, anyway.

KN [00:42:02] So, yes, I became executive director and—

RM [00:42:05] As you mentioned. But okay we maybe didn't talk about the highlights of your 10 years as executive director. And there are a lot of fight backs against the Liberal government.

KN [00:42:15] There were. The first thing I want to talk about is one of the first things that we did. The president, the new president that I was working with was David Chudnovsky, and he told me that he did not support me for executive director, but that he was prepared to work with me and support me and so forth. And I said, that's fine, that good. And one of the first things that we embarked on doing was because now the liberals had soon got elected and they were obviously after us.

RM [00:43:05] Christy Clark was education minister, and she hated the BCTF.

KN [00:43:09] Yes. So we very quickly developed what we called the Public Education Action Plan. Which resulted in quite a reorganization of the whole BCTF because we realized that bargaining, provincial bargaining with the Liberals was going to be more than difficult, if not impossible, and that we had to start putting our resources into public communications, into political action. And so this is why this Public Education Action Plan. There were several aspects to this plan. One, was that we would immediately reach out to other organizations, unions, and others to work with them. In other words, we would put affiliation with labour back on the agenda. We would put a whole lot of resources into going out. The executive going out and meeting one-on-one with school districts, with

teachers in every local, in every school, doing what we can to reach out to them to talk about what we were up against and what we saw down the road and what we had to do. So that was a lot of resources going into that. And then a lot of resources going into what we call political action. In other words, letting the public know that the cutbacks that Campbell was doing in terms of his cutbacks in education, the impact it would have, the school closures that were happening, all those kinds of things. As well as, we decided on sending out a group called Charter for Public Education Commission. Went around the province talking to people about what kind of education system they wanted. And it resulted in this charter, which is an incredible statement about what people do want in a public school system. And all of that formed the basis of our public education action plan. So three years later, we joined the BC Federation of Labour.

RM [00:45:36] This time it went through.

KN [00:45:37] This time it went through. And three years after that, we joined the Canadian Labour Congress. We worked very closely with the Canadian Teachers' Federation, and we reach out to all kinds of organizations in terms of support and give them support to build a stronger BCTF. And when the contract was stripped in 2002, we had a day of protest. And phenomenally, on that day of protest, tens of thousands of people at the rally at the Agrodome, David Chudnovsky says, 'This is not a one-day protest. This is the first day of a protest.'

RM [00:46:24] I was there. But there were no more days of protest.

KN [00:46:32] Oh, there were, but not right away. Not right away. And we launched legal battle. That was another part of the PEA plan (the Public Education Action plan), was to launch a legal battle against what they had done. And we knew that there was gonna be a showdown at some point, it was inevitable. And so we prepared for it. From then on. It took years of preparation, years of organizing, but we did. And we put five million dollars into the next election. We'd never spent more than—and we don't give it to a political party. We just do advertising. Advertising about what's wrong with the current government. And we'd never spent over \$500,000 before an election. This was big, really big. And Gerry Scott, who was a good friend of mine, who was former party secretary in the organized campaigns, party campaigns, organized Rachel Notley's successful election.

RM [00:47:38] Oh, he's wonderful.

KN [00:47:39] He's a wonderful guy. Anyway, he told me when we were having coffee, he said, 'You know, if you'd given us that five million dollars, we'd have won the election.' I said 'BCTF can't do that.' They're nonpartisan and they're very committed to being nonpartisan. They'll just be critical of any government whenever they do something that's bad for them or for education. And that's the way it is. But I take his point. And it did make a difference.

RM [00:48:05] Well it was a terrific campaign, it was regarded as a very good campaign for the NDP.

KN [00:48:10] From two seats to 33. I mean, we were back in the game. And so, so comes the confrontation in 2005.

RM [00:48:23] The illegal strike under Jinny Sims.

KN [00:48:26] Under Jimmy Sims, October 7th, 2005, Friday before Thanksgiving weekend, we were out because the government was imposing yet again another agreement, and still nothing in the way of rights to negotiate other matters. So we wouldn't take it. And the interesting thing is that we, by this time, had talked to teachers so much, and they were so aware of what was going on that they were totally on side with going out. And so we had a strike vote earlier, but we had another strike vote when we told them, quite frankly, that this will be declared an illegal strike. You need to know that. And they voted overwhelmingly.

RM [00:49:15] You could be punished. You could go to jail.

KN [00:49:18] Yeah, potentially. Anyway, it was all a bit surreal, but it happened. And we were out and I can remember one of the highlights of that, those 10 days was the big rally in Victoria on the 17th, the Monday after a week of strike. And we had support from the rest of the labour movement, phenomenal support. And not only that, community support. The polls were showing increasing support. It was phenomenal.

RM [00:50:02] I know, I loved that strike because I was covering it, I guess, and Campbell thought the public would turn against him.

KN [00:50:10] It would get really mad.

RM [00:50:11] These people, your teachers are breaking the law. What kind of an education system do we have here in British Columbia? That the people that teach our kids are law breakers. Instead, as you say, the public support for the strike went up.

KN [00:50:27] Was going up, was going up all the time, every day was going up.

RM [00:50:31] Because Campbell gambled on the public turning against the teachers. It was exactly the opposite.

KN [00:50:36] I know. And I think he gambled on the teachers falling apart. Yeah, it was a phenomenal strike.

RM [00:50:44] And he blinked.

KN [00:50:44] He blinked, and then he got Ready involved, Vince Ready, and Vince Ready came up with a solution that we weren't particularly thrilled with, but we knew that we had to call it a day, and that we made our point.

RM [00:51:01] Vince was great actually.

KN [00:51:01] And yeah, and we ended it.

RM [00:51:07] The vote was close, wasn't it? It wasn't unanimous in your executive.

KN [00:51:13] Oh no. Oh no. I know. We knew, some of us knew we had to, that we'd made our point, we weren't gonna— And the rest of the labour movement, I think too was thinking we needed to—Yes, it was a big black eye for Gordon Campbell.

RM [00:51:30] What was it like behind the scenes? Did you worry if you were going to jail? Did you, you know, did Jinny Sims worry? I mean, were you, as guys, as solid as you seemed? And unworried as you seemed in public?

KN [00:51:43] I don't think that any of us had time to think about what might happen, but I never felt like the judge that we had that was dealing with the case, Judge Brenda Brown, I think could not be unaware of the public opinion that was there. And also, the rulings that she continued to do, allowed us to carry on the strike, even though it created difficulties for us. For example, no strike pay. I negotiated with the Canadian Teachers' Federation immediately a teacher hardship fund, and so any teacher that was really having difficulty could apply to this hardship fund. And teachers across the country were putting in millions into this.

RM [00:52:33] Did anybody apply for it?

KN [00:52:35] Oh yeah, lots of teachers, because lots of teachers would be in dire straits. And we wanted them to make sure they had something to fall back on, and this did it for them. And so that was one thing. Another thing they said that we couldn't use money to support the strike, you know. And so we got the BC Fed to take on the Victoria Rally, which we had previously been organizing. And that was huge, that was just huge. And every one of those things was a statement to the government, a statement that you've gone too far, you gotta back off, you gotta do something different.

RM [00:53:16] I forgot about those rulings by Brenda Brown. No one could believe them. The Campbell government was apoplectic because they kept waiting for her to order you back to work. And she didn't. Well they needed to negotiate more.

KN [00:53:30] And she, when it was all over and she found us in contempt—after the fact and she was going fine us and we were worried then about what the fine would be because— She fined us half a million dollars, which was the largest fine any labour union had taken at that point in time. But we cheered because we could manage \$500,000 easily. And we did. And not only that, she, we could give it to worthy causes. Yes, provided it was approved by the employer, BCPSEA [BC Public School Employers' Association], not the government. And of course, we've lots of causes that were—

RM [00:54:21] Do you remember what causes she gave it to? United Way or anything?

KN [00:54:24] No. Positive contributions. I can't remember specifically, but that was just great. And I eventually married a Supreme Court judge. And I told her that she's the second Supreme Court judge I was in love with, that Brenda Brown had been the first, even though I'd never met her.

RM [00:54:49] I know.

KN [00:54:50] I did meet her because her office was next to Donna's, but anyway, yeah.

RM [00:54:55] Now that was an amazing strike and these things tend to be forgotten but this was teachers, an 11-day, whatever it was, illegal strike.

KN [00:55:05] 10 days.

RM [00:55:05] 10 days against the provincial government and basically you won the strike. It was a victory.

KN [00:55:13] Absolutely.

RM [00:55:15] That's amazing. All right. So I'm glad we touched on that. Anything else?

KN [00:55:21] No, I think in terms of—I think that was certainly the highlight of. I mean, it was, to me, an absolute realization of the Public Education Action Plan that we'd established five years earlier. It was the coming to, you know, bloom of that plan. It couldn't have happened without all that. Definitely couldn't've.

RM [00:55:44] Excellent. All right, eventually you retired. Forced retirement or you decided to retire?

KN [00:55:51] No, I was 65.

RM [00:55:52] Well, you didn't have to retire.

KN [00:55:53] No, time to retire. I'd had 38 years in the system.

RM [00:55:57] Oh, okay, and you got involved somehow with the BC Labour Heritage Centre. How did that happen?

KN [00:56:04] Jack Munro invited me to join the board.

RM [00:56:10] How did he know you?

KN [00:56:11] Well, he knew me through, he had come to the BCTF to get support and for a while we gave him support, financial support at my encouragement.

RM [00:56:27] Is that during their 1987 strike?

KN [00:56:29] No, no, this was during the, for the BC Labour Heritage Centre. When he was chair of that. That was his idea and he was getting support from labour. And so he came to see us and he knew I was supportive. And I got the officers to agree. But then when nothing was happening that was visible or you could see, they backed off. But I was trying to encourage them to keep it up because I thought it was a worthwhile idea. Anyway, so he knew that, and so when I retired, he came and talked to me and convinced me. And I have to say that I never really synchronized with Jack's politics at all. In fact, I would find myself quite the opposite in terms of—

RM [00:57:13] He on the right wing of the labour movement.

KN [00:57:15] That's right.

RM [00:57:16] Plus his role in Operation Solidarity.

KN [00:57:18] Exactly. But I respected his role and his view that working people and their history was important and it should be remembered and recorded and celebrated. So on that I was in total agreement with him. And so I had no problem joining the board and becoming part of that. And in the three years that I was on the board while he was there, I

initiated the curriculum project for teachers, in terms of labour curriculum. I put together a working group and we began working on that. I initiated the rewriting of the walking tour booklet, approached Joey Hartman who was president of the VDLC [Vancouver and District Labour Council] at the time. And she agreed and came on board and two of us oversaw the completely rewriting of that book, booklet. When Jack wanted to—So he saw me as a doer. Well no one else on the board seemed to be doing anything. And anyway, I was doing stuff because I couldn't stop myself.

KN [00:58:43] Anyway, so when it came to doing this book, that he, it was his idea to do this book on the history of working people in B.C., he approached me. And wondered if I would head it up because he felt I could. And I said, yeah, I would. So he convened this meeting with me and him and Howard White, the publisher from Harbour Publishing, and Scott McRae, who was from WorkSafe at that time. And so we had this meeting at a White Spot, of course. He loved the White Spot. And decided that we would move forward on that and so I took that over right away about the summer of 2013 and began to work on the book. Jack, of course, got very sick that fall. Just as one of his projects was coming to fruition and that was all the vignettes that were being done by the Knowledge Network on the history of working people. Which was a phenomenal set of videos, absolutely phenomenal and one that we were able to use for our classroom project as well, that really, really was helpful to have those little vignettes. One of those vignettes was of Connie Jervis, who was someone who I had researched and worked— I knew Connie when she was alive, but it was somebody who I researched and did a major article for the Teacher on it, which was a nationally award-winning article, actually, because I put so much effort into the research.

RM [01:00:20] What was it about?

KN [01:00:23] Connie Jervis.

RM [01:00:23] Oh, it was about Connie Jervis.

KN [01:00:23] Oh yeah, and it was just a wonderful, wonderful—

RM [01:00:30] And these vignettes were on B.C. labour history.

KN [01:00:34] Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And in the walking tour that we revised, we of course, built in the plaques at the Convention Centre, which had become such an important part of what the Labour Heritage Centre was all about.

RM [01:00:52] And then we lost Jack.

KN [01:00:54] And we lost Jack. But before we lost Jack, he stepped down. And the board appointed me as chair. And Merv had told me that he had talked to Jack, and Jack wanted me to do it. So I had his support.

KN [01:01:14] Jack got a salary, did he not?

KN [01:01:16] He got, I wouldn't call it a salary, but he got a huge stipend, not a huge stipend but a significant stipend. No, no, I mean, in Jack's favour, I find this hard to believe, but I know it to be true. He didn't have a great pension. You know, you think that having been a labour leader and so forth, somewhere along the line. I had a great pension. So when I took over the chair, I did not need a stipend, I just didn't. I did it completely

voluntarily and I was fine with that because again, I had a really good pension and my wife had an even better one.

RM [01:01:56] But you basically worked full time.

KN [01:02:00] Yeah, but I enjoyed every minute of it.

RM [01:02:02] Coming into work.

KN [01:02:04] Yeah, no, well, yeah, it was not quite like, nine to five, five days a week or anything like that, but yeah, most days.

RM [01:02:12] Got your lunches paid for.

KN [01:02:16] Some of them, but not really.

RM [01:02:18] So what was your goal? What did you want the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre to become?

KN [01:02:22] My goal during the period of time that I was here was to get an awful lot of more people involved. I knew that there were a lot of people that were interested in labour history and labour heritage. So my first priority was to get more people involved by forming working groups to do different things like a working group for this, a working for that, a working group for this, and hiring a few people on contract, paying them a decent wage. You know more than a living wage, much more than living wage. Get them—

RM [01:03:04] Fundraising, I guess.

KN [01:03:04] Yea. And then I spent a lot of time, every year going to every union, visiting with them, talking to them, getting their money for next year, committed, raising new money wherever I could. Yeah, I did a lot of that. I never thought I could match Jack's capacity to get money out of unions, but I did, and I was happy for that. And of course I had to raise money for the book, which the Community Savings Credit Union made really easy by giving us \$200,000 or committing \$200,000 dollars. It all worked. It all came together. And so I felt really fortunate to be in a position to help make all that happen. It was really a dream come true in terms of my love for history and in particular for working people and what they were capable of doing when they worked together.

RM [01:04:00] Wasn't always easy.

KN [01:04:01] No, it wasn't always easy. There were problems along the way, to be sure.

RM [01:04:06] Want to talk about those or not?

KN [01:04:08] Oh, probably not. I don't think they're worth it, but I think everything has problems. I would say this, that when I became chair, in 2013, I had asked Joey Hartman to join the board. And Jack was a little hesitant, because I think he always felt threatened by strong women actually. But I insisted and Jack agreed finally and she came on board. And when I took the chair I said to Joey, 'I will take the chair for three years provided you agree to do it when I step down.' And she said yes. So after three years I was willing to stay on longer and I did for two more years. And it was in those last two years that I think the future of the Labour Heritage Center was ensured because we moved towards

establishing an executive director and paid staff instead of having five or six or seven or eight people doing bits and pieces here and there, and the chair, the voluntary chair, trying to coordinate all of this. So I wasn't going to be chair, and it was unlikely we were gonna be able to get another chair that could devote the time that I was able to devote. And so we, the executive director who, I couldn't have had a better candidate than Donna Sacuta. I was so happy was willing to do it.

RM [01:05:43] You must be very proud when you look back at what the Labour Heritage Centre has become.

KN [01:05:49] Oh yeah!

RM [01:05:50] It stands head and shoulders above anything else like it in Canada.

KN [01:05:54] Yeah, there's no question about it. It's been very, very successful. And I think it is just a remarkable organization that continues on with very little resources basically overall to produce an awful lot of very useful information and history.

RM [01:06:21] Yeah, think it's your legacy?

KN [01:06:25] Oh, I don't know about legacies. My Legacy is a Subaru that I drive.
[laughter]

RM [01:06:33] Well, the only reason I say that is because there's rocky roads ahead, I think, just because things are so uncertain. The economy is so uncertain, unions are in tough in some ways, and of course they keep it going and funding, it's always a problem. But what it's done over so many years, thanks to you, I mean that can't be taken away, like this interview now, and so many, I mean you were big on oral history interviews, right?

KN [01:07:00] Yeah. Oh, yeah I got that going, yeah.

RM [01:07:03] Why did you think it was important to get do that?

KN [01:07:07] Well, for the simple reason that I felt that, particularly looking back at the whole struggle that unions had, collectively and individually, to gain bargaining rights to begin with, it was not a given, ever a given. It was a struggle. And I think it's important for people to know that. That the rights don't just happen. You're not just given them. If you don't fight for them, you don't get them. And I think also the understanding and knowledge that we had been capable of doing so much together continues to resonate. And we need to continue to remember that. It's only when we are together like that that we can move forward and progress.

RM [01:08:02] And I've got a question arising out of that. But first of all, you were also big on plaques. And so, I mean, tell us a bit about plaques?

KN [01:08:12] Oh well, basically I really admired and respected and liked the plaques that had been established at the Convention Centre. But I realized that a lot of things in the labour movement had happened elsewhere in the province and it would be nice for them to be able to celebrate what they've done as well. And so I initiated the Plaques Around the Province project. And in particular, I knew that also the BCTF 100th anniversary in 2017 was coming up and I knew there were a lot of locals in the BCTF that had done amazing things historically that was important for teachers and I wanted that to be

commemorated too. And so I talked to David Yorke who I knew had done the plaque for the On-to-Ottawa Trek, and found out the name of the foundry in Richmond that produced the plaques. Went and talked to them and worked out an arrangement and when Donna Sacuta came on board and she was—By the way, I recruited over fifty people eventually to take on different roles in the in the Labour Heritage Centre and Donna was one of those who came to me, rather than me going to her, because I didn't know her but she had been involved in a project, in a bit of history in the North Shore where she lived and the Blair Rifle Range which had been a relief camp during the Depression. And she came to me with an article and I was impressed by that and asked her to get involved and she was quite willing, and as I say, the rest of history. She got involved and the plaques project was one of the things she took on and built it into a great program. And in the 100th anniversary of the BCTF, I had talked to five locals in terms of why they should have plaques. The 1919 strike in Victoria, the 1921 strike in New Westminster, the 1981 strike in Terrace, and the Connie Jervis in Langley in 1940, and the Surrey Teacher Walkout in 1974 on class size. All five of those were significant in BCTF history and we commemorated all of them in 2017 and that was one of the highlights for me in terms of doing that job.

RM [01:10:51] Do you want to sum anything up, be it an over-riding philosophy that kept you going? Do you want to touch on any disappointments over the years? Here's your chance.

KN [01:11:05] From a very early age, I developed, I think I developed a confidence in what I believed and that was important for me. Not just to pick it up here, there, or whatever. A set of beliefs that I had and I tried to live by them in everything that I did and that's what gave me the confidence to be able to do a lot of what I did is the feeling that, yes, this is right. Yes this is good. Yes, this is the correct thing to do. And when I felt I needed to change or whatever, I would think about the consequences of what that was and whether this was the right way. I mean, I put a lot of thought into that in terms of my overall view of what I thought was the political direction I wanted to see, not only my life, anything I could influence going, but overall. When I first became a teacher, I was appalled that we couldn't have the right to strike. I was appalled that we were not in the BC Federation of Labour. All those things, I believed in 1971 and lived to see them come through fruition. I feel I was part of a generation of teachers who were there. Who'd lived through it. Who were prepared to make the changes and to work towards it. And I was a part of that and I was very happy to be part of that. And then. The BC labour Heritage Centre was just a nice way to end my working career, if you like, because that's what I did, and it was bringing all that together, and a nice way to end.

RM [01:12:58] One step at a time. Well, Ken, thank you. I mean, thank you for the BC Labour Heritage Centre. Thank you for commissioning me to write the book. So many things that workers in B.C. and teachers in B.C. owe you. You're a modest guy, although you've got a good opinion of yourself. But you're basically a modest guy. And so thank you, I just want to say thank you and that was a terrific interview.

KN [01:13:24] Thank you.