

Interview: Allen Seager (AS)
Interviewer: Bruce Ralston (BR)
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Transcription: Donna Sacuta

[00:00:05.24] - BR

Okay, good afternoon. We're here to interview Allen Seager, who's a prominent labour historian, and I want to begin by thanking the BC Labour Heritage Centre and Donna Sacuta and Natasha Fairweather for their work in arranging this interview and for their continuing work on transcribing and advancing labour history here in the province of British Columbia. So, Allen, let's just begin with your personal background. You're born in 1953, and where were you born?

[00:00:44.05] - AS

I was born in Montreal, Bruce, and you and I are about the same age, and we possibly had some similar influences. I grew up around people who kind of believed that history was bunk. In other words, whatever was written down was not really what happened. And, you know, they were people who had been in the war or other wars or been in France in 1915. They claimed to know what happened in 1812, and one of my aunts claimed to know what happened in Boston in 1775. So my interest in labour history is a bookish one, but it is influenced by these deeper kind of matters. I'm not sure that the history of the working class is anywhere out there in the literature. So that was my idea, to try to make a contribution to that sort of hidden history, if you like.

[00:01:51.00] - BR

So when you say your family, but could you be a little bit more specific about your, say, your mother and your father?

[00:01:57.08] - AS

Yes, my mother was born in 1919. Her father had been an English immigrant who was mixed up in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He survived the war and was very much one of these old veterans who would read about the Kaiser, like decades afterwards. He would be reading about this stuff. 'What exactly happened?' She followed her father's footsteps and was in Italy in 1943. She had very much an insider's view of what happened there.

[00:02:42.20] - BR

What did she do in Italy?

[00:02:43.26] - AS

She was with the nursing sisters. She graduated from Royal Victoria Hospital in 1942 and went directly into the Army. So again, she was a great influence on us, because she reminded us, 'Yeah, you can read about this stuff in books but I'm telling you what really happened.' My father was more a argumentative kind of guy, not so much a reasoner. He would argue too much and I think I learned from that the reverse lesson, which was to try to listen to people rather than try to lecture at them. You know what I mean.

[00:03:31.05] - BR

What sort of work and life did he lead?

[00:03:35.00] - AS

Oh, he got mixed—again, he was one of these people who got mixed up in the war. He was in Los Angeles on the day of Pearl Harbor. He was studying at the Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical school. He had a pilot's license and all of the—I think he dreamed of joining the U.S. Air Force and becoming a grand flyer. Instead, he ended up in the Canadian and British forces as more or less a ground engineer, mechanic.

[00:04:13.18] - BR

In Canada or overseas?

[00:04:15.22] - AS

Overseas.

[00:04:16.11] - BR

England?

[00:04:17.08] - AS

That's right. He was in England. Again, he had a perspective, although it was a rather limited one, because he knew that the people who actually flew the planes knew what happened. The fellows on the ground only had a certain perspective.

[00:04:33.08] - BR

Do you know where he was stationed in England?

[00:04:38.01] - AS

Wolverhampton, among other places, Yorkshire, different places in the Midlands.

[00:04:46.03] - BR

And when was he demobilized?

[00:04:48.10] - AS

They both came out in 1946.

[00:04:51.29] - BR

And then they returned to Montreal? Had they met prior to that, or they met there?

[00:04:55.29] - AS

I'm not sure exactly what their relationship was before the war. They didn't get married during the war. That's why my mother was able to go into Italy. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been allowed.

[00:05:08.09] - BR

Oh, because a married woman would not be permitted—

[00:05:12.05] - AS

Would not have been allowed at the front. So again, I'm not exactly sure what happened, but they did marry in 1947 and because of all the politics about the Avro Arrow and that kind of thing, my father's trade in the aircraft business was centred in Québec. So we grew up around the Saint-Hubert air force base, which at that time had a squadron, like a Cold War era squadron of planes, but they were also building helicopters and things like that.

[00:05:48.21] - BR

Did you have siblings as well?

[00:05:50.27] - AS

I had an older—I have an older sister. She's four years older than me, and she says that in the era of the 1960s when we grew up, it very much depended—she doesn't say you're the victim of your last author, but she has a rough-and-ready theory that we were greatly influenced by media in those times. So from her point of view, my perspective is quite different from hers because she's four years older.

[00:06:24.14] - BR

And where did she lead her life? Stay in Québec, or did she—

[00:06:29.13] - AS

She followed—here's an example of how these patterns carry on. She followed our mother's footsteps and trained at the Royal Victoria Hospital to become a nurse. Eventually, she moved to Los Angeles and became an American.

[00:06:49.07] - BR

Oh, and she's still living in Los Angeles?

[00:06:51.03] - AS

Yes, she lives in Seattle now.

[00:06:52.28] - BR

Oh, I see.

[00:06:54.05] - AS

So with the passage of time, we were able to get over whatever arguments we had back in the day, and to try to get a handle on that whole 1960s scene. Like, her friends were involved in things like the Sir George Williams riot of 1969. So her friends got into more trouble than my friends, let's put it that way.

[00:07:19.24] - BR

I remember seeing a documentary about that recently.

[00:07:22.16] - AS

Yes. Whereas I had the advantage of sitting back a little bit and seeing what these older kids were up to. I mean, I won't say I was wiser than them, but I was an observer and I observed.

[00:07:38.29] - BR

Perhaps more reflective.

[00:07:41.06] - AS

More inclined to hit the books, shall we say, than the older kids.

[00:07:45.10] - BR

Well, that's an appropriate path for a future historian. So where did your formal education, where did that take place?

[00:07:55.14] - AS

Well, to emphasize for the point of view of younger people who might be listening, people like us had great opportunities for education. I was able to go to McGill University from 1971 to 1977. Like, what a place that was. You had Americans, you had former members of the Communist Party of Great Britain. You had an amazing cast of characters, older people who were willing to talk to you, you know, as long as you, you know, at least put on a good act of listening to them.

[00:08:38.06] - BR

Could I take you back a little bit prior to McGill though? I'm thinking more of your early education, primary school, kindergarten perhaps, secondary school.

[00:08:48.02] - AS

Oh, we went to a what you'd now call a kind of K-10 system, which again was very good for us growing up in a kind of suburban environment, because you had older kids and young kids mixed together. I know this is totally contrary to modern-day pedagogy, but I thought it was an excellent system.

[00:09:15.26] - BR

So it was a school in the Saint-Hubert area?

[00:09:19.29] - AS

That's right. There were different schools, but they had the same model. Because there were a lot of Air Force people and a lot of Anglophones who couldn't fit into the actual, you know, the system that had been built up.

[00:09:36.07] - BR

So your education was in English?

[00:09:38.14] - AS

Yes. At that time, you had—more or less unilingual English education. Only towards the end of our career were the principals and people involved in the system beginning to wake up to the realities of Québec. So we were able to spend perhaps a week in the year at a French school.

[00:10:06.05] - BR

A week?

[00:10:07.03] - AS

Yes. I mean, that was not enough to do any instruction, but it was enough to give you a sense of, 'Your system was not the system.' You know what I mean? The system was these other kids who had proper buildings and a much more advanced kind of situation. I don't recall any difficulty with the school administrators, either the French or the English administrators, with that.

[00:10:43.14] - BR

Your social group as a child would be simply the students of the school that you attended?

[00:10:50.14] - AS

Yes. So there would be a lot of Air Force people and a lot of people who worked in what they called Pratt & Whitney.

[00:10:59.09] - BR

Right.

[00:11:01.02] - AS

We also learned at that time that because my parents came from Ontario, they were very sensitive to issues about Ontario. They believed that the Ontario culture was being saturated by American influences, and they also believed that there was too much American subject matter in the schools. They had some very conservative perspectives, my parents. You know, when they went to high school in Ontario, you did not read American books. It wasn't that they were censored, they were just not on the curriculum.

[00:11:49.29] - BR

Perhaps those times have returned a bit.

[00:11:51.29] - AS

Yes, so that issue of what is being read in the schools is quite important. And then there was a more materially significant issue that affected the trade unions such as they were in our community. In 1966, the United Auto Workers had a strike at the Pratt & Whitney plant.

[00:12:17.20] - BR

In Saint-Hubert?

[00:12:18.21] - AS

Yes, demanding what they called the 'formule Rand', the Rand formula. So this was in 1966. Now back to my point about how working-class history is a bit problematic. All the textbooks tell you that the Rand formula was a Ford Motor Company project of 1945 and that that settled the issue. I'm telling you, that's not the case, because 20 and even more than 20 years later, this was still a very hot topic in Québec.

[00:13:00.19] - BR

But labour legislation, well, in non-federal industries, is obviously a provincial jurisdiction.

[00:13:07.06] - AS

That's right. The government of Québec, because they wanted to play what they called 'rattrapage', catch-up. We want to catch up with Ontario. And as part and parcel of that project,

they would not concede this Rand formula issue until 1974. So there's an example of a 30-year lag in labour code developments.

[00:13:36.08] - BR

Was your father involved in any of the union activity or strikes at Pratt & Whitney.

[00:13:42.11] - AS

He was not a line worker, but I mean, he knew the people who were, and we knew people who were involved in that conflict.

[00:13:52.24] - BR

I see.

[00:13:54.00] - AS

The other thing we learned, of course, is that the trade unions in Québec were developing their own policies. The fellow, the trade union leader we knew in Saint-Bruno, where we lived, was a fellow named Bob Dean. He was the Québec director of the United Auto Workers. He was, I would say, René Lévesque's most trusted advisor on labour affairs. Now, I'm not saying that Bob Dean represented Québec trade unions. All I'm telling you is that Lévesque knew that Bob Dean knew about things to do with Ontario industry and Ontario labour relations that were pertinent to the modern Québec government's approach.

[00:14:55.26] - BR

So did you ever meet Bob Dean?

[00:14:57.16] - AS

Yes, yes, yes. He was—I mean, anybody in his situation, he had to balance—you know, there's some very extreme nationalists in his group. There were a variety of immigrants, most of them were Francophones. He was married to an old-time French Canadian woman who I'm sure gave him lots of advice on how to deal with people. I would say that Bob Dean was not somebody who radicals liked, but in terms of talking to ordinary people, I thought he was quite good. I can understand why René Lévesque who didn't know anything really about labour would have trusted him with certain files.

[00:15:52.26] - BR

So, you said you started at McGill in 1971. What were you enrolled in?

[00:16:02.15] - AS

At that time, you were allowed to take economics, you were allowed to take—I won't say allowed, you were encouraged to take economics, geography, different subjects. So, for example, when I studied economics, I was able to take a course called Labour Economics. Hey, there was no such thing as Labour History, but if you went to the economics department, you could study Labour Economics. The professor, I'll mention his name because it's an important name, Sid Ingerman from the Labour College.

[00:16:49.02] - BR

Spelled I-N-G-E-R—

[00:16:51.17] - AS

I-N-G-E-R-M-A-N. Sid Ingerman. He was one of these Americans who honestly believed that the NDP [New Democratic Party] for example, was the Socialist Party of the United States by another name, right? Like with Sid, the name New Democratic Party really meant something to him, right? Because he'd been in the Communist Party, he'd left in 1956. He knew all about the Democratic Party and he eventually got a nomination and ran. I mean, the chances of him being elected in Saint-Laurent, Montreal were very slim. But somebody like Sid took a longer view of things. Later, he was able to get me my first job as a trade union educator.

[00:17:50.25] - BR

Oh, really?

[00:17:51.09] - AS

Right.

[00:17:51.23] - BR

Talk a little bit about that.

[00:17:53.24] - AS

Right. Well Sid was part of a group at McGill who tried to maintain an academic foothold in the Canadian Labour Congress [CLC] as they developed their own educational systems. So by the 1960s, the CLC was not interested in having McGill just do mission work with unions. They wanted to do their own work. So, Sid's idea was to have the academic people work with the CLC, and that meant following certain guidelines, you can understand. So in 1970 it was, Sid said, 'Al, you've passed your whatever, you've got a master's degree. You can come and join us at the Labour College.' That was a terrific opportunity, because you had sort of ranking officers or junior officers from pretty well coast-to-coast gathered together in a dormitory at the University of Ottawa for six weeks.

[00:19:12.22] - BR

Just let me correct you on the—or probe you a little bit further on the dates because you said—

[00:19:16.24] - AS

Yeah, I'm skipping ahead a bit here.

[00:19:18.21] - BR

Well, you said that you were at McGill '71 to '77, but you said this took place in 1970, so is that what you meant?

[00:19:27.25] - AS

No, 1980.

[00:19:29.02] - BR

Oh, okay, okay, that's what I thought.

[00:19:31.17] - AS

Yeah, I'd left McGill by then, but I kept in touch with Sid.

[00:19:37.02] - BR

Oh, okay.

[00:19:37.23] - AS

Because of my interest in railway history in particular.

[00:19:40.20] - BR

That's a continuing theme that we'll explore.

[00:19:43.02] - AS

Yes.

[00:19:43.23] - BR

So, when you were at McGill for those years, did you graduate with formal degrees then?

[00:19:50.20] - AS

Yes, I got a bachelor's degree and then a master's degree.

[00:19:55.14] - BR

Okay, and the master's degree—

[00:19:57.14] - AS

In those days, I mean, the fees were so low, we used to work at summer camps and things like that to pay the fees. The master's degree, you had to write a long paper, it was about that thick, I guess, but I don't remember having even an examination. It was sent to somebody at the University of Toronto who said, 'Okay, pass.'

[00:20:25.28] - BR

Do you remember what you wrote about?

[00:20:28.14] - AS

Yes, it was a history of the Mine Workers Union of Canada, 1925 to 1936.

[00:20:35.16] - BR

So where, if someone wanted to go and find that, where would they find it?

[00:20:41.29] - AS

I'll give you a really good illustration of that point. Have you ever heard of a book called 'Soviet Princeton'?

[00:20:53.01] - BR

Jon Bartlett's book? Yes.

[00:20:54.07] - AS

Well, John Bartlett asked me, 'Al, where's your thesis?', because I talked about Princeton. I said, 'Jon, I don't have a copy of it anymore. Maybe the McGill Library has a copy.' He looked it up and they had a photocopy of it. Not a digitized thing, but a photocopy of it. You can find it through the McGill Library. They took a photocopy of old documents.

[00:21:25.14] - BR

Hmm, okay.

[00:21:27.12] - AS

For that thesis, and here's again an illustration of how easy it was to get through university in those times. I'd gotten my bachelor's degree, got accepted into the master's program. Okay, find a topic, write a thesis on it. I went to Winnipeg, made some phone calls, they gave me the names of people like Don Greenwell, and I got the name of Charlie Drain, who was a Social Credit member in Alberta who knew all about the Mine Workers Union of Canada in the 1930s in Alberta. So you know I strung together some interviews. I went to the library at the University of Winnipeg. I put it together and, you know—

[00:22:25.14] - BR

Was there a supervisor typically in the academic environment? Was there a supervisor?

[00:22:29.22] - AS

My supervisor was John Thompson.

[00:22:34.06] - BR

We'll talk about him more.

[00:22:35.10] - AS

He didn't have any particular opinions on the Mine Workers Union of Canada. He leaned on Irving Abella in Toronto to pass or fail the thing.

[00:22:45.26] - BR

Oh, I see. So between '77 and '80, what were you doing?

[00:22:53.02] - AS

Ah in those years, I had to get a doctoral degree. See, I still had it in my mind, 'Maybe I could make a career in history.' Lots of my friends you know gave up on that thing. Had a good time and went on to do something else, but I still had it in my mind that perhaps I could get a gig in this industry. So I had to get a doctoral degree, and I ended up at York University, which at that time was more or less a satellite of the University of Toronto.

[00:23:27.14] - BR

Yeah, and it's physically in Toronto as well.

[00:23:29.16] - AS

And it's in Toronto. So Irving Abella was my supervisor. He didn't interfere too much in what I was doing. Again, you had some terrific teachers. Do you remember Roland Penner?

[00:23:44.19] - BR

Yes.

[00:23:45.13] - AS

Okay, his brother—

[00:23:46.17] - BR

Jacob Penner's son.

[00:23:48.05] - AS

Yeah, Norman Penner was my political science teacher. And all you needed to do was listen to Norman Penner, and you knew that whatever you read about J.S. Woodsworth or Jacob Penner

was at best, just a story. I mean, he knew it was a very complicated subject, and obviously he was a Marxist, but that didn't prevent him from having what he viewed as a critical analysis. That's all you needed with a fellow like Norman Penner. So you listen to this idea, the Marxist idea of a 'critical analysis'. Alright, we'll do a critical analysis of the Liberal Party. He wanted me to study the Liberal Party. Fine, I was happy to do that.

[00:24:42.27] - BR

It's the Liberal Party of Canada, just for clarity.

[00:24:45.19] - AS

So we learned all about the Liberal labour railroaders and you know folks like that.

[00:24:55.17] - BR

So that, what was the exact topic of the work, this thesis that you produced then?

[00:25:01.07] - AS

Well, it was a lengthy paper on labour and the Liberal Party in Canada.

[00:25:07.01] - BR

Mm-hmm. And that—

[00:25:07.13] - AS

Which intersects, of course, with the Communist Party, because for a time the Communist Party in Canada, including Jacob Penner and his friends, thought that they could be a kind of left-wing of liberalism.

[00:25:24.29] - BR

That would be post-1943 though, wouldn't it?

[00:25:27.17] - AS

Yes, yeah, from 1943 onwards.

[00:25:30.07] - BR

So—

[00:25:31.24] - AS

Just to go back to McGill for a moment, you have to understand that Montreal was in a great turmoil in the 1970s, and one of our—I won't say role models, I would say somebody you knew about and sort of admired, was Charlie Gagnon, who had been involved in the FLQ [Front de libération du Québec].

[00:25:57.29] - BR

Charles Gagnon—

[00:25:59.02] - AS

Yes, yes, and Charles Gagnon, he decided that the FLQ had had no theory, no program. And so he went back into texts like Fergus McKeen's 'Communism versus Opportunism', published in Vancouver in 1945.

[00:26:24.09] - BR

Can you explain a little bit about Fergus McKeen?

[00:26:26.12] - AS

Oh, Fergus McKeen was a member of the Labor-Progressive Party here in Vancouver. He participated in the 1945 elections when the slogan was 'A Liberal-Labor Government for Canada', and after this failed and Mackenzie King was re-elected, he broke away from the Communist Party and believed that they—and wrote a book that thick arguing that the Communist Party of Canada had lost sight of communism. They had become the left-wing of the Liberal Party. Somebody like your father would have read this book up and down.

[00:27:13.22] - BR

Well, he's not here to deny it so, anymore, but just so that we're clear on, you wrote a long paper on the Liberal Party of Canada working with Norman Penner. The thesis for your PhD for which you received a PhD. What was the topic of that?

[00:27:35.17] - AS

Oh, that was a study of the Alberta coal sector from 1905 to 1945. That was not a very successful project in my mind. Bits and pieces of it were published, but not the whole thing because it didn't really hold together. It was a political economy, you know it was about the coal industry. It was about the background of the fossil fuel sector as it would eventually emerge.

[00:28:07.05] - BR

So was it a PhD in Economics?

[00:28:09.19] - AS

It was a kind of a crossover between history and political economy.

[00:28:14.14] - BR

Oh, okay.

[00:28:15.28] - AS

So I mean, it is interesting. Bits and pieces of it are interesting, but it didn't really hold together as a coherent—

[00:28:24.03] - BR

So it—was it published? or—

[00:28:25.22] - AS

No. No. Just bits and pieces.

[00:28:28.18] - BR

And when were you awarded the PhD?

[00:28:30.18] - AS

In 1982.

[00:28:32.28] - AS

Okay so that took a while.

[00:28:36.01] - AS

Oh, yes. Yes.

[00:28:39.15] - BR

When you hear stories of writing a PhD thesis, it's usually a harrowing story.

[00:28:47.01] - AS

What we should do is jump ahead to how I got to Simon Fraser.

[00:28:53.12] - BR

Okay.

[00:28:53.24] - AS

That would make sense.

[00:28:55.00] - BR

Sure.

[00:28:56.08] - AS

I was still working on this thesis when a job came up in the history department here.

[00:29:04.11] - BR

At Simon Fraser University?

[00:29:05.11] - AS

Yes. I'd already published some material on Atlantic Canadian history and Alberta history. So I was trying to advertise myself as a regional historian at that point. Their job was for Western Canada. So I was able to squeak into their program as a Western Canadian historian.

[00:29:39.09] - BR

So is it you were hired—what year were you hired?

[00:29:44.18] - AS

The fall of 1980.

[00:29:47.00] - BR

So this is prior to completing the PhD?

[00:29:48.29] - AS

Yes, yes. That was two years ahead. So that was a very difficult time getting adjusted to university and writing this thesis. But anyway, it got done. The importance there is that Simon Fraser University did not have a place for labour history. There were some people in business and economics department who were interested in it, and from that connection would eventually emerge Labour Studies.

[00:30:32.02] - BR

Tell me a little bit about the history of the Labour Studies, because I know this is a topic that you've expressed a keen interest in.

[00:30:38.26] - AS

Well, the founder of it, in Clive Lytle's narrative, which is in your collection here, he says that Ken Strand, who was I think the second president of the university, was the person who had the idea. Ken Strand, who died about year and a half ago, and I ran Clive's idea past Elaine Bernard, who's again somebody who could testify a lot in more detail about this. But she said, 'Yes, Ken was more or less the person who had the idea.' And it came from the get-go, the administration at the university was attemptedly drawn into BC Federation of Labour issues. These were not about CUPE, okay? CUPE developed a bargaining relationship with the university, but these were more complicated questions about academic freedom, about radicals on campus, and things of that nature.

[00:32:04.22] - BR

But what was the genesis of the—I mean, typically there's an institutional structure for—so was there a department, or was there a program, or was there an institute, or how did that take shape?

[00:32:18.25] - AS

The way Strand and Jack Blaney another administrator—

[00:32:23.22] - BR

He was a vice president, I think.

[00:32:25.08] - AS

Yes, for a time he was the acting president. Anyway, the way they set it up, Labour Studies was part of Continuing Studies, which was part of Adult Education, or non-credit. So the BC Fed, I think the person they listened to was Clive Lytle who was familiar with these individually. He knew them from the late '60s. So Clive's job was to put together something for trade unionists. The trade unionists were given—I mean no resources to speak of. They were given classroom space, you know what I mean? The Labour Studies program was very elementary, and the costs were shared between labour and the university, such as they were.

[00:33:26.01] - BR

So what was your role in that?

[00:33:28.11] - AS

My role was to sit on committees representing the history department as we tried to puzzle out what could be done to make this thing something more than just a sort of community service thing, because that's what it amounted to.

[00:33:50.12] - BR

And so it began in 1980 or—

[00:33:53.20] - AS

Yeah, approximately 1980.

[00:33:55.24] - BR

So that's coincident with your—being hired there?

[00:33:58.00] - AS

Yes, yes. I remember from a very early date going to these committee meetings, and often it was a case of Clive explaining what he was doing and the academics encouraging him, but none of us had any money or any resources to speak of.

[00:34:19.08] - BR

Who were the other historians or trade unionists involved in this project?

[00:34:25.08] - AS

By the time I got involved in it, we had people from the Institute for the Humanities involved. So I would mention the name of Jerry Zaslov, for example, who, as Mark Leier reminded me, was instrumental in puzzling out how to get Labour Studies into some kind of a shape. So the Institute for Humanities, their primary goal was setting something up called the J.S. Woodsworth Chair.

[00:35:08.11] - BR

Ah, yes.

[00:35:10.14] - AS

And that's where Yvonne Cocke and the New Westminster crowd, Pauline Jewett, that crowd.

[00:35:18.20] - BR

Was she president at that point?

[00:35:20.05] - AS

She had been the president.

[00:35:21.23] - BR

Right.

[00:35:22.18] - AS

So a name like Pauline Jewett would open doors. Some of these meetings, I mean, Pauline Jewett's apartment was a place where people met. And again, from my perspective, Bruce, my sort of jaded quasi-Marxist Toronto point of view, exactly what J.S. Woodsworth was up to was really not my remit, but I did know that J.S. Woodsworth was greatly admired here in Vancouver,

and especially among the CCF-NDP community. In time, what we were able to do was build up links with some syndicalists on the North Shore by the name of Morgan, and that's a very important name. Lefty Morgan, who was a railroader who had won a discrimination case against the PGE [Pacific Great Eastern] before the BC Rail was set up. His wife Margaret would eventually be persuaded to give their estate to Simon Fraser University for the express purpose of setting up the Labour Studies program.

[00:36:57.10] - BR

So where did the Woodsworth chair figure in that?

[00:37:01.03] - AS

The Woodsworth chair was the model. The Woodsworth chair was for the humanities, but the idea of having labour studies part of the humanities arena is—you wouldn't believe how wide it is. So we did not want to be grandfathered into their project. Instead, people who occupied the Woodsworth chair helped us to fundraise. I'll mention the name of Ed Broadbent. What a better person to have, right? I mean, he knew all about the United Auto Workers and the NDP and all the rest of it. Another was Alan Whitehorn from the Royal Military College in Kingston. So the two of those individuals were Woodsworth chair holders and they were as part of their job description was to help us raise money and organize things for the Labour Studies.

[00:38:09.29] - BR

Now, as I understood the Woodsworth chair—and please correct me if I'm wrong—it's an annual appointment, and that the person holds the chair for a single year. And there's a— so it's a revolving chair with a new person holding the position.

[00:38:27.26] - AS

That's not the way it works now.

[00:38:30.08] - BR

Oh, okay but—

[00:38:31.07] - AS

But it was during the period from, let's say 1992 to 2011, which is when the Margaret Morgan endowment chair was set up. So for almost 10 years, it was a rotating position.

[00:38:55.01] - BR

I believe Svend Robinson held that for a year.

[00:38:57.10] - AS

Svend Robinson, yes.

[00:38:59.04] - BR

Held that for a single year.

[00:39:00.12] - AS

Yes, yes. So the kinds of people we were able to get in on a rotational basis were just ideal for the purposes of getting the Labour Studies program off the road.

[00:39:15.22] - BR

So aside from the chair, then, what would the further developments in the rollout of Labour Studies at Simon Fraser University?

[00:39:27.13] - AS

I would say the history department had to hire a labour historian. That was our contribution. Other departments had to hire people who were able to make a contribution.

[00:39:45.02] - BR

So was the person they hired you?

[00:39:46.27] - AS

No. Because I was a regional historian and I had other things to do. So that's where Mark Leier came in.

[00:39:57.17] - BR

He's a labour historian?

[00:39:58.17] - AS

Yes, Mark Leier is a labour historian, graduate of Memorial University of Newfoundland, which was the top drawer institution for labour history in the year of the 1990s. So like—

[00:40:16.01] - BR

Is that where Greg Kealey taught?

[00:40:18.28] - AS

Yes. Greg Kealey and W.J.C. Cherwinski and others, yeah, that was the key centre.

[00:40:30.19] - BR

So, aside from hiring—oh, go ahead.

[00:40:33.13] - AS

Between Mark Leier and the J.S. Woodsworth chair and some contributions from political science and sociology, we were able to put together a package for the—you know, everything has to go through the Dean of Arts, as you know, or the faculty.

[00:40:54.02] - BR

No, I don't know that. I'll take your word for it.

[00:40:56.21] - AS

I mean, you can't just say, 'Oh, we're gonna have a labour studies program'.

[00:40:59.18] - BR

Oh and the Senate? Would they not have a say—

[00:41:01.06] - AS

Yeah, eventually the Senate has to approve it. So we were able to show that we've got independent money. We've got people from four or five different departments who can teach, and there's enough soft money, if you want to put it that way, to have particular courses as the case arises.

[00:41:27.29] - BR

So what's the connection between Labour Studies and the labour movement or individual unions here in British Columbia? What's the continuing connection between them?

[00:41:39.06] - AS

I couldn't shed a great deal of light on that. The person to talk to, or one of the people you could talk to, would be Layne Clark. She graduated last year, I think. I believe she would know more about how that fits, because one of our goals is to train people for careers in labour.

[00:42:15.29] - BR

Employees and workers for individual trade unions, right?

[00:42:19.06] - AS

So I mean, not everybody would agree with the model that—'You know, hey, I have to have a university degree to do things.' But the reality, Bruce, is we live in a credentialist society. It's just no longer possible to bulldoze your way into things the way, well frankly, I did. Today, you've got to have the credentials and the university should be able to meet the needs of the labour community, if you want to put it that way.

[00:43:03.13] - BR

So what's your view of—you said that there's some things you're not certain of. But what's your view of the efficacy of that vision? Is that actually happening?

[00:43:13.21] - AS

Yes, I believe that is happening. I believe we are providing a platform for people to have a sufficient background in enough disciplines, because nowadays you've got to be an expert in like six different things, right? That's why it's called labour studies. It's not called labour law or labour history. It's called labour studies.

[00:43:39.27] - BR

So what is the—I mean, do you—what is the credential that you receive to talk about credentials, a Bachelor of Arts in Labour Studies?

[00:43:50.19] - AS

Yes, it is possible to get a major or a minor.

[00:43:54.25] - BR

Okay, okay.

[00:43:59.10] - AS

So a person who's trying to arm themselves for the job market can kind of assemble a package on their CV that could potentially suit different employers. I'll give you another example of a job—I won't use the term opportunities, the reality is that the job market—philanthropy is a growing sector because of the problems in the welfare state, to put it another way. So, one of my students works for the United Way. His thesis was on relief camps, and his argument was brilliant. Look, relief camps were a one-size-fits-all solution to welfare problems in the 1930s. The idea that the relief camp could ever address the welfare issues of the 1930s is just absurd. He didn't want to get dragged into arguments about Arthur Evans and the Communist Party and things like that. Those of us of an older generation are eager to get into that, but from his point of view, really, we're talking about the role of the state. We're talking about the role of the church. We're talking about the role of philanthropy in a broad sense. So there's a concrete example of what we try to do at SFU, to prepare people for work in civil society as Jerry Zaslov would have put it.

[00:45:49.25] - BR

So Labour Studies obviously was then a key part of your work at Simon Fraser, and you retired from Simon Fraser.

[00:46:00.22] - AS

Yes, I retired over 10 years ago.

[00:46:05.22] - BR

So would you say that Labour Studies was the central focus of your work at Simon Fraser?

[00:46:12.29] - AS

No, it could not be. My role was to sit on committees and go to Pauline Jewett's apartment if need be, and talk about the Pacific Great Eastern Railway with Margaret Morgan. I mean, it was wonderful, the people I was able to meet. It really was quite extraordinary.

[00:46:41.02] - BR

So I want to shift topics just slightly and talk perhaps about some of your continuing research interests. and some of the written contributions that you've made. I know that you expressed an early interest in coal mining and coal miners and their labour representatives I think, railways as well. So, can you talk a little bit about why you were interested in those topics and what your contribution in your view, was to the history of of those parts of Canadian history?

[00:47:21.18] - AS

Well, I would say in terms of the coal industry, I was pretty well the last group of researchers who were able to talk to people involved in classic twentieth century union issues so—

[00:47:44.00] - BR

Can you explain that? Because there are representatives, I think the Steelworkers represent coal workers in the southeast of British Columbia even now.

[00:47:56.26] - AS

[...] oh sure, and I knew people like, what was his name, Allan was his name, Allan from District 18, and Anne Edwards was another very knowledgeable person. But I'm referring to people who were involved in the 1920s, '30s frame, those very old battles. About oral history, when I first started researching coal, it was just a question of you know getting a phone number and talking to people. But I was able to have one teacher of any note or consequences, and his name was Hugh Dempsey from the Glenbow Institute. Dempsey was a historian of the Blackfoot and Blackfeet in Alberta and Montana because he had married into that community. I used to spend a good part of my summers for about three or four years at the Glenbow Institute because of the records they had. He said, 'There's no difference talking to people from these outsider communities,' if you want to put it that way, 'than talking to people who are kind of confined to the reserve. It doesn't matter if the language issue is understood as a communications "problem," not some profound obstacle. You can learn how to talk to people and learn from them.' He gave me another list of people to talk to, almost all of whom were Ukrainian-Canadians, or one or two Finns, people like that.

[00:49:52.26] - AS

From Dempsey's perspective—and those interviews are at the Glenbow today.

[00:49:59.04] - BR

Interviews you conducted?

[00:50:00.13] - AS

Yeah, yeah, I conducted the interviews. He gave me the equipment and the names. From his point of view, this was—again, 'We're not gonna get into the Communist Party. If we can learn about it, great, but we're not there to rehash the history of the Bolshevik revolution or the internment camps of World War II. We're here to try to talk to these elders.' That's the way Hugh understood these people. They were elders in community.

[00:50:36.23] - BR

So more a broader social history approach?

[00:50:39.02] - AS

Yes, a social history approach. Exactly right, exactly right.

[00:50:44.02] - BR

Now you mentioned Finns. I noticed from your bibliography, there's a couple of articles you wrote about—there's one on Finnish-Canadian women, there's one on Finnish-Canadians and the Ontario miners movement. So how did you develop that interest in the Finns, emigré Finns, and their connection to labour?

[00:51:07.11] - AS

I tripped across the Finns by meeting a family named 'North' in the Crowsnest Pass. 'North' is a direct translation of a Finnish word. I forget what the name is. The Norths were Finns, like complete Finns. Oh just a few years ago, I was still talking to relatives of them. I mean their—today, they're quite assimilated into the Alberta scene. But their great-grandmother was a Finn who personally organized the Women's Labor League in Blairmore, Alberta in the 1930s.

[00:51:59.02] - BR

Blairmore is a coal mining town in the Rockies.

[00:52:02.17] - AS

That was a classic coal mining town in southwestern Alberta.

[00:52:08.24] - BR

And so what, to maybe give a flavor of that, what did you discover in your conversations with those people?

[00:52:19.17] - AS

That you had to understand that they were trying to educate the English-speaking community. You had to turn the model of, "We're here to uplift the immigrant," right on its head. From their point of view, they were educating the home country, if you like.

[00:52:54.23] - BR

The host country.

[00:52:55.18] - AS

Yeah, the host country. And this is especially true with issues to do with women, because of the uneven development of women's suffrage in Finland, for example, as opposed to Canada.

[00:53:11.16] - BR

Can you explain that a little bit more?

[00:53:14.18] - AS

Finnish women had the right to vote in elections 15 years before Canadian women did. Now, that does not mean that the voters in Finland could decide their fate. No, it didn't. But what it did mean is that you had a different type of political culture. One of my articles is based on a Finnish language magazine in—it was a monthly published in Astoria, Oregon.

[00:53:54.20] - BR

That's Toveritar.

[00:53:57.26] - AS

Toveritar, yeah.

[00:53:59.02] - BR

T-O-V-E-R-I-T-A-R.

[00:54:00.29] - BR

Yes, I was able to get that research done because of an old friend in Toronto who was a Finn, Varpu Lindström, who was a graduate student of a friend of mine. And she said, 'We can get this paper,' now this would be in the 1980s. 'Finally, we can get it,' something like a photo image of it.. You no longer had to go to Astoria, Oregon. She said, 'I'm going to translate this stuff and you're going to try to make sense of it.'

[00:54:44.11] - BR

So that was the genesis for the article?

[00:54:46.05] - AS

Yes. So that was an example of how I personally could not have done that research, because the original source was in Finnish. But we were able to link the names and addresses of people who wrote letters to the Finnish language press in the United States to people in Ontario, or people in British Columbia, and puzzle that out together. The main argument we made is that it was the Canadian government that shut down that newspaper.

[00:55:28.09] - BR

Why was that?

[00:55:29.08] - AS

Because they stopped the post office from delivering it.

[00:55:34.29] - BR

Because of its political content?

[00:55:36.27] - AS

Yes, yes. It was a pro-communist publication. So in 1930, the post office could put that paper out of business, because probably half of their readers lived in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia.

[00:55:59.07] - BR

I see you did a couple of other—there's another one on "Migration and Proletarianization: Aspects of the Finnish Immigrant Experience in Western Canadian Coal Mining", and it's published with

a—looks like a Finnish name— Siirtolaisus, S-I-I-R-T-O-L-A-I-S-U-S, slash migration, published in the '80s.

[00:56:24.29] - AS

Yes, I was able to meet up with people involved in what they call migration studies in Europe. I was not able to go to Finland, but I met them in Germany. I was able to go to a couple of conferences there. And what they argued was, 'We need some English-language sources on Finnish history', Finnish migration history.

[00:56:53.25] - BR

As a different perspective on the migration experience.

[00:56:57.27] - AS

As a different—yes, so from their point of view, my contribution as an English researcher in English-language sources, because they're bilingual in Finland, could fit their curriculum interests. So that particular piece was not a very detailed one. It was a contribution to their curriculum in Finnish.

[00:57:25.23] - BR

I want to—I'm going to introduce a prop here. I want you to talk about—this is a book called "Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord," and you wrote it with John Herd Thompson, who you mentioned earlier. So maybe you can just tell me about that. The series was a series written, I think, on the occasion of the Centenary of Canada in 1967, and there were a number of histories in sequence commissioned of the history of Canada up to that point. So maybe you can talk to me and explain just a little bit about what you and John Herd Thompson got up to in that book.

[00:58:10.26] - AS

Yeah, that's an interesting question. That series, it was called "The Centenary Series." They got money from—oh, I can't remember where. I mean, I wasn't even around at the time. In 1967, I wasn't in the academic circle. But the idea was to somehow write an encyclopedia of Canadian history, beginning with Leif. It was called the Leif to Dief idea.

[00:58:42.06] - BR

Leif being Leif Erikson?

[00:58:43.26] - AS

Yeah, you began with Greenland—

[00:58:46.18] - BR

That's very topical these days.

[00:58:46.29] - AS

And you ended up with John Diefenbaker. Just a brief aside, I used to teach a course called the 'Social History of Canada,' which was a Leif to Dief kind of thing. I'd never talked about Greenland. Let Greenland be Greenland. In any case, this idea of an encyclopedia of Canadian History was the brainchild of people back in the '60s, and by about 1980, it was beginning to run out of steam. Bill Morton, W.L. Morton, was Thompson's teacher at Manitoba, and he was the type of elder that, you know, you've met at the seminar table. Great guy to listen to.

[00:59:44.14] - BR

But he's a very eminent Canadian.

[00:59:45.25] - AS

A very eminent Manitoba—

[00:59:47.06] - BR

English language historian.

[00:59:49.08] - AS

Yes, very eminent. You know, he wrote the critique, the original critique of the old conservative interpretation of Louis Riel, for example. Like, that's foundational stuff in Canadian history, getting away from a partisan narrative of Louis Riel. So anyway, Bill Morton got Thompson to sign up for the 1922 to 1939 volume. Thompson too ran out of gas and that's when he strong-armed me into putting it together. In those days, we didn't have the email. Instead, we just sort of storyboarded it up. I'll tell you a not very funny story. My storyboard was about education. So a young person in the 1980s, I thought that residential schools might be a good topic education section. I wrote it up. There weren't many sources, but there was enough. Do you think that flew with the editors? 'No, no. Too complicated.' Because, just devil's advocate, take their position. It looked like Allen

Seager was taking an argumentative stance that the residential schools were actually part of the school system.

[01:01:35.14] - BR

Oh I see.

[01:01:37.23] - AS

Not the Indian Affairs system or the colonial system. Now, if you put me on a rack, I would have said, "Yes, they were. They were part of the school system."

[01:01:52.20] - BR

An unacknowledged—

[01:01:53.21] - AS

An unacknowledged system, and in fact, I went a little bit further. My argument was the more, quote-unquote, advanced people in the system wanted to be part of the school system. In other words, they wanted out of Indian Affairs and they wanted into the school system. But that's a very contentious argument, and it's not something you can just put together in a few paragraphs.

[01:02:25.29] - BR

So was that going to be part of this book?

[01:02:28.06] - AS

Yeah, that was going to be part of that [...]

[01:02:29.28] - BR

Okay, so that was—

[01:02:31.20] - AS

But I say it's a not very funny story because the whole thing got dropped. Later, I said, "John, can you tell me exactly what happened to my section on the residential schools?" He explained it to me.

[01:02:47.03] - BR

It was simply sensitive?

[01:02:49.27] - AS

Too complicated. So any reviewer, not that they made an issue of it at the time, but any reviewer could have poked a hole in the educational section because there's no mention of residential schools.

[01:03:07.06] - BR

So between you and John Thompson, you divided up the topics? How did that work?

[01:03:12.07] - AS

As I said, we storyboarded it out. So I was assigned the Communist Party, of course, and also the section on the trade unions in Québec, among other parts. I mean, Social Credit, I did that as well. And I think we shared the CCF. Thompson wanted control of the Bennett New Deal. I was not allowed to disturb his theories about that. So it's an interesting book, but anybody who would read it today would have to know how things were storyboarded out and how things either do or do not fit in.

[01:04:06.26] - BR

Is that evident to a reader now?

[01:04:09.16] - AS

I don't think so. Because—

[01:04:11.19] - BR

because— are there chapters that are specifically mentioned where you were the author?

[01:04:18.21] - AS

No, no.

[01:04:19.08] - BR

So it was a joint project?

[01:04:20.18] - AS

Absolutely—

[01:04:22.13] - BR

seamless that way. Oh, I see, I see.

[01:04:24.22] - AS

I'll give you a really concrete example. If we knew more about the New Deal radio broadcasts of January 1935, we would have a much better understanding of how the relief camp workers' organization got their idea of having a trek to Ottawa.

[01:04:54.09] - BR

Explain that, please.

[01:04:56.22] - AS

In January of 1935, we know from the RCMP security bulletins that Arthur Evans was in Prince George. Prince George is not a hotbed of labour activity. It's a hotbed— it's not a hotbed, it's a pulpwood logging sector, which is 100 percent non-union. Like, there's no union.

[01:05:23.04] - BR

At that time.

[01:05:24.00] - AS

That's right. That's right. The only union talk in Prince George was the Relief Camp Workers' Union. So Arthur Evans in January of 1935, he's talking to the pulpwood logging people. He's talking to the Relief Camp Workers' Union people. I think they're all listening to something on the radio about the New Deal or Franklin Roosevelt or something of that nature. Who can act on it? The loggers can't act on it. In 19— winter of '34, '35? No. But the relief camp workers can. They have a union. They have connections in Vancouver. AAs we know, during that springtime, they kind of vacated the camps, went to Vancouver, and organized something like a media event. We know from the Vancouver newspapers, we know from Vancouver radio that the relief camp workers' endeavor became a media event. How to build on that? You've got to get the Toronto Star.

[01:06:52.29] - AS

Ideally, get the CBC Radio talking about it. You know, from that perspective, this whole On-to-Ottawa movement makes a lot more sense than some of the old literature debating of you know whether Tim Buck thought it was a good idea or not.

[01:07:11.28] - BR

Or being exhorted to do things.

[01:07:13.27] - AS

Yes, yes.

[01:07:15.25] - BR

So what objective evidence could you, did you point to, or did you discover to support that theory that you've just expressed?

[01:07:26.01] - AS

Only the RCMP records, and the RCMP records, they were not allowed to comment on the CBC Radio. If an RCMP constable had made some comment about the CBC Radio, that would have been out of order.

[01:07:45.02] - BR

So they were allowed to comment on—

[01:07:46.16] - AS

They were allowed to comment on what the pulpwood loggers were talking about.

[01:07:51.15] - BR

And what about American radio then?

[01:07:54.18] - AS

That's something that I'm working on right now.

[01:07:59.26] - BR

Oh, interesting.

[01:08:00.17] - AS

We do have some records about reception in the west from Roosevelt's broadcasts.

[01:08:10.05] - BR

And by reception you mean like physical—

[01:08:12.25] - AS

Could anyone in Vancouver—

[01:08:15.24] - BR

Hear it?

[01:08:16.18] - AS

Hear it, yes.

[01:08:17.05] - BR

I see. Well, that's something to look forward to then.

[01:08:19.24] - AS

Yes.

[01:08:22.10] - BR

Is there anything else you want to say about this book in particular? Just, it's a fairly momentous time in Canadian history, those two decades.

[01:08:33.07] - AS

Yes, I think that the modern debates over the labour code, welfare, the role of the church, and above all, the shape of the state were pretty well litigated in the 1920s and '30s. I think obviously events in Spain and later in Europe would change things dramatically. But I think one could spend

a lot more time talking about the '20s and the '30s, and looking at them as one period. One of the problems with thinking about the Depression is that from, like, the standpoint of, I don't know, 1970, the Great Depression was an aberration. But we're much less inclined to believe that today. How many people today think that the Great Depression was an aberration in the history of capitalism? I mean, very, very few people have that point of view today. So if we can get away from the macro-economic stuff and look more at the social and media history and cultural history of the period, things will become a bit more clear.

[01:10:07.11] - BR

Now, speaking of more cultural and social history, I wanted to take you to a couple of areas that you had expressed interest in and written on. One was workers and class conflict in New Westminster, and also some local history of Burnaby. I think it's called the "Suburb of Happy Homes". I've not heard that term before, but so maybe we could—could we start with New Westminster?

[01:10:37.29] - AS

Yeah, let's start with New Westminster.

[01:10:39.13] - BR

Then perhaps—

[01:10:40.11] - AS

because Burnaby is kind of a—I wouldn't say—I would never use the term footnote, but it's part of the same story. New Westminster was the failed capital of British Columbia. The colonial administrators, their mistakes, I mean, you know about the land question, and one of their huge mistakes was incorporating Vancouver Island into the colony. And when that happened, then New Westminster lost its capital status. But it did have an industrial base upon which significant developments occurred. So in my view, New Westminster historically was the labour capital of British Columbia.

[01:11:29.24] - BR

I don't think I've heard that expressed before.

[01:11:33.06] - AS

I would go so far as to make that statement. I mean, Vancouver would obviously become supremely more important in terms of metropolitan development and industrial development as well. But some of the ideas in New Westminster about linking with Eastern Canada, for example, that was not obvious to trade unions on the West Coast you know around 1900.

[01:12:04.03] - BR

Can you explain just what do you mean by linking with Eastern Canada?

[01:12:08.08] - AS

Well, joining with the Trades and Labor Congress based in Toronto, or having much to do with unions in even Winnipeg. It was not obvious to trade unions here on the west coast. I think it was the New Westminster people who had that notion.

[01:12:34.12] - BR

So what was, why were they more cosmopo—

[01:12:37.25] - AS

Because they were more Canadian. Many of them were Canadians.

[01:12:43.28] - BR

In the sense of being origins—

[01:12:45.23] - AS

I'll give you an example. When I was involved in the Winter School out there, the Harrison, the trade union, I got into a bit of a—I wouldn't say an argument—but Gerry Stoney was upset with me. So I said, "Gerry [...], let's talk about New Westminster. Let's talk about your grandfather, R.A. Stoney." Well, this disarmed Gerry right away. R.A. Stoney was a printer who came from Toronto. R.A. Stoney and John Robson are two sides of the same coin.

[01:13:33.02] - BR

John Robson was—

[01:13:33.09] - AS

John Robson was the more or less Liberal politician, you know, master of events or would-be master of events in New Westminster. R.A. Stoney—

[01:13:44.13] - BR

Did he not become Premier?

[01:13:46.02] - AS

He was the Premier.

[01:13:46.29] - BR

Became Premier of British Columbia?

[01:13:48.27] - AS

R.A. Stoney represents another side of the coin. A working man, skilled trade union organizer from Toronto. He comes to work for Robson's newspaper. He wants to have a union shop. He wants to make sure the New Westminster Columbian isn't like the Toronto Globe, where the printers are thrown into jail on some trumped-up conspiracy charge. Robson and R.A. Stoney know that history. Most people in Vancouver know nothing about that, and it does influence their outcome.

[01:14:36.13] - BR

Have you written about that?

[01:14:38.29] - AS

A little bit in that piece about New Westminster, but I need to do more. I'm working on a piece about elections in New Westminster, and I hope to bring that out more clearly.

[01:14:51.04] - BR

And Burnaby?

[01:14:52.17] - AS

Burnaby is sandwiched between New West and Vancouver. In terms of elections, Burnaby is part of New Westminster, not of Vancouver. So we have a wonderful history of campaigning in

Burnaby and New Westminster around issues like conscription in 1917, labour representation in 1921. By 1925, they've got a woman on the ticket. Not a local woman, somebody from Ontario. They bring somebody in from Ontario. 'Here's where we can spread the enlightenment such as it was in Toronto, in the west. Where are we going to do that? We're going to do it in New West and we're going to do it in Burnaby.' Just as an example. Now by 1926, you have elections in New Westminster/Burnaby, where you finally have a local alderman, like a municipal farm team type of person, running on the slate. That was W.A. Pritchard, who was a ward representative in Burnaby, who became the reeve of Burnaby in 1931.

[01:16:27.29] - AS

So he represents a ward in Burnaby. He gets his name known in New Westminster, all the way out to Port Mann. That's part of his remit. Finally gets elected as reeve of Burnaby in 1931. And finally is able to get a seat at these sub-federal conferences. They were called municipal—Dominion-Provincial municipal conferences. And that is quite important in the history of Burnaby. He said, 'We are going to spend our money on improving the town, building roads, building sewers. We're not going to just, you know, give people meal tickets. We're going to have work and wages.' That lasted for about 18 months. The Victoria authorities pulled the plug and put the city under trusteeship. But still, that was a major contribution to the puzzling out of something like a modern federal system. But that would not have come about if it hadn't been for these labour people in New Westminster, and they had their own New Westminster and District Labour Council. Burnaby was part of it, and the way they, you know, wheeled and dealt.

[01:18:13.06] - BR

I recall being told or hearing, and this may be an error, that in the Depression, Burnaby went—as a municipality—it became bankrupt. Is that as a result of the trusteeship that you talked about?

[01:18:29.05] - AS

I would say that that is a legend. Burnaby was not bankrupt. The government said, 'The municipality is not spending money according to our guidelines,' and as you know, municipalities are creatures of the province. They were spending too much money on what they called public works, which meant that there wasn't enough money for sort of relief payments to families. So Victoria stepped in and said, 'If there's any public works to be done, we will do the public works. In the meantime, we will maintain our you know bare-bones standard of family relief assistance.' So to say that Burnaby was bankrupt, there's no evidence in the report that was written by a provincial appointee to support that.

[01:19:39.17] - BR

Interesting. Certainly that is a myth dispelled.

[01:19:43.13] - AS

Yes, Burnaby was not bankrupt. But what the report argued was the socialist government's policies were not sustainable given the revenue base that they had. So that meant—and you would know this very well from your time in government—that meant that the municipal socialists had to expand their planning beyond the gas and water model. They had to think about the tax base going forward. 'How are we going to build a tax base in a place like Burnaby?' New Westminster as such was too small. There wasn't the space. The railways in New Westminster had the entire waterfront. But Burnaby, there was plenty of space. Well, we're in Burnaby right now. You know, 100 years ago, Burnaby was just a patchwork of settlements.

[01:20:51.28] - AS

So that experiment with what they called municipal socialism or gas-and-water socialism, I think, had a lot to do with the development of the CCF [Co-operative Commonwealth Federation] and the NDP [New Democratic Party], from our local perspective. Building the tax base, sorting out where is the provincial lane, 'How can we get federal money for this or that thing?' As late as the Dave Barrett era, you had people like James Lorimer and people like Eileen Dailly who were extremely knowledgeable about anything to do with what you'd call municipal issues.

[01:21:48.14] - AS

You know, that was their remit. I mean, this is a contentious argument and what's that wonderful book, 'The Art of the Possible', by Geoff Meggs? That's the best source on it. But people like Lorimer had to deal with sort of university graduate level planners, like Bob Williams, for example. They could agree on some things. They couldn't agree on everything, but at least what that administration allowed people to do was to have some kind of reasoned dialogue about how to plan things out.

[01:22:37.22] - BR

My recollection is that Lorimer was the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

[01:22:41.20] - AS

Yes. So in the cabinet, Lorimer's you know Municipal Affairs was his remit. But of course, Bob Williams was you know the overall planner of things.

[01:22:59.14] - BR

Yes, yes. Bob, before he passed away, wrote a fairly detailed book about his recollection of that era. So certainly that's—

[01:23:11.23] - AS

Again, I mean I was so lucky in my career. I was able to talk to people like Bob Williams or Lorimer right?. All you needed to do was just egg them on a bit, and they could you know they could really run with it. They were wonderful people to talk to. And unfortunately, only a few of them were able to you know write something down or sit down in a forum like this.

[01:23:46.19] - BR

I think we're probably close to conclusion. I just wanted to wrap up by giving you an opportunity to reflect or comment on what you see as the future of labour studies and labour history, because in some respects labour history is not fashionable in the universities these days, is my impression.

[01:24:11.04] - AS

It's not.

[01:24:11.24] - BR

And so, what's your sense of the future of labour history, and why should we study the history of labour in British Columbia, or in Canada, or the world for that matter?

[01:24:25.04] - AS

Well, I think that we need to move a bit beyond the old debates over what is labour history. We have to understand that there is today an institutional structure generically called 'labour' that has a history, that is an interest in society, and it's a legitimate interest. We no longer have to indulge in special pleading, in my view, for labour. I think we should return to—again, I'm not describing what's going on, I'm talking about what I think should happen—

[01:25:15.05] - BR

Oh no, that's understood.

[01:25:16.18] - AS

I think there should be a more reasoned discussion of trade unions. Trade unions in the wider sense. What's going on in Europe? I mean, if Bob Williams would here it was [...], he'd be talking about Italy, right? We need to know more about trade unions as a phenomenon, as an interest, as an institution, and how they do and do not fit into national and transnational situations. I think there's a lot of room for understanding how international unions have functioned historically and how they've been transformed. For all intents and purposes, international unions don't really exist anymore.

[01:26:18.05] - AS

There's an example of something 50 years ago, if you were talking to Dennis McDermott or even Gerry Stoney, I mean, you tread very carefully on that terrain. But today it's history, and I think we can, in a genuine sense, look back on the history of trade unions in British Columbia, in Canada, in the United States, and elsewhere, and try to figure out how they can be sustained in a broad sense of the term. Because certainly we know from U.S. experience that trade unions are precarious institutions.

[01:27:09.27] - BR

Certainly the— I think the term is 'labour density', the percentage of the working population that belongs to unions has declined dramatically in the United States. It's down, I think, at eight percent, and given the current political context, I'm sure it's not going up so.

[01:27:28.14] - AS

There's just one other thing that I might want to remind people of if they're ever watching this tape. The labour studies or the sorry, the Labour Heritage Centre is in a sense connected with the tradition of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association. It's an American institution, but during my time in the university from 1984 until at least, oh, about 2010, it was a cross-border organization. And we would have the conferences every three years here in Canada and we had the full support of whoever was at the CLC. You know, you could take or leave their politics, but people like Art Kube, as one example, was a very strong supporter of the Labor History Association because in his mind, you could get people to talk about international unions away from the convention floor. You were not having resolutions on autonomy issues, right? You could sit back—not sit back, you could step back—and Art also believed that academics could play some kind of a role.

[01:29:06.08] - BR

Yeah, no, Art had intellectual interests which were not always prevalent in the group.

[01:29:14.07] - AS

Right. And, you know, looking back, a place like Sudbury, I mean, it was not a place I knew. I mean, I drove through it, but I knew that people like Art Kube or Laurier Lapierre—who was one of my teachers at McGill—I knew that they thought of Sudbury as being a kind of labour capital right? To look at history from a labour studies perspective is to kind of alter your sense of geography. That's why I was interested in the Finns in Northern Ontario, because from their point of view Sudbury was the capital. I mean politicians in Ottawa or wherever, but Sudbury was where the wealth was generated. That's where you had 12,000 people working you know in the mines.

[01:30:17.11] - AS

So I think labour history stands on very firm ground, and I urge people to try to look at things from labour's perspective. I was lucky enough to know people who had that perspective. They didn't need to read about it in books. But today, I think we do need to crack the books, at least somewhat. And thanks so much, Bruce, for the conversation.

[01:30:46.21] - BR

Well, thank you for listening to my questions and giving, I think, very full and comprehensive and thoughtful answers. I think that's so. So thank you very much, and perhaps we can conclude right there.