

Interview: David Chudnovsky (DC)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)

Assisted by: Al Cornes and Lesley Harrington

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Note: This interview is presented in two parts. This is Part 2; Part 1 was recorded on July 22, 2016, Part 2 was recorded some time after that.

[00:00:10] KN: We're here with David Chudnovsky, the BCTF President from 1999 – 2002. This is Part 2 of the interview. David, can you talk about the development of the Federation's Public Education Advocacy Plan, which we generally refer to as the five-year plan, which was developed in the response to the government actions?

[00:00:35] DC: Yeah, well as I recall, we were up against it. We, as I said last time, we were dealing with a situation where in the formal political sphere we had no allies, virtually no allies, the media were killing us, the legislation was horrific—the Bills 27 and 28. And so, we had to figure out a way to move forward from there, to a place where we could have some impact, on the public policy, the perception of teachers and public education. And, so the decision was made, and Ken Novakowski had a lot to do with this, that we would turn all of the activities of the Federation—remember, the Federation has all kinds of stuff that's going on—that in a normal situation has nothing at all to do with collective bargaining, class-size and composition, with a raise for teachers... There's professional development activities going on the whole time, there are social justice activities going on, there's economic welfare, there's pensions, there's all kinds of stuff, that's going in the Federation, that in normal times it's focused on what it is supposed to be focused on. The decision was made to take the entirety of the Federation and turn it to a plan, to begin to fight back in the public mind. And in the minds of teachers, around what our goals would be.

[00:02:30] DC: And it was very obvious, but it was also very conscious, that that would focus on the issues that had to do with the conditions, under which children learn in classrooms, in schools across the province. So, the Public Education Advocacy Plan was a plan to focus the attention and energies of teachers, the Federation and, ultimately, the public, on the need for better conditions for the kids in classrooms across the province. And I guess the one thing that I would want to say about that is, that it is a complicated thing to do in an institution, like the BCTF. Because, you got people who are very committed to their work. And, very accustomed—maybe that's even more important—to their work. So, somebody involved in professional development work, or somebody involved in pensions work, that's what they were hired for, that's what they knew, that's what they wanted to do. And it was a complicated and difficult thing, to turn. And it fell to the administrative people at the Federation, to the Executive

Director and the directors of the divisions to help their staffs to understand that that's what had to be done.

[00:04:06] DC: And it wasn't an easy thing to do, in some cases. So, that's one thing I wanted to say about the plan. The second thing I wanted to say, is that it was very formal. What we did was to implement it in a very formal way. And what do I mean by that? I mean, that you'd come to an Executive meeting, and the first thing we did was review the public education advocacy plan. For months, in my time, at least. Every time the Executive came together, (there) was what we called the PEAP Plan; the five-year Plan, which, I think, every union should have, all the time; so (it was) a strategic plan. And we would go through each division of the Federation, and discuss how that division was implementing its responsibilities under the plan. And I remember, Ken Novakowski reporting challenges in that regard at the Executive meeting. Talking about areas of the Federation work, where there was—and I am not sure what the right word is—resistance, or complications, or difficulty in implementing the plan. But the result of it was that it was a very successful exercise.

[00:05:31] DC: And, we began—well, two things happened. One, the situation in schools began to change

[00:05:39] DC: the very next year, after Bills 27 and 28: class-sizes exploded, and everything we predicted. I remember I made a million speeches in which I said, class-sizes are going to get bigger, specialist teachers are going to disappear, and schools are going to be closed. We said all of those things, and not because I was so smart, or we were so smart, but because it was the inevitable result of the legislation. All the things that we were predicting began to become true. So, the two things came together: the turn of the Federation's energy to focus entirely, virtually entirely, on telling the story of class-size and composition; of working and learning conditions, and the deterioration in working and learning conditions. It came together and you could feel the change in the public perception of what was going on.

[00:06:46] KN: Thank you. As President, and before, and, maybe, since—you've always had a special relationship with South Africa. And in particular, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union. Where did that come from, that you came to have that kind of relationship; do you want to talk about that?

[00:07:11] DC: I'd love to talk about that. So, let's think about the history of South Africa for a minute. Very important date in South African history is 1994. In April or May of 1994 the first democratic elections took place. There had been 50 years of state-sponsored, official, formal racism; the Apartheid system. And then in 1994 the first democratic elections took place and Mandela and his government were elected. For many years, leading up to 1994, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation was in touch with teachers who were living and working under the Apartheid regime. And Larry Kuehn deserves all the credit for our relationship with the then-ethnic-based teachers' organizations and unions in South Africa. Indian teachers' union in various areas, and the kind of, sort of unions—the legislation was very narrow—of African, what

we call, black people, in South Africa. And in the early 1990s there was an attempt to bring, even before democracy, when things were opening-up after the liberation organizations—African National Congress, and Pan-African Congress, South African Communist Party, the unions were un-banned, as the Apartheid government began to be forced to change its tune. There was a move to unite the teachers' unions, these ethnic-based teachers unions into one democratic teachers' union.

[00:09:12] DC: And we were in touch with the people who were involved in that—well, Larry was, to a great extent—it was him. And we brought in one of the leaders of that non-racist, non-sexist teachers' union, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union, which was just getting up and being organized.

[00:09:34] DC: Thulas

[00:09:36] DC: Nxesi was brought to Vancouver for several months, and the BCTF sent him to Cap College to the Labour Studies Program, and we all got to know him. He used to hang out at some of the BCTF stuff. Thulas said, at one of the Rep Assemblies, and I remember it very clearly, that he had been to a couple of locals and he had observed staff-rep training. What we call staff-rep training, and most unions call, steward training. And he said, you know, it would be great if—and he liked the model, and I don't want to go into all that stuff, the kind of learn from the learners model, that the BCTF used in the staff rep training—we should figure out a way for you guys to come and help us to develop that. And it happened. In August of 1994 three of us were asked to go to Johannesburg, and do a two-week, sort of train-the-trainers, staff rep training, prepare and help these folks, who... These teachers, the unions, who were they? The teacher unions were mainly, up until 1994, teachers' part of the struggle against Apartheid.

[00:11:07] DC: Now, they did some bargaining, and some negotiating, but it was very sporadic and very... Again the legislation wasn't there, and so, the day-to-day functioning of the union was something that they didn't have very much experience with. So, the three of us, Carol Whitwell, Christina Schut and I were asked to lead that workshop. It was a tremendous time for me. Met what was the sort of middle-level leaders, of what was then the brand new SADTU. Just three or four months after the Mandela's election, we were there for several weeks. And it was still a time of real instability.

[00:11:51] DC: We were told by many of those teachers, that, you know, there is likely to be a civil war, and everybody has got guns, and it is going to be scary, and they were frightened. They were very frightened. But, it was a terrific time, and there wasn't a civil war, as you know, and there was stability, and there is lots to be said of what's happened since those,

[00:12:16] DC: nearly

[00:12:17] DC: 22 years. We made friends with many of those teachers, still have relationships, individual, personal, friendship relationships, with some of those people. And then we were asked to come back a number of times, over the next few years, to

[00:12:44] DC: help with a number of things; mainly staff rep training. But there also was some professional development work, and I was there, very fortunate to be chosen, one of the people who went—that person, who went—on a number of those projects. I wanted to say that I have made good friends and still have an ongoing relationship, although our relationship with SADTU isn't as close as it once was. For all kinds of, mostly bureaucratic reasons, not to do with their commitment, or our commitment. But I do want to make one point, one very, very important point, I think. Because sometimes, when we think about our international work, we fall into the trap of thinking, we know everything, and we are going to teach these poor people from other countries about our good world and other good things that we have. And what that relationship is about, is them learning from us. Not us learning from them; and of course, that's not true. It's not true, and it's very important that we remember that's not true. There are all kinds of things that we learned.

[00:14:12] DC: I certainly learned a lot about leadership, personally, especially from one of the presidents of SADTU, Willie Madisha, who is a member of parliament now. But more important than that, during the period leading to the 2001 round of bargaining, we did something that we called bargaining forums. The BCTF Executive members, and I brought that idea to the BCTF Executive Committee, that the Executive members of the BCTF visited every single local in preparation for that round of bargaining. And the plan was, they were supposed to go out there and just listen. Just listen and observe what people were saying about bargaining objectives, and what they wanted to see, and what the conditions were in their schools. Now, some of those Executive members didn't just listen, and that was a challenge... But where did that idea come from? It came from... And it was tremendously important—because we would never would have had the strength in that round of bargaining, to face up to the government. We never would have had the successful demonstrations

[00:15:45] DC: after the passage of the legislation in January of 2002. Virtually every member participated in the fight-back then, and continuing. One of the reasons they did, was because they felt like they were involved in the life of the Federation, because they've been asked what they thought about all this stuff. Where did all that come from? It came from something I saw in South Africa.

[00:16:11] DC: It came from what they called teacher forums, that SADTU held in all of their regions and locals, at the time that I was visiting. And not just visiting, but working on various projects with them in South Africa. So, it's really, really important for us to understand that those are and need to be in our international work: relationships of solidarity, not charity. It is not about us telling them how to come into our good world. It's about some things that we know and can teach; and can share and stuff that they know and can teach, and can share.

[00:16:53] KN: As President, you launched and participated in a community and provincial process that involved a Charter for Public Education. Can you talk about that, the process, and result?

[00:17:05] DC: Sure. Except there's an error in your question. It wasn't as President. It came the year after I was Past President.

[00:17:15] KN: You introduced it

[00:17:16] KN: as President. You did, and you got it going.

[00:17:20] DC: When I was President? Well, you probably know it better than I.

[00:17:25] KN: You worked on it as Past President.

[00:17:27] DC: OK. You're way better on the dates and timing, than me. Another thing that I learned from South Africa, you know, there is something called the Freedom Charter, which the African National Congress published in the 1950s. They went and they talked to people all over South Africa about what they wanted to see, what kind of country they wanted, as opposed to the Apartheid regime. And that Freedom Charter became that kind of bible, or for the African National Congress in the coming years. Unfortunately, they haven't moved to implement it in a way that they should have, after they became the government. But it is a beautiful document, and it's a document that was written on the basis of what they heard around the country; and it inspired, and became an icon for the freedom movement. I was very taken by, and moved by the Freedom Charter in South Africa. And, as we were forced into this very, very difficult situation—not in any way comparable to the situation of the people in South Africa—but for us, in terms of being teachers, in British Columbia in the early 2000s we were in a terribly difficult situation.

[00:18:59] DC: And it came to me, in a flash, I don't know how exactly, why don't we do the same thing? Why don't we travel across the province, and ask people, not what they—and it was another concern of mine, because I've always been concerned politically, that we, as trade-unionists and teacher-unionists sound like, all we're doing is complaining, rather than... And we have lots to complain about, lots to criticize, but what about what we want? Where do we want to go? So, let's go around the province and talk to people—not just teachers—residents—about what they want to see in their public education system. And then we started thinking about it, and I remember talking with you about this at some length. It wouldn't work if it were just teachers, because it would be seen to be self-interested. So, we came up with the idea—let's have a panel of people, of interested people, of people who are committed to the public education,

[00:20:06] DC: who would sit and listen to submissions of people across the province, about what they want to see in their public education system. And we found four additional people to sit on the panel. We would have one BCTF person, and I always thought that should be me, and then the Executive agreed. George Watts, First Nations leader; you,

[00:20:31] DC: Ken, and I went to visit him and ask him if he would be prepared to sit on that panel. And he said yes right away. And he was a guy who had a tremendous respect for the

public education system; notwithstanding the fact that the public education system didn't do well for the aboriginal people in many ways over generations. John Moss, who was a former superintendent, and I can't for the life of me, remember how we came to John Moss. I think it probably was through the Parksville-Qualicum Teachers' Association group, who suggested him. Margaret Marquart, who was Anglican minister;

[00:21:16] DC: Cathy Witham, a mom, who had a child with special needs. And we went to them, and their only qualification was, we asked them: "Are you supportive of public education"? And they all said: "Yes". Beyond that, we didn't know what they thought about various issues, and there was some nervousness. There was certainly some nervousness on the Executive of the BCTF. There was debate on the Executive of the BCTF. Some people

[00:21:49] DC: said, wait a second; we're going to expend resources putting together a panel of people, who don't really know what they think; who are going to listen to people across the province, who are going to say whatever they think? And we are committed to a report at the end of it; that accurately reflects what people said around the province?! So, a number of people on the Executive were nervous about it, and said, who knows what is going to come out of this. But in the end there was support—unanimous support for what became the Charter for Public Education, which was a fantastic process. We visited dozens of communities across the province, we were entirely and completely independent of the BCTF, entirely and completely; and I will talk about the report in a second. The BCTF did provide resources, that allowed us to travel around the province, and so, typically, we would arrive somewhere, depending on the local presidents of the teachers' association to help us with advertising. We would put out the press releases, they would help us to let the community know that we were coming.

[00:23:22] DC: We'd rent a room in a public library, or a school; we'd use a school gymnasium or a library, and we'd wait for people to come and tell us what they wanted in their public education system. And we were very clear.

[00:23:37] DC: We were very clear that this was not a process for complaining about what the government was doing to public education, which was completely legit. People were very angry with what the government was doing with the public education, with the attacks on teacher rights and the cutting of resources to the public education system. So people wanted to come and start complaining about the government. And it fell to me, most of the time, to say: "We understand that you're critical of what the government is doing; but I wonder if you could turn that comment into what you want from public education, rather than what you're not happy with". We had more than 700 submissions; written and oral submissions. And we collated those. Carefully collated the submissions in a very tedious data-driven way. So, we counted every time people said there should be an emphasis on arts and culture. And it's something that's been said by many, many people. It was one of the surprises, for me, was how committed people were to music and art, and drama, and wanted that to be emphasized in the public education system. That's just one example, you know, libraries, school counsellors, and, and on, and on, and on.

[00:25:10] DC: And we collated those responses by counting the number of times that people said particular things. And the finished report... There were two documents that came out of the Charter. One of them was a longer one, but most people have never seen it—it was a long report, which reported on this process of counting. This is what people said, excerpts from what they said and quotations from what they said. And, a report on just how many times each of the issues was mentioned. And the second thing that came out of it, was the Charter itself, of which I am very proud, it is up on the walls in hundreds of schools across the province. Typically beside a picture of the Queen. You walk into a school and there is a photo of the Queen on the wall, and beside it is the Charter for Public education. I think it is a tremendous document,

[00:26:11] DC: there were

[00:26:23] DC: some weaknesses actually, in it; if I look back on it, and that's another discussion for another time. So, a couple of weaknesses, but it accurately reflects what people had to say and it is used still, to this day, as you know, to point to as a kind of guidelines and principles that people would like to see in the system.

[00:26:36] KN: Thank you, David. Let's move on, and talk a bit about your time during presidency. Do you have the most satisfying accomplishment that you'd like to talk about, or something that happened during your time that was special?

[00:26:58] DC: A satisfying accomplishment? I think, if there's one—and there are many... It's a wonderful job, there's no doubt. No job better than being President of the Federation, and there are many highlights and many moments that I cherish from that time. But in the long-term, certainly the contribution that I helped—helped, certainly didn't do on my own—that I helped to make, was to change... help change that was the atmosphere of the way that we did politics inside the Federation. Help to make it a bit less confrontational, a bit less divisive and a little bit more respectful, and united.

[00:28:00] KN: Is there anything you'd like to say about any of your experiences in the BCTF?

[00:28:06] DC: There is a million things, but enough is enough! (

[00:28:08] DC: everyone laughs)

[00:28:13] KN: Lastly, do you have any message for young teachers who might be starting their careers in public education now?

[00:28:19] DC: Well, if you'll allow me, I will say two messages. One about teaching itself and one about the Federation. And political action inside the union. I love teaching and I taught for almost three decades, and during times when we were up against it, a lot of the time. So, I guess what I want to say to young teachers is that however bad things get outside of your classroom, you, lucky duck, get to go back inside of that classroom, close the door and be with kids all day. And there is no better job! There is no more interesting job, there is no more fun job for me,

than being with kids. What a privilege, what a wonderful profession to be able to interact with kids all day, and contribute to their education and help them to grow. So, enjoy it; and however

[00:29:40] DC: depressive

[00:29:41] DC: it gets, and however difficult it gets—and it's a difficult job—it's a tiring job and sometimes it's a job that seems to have no end, you know? You could be working 26 hours a day preparing. But it's a wonderful job, and I hope that people who come after us enjoy that job. In terms of working, I always said, as Presidents, what we did was speak at a lot of new teacher inductions. Over the years, I don't know, probably, 40 or 50, at least, new teacher inductions. And one of the things I said in all my talks in those, was once you get your nose above water, after the second or third year, when you have got a few minutes, get involved in your union. For all kinds of reasons—one of the most important is, you will know what is going on. You will be among the first to hear what's happening. And the one piece of advice I would have for our future union activists, the BCTF activists, is—and it goes back to the five-year plan—I think, that one thing that we do...

[00:31:01] DC: one... it's not exactly a weakness, but one challenge that our union, and all public service unions have, is that we tend to spend most of our energy, for good reason, reacting to government. Government does something that under-cuts our profession, and we respond. And as a result we tend to be tactic-driven, as opposed to strategy-driven. Of course we need to respond to government attacks on the public education and teachers, and we'll always do that. But I think, that one of the things that our union leaders need to spend more time on, they need to find time, somehow, to think about the medium and long-term. Where are we going? What do we see for public education? What do we want the system to be? When I first became an education activist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we spent a whole bunch of our time dreaming about what a better education system could be. There were all kinds of ideas, some of them crazy. But we were—

[00:32:18] DC: and many of them were not crazy, at all—much of our energy was spent on, how do we make what is, better. What's better pedagogy, what's better school organization, what's better teacher education? All of this stuff that the education activists concerned themselves with in the late 1970s and the early 1980s,

[00:32:46] DC: fell by the way-side over the next 25 or 30 years, because we were under attack, almost all the time. But it was very important, and I hope that in the coming years, teachers will have the time and the energy and the inclination, to begin again to think about how do we make it better. Not just how do we defend what we have, which is incredibly important and shouldn't stop, but how do we make better things for the kids and communities by improving the public education system.

[00:33:18] KN: Thank you, David. We are going to move now to look at something that happened in the years beyond your presidency. And the first thing I'd like to you to comment on, first you've talked about the Public Education Advocacy Plan that was adopted and had its

initial effect while you were President. Can you look at what happened subsequently to your presidency and the next, say 4-5 years that saw the implementation of that plan, and its impact?

[00:33:58] DC: Well I can think of two or three very important moments. One of them was that the next President after me was Neil Worboys. And during his time we joined the BC Federation of Labour. Think about the change in consciousness! Of teachers, in BC. In the few years between the time of Kit Krieger's presidency and Neil's. And this is not to criticize Kit—just to think about it: if you had asked the teachers of BC, I think, we did, in 1996 or 1997,

[00:34:41] DC: do you want to be part of the BC Federation of Labour, they'd say, "No!" During Neil's time, we asked them again. And they overwhelmingly said, "Yes!" So, something happened in between, and what was very important, was, I think, two things. Well, three. One, they were under attack and they were looking for something to help defend them. Secondly, teachers began to see themselves much more clearly, as trade-unionists. They began to see themselves much more clearly as being aligned with other members, other working people, who were in unions. And whatever the third thing was that changed, I can't remember right now, so let's go onto the next thing (

[00:35:38] DC: laughs).

[00:35:40] DC: Oh, right! So, then, the next thing that happened was the 2005 action. Or was it in 2006?

[00:35:49] KN: It was 2005, as we had the election before the action.

[00:35:52] DC: Oh, right (laughs)! How quickly I forget. In 2005 I ran for the legislature, and was elected, together with a big group of New Democrats. So, in 2001 it was 77:2; in 2005 we elected 33 MLAs, and came within a very, very... it was very close, only a few thousand votes one way or the other, we might have formed government. And that, partly was a reflection of a changed attitude around public education. There was a large teacher mobilization during the 2005 election; TPAC,

[00:36:46] DC: the Teachers' Political Action Committee. And there was support for opposition, and there were more voices in the legislature; certainly more voices. And it should be said, that three—it wasn't just me, three teachers were elected in the opposition in that election. Norm MacDonald from Kootenays, I can't remember what the name of his constituency is; and Gary Coons from Prince Rupert. And then there was the next round of bargaining. And the leader, the very, very important leader if the Federation at that time was Jinny Sims. And so, I think it's important to see that as a process. The strike was in the fall of 2005?

[00:37:52] KN: October!

[00:37:53] DC: October of 2005. That wasn't a random event. It was an event that took place as part of the process, that I would argue, began in 1999. And I am not trying to say that we, back then, should take credit for the strike in 2005. Not at all, that's not my point. Jinny deserves all

the credit for the leadership during that time, it was tremendous leadership and she did a fantastic job during that time. And I am sure you spoke to her about that, and there are more details than this set of interviews. But for me, what is important, is to see all of this as progress along a continuum. So, what had happened? Well, teachers have had five years of the Public Advocacy Plan. We had discussed and talked, and had been interviewed, and put out materials, and engaged with parents, and all of that stuff for five years. And that change took place. Conditions for kids in schools had deteriorated during those five years. There was an impact on the media: there were more media voices in 2005, who were prepared to speak, if not on behalf of teachers, at least in support of the arguments, that we were making.

[00:39:29] DC: The membership had gained some confidence. I remember I used to say, in the period of 1999 bargaining process, when I spoke to teachers, I used to say, you'll know when we're strong, and when we're ready, is when every teacher in the check-out line at the Safeway or the Overwaitie, is prepared to turn around to the person behind them and say, you know I am a teacher in this town, and I want to talk to you about what is going on in classrooms. Well, I think by 2005 just about every teacher in the province was ready to do that. Or something like that. There was a kind of self-confidence that had developed, and in the form of political sphere, there were other voices. There wasn't just 77:2; in the legislature. So, that was part of the process that resulted in that amazing, amazing action that was taken by teachers. Just one anecdote that—couple, that come from there. They'll be quick. One is, there was a big rally on the steps of the legislature, at which Jinny spoke. And we came out of the legislature, some of us did, to participate in that rally and watch.

[00:41:05] DC: And I have to say I was incredibly moved, and incredibly proud; and I certainly, had tears in my eyes, when Jinny spoke. And it was tremendously moving to see the strength and the power, and the courage of teachers on that day. When I walked back into the legislature, I ran into one of the Liberal MLAs, what was the guy's name? One of the decent, one of the few decent liberal MLAs.

[00:41:40] DC: Blair Lextrom, thank you, Ken! Blair Lextrom, who was a trade-unionist, actually who had been the mayor of Fort St. John, or one of those places up there. I ran into him, and he said, something like, what are we going to do about this? And I responded, well, you guys better do something, because they're not going away. We're at the window, looking out the window at these thousands of teachers

[00:42:07] DC: on the steps, and in the grass, in front of the legislature. I said, well, you guys better do something, because those people aren't going away. And he said, I know. And I said, if there is anything I can do to help, let me... and we and it's something that happens from time to time in the legislature; we talk to somebody on the other side. Nothing ever came of it, but he was a decent guy, he understood, that something had to be done. And, you know, the eventual ending of that action, you know, there were a few improvements, that were good; and then, you know, it continues to the time of Iker and what teachers went through then. It's a process, it is not a series of isolated events; it is a process.

[00:43:00] KN: David, I wonder if you wouldn't mind talking a bit about your own political evolution in the Federation, which I would characterize, includes your increased capacity to work with a broader range of activists over time. Go back as far as you like.

[00:43:18] DC: Yeah... As you know, I was involved—I was never a member, but I was involved in the early days with some pretty left, kind of Marxist-Leninist politics. And I learned a lot from there, there was some political growth that was important for me. But in those days, I think, that my political perspective was, that the most important thing to do is to say what's right. And, to call a spade, a spade. And while I still believe that that is incredibly important, I came to understand over time, I think, that not only do you have to say what's right, but you have to say it in a way that people can hear. It's no good

[00:44:17] DC: to just rail against the reactionaries, rail against the government; complain about what is genuinely to complain about; if all you're doing is speaking into the wind. You've got to find a way to talk in a language, and with a voice that people can hear. And that for me was the most... because the point of doing this, was to make things better. It's not to... if it was simply a question of knowing what's wrong, we would have won a long time ago. We would have won a long time ago. Because there is exploitation, and there is oppression, and there is unfair treatment of children and schools, and public education. And we were right about all of that. So, if it was simply a question of calling it out, we would have won a long time ago. So, for me, the first and most important lesson is, and has been, that when you're doing politics, whether it is outside the union, or inside the union, fundamental to that is finding a way to talk in a voice that they can hear. It's not good to say, and it doesn't do anybody any good to say: "What's the matter with the members,

[00:45:50] DC: they don't come to the meeting?" And it's, in fact, incorrect. Because it can't be the members' fault, that they didn't come to the meeting. It must be the leadership's fault! It must be. Members are busy, they're teaching, they're up against it. They've got their families, they've got all kinds of things that are going on in their lives. You can't complain that the members didn't come to the meeting. You have to ask yourself, why didn't the members come to the meeting? What can I do as a leader to explain things better, to listen better, and to find language that they can hear and understand? So, for me, that was the first and the most important lesson, and it leads to the issue that you were talking about. You then have a union, especially in the Canadian model of trade-unions...in most of the world, there are multiple unions in any enterprise; and you join the one that you agree with). Not so much in Canada. In Canada, our model—in North America—our model is that we negotiate a contract that makes one union the bargaining agent. Well, one of the things that that means, is that there is going to be lots of people within the union, who don't agree with everything you have to say. And you need to know, and understand that.

[00:47:21] DC: You need to know and understand that, there are thousands of the members, who see many things different from the leadership. And part of your task, as a leader, is to find the areas where we do agree. And to deepen and broaden those areas, where we do agree. And

help people be confident that even though they don't agree with Chudnovsky about everything—and they didn't— and they didn't agree with me, or Jinny, or Jim, or anybody, about all kinds of things. But how do we then talk to people in a way, and explain the issues in a way, and help people to prioritize in their minds the issues, in such a way that we build the greatest possible unity around the greatest, the broadest program that we can. And that's the job. So it is not a question then, for me, at least, of going against your principles, or giving up on your principles, or softening the line. No, I don't think I really ever did that; or I hope I never did. It's the question of, first, talking about the issues in way that people can hear; finding the language, the examples, the metaphors, the analogies, the stories, the narratives that people can hear.

[00:48:46] DC: That's the first thing. And the secondly, helping people to be confident, that even though they don't agree with you on A,B,C and D, we can all agree on E,F and G, and that's how we have to move forward.

[00:49:01] KN: David, for a long time you were a member, and active, in the Surrey Teachers' Association. So can you take a minute—and in the previous part of the interview you have said quite a few things about the Surrey Teachers' Association, and so, basically, is there anything else you'd like to say, or make some general comments about that local. Why you've been so proud of it?

[00:49:23] DC: Well, I want to say first, that I am incredibly proud of the Surrey Teachers' Association. The STA has a history of progressive leadership that goes back 45–50 years, with tremendous, outstanding leaders. You know, some of them are the people that I had fought with, argued with about all kinds of things, at all kinds of time, but outstanding leadership! The Lloyd Edwards, and the Kerry Gibbs, and the Peter Thomsons, and the Peter Ellis, and the Moira Mackenzies, and the Brian Porters, and Stewart Schons and the Bob Rosens and the Kelly Shields and the on, and on, and on—I am missing some of the newer ones. And the people who weren't President. Tremendous energy and stick-to-it-iveness, and if they keep electing these wonderful progressive leaders, then I guess, the members are tremendous as well. So, the STA, as a local union, did terrific work over all these years, member-oriented work, a very democratic union. We've, had all kinds of issues over the many years, lots of stuff to criticize, but, on the whole, tremendously democratic, tremendously progressive, wonderful international commitments. Let me tell one last thing—we're probably coming to the end, I want to tell one last anecdote. It brings together the Surrey Teachers' Association, and the South African Democratic Teachers' Union.

[00:51:18] DC: I think the second time I went to South Africa for the BCTF, it was in our summer. And the Surrey Teachers had just had our Annual General Meeting, and there was, amazingly, a surplus, in the bank account. The STA had money left-over at the end of the year. And there was a debate at the AGM, and some of the money was given back to the members, and some of the money was used for something else, and some of the money, I think about \$10,000, a lot of money in those days (it was mid-1990s). It was about \$10,000 and a decision was made, to make

a donation to SADTU—the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union. And, off we went to do our workshop; maybe it was the first time we went, I can’t remember. Maybe it was 1994... I was in the office of SADTU, and the treasurer, the then-treasurer, Harold Samuels, wonderful guy, still a good friend; came out of the meeting of their finance committee, and I said, Harold I’ve got this cheque from my local union, and we wanted to give it to you as a donation, to SADTU.

[00:52:38] DC: And he turned to me and said” You know, I was just in the finance committee, and we’re out of money. We don’t have enough money to pay the rent, we don’t have enough money to pay salaries of the staff, and I told people, something will happen, I don’t know what, but something will happen”. What happened, was, Surrey Teachers made a donation, and they were able to pay their rent.

[00:53:03] KN: Amazing story. So, and lastly, David, you played a key role in founding of the Charter of Public Education in the time after your presidency. Can you tell us something about your continued involvement in public education in the present time?

[00:53:21] DC: Sure. I was a part of, kind of, initiated group, a discussion group, or a study group, almost, after the Charter, that was called the Great Schools Project, which was a group of teachers, former teachers, advocates, academics, that got together initially to talk about the issue of standardized testing. Again, it goes back to something that is very important for me—I was quite frustrated, I’ve been quite frustrated, but—we’re winning the debate on standardized testing. We keep winning the debate! When the government, the NDP government, brought-in the standardized testing, and the Fraser Institute began to use the results of the provincial standardized testing, it was totally accepted. I was President at the time, and it was a rough go having those kind of debates in the public. I remember discussing it with Janet Steffenhagen, who was then the education writer for The Sun, and she had no time for our critique of standardized testing. But, over the years, as teachers, and academics, and teacher advocates, and some very important people around the world began to critique both, the use of standardized testing itself, and the use of standardized testing by the right-wing think-tanks and the media,

[00:55:06] DC: we began to win that argument. But, at the end of the day, people kept saying, in my experience people would say, yeah, yeah, yeah, you were right! You’re right about the Fraser Institute, and I am not comfortable with standardized tests, but what would you do? What would you do? And how would I know how our school is doing? So, the Great Schools Project was an attempt to have a discussion about how might we determine how our schools are doing. Without replicating the kind of anti-child, anti-public education impact of the standardized testing regime. And that was a terrific process, and a number of very, very bright and thoughtful people participated in that, and we wrote a couple of articles that were published around the country. That process kind of, came to a natural end last year, and we began to think about what might come next. And, something interesting happened during the teachers’ strike that I

identify as the Jim Iker strike. I noticed in the press, in the media, that there was this professor, from UBC who kept getting quoted. Professor Wayne Ross.

[00:56:42] DC: And this guy is in every newspaper, and is on the radio all the time, during this teacher strike and he is saying all this really good stuff. And I asked Larry Kuehn, where has this guy come from, how come he's quoted all the time? And Larry says, well, some reporters asked us, if there is anybody other than the BCTF that they could talk to, who might supportive of the view. They don't want to be quoting the BCTF all the time, they wanted somebody else. And they went to Wayne Ross, and he is a very bright articulate guy. And you know how the press is—they're kind of lazy. One group, one media outlet uses somebody, and then the next one goes to the same person, and the next one; and the next. I thought, holy mackerel—it's true, you know? If you become accepted as a spokes-person, or an expert, or a media darling, it just sort of builds on itself. And so, a group of us are working on, and have just established, what we hope will become, a well-known, a kind of think-tank. A kind of public education think-tank, which is called the Institute for Public Education of British Columbia. The purpose of which, among many purposes, is to say to a media: “

[00:57:59] DC: Here we are! If you have a question of public education, and are looking for people, who have experience and knowledge, and information, and data about public education, and are prepared to speak on a pro-public education stance, we're there for you to talk to”. So, that's another little project that I have been putting some time and effort, and energy into, and we are moving forward. We are now, a society, and we have a really good board, and looks like we are going to get some funding. And we hope to become a poll for commentary on public education issues, from a pro-public education stand-point. The chair of that institute is professor Sandra Matheson, from UBC, that same Dr. Wayne Ross is involved; Dan Leitch from Simon Fraser, Larry Kuehn is involved in that group, Adrian Montani, former chair of the Vancouver School Board, who's also one of the directors of the group. And we have a whole range of activists, and advocates, and academics, who have said that they will join with us to build that organization, and we are really excited about the future of it.

[00:59:29] KN: Thank you, and we look forward to some public comments on that matter.

[00:59:33] KN: Thank you very much, David for your time, and your thoughts. Much appreciated.

[00:59:37] DC: Thank you—it was fun.