

Interview: Irene Lanzinger (IL)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)

Assisted by: Al Cornes and Lesley Harrington

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[00:00:10] KN: Good afternoon, Irene, and welcome, and thank you for doing this interview. It is July 13th, 2016, and we're interviewing Irene Lanzinger, who was the President of the BCTF from 2007 through 2010. The interviewers are Ken Novakowski and Al Cornes, and we have technical assistance from Lesley Harrington. So, Irene, we want to start off the interview by trying to find out just a little bit about your past, and that is where you were born, and when, and also, where you were raised?

[00:00:49] IL: I was born in Kelowna, my parents had very recently emigrated from Austria. My mother had only been in Kelowna for three weeks, when I was born. She traveled all the way from Austria to Kelowna eight months pregnant, and I was born. I was born a bit early. I grew up in Kelowna, went to elementary school and secondary school there—ironically, to a private school, a Catholic school for all of my school years.

[00:01:18] KN: Can you tell us anything at all about your family, and were they involved in unions, or were they progressive?

[00:01:25] IL: No, I did not come from a background of progressive politics: my father was a car dealer. He was a car mechanic; but relatively rapidly became a businessman in Kelowna and ran a car dealership. He was a SoCred and a federal Liberal, in the Trudeau years, I think. My mother was not all that forthcoming about how she voted, we talked a lot at home about news and what was going on, and probably a bit about politics, but certainly, not a left-wing family at all.

[00:02:03] KN: Just going back, you mentioned the schools you attended. Do you remember anything specifically, any experiences you had in those schools, or any teacher that you might have had, that had some kind of an impact on you, or anything like that?

[00:02:18] IL: You know, we grew up in our early years, the primary years with the nuns teaching us. I think that had an impact on me, I described myself as a fallen-away Catholic. It didn't make me in a lasting way, a religious person. And, of course I have my criticisms of the Catholic Church, and I remember the strictness of the nuns when I was very young. But by the time I got to, kind of, intermediate years, we had lay-teachers and I remember quite liking school. I was, not surprisingly, as many teachers are, quite a good student. In high-school I was quite athletic; I played basketball, I was on the track-team. And I remember early, in the years of Grade 8 and 9, and 10, I've developed what became to be my love of mathematics and science. So, I think, I really found, I think, an aptitude in my high-school years, that wasn't really reflected in the

elementary school for the sciences and for mathematics. And the teacher, probably, I remember best—I was very fortunate to have a woman, as a Physics teacher—that was very rare in British Columbia at the time, it was very rare when I became a Physics teacher.

[00:03:36] IL: But Mrs. Butler, Lois Butler, was my Physics teacher in Grade 11 and 12 and she had a big impact on me. She was very meticulous, she was a hard marker, but she was, really, a wonderful teacher. And, I think, she really did inspire me to become a teacher.

[00:03:55] KN: So, what can you tell us about your university years? Where did you go to university, what did you take, and what happened?

[00:04:01] IL: I went to UBC, and I went from a high-school of 150 to UBC, which had about 20,000 students at the time, much more now of course. So, that was a big change, but I loved it, I loved it. Loved university and of course, it was much harder to get the kind of marks I was getting in high-school, and I remember being a small fish in a big pond in the university. But I enjoyed it, particularly the social life that comes with the university. I had many good friends and we had a lot of fun together. I was known in their circles as the studious one, but certainly I had lots of fun at university. I was completely undirected, I wasn't looking at a particular career, my love of math and physics took me into the sciences and I eventually got a Physics degree. And then I was hired to be a meteorologist. And this is a not a very well-known fact about myself, that I went to Toronto to train as a meteorologist. But I was the only woman in the training program—and that shouldn't have bothered me, because I was the only woman in many Physics classes at UBC—

[00:05:15] IL: but it was very competitive program. And I remember around November and December, when the prospect of being sent to Cold Lake, Alberta, to forecast for the military came up, I thought, you know, I think I'd rather be a teacher, than a meteorologist in Cold Lake, Alberta. Cos Cold Lake did not sound like the place I wanted to live. And so, I quit. I quit the program at Christmas, it was one of the few things I've quit in my life, and I went to work for 6 or 8 months for Employment Canada, and I went back to UBC to get my teaching certificate.

[00:05:53] KN: So, where and when did you start teaching? Could you tell us a bit about your first job and subsequent jobs in teaching?

[00:06:01] IL: Yeah, I started teaching—well, I went to teacher training in 1977–78, and I met my husband Lee there. And he was going off to Japan to teach, and he said, “Why don't you come along?” So, we went to this kind of, group interview and we both got hired to teach in Japan. So, I went off with him, to teach a few years in Japan, and so, when I came back I got a job in Abbotsford. So I started my public school teaching in Abbotsford. I taught there for three years. And Lee went out to get his Master's in ESL, and then came out and taught in Abbotsford as well. Abbotsford was not well-known for their ESL program, and he really struggled; and through those three years we started talking about going abroad again. And so, we went to Saudi Arabia in 1983 and taught there for four years. And in that time period I taught elementary school,

which I still considered to be the best professional development I've ever had. I learned a lot from the teachers in the elementary school; I found it a very enriching experience.

[00:07:08] IL: I taught Grade 6 at first, for the first two years and then I was a computer specialist for K to 6. And, living in Saudi Arabia had all sorts of issues and difficulties, but—Lee taught in a university—it gave us the opportunity to travel all over Europe and Northern Africa. And I enjoyed the teaching—I was teaching in an American school, that was quite progressive and had very small classes, and so, I really enjoyed that teaching experience. When we came back to Vancouver I had a young son, and I got pregnant again, and I did my Master's degree at that time, at Simon Fraser. And when my Master's degree was done, we started to look for jobs; and we really had decided when we came back, that we were going to go to the place we wanted to live, and let the jobs come. And, that was Vancouver, so, we both eventually got jobs teaching in Vancouver. And I taught in Vancouver, and I am still, to this day, a Vancouver teacher, on leave. I taught at McGee for two years and then I went full-time to my local office.

[00:08:21] KN: Now, looking back at your years as a teacher, in Abbotsford, Saudi Arabia, and Vancouver—can you reflect on what were your highlights your joys and what were your challenges?

[00:08:37] IL: Well, I loved teaching and, kind of, to this day I miss parts of it, although I haven't done a lot of it in the past 15 years. I loved the atmosphere of schools you know, the energy of the kids; I loved the humour that comes every day. Kids are really funny, you know, think about the Grade 8s you've taught or the Grade 9s you taught. I found elementary kids were very, very funny, and very affectionate, you know, they really like their teacher. The relationships you establish with kids are always the highlights of teaching. Many, many, kids struggle with Mathematics and I found the real joy in all of the parts of my teaching and helping the kids to solve all the difficult problems, and gain skills in the Math and Science area. I had very much enjoyed my colleagues, I think that you always have a community of colleagues in a school. And people go into teaching because they love kids, or they love their subject area, hopefully, both, so there are always a lot of characters in the school. And I miss that atmosphere of the schools, I think, that is probably the thing that I miss the most.

[00:09:49] IL: But the relationships I had with kids, of course, those were the highlights. I think there are many struggles for teachers. For me, it was a struggle to do as much as I felt needed to do, to be a good teacher—there is always something else that you could be doing or should be doing. Over the years, and this is particularly true these days, and during my years in the BCTF, there is an enormous struggle for resources. You know, we've seen so many cuts in schools and you never have enough to help the kids that need help. There is never enough resources in the school to do what you feel you need to do for kids, and I think, that that is the major challenge. It was, certainly, the major challenge for me, and in my many discussions with teachers over the years, I think it is the major challenge for all teachers, really.

[00:10:43] KN: Irene, you mentioned that you taught in Vancouver; and then you went into the union office, I assume the local teachers' association office on the full-time basis. So, how and why did you get involved in your local?

[00:10:56] IL: Yeah, and we talk about this quite a lot when I talk at leadership events, particularly for women in leadership. I was pretty much always talked into it. I have to say, that was my route into leadership. I remember the President of the Vancouver Secondary Teachers coming into my school, to talk at a lunch time meeting. And her name was Ellen Smith; and she was at the front of the staff-room; and all the teachers were there. There was some controversial issue, I can't remember. We were in local bargaining, when I first got hired in Vancouver in 1990; and so, it might have been around that. But I remember teachers asking her very difficult questions and challenging her, and really pushing her; and criticising the local. And I remember thinking, how can she stay so calm? I said, "I would be yelling at these people right now, you know?" I couldn't believe how she maintained this even-tempered demeanor, and answered the questions so calmly; and that really provided the model of leadership that I aspired to. Probably, still aspire to. But I became interested in the local.

[00:12:10] IL: We were in bargaining, and in 1991 we had—I got hired in 1990, and in 1991 we had a strike. It was an eight-day strike, it was primarily about class-size. Those were the heady days of local bargaining, when we achieving things at the table, we were achieving things through strikes. We were bargaining with the Vancouver School Board, which has always been—well, I shouldn't say it has always been a progressive school board—but it is a progressive district in general. And so, I remember that strike, and as usual, when you have strike votes and strikes, you have the big meetings, to which almost everybody comes, and I got up to speak at some of those meetings. And people came up to me and said, "You should be a staff-rep, you should run for the local Executive". The only thing I ever volunteered for was to be on the Status of Women Committee. I had written my Master's degree on the feminist analyses of science, why there aren't more women in science, with a view to schools and what we do in schools. And so, I got interested in the Status of Women Committee, and then volunteered to be on the Bargaining Committee. And then, spoke up at a few meetings,

[00:13:20] IL: and then Ellen and a few others contacted me and said, "You should run for the Executive of the local". And I had really felt, that I might do that at some point in the future, but that I wasn't really ready now, but they kind of talked me into it. And before very long, it was: "You should run for Vice-President, because this other person is running and we don't really want them, we'd rather have you, so why don't you run?" And, I always had this attitude of saying, OK sure, I will try that. And I got elected as First Vice-President; that was a full-time position at the VSTA. That was in 1995. And I went on to being President of my local. And then a number of people encouraged me to apply for the Provincial Bargaining Team. By then, of course, the NDP government has brought in the provincial bargaining. And we had several relatively unsuccessful rounds, even though we had had the round where we had the Kindergarten and the primary class-size limits, and ratios for non-enrolling teachers. And by then, I was pretty much done being President—I had been President for three years, and a few

people called me up and said, “Why don’t you apply to be the Chief Negotiator for the Provincial Bargaining Team”?

[00:14:35] IL: And I was thinking, hmm, goodness, maybe I’d apply for the team, but wouldn’t been really thinking, I’d apply to be the Chief Negotiator. But I did, because a number of people suggested it, and I ended-up being the Chief Negotiator. That, of course, gave me a profile in the BCTF. And, once again, that was a terrible round of bargaining, but when it was done, a number of people on the team and the people on the Executive of the BCTF said, “You should run for Second Vice-President”; and I did. And, got elected.

[00:15:08] KN: So, going back to your term as Local President—did you say, three years?

[00:15:13] IL: Yes, I was a full-time Vice-President for two years, and a full-time President for three years. So I was a full-time officer in the Vancouver Secondary local for five years.

[00:15:21] KN: Can you remember any highlights of the three years as President of the local?

[00:15:29] IL: Well, yes, I really enjoyed that job. I look back at my time as Local President, and I think, in some ways that’s the job I enjoyed most. Partly because there was so much direct service to teachers. I loved answering the phone and teachers would have a problem; and you would get to solve that problem. And to this day I bump into Vancouver teachers, who thank me for—and I don’t even remember them. And they thank me for something that I did for them. I think, probably the most significant thing that happened in that time, and it was controversial... Funnily enough, when we look back at it, it was controversial, for the BCTF, but it was the provincial deal that we got around primary class-size limits and ratios for non-enrolling teachers. And when we look back at that language—now, the language that was stripped and is the subject of the Supreme Court challenge at the moment—we think, oh my God, that was fabulous language, and how we got it and our dealings with the government, were controversial. But it was very good language; and looking back on it, it was a very significant victory for the BCTF.

[00:16:44] IL: That was some of the best language around staffing and services to kids in the world. And when I was Chief Negotiator that was pointed out to us. And, of course, that was the round when they took all of that stuff out of our collective agreement. But I think, that was, probably, for us, in the BCTF, our most significant achievement of my time as President.

[00:17:06] KN: So, can we go back then, to talk about your experience as the Chair of Bargaining Team?

[00:17:14] KN: Did you have a co-chair?

[00:17:15] IL: Yes, Alan Crawford from the Vancouver Elementary and I were Co-chief Negotiators at the time. Yeah.

[00:17:22] KN: So, can you talk about the experience at the bargaining table at that round, and also talk about what subsequently happened in that round?

[00:17:30] IL: Yeah, that was the round, it started in the year 2000, I think, when we brought the team together. And, we had a great team, I have to say, we were full-time here around December of that year, we worked really hard to consult with teachers around the language. We had pretty good class-size language, but we were putting all of these local agreements together into a provincial agreement. We had the primary language and the staffing ratios, which we wanted improvements for. We went to the table and it was clear, that the BCPSEA team was absolutely intent on concessions. They wanted to get rid of the class-size language, talk about how difficult it was to staff schools given that language, we knew that they just wanted to get rid of that language. I mean, we talked about lots of minor issues and things, and I remember spending a lot of time coming up with the protocol agreement, which took a long time. But it was clear, that they were not going to agree to any improvements and they wanted major concessions. They did propose that we have a kind of system where we keep the same amount of staff, but the management in the school, the principals and vice-principals would have the flexibility to move that staff around.

[00:19:05] IL: Eventually, we brought in a mediator. Stephen Kelleher was the mediator. And we've been at the table for a year and a half, or so, I think, by the time he came around—by then it was the year 2001. And he worked with us back and forth, back and forth, quite a bit. But I do remember him calling us back over the Christmas Holidays and saying to us, "You know, you'd better think about what is going to happen to you, because this BCPSEA has the government on their side"...

[00:19:49] KN: Which government was that?

[00:19:50] IL: It was the Liberal government by that time, the Gordon Campbell government, which had gotten elected in 2001. Right? "And, you'd better think about what you're doing here, because that government is going to take that away from you", somehow, right? Or, they're going to legislate an agreement and you're going to lose this stuff. I am not certain that he said it quite that way, but that was certainly the message that we got from him. And so, maybe you'd better consider negotiating how that happens, rather than having it done to you. And we went away, and we talked about that, and we really felt we just couldn't do that to teachers. That, if the government was going to do that, you know, so be it, they were going to do it—we were not going to cause this change, and give up language that we fought so hard for. We were just not prepared to do that. And our, kind of, attitude was, if they're going to do it to us, they're going to do it to us; we're not doing it to ourselves. And I don't have a great memory for details of things that happened along the way, but I do remember that conversation with Stephen Kelleher, and the subsequent discussion.

[00:21:03] IL: And sure enough, in January of 2002, the government introduced legislation, that took all of the class-size provisions, all of the staffing ratios, everything to do with class-size, out

of the collective agreement. The legislation didn't take it out, but they put a process in place to take it out. And that was devastating. I mean it was terrible, terrible end to that round of bargaining.

[00:21:25] KN: Do you remember that particular day?

[00:21:48] IL: I do, I do. I was here in the building, and, I think, it was faxed to us— a heads-up that this legislation was coming. And it was a terrible day here, I mean the people—of course, at the BCTF, who had worked for the BCTF for a long time, who had been teachers and leaders in the organization; for 20–30 years, and they've been around a long time, and, certainly there were some of those people in the building, many of us had worked as activists for a long time. And people were devastated. They really saw the end of things that they had worked for, for many, many years.

[00:22:11] IL: So, it was terrible time and, of course, we were all devastated by it.

[00:22:17] KN: So, shortly after that, you were elected as a Second Vice-President

[00:22:25] KN: of the BCTF, which was a full-time position at that time. And you, actually, served as a table Officer for 8 years!

[00:22:35] IL: That's right.

[00:22:51] KN: So, what I want you to talk about is, some of the issues that happened at the time, when you were a Table Officer—you had a hand in the issues, even though you weren't President. But I'd like to hear your view of what happened and what the Federation's response was, and how that came out overall; I guess, starting with the stripping of the agreement that you refer to in January of 2002;

[00:23:07] KN: what was the Federation's response and how did you feel about that response?

[00:23:14] IL: Well, we sat down to talk about what we were going to do about that. And there was debate whether we just walk-out and go on strike, and it would have been, of course an illegal strike at that time. And in the end the decision was to have a one-day protest. And, David Chudnovsky, at the time had famously said, "This is not a one-day protest; this is day one of the protest", which, really ended-up being true. Over the years, subsequent to that statement, it really was true, because we did sit down, and start to plan what was a longer term plan. And the plan ended—although it didn't end—but the most significant result of that plan, in my leadership period, was the 2005 strike. The two-week illegal strike; and I think, to some—and I've said this various times when I've been asked to talk about leadership, that I think, to many other unions in the province, perhaps, or to the public at least, it looked like a spontaneous thing. But, really, that 2005 strike was a result of the years of planning and a number of other things that happened along the way.

[00:24:33] IL: And so we started to sit down and I think, the most significant part we started to talk about was, what do we do next time they pass legislation that either strips our collective agreement, or orders us back to work, or imposes a collective agreement? Because that had been happening to locals at the BCTF and the provincial body since the 1991–93, when Vancouver and Surrey were ordered back to work through legislation. So, for a long time governments had been enforcing collective agreements, taking things out of collective agreements, ending strikes through legislation. And the discussion we began to have with teachers, in that time after the stripping of the collective agreement, was, what are we going to do next time? What are we going to do next time they impose something on us through legislation? And I remember, many of those meetings with teachers in locals, and the teachers really started to say, “We’re going to defy that legislation”. Right? You know, others in the crowd would say, “Yes, but that would be illegal”; you know, “What would happen then”? And so,

[00:25:52] IL: we really had that discussion with teachers and planned around that, and over the three-year or four-year period—well, three-year period from 2002 to 2005. And we put a plan in place that said, you know, we are going to go into bargaining, we’ll go through the regular process of selecting a team, and deciding on objectives together and consulting teachers. We may have to take a strike vote, go on an illegal strike, but we are going to have a legislative response plan, in case they impose a collective agreement, or order us back to work when we’re on strike. And so, we put that plan in place. And so, when I look back on that, it feels to me like the government walked into the trap. Right? We were ready for them, we expected what they would do. And I don’t think they expected what we would do. And that is always the challenge in these political battles—to plan out and anticipate what the government is going to do, or the employer in some cases, and to be ready for that and to surprise them with what you’re going to do. And so, I remember so well, that period of time in September, where we had been at the bargaining table,

[00:27:17] IL: I was on the bargaining team. We had taken the strike vote, it was in the high 80s, 89% or something... We had started the first stage of the strike, you know, not doing supervision, not going to staff meetings, what we always call Phase 1. Low level, still teaching, school is still open; no report cards, I think, maybe. But, we had a legislative response plan that said, if they pass legislation, we were going to meet as an Executive and we were going to decide what to do. I was First Vice-President at the time, Jinny Sims was President. And, sure enough, they imposed legislation. And we decided as an Executive that we were going to have a second vote of our members to go on strike anyway, a full strike. And the Executive sent me over to Victoria, to be in Victoria during the debate in the Legislature. So I was on all of those difficult calls, I was on the phone making this decision to go on strike. But I was also at the Legislature, overnight, late into the night, because the NDP filibustered around that legislation.

[00:28:38] IL: And I can’t quite remember the sequence of events, but the legislation passed on late Thursday or Friday morning. And we had decided to go on strike. And we did, and the strike was ruled illegal. We had decided to go out on Friday, if I have the sequence right.

[00:28:58] IL: And

[00:28:59] IL: the strike was ruled illegal by the Labour Board on Thursday evening. And I came back to Vancouver sometime on that Thursday or Friday. And we were then on an illegal strike; and it was, I sometimes say, the longest 14 days of my life. It was a very emotional time for all of us, but we had planned it very well. And, I remembered, also, the advice of our lawyers, who said “You will never win this strike, you can’t win a strike with government, it’s an illegal strike, they can fine you and do all sorts of things to you, because they’re government and they have a lot of power”. But our response to that—or my response to that was—we have to, you know, we can’t keep letting the government get away with these things. And, indeed that’s what teachers said, when we went to talk to them on the picket-line. They were amazingly supportive, because, they, you know, they had been part of the decision-making: they voted, they had been part of everything all along. And, of course, it felt like we had trained every one of our members to be in the media. Because it got a lot of attention from the media.

[00:30:42] IL: Of course, Jinny was on the media, from early in the morning to late at night, but they also sent the media out to picket-lines. And we all remember the reporters going to Burnaby North, and interviewing a teacher named Natasha, who was a Math teacher, and the reporter said to her, “What do you think of the BCTF, they’ve taken you out on strike, now the courts have ruled you can’t get strike-pay, the BCTF has done this to you, what do you think?” And she said, “I voted to go on strike, I am the BCTF!” And that became, the button that we made! It was the most wonderful thing! The teachers were just part of it, they were so much just part of it. But that was because we did do the work to get them engaged, to make them part of the decision-making and we had spent a better part of three years doing that; so, as you can tell, I am still very emotional about it. KN/ AC: And

[00:31:47] IL: so am I!

[00:31:49] KN: So, how did that end, that strike, and why? Why do you think it ended the way it did?

[00:31:57] IL: Well, I have to say, Vince Ready got appointed as a mediator, and, of course, we had this judge that kept making these rulings, that were not completely in our favour, but allowed us to continue the strike. The judge was a bankruptcy judge, so her first ruling was we couldn’t spend money on the strike, which was why we couldn’t pay strike-pay. And that was a big media story; and I tell it as this funny story about the strike-pay, because they went out on the picket-lines and Natasha said, we are the BCTF, and it’s not about the \$50 a day and “look at this textbook!” So, teachers had a wonderful response to that, when the media went out. As soon as the strike was over, all the teachers said, “Where is my strike-pay”, you know? They wanted their money! But, of course, we couldn’t pay it because of the court order. But, in a way, we got a judge that didn’t impose a lot of penalties on the BCTF. In the end, I think, we paid a \$500,000 fine, which, for a two-week illegal strike, given what some of the predictions were, that wasn’t too bad.

[00:33:17] IL: So, the strike really ended, because we brought in Vince Ready. The government assigned Vince Ready to work with us, and he came up with recommendations. I think back on that second week, and some of the decisions we made, and we were really struggled with Ready's recommendations, because they didn't do anything about class-size or nothing significant, really about class-size and composition which is always such a huge issue for teachers. And I remember the debate at the Executive, whether we would recommend them to members, or not. And that was tough, but, we did, and in the end, our members voted to accept those recommendations. Probably, one of the most significant things that came out of that, was very good improvements for Teacher On Call. And I think, that one of the great successes of the BCTF over the last 15 years, is to bring Teacher On Call pay up to regular teacher pay. Thank goodness, because that was something that was greatly needed. We ended-up with a round-table around class-size and composition, which we participated in, but we found it as a source of frustration. I think the real success of that round of bargaining, was, that it had a big impact on the 2006 agreement.

[00:34:45] IL: So, we had that Ready deal in 2005 October, but we were already into another round of bargaining in the public sector, and I call that the bonus year. And so, we went back into bargaining the next spring, and we settled in June of 2006. And I think the fact that we had the courage to have the strike in 2005, really had an impact on the deal we got in 2006. But even with all that bargaining, the very thing that hasn't been addresses and to this day it hasn't been addressed, is the loss of that language around class-size and composition. And so. I see the BCTF continue to struggle with those issues in every round of bargaining. Because that language that we had, guaranteed service for kids, and that's really the only way to guarantee resources. The only way I know yet, that guarantees resources in the classroom, that we have control over as teachers. And so, you know, we didn't achieve that, and we got (the government to) put some money here and there; and little pieces of it, that addressed some of the issues. But, I think, that the issue of teachers struggling with resources and not genuinely feeling they have the resources to help the kids who need help; is still the major issue for teachers in the province, I suspect. Because that issue has never been successfully dealt with.

[00:36:19] KN: OK, during your time as Table Officer, there were a few other significant things that had happened. One of which was that we joined the BC Federation of Labour.

[00:36:30] KN: And

[00:36:31] KN: a couple of years later confirmed that decision, and joined the Canadian Labour Congress—both, by membership votes.

[00:36:39] KN: And so I'd be interested in getting your reflections on those two events, also, considering that you are now the President of the BC Federation of Labour, as well. Especially, it would be nice to hear what you thought of those two votes and also, what you think it meant for teachers?

[00:36:55] IL: I think, joining the BCFED was, first of all a difficult debate in the BCTF. And it looks like there were two reasons why the teachers did not want to join the BCFED. We had the progressive left-wing group in the BCTF, who thought the BCFED, particularly in the 1990s was too conservative for them. And, then we had a group of teachers who thought they were professionals, and thought it would be unprofessional to join with other labourers, or workers—an idea that has pretty much gone away, thank goodness. But, I think, we had a group of things that happened in the late 1990s and early 2000s that turned some of those things around. We've had the leadership of Jim Sinclair in the BCFED and, I think, Jim is a very progressive leader of the Federation. And, I think, that made the Federation more attractive to certain people in the BCTF. David Chudnovsky got elected as President of the BCTF and I think, that helped, because David, even though he may have been one of the ones in the 1990s, who thought the BCFED was too conservative, he was supportive of the idea. As was Neil Worboys, who succeeded him.

[00:38:24] IL: And so we had the leadership of the BCTF, who was committed to the idea of joining the FED and did a campaign on the ground, and worked to convince teachers. And my experience in the BCTF is that, it is all about what I now know as good organizing. Right? And the BCTF is a very good organizing union, even though we don't do much union-organizing. The BCTF organizes on the ground in the right way; and that is by talking to people one-on-one, and getting together, and really having a debate—a discussion—with them. And so we did that around joining the BCFED; we talked to teachers, we persuaded them we told them it was a good idea. Even then, the vote didn't pass by much, it was like 58 or 59%, as I recall. But, we did vote to join. And, I have to say, that once we joined, it was a very good place for teachers, I mean the other unions in BC love having teachers in the FED,

[00:39:36] IL: they'

[00:40:19] IL: re proud of the fact, that teachers belong to the FED in BC, which they don't in every province in Canada. And I think it was a very good fit for the BCTF. Because the BCFED is, essentially a social justice enterprise, right? It is about workers' rights, it is about raising the minimum wage, and it is about raising the progressive issues. All things that the BCTF does and joins-in with; and also, the many struggles the teachers have had over the years, those unions have been there in solidarity with them. And so, the support teachers had in the 2005 strike, for example, from the other unions in the province—other unions walked out in support of teachers in the province! Lost pay, got fined by their employers... So, there were some significant sacrifices made by other unions in the 2005 strike, and that did not go unnoticed by teachers. So, when it came to join the CLC, the vote was much higher. And the teachers happily joined—I think the vote was 75 to 80% to join the CLC. I also think, it was important that we challenged this notion, that there is some kind of a divide between professionals' and workers' rights.

[00:41:03] IL: And we have many, many, unions in the BCFED, that have people who have degrees, who have professional certificates, who have some significant level of qualifications for their job. And even for people who don't, who are trades-people or do other line of work, there

are many, many fundamental issues of rights that we all share, as workers. And, I think that teachers have come to understand that, and to appreciate that the struggles that we have as teachers and as employees of school boards, are very much in-line with the struggles other workers have across the province. And so, I think, it has been a very good thing for the BCTF to join the BCFED, for both, the BCFED and for the BCTF. I just laugh— and this is the story that I tell to people sometimes about the BCTF joining the BCFED. When we went out to talk to teachers about joining the BCFED, one of the things that came back to us from the people who were nervous about it, they said, “Well, the BCFED will make us go out on strikes in support of other unions”. And we said, “No, you know, unions are autonomous in the BCFED;

[00:42:23] IL: nobody can make you go on strike, that has to be a decision that you make and your leadership makes. The BCFED won't force you to go on strike to support other unions”. And in the time the BCTF has belonged, the only union that other unions have gone out on strike for, was the BCTF. It ended-up being the other way around that other unions walked out to support the BCTF! Not the other way around. So, I do take some joy in pointing that out to teachers, sometimes, when they talk about the relationship between the BCTF and the BCFED.

[00:42:56] KN: So, one other issue, Irene, I'd like to talk about, that happened while you were Vice-President, and that was the position on the College of Teachers, when it was changed from the one that we were used to, the one where its members were all appointed by the government. So, could you just talk about what happened, and our response to that; and, in particular, then-Education Minister Clark is now the Premier and so you might want to comment on her handling of that particular issue as well?

[00:43:32] IL: Yes, and I remember that issue with some fondness for a couple of reasons. I think that the College campaign was the key piece of the organizing that led to the strike, because it connected us with our members. And what happened, was that the government took away our democratic majority on the College, and we developed this campaign on the Executive, to refuse to pay our College fees. And most of those fees were deducted by school boards, so the first thing we had to do was sign a letter to ask the school board to not deduct our College fee. And that required us to go out and talk to teachers, and convince each one of them to sign a letter. And I think that was a very important organizing tool, that letter. I remember Linda Shuto, who was on the Executive at the time, coming the Executive Committee and proposing this process; this step-by-step process where we would refuse to pay our College fee. And the first step was simply, a letter saying please don't deduct my fee from my cheque. And I remember having a press conference with these stacks of letters that we had gathered from around the province.

[00:44:49] IL: And I go to workshops now, on organizing; we bring people now who talk about organizing in unions, and they talk about these step-by-step processes. And I think, yeah, that's what we did at the BCTF. It is exactly what we did in the College campaign. It was a very good old-school, well-run organizing campaign. And because we brought people in the position of refusing to pay their college fee, step-by-step, and they came with us. And so, we all signed these letters, don't deduct our fee, then we didn't refuse to pay our fee, we wrote a cheque to

the BCTF, we set-up an alternate fund, also, a great organizing tool. And, it is not about the money, it is about the fact that you did this to me, right? And here is my message: the money is going there. And it ended-up being pain in the neck paying all of that money back at the end, but that was also a very good organizing tool. But my best memory of that campaign, we had some boards refuse to not deduct the fee, and some teachers were freaked-out and still paid their fee, right?

[00:45:58] IL: So, I think we had about 70% compliance, about 70% of teachers in the province that didn't pay their fee—which is also a good message. You know you don't always need a 100% on these things, right? So, we had about 70% who didn't pay their fee, their College membership expired on December 31st, and on January 1st we were not going to be teachers in the province, right? The schools were going to be shut down, I guess, because we weren't going to be able to teach (laughs)! And, I think again, the government must have miscalculated: again, they thought that we would give in, that we would fold, that we would freak-out, and we just held our ground. And I remember going off on holidays, because it was Christmas break, and we hadn't paid our college fees, and I was skiing—we're skiing at Silver Star, cross-country skiing. And I was there with my husband Lee, also a teacher, and we were going into a pub to have lunch; and I got a call from Moira Mackenzie, and she said, "Christy Clark has just paid our College fees!" And I think it was, either December 30th or 31st. It was, like the day before New Year's Eve, and the government just folded and paid our fees.

[00:47:15] IL: And then we had to take that fund and pay it back to teachers. Which we did, we sent teachers their \$90 back, the teachers who paid their fees came to us and said, "I want my \$90 back" and we said "Too bad. You paid your fee". But it was a very, very successful; campaign. And every time we managed to drive the government back a little bit, it was a huge success for us, I think. And it was an important lead-up to the strike in 2005, I think, because it really taught the teachers this fundamental principal of unionism, in my view, and that is, that you can achieve amazing things, if you stick together. That sticking together is the key! And if you stick together, you can do just about anything; you can not pay your College fees and survive as a teacher, you can have a two-week illegal strike, but the organizing to ensure that people are with you and stick together, is the key part of it. And in my view, the BCTF does that extremely well.

[00:48:27] KN: And so, we've come to your presidency and you were elected in 2007 AGM to take over as President; and you remained in that role for 3 years. And in your 3 years you had no collective bargaining, essentially, happening, so you had a moment in labour, where one would say, a quiet period of time. But there were other things that did happen. And one of them was a major campaign, to eliminate the Foundation Skills Assessment. Do you want to talk about that for a bit, please?

[00:49:06] IL: Yes. The most of the media that I remember doing, when I was President, was mostly around the FSA. We boycotted it at one point, we really tried to drive the government back on the FSA test, and really get them to get rid of it. And they at one point, eventually, they

had eliminated the Grade 10 test, so it was only in Grade 4 and 7. And so, I had never administered this test as a teacher, right? But I really understood the issue, and it was an example of the BCTF taking on a professional issue for teachers and really fighting hard on it, and being persistent. Because, you know it is Grades 4 and 7 in some says it would have been easy to say, let's live with it, but teachers felt, and quite rightly, that it had an impact on their ability to teach. And testing always drives teaching, because you want your kids to do well, you have to get them ready for the test, and so you're doing stuff to get them ready, you're not doing other stuff. But it is a difficult issue in the public. Class-size and composition is an easy issue to explain to the public, you know?

[00:50:19] IL: Do you want your kids in a class of 35 or 25? Pick one, everybody gets that the 25 will be better than 35. But it is a much more difficult issue to explain to the public, why testing is bad. And so, our message was, testing is not bad, it is just standardized testing that has an impact and it can have a very negative impact. And if it is standardized testing, it should be done randomly it should be a random sample, it should be used for this purpose, and not to assess kids. And so, that was a major campaign. I think, the major success we had in that campaign, was the convincing the public started to come around. And the response from the public, was that they understood, to some degree, this issue—not universally, but I think, we made some inroads, in terms of public perception on those tests, and standardized testing. And of course similar campaigns were happening in the United States. And so, there was a public discourse around this issue of standardized testing. And the way it drives curriculum, the way it drives teaching practices, and the impact it has in schools.

[00:51:29] KN: Can you talk a bit about the Fraser Institute ranking of schools?

[00:51:34] IL: Yes! And I, actually, think that was also a success that we had, in that the papers didn't publish the Fraser Institute rankings anymore. And every single stake-holder group in education eventually agreed with us, that the fact, that these tests were used to rank schools, was really an attack on the public school system, and an attempt to undermine public education. And so, this is how the right-wing undermined public education, by ranking, and saying, public schools aren't doing very well, and we should privatize more. And so, the whole issue of privatizing, and the privatization agenda, with respect to the ranking of schools, and the Fraser Institute, was an issue that we made some head-way with, I think, over the course of my time in the leadership here.

[00:52:32] KN: Can you talk about the Federation's role in the 2009 election, and maybe going back, first touching on our role in the 2005 election, as those were the two very significant elections.

[00:52:40] IL: Yes,

[00:52:48] IL: well, in 2005 there were only three NDP MLAs, right? And, I think what the BCTF does well, is have two things in elections: one, is to try to make the public education an issue in the election. So, to raise that issue, to have an advertising campaign, to make sure that

education is something that is debated and that the public understands the impact of cuts and the importance of public education. In terms of what are the issues of this election, for the BCTF, it has always ran an issue-based campaign, and making sure that the public understands what is happening in education: school closures, the cuts to the staffing that caused class-size to go up; and, I think, that was something that we did at both of those elections, 2005 and 2009. The other significant piece of it, is to get the teachers engaged and involved in the election. And that's in terms of them having a plan in their local election, in their local riding, around the election, to hold the people who are running accountable, to make sure the issues like the election are debated. To make sure that the teachers get out and work in election campaigns, to elect the candidate that is going to support the issues that teachers want to be supported,

[00:54:26] IL: so to support public education and to talk about funding. But education is always at the forefront of these debates; so one thing that the BCTF did in both of those elections, what was is important, was to get teachers engaged in those elections on the ground and in their local areas. And so, you see a lot of teachers volunteer in campaigns, and I think, that's important. I've met all the teachers that lived in my neighbourhood, volunteering in the same campaign. And I had many MLAs talk to me about the importance of teachers working on their campaigns, because teachers bring significant level of skills to the campaigns. So, I think, one of the things that the BCTF did in both of those elections, was to encourage teachers to be very engaged in both of those elections. And that is important, it's really important. It is the only way to make sure that education is an issue, both, provincially and locally; and to make sure that people get involved in the campaign and elect candidates that are going to support our issues. And it will be a big issue next May, in 2017 we have another election coming. Elections are opportunities to change the government, and get a government that supports a public education.

[00:55:56] KN: Did the BCTF in those campaigns do anything significant, organizationally, to mobilize teachers to get involved in the election?

[00:56:04] IL: Well, we encourage every local to have a local election contact put in place, local committee around the election, to release teachers to do that, and so there was money from the BCTF to go locals to release teachers to work on the election. And to work on the local committee that was going to be engaged in the election. I think it is very significant, because it says, we are committed to electoral process, and to politics, we understand the politics and the role that politics plays and the health and well-being of the public education system, and we are going to put some resources into that. And so, you have to plan around teachers becoming engaged in the election, so I think, having that network of local election contacts, bringing them together to train them, right? So, training is always an important aspect of those campaigns. So, you set local election contacts, you bring them together, you train them, you give them some release time, and you send them back to locals to pull together a local election committee to get teachers engaged in the election. And that is one of the reasons, why teachers do get engaged in elections, and have been engaged. Because they care so deeply about issues, and they are willing to volunteer their time, to help elect candidates that support our issues.

[00:57:31] IL: And so, that is the source of MLAs saying I couldn't have gotten elected without these teachers, who came and worked on my campaign.

[00:57:42] KN: So, if you reflect back, Irene on your 3 years as President of the BCTF, what, if anything do you see as your most challenging experience, or moment?

[00:57:56] IL: Well, you know, I was President at a relatively peaceful time, I think. I don't think that there were enormous hurdles that I had to get through. When I think of my time as a Table Officer, the thing that stands out the most for me is the 2005 strike. I mean, that was the period of my leadership that I remember most dramatically, and it was an event that had a huge impact on me, and my view of the world, and my view of leadership. I think, that the biggest challenge for me, was the fact that we didn't ever, in my time, as both, a negotiator and a leader in the BCTF, and not in my time as President, make a significant impact on the issue or resources for teachers. This story of teachers telling us about their struggles with kids, and not having the resources to meet the needs of kids, was a theme that ran through all of my activism. And if there is anything that I regret—and the story isn't over yet—is that we couldn't deal with that issue. And we really couldn't deal with that issue, because governments have a lot of power,

[00:59:19] IL: and we had a government, that was right-wing. And we still have this government, that doesn't believe in the funding of public services, really. And when Gordon Campbell came to power, he talked about three unions, where one was the BCTF! The other was the HEU and the third one was BCNU, ironically, given what's happened there... And that government did go out and attack the BCTF and the HEU. And this relates to the question around the election. You know the frustration around this inability to deal with the resource issue, really comes from the fact that governments have a lot of power. So, you can do a lot of things to drive the government back—and we did, in the BCTF, and we had some success with the College campaign, with the FSA, with our strike in 2005—but in the end, you cannot achieve the things you really want to achieve in public education, without a government, that supports public education. And, I think, that is why the BCTF has always been engaged in elections, because fundamentally, we understand the relationship between politics and government, and good public services, fair taxation, and how we improve public education.

[01:00:33] IL: So, while we can make some gains, with right-wing governments in place, we cannot really make the gains we need, until we elect the government that supports us and supports public education, and really believes in it, in the way that we do as teachers. So, it is interesting how those things, kind of, come together. So my major frustration, or the major obstacle or difficulty we faced as I was President, was not being able to deal with that issue of resources for teachers. And not being able to get rid of the government that didn't support us in public education.

[01:01:11] KN: So, did you have a most satisfying moment during your years on the Executive?

[01:01:17] IL: Not, a particular moment that I can put a finger on... I do think the deal we got in 2006 was a good deal—I mean it was negotiated in a very strange way, but I did find that very

satisfying. I loved being President of the BCTF, as I think, almost everybody has, I really enjoyed the democratic decision-making of the BCTF. It is very comforting to have the processes in place that the BCTF has, you're the leader of the organization, and if you can't make a decision, you can always go to an RA or an AGM, or an Executive Committee, that will vote, and a decision will be made. And some of these people will live with it, because it was made democratically. And it was a pleasure to work for a union and be a leader of the union that is so well-organized. And has such a deep commitment to process, and to the organization, right? So, there were just fabulous people that I worked with, fabulous people on staff and on the Executive Committee, and I loved it—it was a great thing to do.

[01:02:39] KN: So, after you left the BCTF you did go back to teach for a while, and then you took on a position—elected position, at the BC Federation of Labour, as the Secretary Treasurer, and then, as of recently, you were elected as President of the BC Federation of Labour. The first woman to ever lead the BC Federation of Labour; the first teacher to also hold that position, so it is a remarkable achievement. So, I wondered, if you wouldn't mind just talking about that, and its overall impact on you, and, I think, on the BCTF as well?

[01:03:22] IL: I remember when I got elected as President, well, first of all, I got into the BCFED the same way I got everywhere else. I got talked into it, by Jim Sinclair, who came to me, and said, "You know, here's this issue, this problem we have with the BCTFED and you've got to run". A-ha, OK, I guess I'll do that... And I loved teaching at Gladstone and I remember thinking, "Oh, maybe I should just go back to teach?" cos I wanted to be back to Gladstone, to work in the school. But, I had already committed to Jim and a number of officers that I would run. And I did, and I must say, I think, it was the right decision, because I am very much enjoying my time at the BCFED. When I got elected, and I was the first woman to ever be elected, I was interviewed many times on that issue and people said, "Is that significant?" Well, first of all, I thought, well, that's a stupid question—of course, it is significant, and what is the significance? So, you know, I talk about the fact of why that's important: women are more than half the workers in this province, certainly more than half the membership of the BCFED,

[01:04:22] IL: and so it is important that a woman take on that role. And, I think, it is important, in terms of bringing a different style to leadership, sometimes women do bring different strengths to the positions of leadership; and it is important, as a role-model. Nobody really asked me the question which I thought, really should have been asked, and that is, why did it take so long for a woman to be elected as President of the FED? And I have lots of thoughts about that, but part of it is, that we still deal with a lot of patriarchy in our society, and I've been a feminist for a long time, and of course, we're not there yet. And you know, the BCFED is an organization, where leaders tend to stay on for a long time, unlike the BCTF, so you don't get that change-over, and you don't get as many women, when you have that system. So, I think, it was a funny thing being the first teacher because, the, kind of, joke is that, we took so long for the BCTF to come in, and then you took over! And I would say, it is partly true!

[01:05:32] IL: And, we haven't actually, taken over, but we have a teacher as the leader—and a member of the BCTF as the leader of the BCFED now. And I thought that there would be some reservation about that among other unions, that other unions would be, kind of, yes, you just joined, and now you're President, and... but really, there was none of that. It is not that we don't have our political struggles, in the BCFED, but people are quite delighted that there is a teacher leading the FED—and, of course, the fact that I am a woman means a lot, to other women-leaders of unions and women in leadership positions within their unions. And many of them talk to me about that. And we don't have enough (female) leaders of the unions: look at the largest 14 unions in the province; only two are led by women: That's Stephanie Smith at the BCGEU, and she is the first woman to lead that—one of the largest unions in the province. And, Val Avery at the Health Sciences Association. And so, I think, to the women-leaders, who struggle with their own issues and there aren't enough of them,

[01:06:44] IL: it is a significant thing that a woman is leading the BCFED.

[01:06:51] KN: So, during your period as a leader in the BCTF, and, of course, subsequently, but I am looking back at that period of time, you served at the BCTF Executive Table Officer, and you also attended the CLC meetings on behalf of the BCTF. Can you make any comments about that particular experience? Particularly, the CLC, which is the national body?

[01:07:22] IL: Well, I think it is very important to go to CLC and have that experience around national unions, because the BCTF is very much provincially-focused. And we have belonged to the CTF and then not belonged to the CTF; and belong to the CTF again; but CTF is not really a national union. And so, we don't have an effective way of dealing with, or grappling with federal issues, right? So, the CLC brings that opportunity to learn about, and get to know leaders of national unions, which I think is important, but also to be engaged in the debate around the national issues. And so, a good example of that, is improvements in the Canada Pension Plan, in which the CLC was key in achieving. One of the first major improvements to a public benefit that we all enjoy has just been achieved by the CLC, and I think that it is a good example of issues that we get to engage in through our work in the CLC. And, we were engaged in that at the BCFED, and the BCTF supported it, but, really I don't think that improvement to the Canada Pension Plan would have happened without the Canadian Labour Congress.

[01:08:45] IL: We have good relationships with other teacher unions in the provinces, but Ontario unions belong to the CLC and I see them all sitting together. And it is kind of a good way for the BCTF to build closer relationships with the leaders of the Ontario unions, who also belong to the CLC and to work together within that body. But, the national leader of CUPE for example—you get to know that leader through engagement at the CLC. So, there are lots of opportunities that the CLC brings to us, to use the skills that we have in the BCFED and the BCTF; and to engage in the issues that are national issues. We did a lobby at the last CLC meeting, which was very important, it was on the Canada Pension Plan, it was one the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and a ban on asbestos, which is very important issue for workers, in the country. So, I think, that ability to get to know national leaders across the country from other unions, and

to engage in issues in a broad way, that are national issues, is an important aspect of what the Canadian Labour Congress brings.

[01:10:12] IL: Next week we will meet with the premiers and the Canadian Labour Congress will be there as well. So, these opportunities to engage with leaders across the country are very important, I think.

[01:10:29] KN: So, is there anything else you would like to say, or share about your experience in the BCTF?

[01:10:40] IL: I think, that the best thing about being a leader in a union, and now in the BC Federation of Labour, is that you get to work on the things that you really believe in. And I had that great privilege—in the BCTF, I really believe in public education, as a teacher, we all do. And it is not all about your union rights—that’s an important aspect—but we don’t just fight for our rights, and union rights, but we also fight for public education. Now, at the BCFED, we have a big campaign about fair taxation and good public services. And we have our minimum wage campaign, so the important thing about the work that we do as unions, both in the BCTF and the BCFED is that we really get to fight for the things we really believe in, and make improvements in the world. And that’s what teaching was about, and where my heart was; and that’s what my work in the union has been about. And so, all I can say is, it’s been a great pleasure.

[01:11:45] KN: So, just wondering if you have any message at all for young teachers, who just might be starting out in their career at this time?

[01:11:55] IL: Well, the message I would have is that teaching is never easy, but it is always worth it. We struggle with resources, and I hear teachers say sometimes, “I wouldn’t advise my kids to go into teaching, because it is so difficult right now”. But I would always advise for people to go into teaching if that’s what they want to do, because it is a great profession. It’s a profession from the heart, where you get to engage with kids who are always funny and you’ll work with some wonderful people. And if you like kids, and like teaching, then it is a wonderful, wonderful job to have—and you will have a wonderful union, which is an added bonus.

[01:12:37] KN: OK, well thank you very much. That was great!

[01:12:42] IL: No problem, I enjoyed it!