

Interview: Jinny Sims (JS)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)

Assisted by: Al Cornes and Lesley Harrington

Date: July 11, 2016

Location: Vancouver, BC

[00:00:10] KN: We're here to interview Jinny Sims, who was the BCTF President from 2004–2007. Today is July 11, 2016; and the interviewers are Ken Novakowski, and Al Cornes, technical assistance is provided by Lesley Harrington. Good morning, Jinny.

[00:00:35] JS: Good morning.

[00:00:36] KN: So, I'd like to start by asking you where and when you were born and where you were raised.

[00:00:46] JS: Well, that's an easy one—I was born in India, in a very tiny village called Babuan, in the district of Jalandhar, which is in the Punjab; in 1952, and I spent the first 10 years of my life there, went to school there and did my first 5 years of schooling in India. But my father emigrated to England, when I was about 5 years old. So, in 1962

[00:01:21] JS: we emigrated to England, and that was my mom, my three brothers and myself. And, I'm the oldest, so it was quite a transition at that age.

[00:01:40] KN: And when did you come to Canada then?

[00:01:46] JS: Well, should I give a bit more information about England?

[00:01:49] KN: Sure!

[00:02:29] JS: Because that becomes part of where I grew up, right? Well, I grew up in England from 1962 on; and I went to school there. My first experience was at an elementary school; when I didn't speak a word of English, and was sleeping through a lot of the classes, because in those days they didn't have such a thing as ESL or anything. And then one day, when I fell asleep, a teacher threw a blackboard eraser at me and that made me fall backwards; the whole class laughed, that was a very embarrassing moment; and I decided I was going to sit up, learn the language and get on with things. And so from then on, by the end of the first year my language level moved to a point that I was moved into what they called the A Stream; and I had amazing, amazing teachers and one of the reasons I became a teacher is because of my History teacher, called Mrs. Rowe. She made history come to life. And both, the head mistress lady, and Mrs. Rowe, kind of took me under their wing, and I had amazing experiences—both, academically and in sports as well.

[00:03:09] JS: And I earned a black belt in judo, I became a head-girl at my school, and I really wanted to be a nurse. All my life I wanted to be a nurse—that's the only thing I could think about. Only after I hit my brother on the side of the head and he had a bleeding nose I realized that I couldn't cope with blood. (Laughs) Anyway, nursing went out of the window, and I went to the

[00:03:35] JS: university.

[00:03:36] JS: And I think, I may have never ended up at university, had it not been for my teachers, their encouragement and everything. It is amazing how much extra time they took with me, to make sure I was ready. And in those days you got interviewed by the universities. It wasn't just your marks, you went up. And I can remember, my teachers practising with me before I went for my interview. Now, going to university was very hard in those days, especially for a girl who was born in India and grew up in an Indian household. So, all the uncles and everybody decided that I needed to get married before I could go to university. And I'll be forever thankful to my Father, who said, absolutely not, she has earned her right to go to university, and she is going. But I have to be honest, after I got accepted at university, it was my Father who said, oh my God, you can't move away from home. And I realized my Mother's inner strength, when she said, you encouraged her; you let her know that she could go, and now she's going.

[00:04:48] JS: And my Dad was OK by the next day. I went through university, I went into teacher education and loved it, and became a teacher in England. And then Margaret Thatcher happened to England. And all of you can remember the day of "Margaret Thatcher the Milk Snatcher", so we just decided we needed to get out of England for a year or two until the Conservatives were gone. And so we started to apply for jobs out to get accepted in Bahrain, in New Zealand in Canada. And, we ended up in Canada, and Québec—Montreal is where we landed. And, we taught in Thetford Mines; in Québec.

[00:05:35] KN: Thanks, Jinny, can you—and you've given us a very nice history of your school experience and could you talk a bit about your family, in terms of whether or not it was a union family, or a progressive family, some of the politics that came from those roots?

[00:05:54] JS: Well, my Dad was a member of the Anglo-Indian Workers' Club; and anybody who knows what that is, that was basically the socialist club in India; part of the Communist Party. My Dad was a comrade and very, very progressive; both in how to raise girls, because there was lot of pressure on him to raise me very differently than I was raised; for example, don't let Jinny go on field trips, don't let Jinny do this; get her married before she could go to university. And my Dad was the one who always encouraged me—you could do anything, is what he said. Just live your dreams, but make sure that you give back to the society. And I think that's where a lot of social justice values come from. My Mother comes from more of a conservative background; and didn't really play a political role in my growing up, I would suppose, so a lot of what I would say, my political ideology and my political grounding comes from my Father. They used to have

the Indian Workers' Association meet at our house; and it was all men, I don't know, but there were never any women.

[00:07:18] JS: And they would all sit, and they would talk, and some of them had graduated from universities in Moscow, but they were all, sort of, Leninists, they were all wanting to change the world and they were all if they were born a lot earlier, they would have been the freedom fighters in India. But they were part of the freedom fighters movement; that wanted to see an independent India, but, actually, had a vision much bigger than India. They wanted to see more equal and just distribution of wealth. They would read poetry, they would read books, they would talk about their visits to Mao's camp and how some of them got there. I was given a copy of Mao's Red Book when I was 16; really quite an amazing experience from that side. Although on my Mother's side, it was the business world. Her side of the family was very much into (it)—they had retail stores, they had these major investments, warehouses, lots of property. My Dad was more... He worked very, very hard in England, and it was very important to him to have his house paid off, but he was never a person who valued wealth.

[00:08:41] JS: It was always what he could do with the money he had. And I have so much respect and love for my Dad, who isn't with me anymore; but he worked very hard and raised 6 kids. You know, two of my siblings were born in England, but he raised 6 kids and he put us through university and made education the top priority.

[00:09:10] KN: OK—can you tell us then when you started teaching in Nanaimo, and tell us a bit about your teaching experience in Nanaimo?

[00:09:20] JS: It started a little bit in England, I started teaching at what they called a high-school... not a high-school, it was a comprehensive school; it was a high-school, and I had all academic classes. But I ran a youth club after school, where I got to meet all kinds of students. And my first experience was when I walked into the Fairfax school to teach English, and I was going to be teaching the academic A-level English, immediately, the deputy headmaster thought, because of my colouring, I suppose, that I was there to teach ESL. And he took me to the ESL department, and the department head there said, I don't know you, what are you doing here, and I said, I don't know you either, but I've come here to teach English and this man has brought me here. And so, there was all that confusion there. But I had amazing, amazing experiences teaching in England, and I did, but, as I said, Margaret Thatcher got in the way and we taught in Quebec for 2 years. But I taught both, at the university and the high-school,

[00:10:30] JS: and it was a very different experience because a lot of the students were from a francophone background, but they were going to the English school. And I taught at the SECEP. That's where I taught English. But Nanaimo... to tell you the truth, we only came to BC for a holiday. We had no plans to stay; but when we got here, we thought, why not stay for a year. And we both happened to get jobs, my husband and I, and my first job was...

[00:10:53] KN: You got teaching jobs?

[00:11:16] JS: Yeah. And my first job was the Woodlands Secondary school, where I was to teach Social Studies. But the job—the teacher I was replacing—was a French teacher. And when I got there I said, I know I lived in Quebec, but I can't teach French. I still remember the principal saying, "it's OK, I am going to take care of it". So he re-arranged the schedule—this was before the contract days, right? He re-arranged everybody's time table, and miraculously I ended up with three periods of Social Studies and he said I've left you with one period of French—I've got nobody. And I said, I can't do it.

[00:11:40] JS: And he said it's Grade 8. And I said, look, my written French is OK, but my spoken French is atrocious. He said, it will be better than everybody else's just shut the door when you're speaking (everybody laughs). So, that was 1978. In January. So, I had an amazing experience, I actually did very well teaching French, though, I must admit I never wanted to do it again. So, after that the teacher came back and I got hired at another school, at Ladysmith and I had an amazing teaching experience there as well. But the most telling thing for me there was, once again, I was teaching high-school English, Grades 10, 11 and 12; but once again, the principal took me into his office; he said I really want to say something to you; and I said, what? He said, we had a teacher here from Africa who used to teach shop and, he said, we had nothing but graffiti and we had to deal with terrible racist situations. And he said, you've been here for 6 months and we haven't heard a word. Nothing, no graffiti, nobody has come in and complained; or anything, which I thought, was a bit strange at that time.

[00:13:04] JS: But in hindsight, thought on it a little bit, and realized what struggles other teachers who are not Caucasian, must have had to deal with in those days. So, basically, my career in Nanaimo kept going, and I loved every minute of it. I taught Social Studies, I taught English, I taught History 12, Lit 12, and English 12, so a wide range of things. And then I was asked if I would be their counsellor and I said, absolutely not. I love teaching, that's what I want to be, but then the principal persuaded me. He said, you're talking to half the kids, they come to you anyway, so why don't you just give it a try. And I became a high-school counsellor, and I have to admit, I absolutely loved it. All types of counselling—both, the academic counselling, dealing with students, dealing with the families, but I always kept some teaching because I didn't want to be out of the classroom. And during those (years)... It was a very, I would say, exciting time in education, if you remember, those were the days when you got a 17% pay increase, and those kinds of things happened;

[00:14:20] JS: and those were the days when you had two preparation periods at high-school, and it was really, great teaching. You had no shortage of maps, if you were a Social Studies teacher, or books, or going on field trips. I did so many Vancouver trips with my students, and for some of them it would be their first trip off the Island. And I just loved teaching. And then Vander Zalm happened. And, up until that time I wasn't involved too much in the association. But when Vander Zalm happened I was asked if I would help with some of the organizing at my school, and I said, yes, because I thought, what was happening to teachers was just not fair. So, I played a role in the original sign-ups that occurred, and when we became unionized; and after that I kind of backed-off again. And I was involved with the Year 2000 after that and working on

that curriculum, but before even the Year 2000, working on the curriculum side with the school board and with the Ministry. And after a few more years, I can remember, when Vander Zalm gave teachers that choice,

[00:15:54] JS: you know, you become a union or you remain an association—basically, that was, at the end of the day, the turning point for teachers in BC. And it was an amazing experience to have had at that time. So, during that first round of negotiations, I wasn't really playing any critical role. I was sitting on the committee called The Status of Women Committee, because I got asked to by a friend, who was chairing it in Nanaimo; and I went to that meeting a few times and took the training on Roberta's Rules of Order, which the Federation offered at that time. And I was quite content to be teaching and going to the odd meeting, and then... I received a phone-call at about 3:30 in the morning, saying, Jinny I need you to go to a bargaining session. In Nanaimo this was, and I said, I don't know anything about bargaining. What do you want me to go for? She said, well, my mother-in-law is not doing well, and we have to take her to Victoria, so you need to go; and I said, to do what? She said, you don't have to do anything.

[00:17:09] JS: I'm going to give you a file, read through some of it, and plus, they were going to be negotiating maternity leave. Paid maternity leave—and it was the first time it was on the table. She said, I've got some tables there for you, she said, just go, they just need a woman there—it was an all-male bargaining team from the teachers' side. And, my memory is, I don't know if any of you remember Nelson Allen? He phones me at about 8 o'clock in the morning and tells me to make sure I'm there on time. One, I hate it when somebody tells me to do that; and secondly, he made his next mistake. He told me to wear a skirt... And he said, you know, it's all-male teams, and so, come dressed really smart and you know, wear a skirt. To tell me to come dressed professionally is fine, you know, I always dress professionally for my job, but that just really pissed me off—sorry, that made me so angry—I didn't wear pants very much in those days, actually, I wore skirts or dresses. I actually, looked through my closet to find a pair of dress-pants, so I could wear pants and go do my thing.

[00:18:26] JS: So, I met with the team, Peter McCue was there as well; and Mark, and Nelson Allen. So, I had breakfast with them. And they went through the bargaining laws, and I must admit I was still angry after that, I wasn't really listening to what they were saying. I was still fuming over the fact I was told to wear a skirt. And, it reminded me of my practicum days, because in England you weren't allowed to wear pants at the time that I did my teaching practicum. Anyway, they then told me that I don't get to speak; I'll be sitting in the second row; and that if I have any information I want to give them, I write it on a piece of paper and pass it to Peter McCue, who was the President of the day. So, we went into bargaining, and it was exactly what it was like. Walt Dallamore, who worked for the BCTF (later), was sitting on the other side. The bargaining started, and they were talking about maternity leave and I learned something new that day—that in the agreement that existed, it wasn't a contract, but if you were a male in Nanaimo you had up to 5 days paid paternity leave, when your wife had a baby.

[00:19:44] JS: But if you were a woman, you didn't even get a day. And you could tell, men had negotiated that collective agreement! Right, so they were talking about all of this, and I was getting angrier and angrier, so at one stage I—not angry, I was a little bit bemused—remember I came from England, where you had very healthy paid maternity leave. And a lot of European countries had very good paid maternity leaves. So, I passed Peter a note and I said, can I say something? He said, of course, and he made a chair available, I moved there and so I said, I just have one question to ask... And, by the way, Al Blakey was there. And, I said, I only have one question to ask, because I am not a bargainer, I don't really understand a lot of what you're saying, but I just want to give you a scenario, that my husband and I, both started to teach at the same time. We both teach senior-level English, and what you're trying to tell me is that if we, between us, decide to have a child, you're going to give him up to 5 days "maternity leave"...

[00:20:58] JS: Is that right? And one of the responses was, yes, it's three days is a given, but you can ask for the two extra days, because sometimes the labour can be so long, and can last for days, so the extra two days may be needed for recovery... For the man, that is.

[00:21:17] JS: Right?

[00:21:18] JS: So, when I got that answer, I said, OK, just hold on a minute. So, what you're giving—my husband—I said, using it as an example—you're going to give him up to 5 days off, and I want to know what that's for: whether it's for the active insemination, that happened 9 months earlier, or whether it's for holding my hand and mopping my brow? And, the whole room froze. Nobody knew what to say, they called caucus and everybody disappeared into their rooms. And, believe it or not, when we went back, we got our paid maternity leave. And, Al Blakey put this out on SoliNet;

[00:22:05] KN: To clarify, Al Blakey was the BCTF staff person?

[00:22:08] JS: Yes. And, of course, from then on, the first time poor Steve came to a BCTF meeting, he got asked if he was the Great Inseminator, because that story went around quite a bit at that time. And, I learned a lot from that. That, in bargaining, it doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong, or how many technical arguments you have, you have to make it real and you have to relate to the people sitting across the table from you. They've got to understand the issue; not oh yea, Sweden has 12 months paid maternity leave, Hungary has 10 months paid maternity leave, or so-and-so has that. But you have to actually bring it down to that personal level, and have them make that connection. So, after that they asked me if I would run for Vice-President. I said, absolutely not. But, I did go back to the bargaining table again, I did end up running for Vice-President, and within very short time, the following year I ran for President of the Nanaimo Teachers' Association. And during that time, I mean, when I was Vice-President and President, we had teacher strikes;

[00:23:31] JS: Nanaimo was known for that; we were a bit of an in-the-forefront for setting contracts; and our last Nanaimo strike, with me being there, was when we struck for the number of special needs kids, who could be included in the classroom. We had firm class

numbers and were one of the few districts to have that, but during that round, after a lengthy strike, with the support of the parents we were able to get no more than two special needs students integrated into a regular class. And the third one only placed there while the assessment took place. And, with additional resources. So, Nanaimo teachers were very brave and very courageous, and did an amazing, amazing job at fighting for learning conditions for students, which were also their working conditions. But, as you know, they lost all of that.

[00:24:39] KN: So, Jinny, could you tell us a bit about how you moved onto to become active in the BC Teachers' Federation?

[00:24:46] JS: Well, after I finished my presidency in Nanaimo, I went to teach at a high-school, a brand new high-school, it was called the Retirement Village of Nanaimo, because it was such a beautifully built school—Dover Bay. And, I was counselling there, and really loving it, and had basically pulled-back from the local, wasn't really doing much, except I was the local rep to the BCTF. So, I was engaged in coming to three BCTF meetings a year, and went to the Summer Conference.

[00:25:24] JS: But other than that, after my presidency my focus was, mainly, my kids, and also, my classroom, or my kids, whom I was counselling. But I was engaged at the district level, and working on the curriculum, and those kind of things, non-assessment. And then, as you know, the BCTF in those days, was quite... what's the word? Polarized, in many ways. There were two distinct groups and I have to be honest, I was totally oblivious of that, to a point, until provincial bargaining was imposed. And once provincial bargaining was imposed, I became very informed about the federal scene, as well, and I became a member of Viewpoint. Many people asked why, I think, because Peter McCue was there, Mark Rigler was there, my other friends were there, and it was a progressive group. And, they were against provincial bargaining. And I'll tell you, I tore up my NDP card—membership—when we had the provincial bargaining imposed on us, because I could not believe, a labour-friendly party could destroy 70+ unions. Because that's how I saw it—I saw my union being decimated. So, when I was asked to run,

[00:27:08] JS: my friend David Chudnovsky, who became President, he had run and was on the Executive, they asked me to run, and I said no. My son was in Grade 12, going into Grade 12, so I said, no, this is not a good time for me; I'll run the following year. And they persuaded me by saying, nobody gets elected the first time around; most of us had to run, they said, to get elected, so just run, it will be a good experience. And, I ran and I got elected; which was not good news for my son, but they were great and very supportive. And the ironic part is, only because when you get elected in March, you don't actually take your position until July 1st. And then, in September people said to me, actually, at the Summer Conference, people said, you need you to run for Vice-President. And I said, no, I've just got elected for a two-year-term! And you told me it is impossible to get elected the first time around. I've just got elected and I want to do that, I don't want to run for Vice-President. But then, as you know our history, I ran for Vice-President, got elected there,

[00:28:28] JS: and the key issues for me was local autonomy, it was class-size, class composition; but it was also, the state of the union. It was to engage members and to make us more active and do the social justice part. So, I ran and I got elected, and from there it just kept going forward and I became president.

[00:28:58] KN: So, looking at that time when you were a full-time table officer, leading up to your presidency, could you talk a bit about the political, social and cultural context in the province, and what was existing at the time, and what was happening, generally, at that point in time when you became one of the leaders of the BCTF?

[00:29:24] JS: I think, BC was under siege at that time. We had a transition in government, as you know, Gordon Campbell became premier; it was social justice-wise, the Women's program had been decimated federally, and provincially, there was a growing child poverty rate, I saw growing inequities in my schools, the schools that I had left behind. I saw a lot of the things that I chose... I chose Canada to be my home; and a lot of the reasons I had chosen Canada were disappearing. The funding for education was just being decimated, class-size, as you know was stripped out of our collective agreements, HEU faced that horrendous taking-away of their rights, all of labour became under attack during that time. It seemed like a period, when to be a working person in BC it was no longer safe, and you could no longer count on what was predictable, or what was the norm because things were just happening that were unthinkable. For me it was unthinkable, that in Canada, a government could get elected and they could take... I could see that they could make changes for the future, but they could, actually, take away the rights that you had sacrificed for.

[00:31:08] JS: Remember none of those things in our collective agreements were given to us on a platter. People had sacrificed salaries and family life to fight for those. Those were things we didn't fight for to go into teachers' pockets, they were for all of society, and we watched that go. What we watched in healthcare was a very telling experience for me. And, I think, as a labour movement we made a huge, huge mistake at that time. I think that was the time for labour movement, and I think, they would have got the province around them, but, I think, everybody was shell-shocked. Even teachers were shocked by what happened. Yes, we had our huge rallies and I will always remember that one-day-strike, right? David saying, this is not a one-day-strike, this is day one of our strike; that kind of (events) gets ingrained in your mind. And I can remember that day, getting on a little plane out of Abbotsford and getting to Victoria, and trying to get downtown for the rally, and the energy that was there. But I also knew that at that time, the rest of the labour movement was in shock too.

[00:32:31] JS: I don't think people knew what to do, everybody just... I don't know, I often liken it to everybody wanting to shut the door and hope it would go away. But it didn't. We know that it just got worse and worse. So, for me, there were a lot of reasons to get involved in the Federation. At the time, within the Federation, the Status of Women program and all of our social justice programs had become combined under an umbrella. And under that umbrella I saw a dilution of the focus that we needed to have. And so, I think, the first time I spoke at a mic

was on a social justice issue. And the first time I went and, actually, was aggressive at a mic, I would say, and very firm, was to bring back the Status of Women Program. And it wasn't because I had anything to... or had any political pressure to do that, but I fundamentally believed that the work the Federation was doing in the area of rights; because when you're fighting for the rights of women, you're fighting for the rights of everybody. So, that had got diluted, as had our work on fighting racism.

[00:34:03] JS: And, I feel that today—that the Federation is not where we need to be in taking on those big fights. But the other big reason, that happened during that period, that's really important, is teachers were so shell-shocked, they shut their classroom door. They shut their classroom door and said, leave me alone. Because, when you had fought, and they've been fighting since the Vander Zalm years; when you have fought as hard as they had given up so much, then to have all that taken away, was like... Because they love teaching so much, they're in it because of their passion for teaching; they felt if they could only focus on their classroom, that everything was going to be OK. Because that's where they could have a little bit of positive experience. So, during that time, one of our biggest challenge, as a leadership was to help teachers open the door, and to let them see that the problems were not going to go away; nothing is going to be solved by closing the door. That they actually had to open the door, start talking with other teachers, start talking with the community—so that we could start rebuilding.

[00:35:31] JS: And that was a major challenge both locally and provincially. And that's a challenge. If the leadership of the day had not taken up that challenge, we would not be where we are today. We would not have gone through 2005, 2006 and other periods. But teachers had to be, almost, at the beginning, cajoled out of their classrooms. Even the long-term activists. It was just—they were burnt; they said, Jinny, how can this happen. And how come we're back at work after one day? They knew why, but at the same time it was like, what is the point? So, for me that beginning period when I was engaged at the Federation level as an elected official, it was, how do we open those doors? How do we open those doors for teachers? And how do we create a space, where they get to tell their story. And that's where, I think, the leadership of the day, led by David did an amazing job. Because we had two camps on the Executive still, at the beginning, I think, those disappeared as the struggle went on. We had set up a system, where there would be people going out, but there would be two EC members and they travelled around the province.

[00:37:02] JS: I don't think I even saw my home, never mind Nanaimo, not even my home in Vancouver for weeks, because you were on the road going from local, to local, to local, to local. Listening. And David brought that one back from South Africa, of course, where he had experienced some of that, where you go from village to village; instead of talking at people, telling them what's wrong, you just go and you create a space, you don't talk; you just listen to what they have to say. And we did that, and I travelled around the province with Patricia Clough, who belonged to a different political affiliation at the time, and we became good friends, and many other EC members. And it was a truly moving experience to go into a local and just say to teachers: "Talk." And, at first they wouldn't. Because, you had gone in from Vancouver, they

wanted you to give a speech. And when you'd say, no we can sit here, but I've said everything I'm going to say, this is your meeting; and once they started to talk, you began to hear the pain they were in, and the things that were happening in their classrooms.

[00:38:25] JS: And based on that we could then start planning some strategies on how to move on. And, you could remember, Ken, how we did the Five Year Plan? But there were many iterations of that long before that. I can remember traveling around the province at that time, with Debra MacPherson, who was the president of the nurse' union; I travelled with Art Kube, I travelled with other members of COSTCO and I travelled with labour leaders as well. And that was later on, but the first round of trips around the province were truly BCTF talking to members, and having community meetings and hearing from the community what they were experiencing.

[00:39:19] KN: Jinny, that's a very good overview of what went on in that period of time. Can you comment, because you mentioned it, about the response of the labour movement, and looking back at that period of time, why do you think the response was, given what was happening, as timid as it was? Why was it—I mean, you've given some reasons in terms of people feeling they had enough and stuff, but what was some of the other factors, like the legislature and stuff? That might have given way to create this kind of response, which was not what we felt should happen and others felt should happen, but a much more significant response from labour.

[00:40:09] JS: Nobody in labour likes to talk about fear. Right? But after you have a government that goes in and decimates the teachers' collective agreement, practically drove a truck through it; then they go after HEU and destabilize that union to the point that, well, it is still recovering, and hasn't recovered fully;

[00:40:36] JS: there is tendency to say let's form a circle and try to protect what we have. Because to take on the government right now could aim the cannons at us. I don't even called them guns, I called them cannons at that time. So, it was fear of what could be done through legislation to organized labour. I think labour of the day, the leadership—and I'm part of it—underestimated the anger and also the strength of the people at the grass-roots level. I think it was very defensive response from labour, it was a very conservative response from labour; so it was one of those "let's re-group, let's strategize". I think that was the rationalization, but, I believe it really was more shell-shock, and people froze. People froze. And once they started to come out of that freezing it was, how do we protect what we have? Because these cannons are pointed at the rest of us as well. And I've had these conversation with leaders since then about that period, and they really believed that they could achieve things at the table by sitting down with government, but that they needed to pull back a bit.

[00:42:35] JS: And they tried that, as we know. And got hammered again, and it was royal hammering. And I can remember the year, in spring after the stripping and everything; we all had said that nobody was going to settle, labour had drawn this line, right? We were all going to

negotiate and use our collective strength. But, as soon as one union settled, and everybody was starting to say yeah, they had pressure on them, they this and that; then another settled, and another settled and it just was the domino effect. So, for me, the lesson from that is, you know, it's very, very hard, Ken to inspire people if you miss that initial spark that was there. We know that, when we did our one day, which was supposed to be other unions joining as well, as you know, eventually, and when we stuck out till we heard from the HEU president, you know, that we're not going to go back; later on as well, when we went out. It just gets to me, Ken, that in many ways, in hindsight, we missed a very significant point in our history where things could have gone differently,

[00:44:04] JS: but you don't get to re-write history, you get to just live what is. And so, having lived what is, the struggle to rebuild that confidence even in the union movement, took time. And I would say, in some unions it's still taking time, because the people then begin to question the role of the collective, and what role do we play, not just in our own union, but in the larger labour movement. And I do believe there were leaders at the time, who sincerely believed that if they could sit down with government, that they could be reasonable. And you know, with a bit of give-and-take everything would work out. But with that initial hammer, that Campbell exercised, he, many ways, took away our strength. You know, I don't mean the BCTF strength necessarily, but collectively, he muted the strength right across all labour. And, in BC that's the first time I began to see people questioning, even in HEU, what's the point of belonging to a union, if this can happen to you. And, we had our own members saying that. They were very, very angry at first, but after anger came, kind of, "let's close our doors and... wait".

[00:45:52] KN: OK so you then, in this climate and at this time, you then, in 2004 became the President of the BCTF; and so we had all those cut-backs and this loss of rights, and so forth; and lots of underfunding of public education. Could you talk a bit about your first year as President and the year leading-up to the 2005 election? Remember that in the 2001 election there were only two opposition members, just two NDP members elected in the legislature, and so, this was the first election after all of this happened. What role did you and the Federation play in that election, in 2005 and could you talk a bit about that year leading up to it?

[00:46:45] JS: You know, one of the things I have to say is—I forget to mention all the legal challenges we had, right? And we did, I mean, we went to court and we won, that they were wrong to strip our collective agreement—all of those things. And legal discourse and legal fights have a role to play in the union movement, in the labour relations. But one of the things is, is that these legal fights cannot displace engaged membership action. And so, for me and it didn't happen overnight, as I said, it happened under David's presidency, was to start re-connecting with our members. Start re-connecting with them, start talking with them, start listening to what their issues are and start planning strategy. And, for teachers to be political is very hard, I don't know why, but the word "politics" you'll hear them say, oh Jinny, I'm not political—this was even, when I was Local President. It's the one word—phrase—that absolutely drives me crazy. And I have to say to teachers, teaching is political. The very act of teaching is political. Every time you choose a novel, every time you choose a newspaper article, you want to talk

about—every time you make any kind of selection, the way you present, all of it has a political element.

[00:48:19] JS: But teachers still have this thing—I just want to teach. They want to have nothing to do with the political. So, one of our biggest challenges, Ken, was to engage teachers in such a way. David, Neil and I used to be a part of the conversation, used to talk about this; is to get teachers comfortable talking about their issues. And, for me, it was to get teachers to open their doors and start talking. But also, to convince them that to be political is not a bad thing; that it is part of our everyday life. But also, the biggest challenge was convincing them that any action on their part could bring about any change, especially, when you have a legislature, that is two (members of opposition) and the rest is the Liberals. It was that hopelessness and helplessness. And that was a big, big challenge for us. But also, convincing teachers, that it doesn't matter how many legal fights we do at the end of the day, it is not going to get us what we want for education and for our communities, unless we engage in the political process. It's one thing to be political as teacher, and I don't mean partisan politics; but it was convincing teachers, that unless we get engaged in this election, unless we can have a change in government, we are not going to be able to win back what we had, never mind make further progress.

[00:49:56] JS: So, for me the biggest challenge leading up to the election was convincing teachers that it was absolutely imperative for them to get involved in the political process. It didn't matter—we didn't want them going around wearing the great big NDP signs, or anything else, because we are a non-partisan Federation. But sometimes people think, non-partisan means you can't get engaged politically. No, non-partisan means that we're here to defend the rights of teachers and to fight for a better British Columbia, for everybody. So, when you're fighting for those rights, and you need to take on a Liberal government, you do; and if you have to take on an NDP government, you do. And I did that, when I was Local President. I was very critical of the NDP, when they imposed provincial bargaining on us; and it has taken me a long time to put that on the back burner. And it still comes up to the front burner sometimes. So, for me, being politically engaged it doesn't mean and we're all of a sudden NDP and every BCTFer was going to be an NDP supporter, but we wanted them to look at the issues, and say, OK this is what this government has done to us.

[00:51:22] JS: And you can't say, people will remember, you have to tell them, over and over, and over again, that this is what Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark had done to you and the kids you teach. You've had hundreds of school closures, your class-size is undoable, special needs support is gone, ESL has been cut, learning assistance has been decimated. And your class-size—it's become impossible to teach and you don't have the resources you need. And so, you're getting burnt out. And you will burn out more unless you open that door, and get out there and start saying these things. And if you remember, Ken, it's very hard for teachers. So, the BCTF had a plan—you know, we had contacts in every local, and we do, but we had to give teachers speaking notes. Not that they didn't know these issues, but teachers get very nervous and they don't want to look political. So, I can remember talking to teachers and saying, we are not going to ask you to do anything extra because they're already burnt out under the sort-of

pressures of teaching in this new climate. So, we asked them to talk to their neighbours; we asked them, when you're buying groceries, talk to the other person in front of you and talk to the person behind you; and talk to the teller.

[00:52:43] JS: They love to have a conversation. When you take your child to the soccer practice, talk to the parents on the soccer lines. When you go to hockey practice, at 4:30 in the morning with your flask and your blanket, talk to the parents there. And, that's what I did. And I would tell teachers, you know I was at Safeway the other day—and talked to the person in front of me, then I turned to the person behind me and said, do you have any kids in the school system? And you know that's how we engaged our members. But the Federation also put incredible resources: both, human and financial. And it wasn't into the NDP coffers: I think, that's really important. Our focus was on education and on social justice issues. We talked about all that Christy Clark and Gordon Campbell had done; and the other Liberals. And we organized and we talked to our members. And our members organized in schools, and they talked to each other. And at the provincial level I travelled right across this province leading up to that election and during that election. And our members worked hard on the campaigns

[00:54:04] JS: in every riding, I would say. And they were fighting for a more just and inclusive BC; they were fighting for class-size, class composition. But you know what else they were fighting for? They were fighting for the dignity of teaching, which this government had attacked. They came after our profession through the College; and they came after our profession through many, many ways. So, that was not just for our rights as working people they were fighting, which we have to fight for; (it was also) international rights that we have that this government burdened; we were fighting for our professional rights, and for teaching. You know, teachers may not fight for too much, but if it comes to an attack on their profession, an attack on the kids they teach and their learning conditions, even the most, I would say, quiet teacher, who doesn't really want anything to do with the world out there is then willing to come out. And I would say, that it was the teacher engagement at that time that lead to the opposition electing the number of MLAs they did. And we played a role through advertising, through outreach, every which way we could and my only regret is that the Liberals still won.

[00:55:31] JS: Not because they're the Liberals, but because they're not good for BC and they're certainly not good for education and working people.

[00:55:42] KN: Ok, Jinny, then let's maybe, move onto one other issue that happened, I think, in your first year, and that was the decision by teachers and the Federation to affirm their membership in the BC Federation of Labour and to join the Canadian Labour Congress. So, we talked a bit about that decision and why you think, it happened, also, maybe talk a bit about your involvement as the BCTF President in the Canadian Labour Congress as that was first time that we were actually heading to CLC.

[00:56:17] JS: Well, I think, our membership in the Federation of Labour was a work-in-progress for many years. And, when it happened it was a very moving moment. I know people cried at

the mics and others were not so happy; but on the whole, I think, it was the right decision to be made at that time. I think one of the reasons that the vote was successful and we can give a vote of thanks to Gordon Campbell and the Liberals. I think it was all the attacks on teachers, our teaching profession and teachers began to see themselves as part of a bigger movement. We were already members of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, but they were starting to see for themselves allying with labour more and more. And labour did an incredible amount of outreach to us during that time as well. And we did a lot of outreach with them as well, and during that period when the vote was occurring—first, for the BC Federation of Labour, as you know—I don't think everybody was predicting it would be a "Yes" vote. Because, there were still some strong feelings from people, who felt we still could be aligned with labour without actually being part of the house of labour.

[00:57:50] JS: But when the vote carried, teachers are great, they will get together and say, it was the right decision—and we began to play a role as a table officer at the provincial level. And, I have to admit, I learned a lot. I have a great deal of respect for some of the presidents of the day; David Cole, president of the CEP; there was Steve Hunt, they were representing Steelworkers and IWA; and then there was Barry O'Neal—how can we forget Barry O'Neal,

[00:58:32] JS: right?

[00:59:14] JS: And you know, Brook Sundin were there—there were lots of other people there who were there as officers, and Jim (Sinclair) was President of the day. And I learned a lot from those officers in the early days, because I didn't have the kind of experience they had, either within the BCTF, nor in the labour movement. But, I learned something, that the BC Federation of Labour is a conglomerate. It's like a group of unions that has very little power in its hands, the power still rests with the individual unions, but it's like an umbrella under which they get together and see on what issues they want to work together. So, it's more like a club, than a federation, that has a lot of clout because the Federation itself, the President is only as strong as the officers that are sitting around him. So, that was an important thing to know. But it was also good to see things from other people's perspectives, I think that was good, and we brought that back here. And I was the first BCTF president to attend the CLC meeting, with you, Ken; and we went. That was a moving experience there,

[00:59:57] JS: they presented us with our certificate and all of those things; a very nice meeting; but I must admit, both at the BC Fed level and the other level I began to see the CLC, or I saw it at that time as an old boys' network. And it was very much like that. I mean, Ken Georgetti was the President of the day, very nice, always have a lot of respect for Ken, and, you know, very welcoming to us. But when we broke out into those group meetings and I was taken out to a group and talking with the women officers there, I began to realize that in the labour movement you'd always think we've made so much progress, when it comes to the role women play—and we have compared with many other sectors—but this was way back when, Ken, I realized we still had a long way to go. We still had a long way to go; and that glass-ceiling was definitely

there. And, actually I would say, even now, we have a long way to go. But it was good for us to be at the CLC;

[01:01:08] JS: there were other teacher organizations there from Ontario, and at that time we had started to negotiate who was going to have a seat at the officers' table. And, I think, that at the end everybody ended up having a seat at the officers' table, because no teachers' union was going to give up that right or that seat. For me it was a historic moment. I'm a team-player, and I know that when you're part of the BCFED and the CLC we do have to make compromises and we do have to listen to other voices at that table. But I think it's a great table, both the CLC and the BCFED, it's good for lobbying, and it's good for planning joint strategies. I think that for the future, the BCFED and the CLC has to—I know they're always active, I can't say, not be active—but they have to be more active in engaging the unions and then, the members in the political process. Because as long as they shy away from that direct involvement, we can spend millions and millions of dollars in the courts, we're not going to make it better either for workers or for Canadians, unless we get changes in government.

[01:02:41] KN: I'd like to move the discussion now to the 2005 strike. And start out by asking you to give us an idea what the scenario was in the fall of 2005, prior to the strike. What was happening? We were in bargaining, but what was going on, and then what was the trigger that initiated a lot in the fall?

[01:03:13] JS: You know, Ken, it was the day I lived, you know, literally lived 24 hours a day and it will probably be etched into my mind for a long, long time. And I would say (that day was), the best part of my experience in the Federation. I think, what happened in 2005, Ken, goes way, way back. That fight goes back to when we lost our local union bargaining, and we took on provincial bargaining. But it also goes back to the day that we had our collective agreement stripped. It was a culmination of all the work done in that decade, leading up to that particular strike. That was a long, long period and it took a long time to engage teachers. But I think, teachers are very, very fair. We gave the negotiating table every opportunity to reach a settlement. And, we weren't there to have a strike. People who say, oh, unions like to strike, I always say to them, go and give your head a shake. I've never been a part of a group that just wanted a strike for the sake of a strike. I think, when working people take a vote to go on strike they had reached that end of the road when they see no other option.

[01:04:53] JS: And teachers had been struggling. That they were fighting in the courts and they knew it was costing us millions. They had tried to bring change in government; they had really tried, worked very, very hard. It didn't work that time, and yet, more schools were being closed. You know, at this time school closures were almost like a daily announcement. More schools were being closed and classes were getting larger. More special needs students were not getting their needs met; and teachers were getting burnt out. But they were getting the fight back in them that we helped in nurturing back to grow. And they wanted to see a change, and they had seen the negotiating table as the way (forward). They had tried the political side; yes, they had brought about some change, but they now put their focus at getting agreement at the

bargaining table. And we were very, very clear with the teachers from day one, and I think, that's what helped us. That this was not going to be easy—that is, they had gone down the path of taking a strike vote—they'd better be prepared to walk. We were not asking for a strike vote just to use as leverage at the table, or to do a press conference around;

[01:06:21] JS: we were very, very clear about that. We were clear about the power and strength of the government, we were clear about what they could do legally, and we actually had in hindsight a very clear message, that every teacher could say in their sleep—every teacher in the province knew what the message was. And, they knew we were fighting for class-size; and special needs kids; they knew we were fighting for our bargaining rights. But they also knew the third message, which we said, and you're fighting for a fair salary increase. And that was the hardest one to get into teachers heads, because everybody else was suffering around them as well. And I can remember telling teachers, saying, I want you to stand in front of the mirror and I need you to practice: "I need a salary increase! I deserve a salary increase! I am going to have a salary increase!" And I used to say to them, if you can't say it out there, go out and practice in front of a mirror. Practice, class-size, class composition. Don't tell them stories of other teachers, tell them what's happening with you, but don't use kids' names.

[01:07:49] JS: And so, we had as you know, very much a grassroots campaign; we worked incredibly hard at the table. I wasn't at the table at the beginning, as you know, the president, even though you're a member of the bargaining team, you're not there all the time. We went to the table; we tried to settle, it didn't work out. And the government then—we haven't even gone on the strike, Ken, we hadn't even gone on the strike—and the government introduced legislation. And, within a very short time we had a provincial vote.

[01:08:37] KN: What did the legislation do?

[01:08:41] JS: The legislation was to order us back to work. It was to mandate an agreement, and we thought, we haven't even exercised our right to strike, which we still had—because, remember even though they limited our right to strike, our right to strike was not taken away. And we had negotiated over a number of years, some elements of that; and it was too onerous to mandate an agreement. And there was an incredible unfairness about that. So, we had to have votes—how many votes did we have, I sometimes forget? I think we had four or five votes during this period.

[01:09:25] KN: Four, for sure.

[01:09:26] JS: And that very last vote was while the legislation was being done. And, everybody said, the vote was going to not carry at that time. And that vote, the number was higher, than the vote before. And, what I liked about that vote, that took us into that strike—illegal strike, knowing it was illegal—we made a video from here, if you remember, that went out; but also, every local had to have the legal ramifications explained to them before they voted. I was on my way to Kelowna, I got pulled back from the airport, they say, we need you in Delta. Irene would go to Kelowna.

[01:10:21] JS: And

[01:10:22] JS: I turned back from the airport—I'd already checked-in—came back out, and went to Delta, because they thought the vote was going to be in trouble there. And, I remember, Alice McQuade was there, Paul Steer, Val Windsor; and they're telling me, it's not going to be good, Jinny. It's not going to be good. And Jan Eastman was there as the staff-person. And I said, well, all we can do is do our meeting; and it was a packed, packed room. I think, they thought almost every one of their members was there that day. And so, we did our presentation; and after I finished my presentation, people just started to yell, let's vote, let's vote! And I had to say, no. You're going to hear the legal ramifications of this vote, because you need to hear all of it. And we had that written out, so everybody was getting the same clear message. We read that out to them, and then Alice McQuade spoke last, and said now you've heard both, from the President, and you've heard the legal side; now you got to go and vote.

[01:11:46] JS: And they voted. And their vote was higher than the first vote they took to go on strike. And so, it came like that from right across the province.

[01:12:03] JS: And

[01:12:05] JS: we were here, all the Executive and a lot of the local presidents, had gathered and thus started our strike. Thus started our strike.

[01:12:18] KN: So, can you talk a bit about the strike itself—first of all you've told us that teachers voted overwhelmingly to go strike, even though they knew the possible legal ramifications for them personally, and the Federation, for taking this action. They overwhelmingly voted to go on strike, so could you talk a bit about the strike, the first few days; and then get into the response of the labour movement of British Columbia to the strike, response of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, and also the response of the public, of the general public, to what we were doing.

[01:12:38] JS: Yeah.

[01:12:58] JS: Well, let me take myself back there for a few moments; first of all, I have to let you know that as a President of the day, I was quite overwhelmed by the vote of confidence; and the yes vote, that the membership gave us. And I can remember sitting in your office and saying, oh my God—you know—look at this. And, I think, the whole Executive. And it would be foolish of me to say that I wasn't scared stiff... I can put on a pretty good front;

[01:13:49] JS: but there's a part of me that was absolutely scared stiff. Not scared of the government; not scared of the strike; but scared that the membership had put so much trust and they were putting so much of themselves on the line for this; of our ability to deliver; of our ability to get something for them. Also, knowing that as much as it sounds great to go on strike, that the moment you walk out, there are families that are impacted. There are the teachers' families, but there's also CUPE families, and that's a big burden, but there's also parents and the

community that is going to be impacted as well. So, all of those things are going through your mind and nobody knows this stuff is going through your mind, because you're trying to manage everything else at the same time. And our membership was incredibly strong,

[01:15:05] JS: ready,

[01:15:07] JS: I don't know how. But I have to stop a moment here and acknowledge CUPE, our sister-union. We were out there knowing, that we had taken a vote and we were going out on an illegal strike against a draconian government. We knew that. But CUPE people walked out and honoured the picket line because of us. They didn't have a vote. And they stayed solid with us till the end. They stayed solid every single day. Barry O'Neal was there with us, as was the rest of their leadership. And I think, as teachers we have to keep reminding ourselves of that over and over again. We made that decision. They did not. And they gave us that support, so hats off to CUPE. Because they, to me, had demonstrated what solidarity is, and what solidarity really means, and I'll never ever forget that. I still try to attend their conventions, even if it's only for an hour or so, just to say, thank you, because they gave me strength along with our members. So, the strike starts, as you know, and Gordon Campbell is out there, he says he's not going to talk to us; he's got the legislative hammer. And the teachers are out,

[01:16:48] JS: CUPE is supporting them, and I don't think, anybody in the labour movement except, maybe, Barry O'Neal, thought we would be out for more than a day. Or two. I've talked to some of the other leaders, saying they thought this was going to be another one of those one-day-strikes; and then we would see the light of the day. And I think, our actions, in many ways put pressure on the rest of the labour movement. Remember, they had settled? We were the only ones left. We were asking for more than the 0-0-2. Or 2-2-0, I've even forgotten which conglomeration it is. They're thinking, but we've already recommended ratification to our members, and now here, a union is going out, trying to break that mandate. So, in hindsight, I can understand their struggle, but I don't think they thought we would do what we did and we would carry on. I can remember meeting with Jim Sinclair—you were always at all those meetings, Ken—and they were always interesting meetings; and you know, he gave us support and said, we're all with you.

[01:18:18] JS: And we said, great, thank you very much; and right now let's just see how things play out. And, as you know, things escalated fairly quickly, because it was an illegal strike; the threats and everything came out far too soon; the court challenge came out much sooner than it should have done. I think they were in the courts before we even went on strike, trying to get an injunction; yeah, it was there, we didn't care, we still went out. And then we had some more earnest meetings with labour, I would say. And labour supported us. And it was hard for them; but they had their rotating strikes. People like Steel (Workers) took on huge, huge fines from then; and Steve Hunt and I are still on a regular contact; and he's a big supporter in many ways, and I am thankful to them; to CEP... The labour movement then went into what they called, rotating strikes. We were out full-time, but labour chose regions that they would go out on

different days. And, the working people supported us and it was truly, truly amazing. Our teachers thought, at the beginning, that they were going to get abused at the picket lines.

[01:20:00] JS: And I can still remember a phone-call from Dawson Creek, and it was Linda, who phoned; she was just so upset, she goes, you guys in Vancouver don't know what it's like up here! I said, Ok, what's going on, you know, are you OK? You don't know what it's like—it's OK in the big city, but here Tim Horton's wouldn't even sell us coffee, and donuts! We went there, they said, they're sold out of donuts. So, we thought, OK, how do we get donuts to them? That was my thought, right? If donuts are what the teachers up there want, how can we get donuts up to the Dawson Creek area, right? We get a phone-call within half-an-hour. "We've got donuts and coffee!" The local car dealer—a dealership owner—gone in and bought out all the donuts and was delivering them to the schools. And coffee. And they came back to us—"Oh, that was amazing, we got donuts and coffee, we didn't have to pay for it; it was delivered to the schools!" And we began to hear stories like that from around the province.

[01:21:18] JS: Yes, there were some parents that were annoyed, and the Liberals did everything they could to make the parents angry with us. But we had done our homework, we had tilled the ground. It had taken us years; we had engaged parents, our message was clear, our advertising during that time was stellar—very clear messages. We were out on ethnic media like never before. I can even remember doing Chinese media, with an interpreter. And, we took our own interpreter this time, and it was so good; and by the end of the conversation, by the end of an hour, because those interviews tend to be long, we actually had people talking about what we were doing as a human rights issue. And that was in the Chinese community; and the moderators were shocked. Because we phrased it so, that , look this isn't just about fighting for teachers' salaries; this is about fighting for your kids, for education, and it's also about fighting for the right to negotiate. And linking it to the fact that many of them left China because they didn't have that right to gather, they didn't have that right to form organizations, and to do all of those things.

[01:22:37] JS: And the fact that I spoke Punjabi, which, by the way, now, is brilliant; it wasn't that great at the beginning, we were able to absolutely do both, TV and Punjabi radio stations. I could (do it) even from sitting here, didn't have to be in Surrey, or anywhere else. And the news covered us, I mean, an illegal strike, and especially, teachers doing something illegal, it was big news in those days. So, we didn't have 2 or 3 cameras, as you know, in those days there were many cameras; our foyer used to be like a recording studio, and then they'd be parked in the parking lot out there, and there'd always be a car following us, as you know, Ken, wherever we went. And our teachers were amazing. They were amazing. As you know, I went to a picket line every morning, before I started my day, and throughout the day I would attend different picket lines. And if I was getting a little bit anxious, they always gave me the strength. And I will always remember a young woman from Burnaby: when the media tried to get her to say that, c'mon, you're a young teacher, you're going to get a record, you'll end up not being able to teach, and you're letting Jinny Sims tell you to do this?

[01:24:08] JS: And, I hugged her till you won't believe it, when she replied: Jinny Sims doesn't tell us what to do—we tell Jinny Sims

[01:24:17] JS: what to do. And I was in Victoria when I saw that clip, and it made me cry. I still get emotional when I think about that; and that was the power of this job action, this strike; this civil disobedience; and that was that the strike belonged to the teachers. It didn't belong to the BCTF, it didn't belong to the President, it didn't belong to the Executive. This strike was owned and run by the teachers. And they were truly amazing, amazing, amazing—whenever I went, whether I was in Victoria, I flew to Kelowna, I had meetings throughout. I didn't just stay here; but understandably, I was always where I could get back to the Lower Mainland quickly; but wherever I went, teachers were, Jinny, we're together; we can do this. And that strength of teachers held the Executive together as well. And during that time on the Executive, there were no longer these different internal political affiliations, we were one voice. The local presidents that came in and sat in the room, doesn't mean people didn't have different points of view. That would be silly for people not to do that—of course we had different points of view. But we discussed, we debated, we stayed up all night, and we talked things through.

[01:25:47] JS: And we were out there, and our Executive was out supporting members during this time as well. So, our members were incredible. They could tell you the message very, very simply. The three points—they could say them with their eyes shut;

[01:26:04] JS: and so they knew what the issues were, and that was very, very important. And the public—I believe that the working people around this province were waiting for someone to take this stand. And when we did, all their old frustrations came out as well. But also, what they saw happening to us, was incredibly unfair. We were still at the negotiating table, we hadn't walked away. And they were writing legislation to impose a collective agreement on us yet again. This was just seen as unjust throughout. We were getting international support, as you know, we were getting messages from all over the globe; which was great; and the regional strikes were just amazing. And, as you know, during this time I always had a media person with me, and, you know, The Globe and Mail had somebody with me for 24 hours, just to see what my day was like. I think she gave up after a certain number of hours, she said she had to go to sleep; because we were still moving. But this time was, I have to acknowledge, was very hard on my Mum. My Dad was, now you've started, keep going. He was always encouraging; you'

[01:27:30] JS: re doing a great job! With my Mom it was always, why can't you find somebody else to speak? Why is it always you on television? Surely, you have other people there, let somebody speak. And she was always scared I was going to be sent to jail, because it was always in the paper and in the media. Because I was being threatened with jail, and I used to make a joke, that my bag was packed, it was in the trunk of the car; and it would give me a day of rest if I went to jail, right? But, all joking aside for my Mum it was very stressful time, but, I think, my Dad handled it beautifully, and he was just, do what you have to do. And I think, one of our iconic demonstrations, gatherings, they were happening right across the province, as you know—and by the way, the CTF was amazing; they gave us incredible support during that

period. But it was the big march onto the legislature; in the rain, I am sure you remember that. I was speaking to rallies here first, and then getting over there; and that was the day when we stood on the legislature doorsteps up the top, and you looked out—

[01:28:52] JS: all you could see was people—in every which way. And even before that, when we gathered in the Coronation Square there, that's when I received a phone-call and Nancy brought me a phone; it was from the Crown Prosecutors. Because I was supposed to go to court that day; and they said, that they couldn't possibly go to court against Jinny Sims to represent the government, because they would be in the conflict of interest, because they were in the process of negotiating as well. And the whole crowd cheered, when it was shared with them that day;

[01:29:32] JS: and

[01:29:34] JS: we had the labour movement leaders there, and in that bitter rain with umbrellas, we marched onto the legislature. And one thing the Global guy told me that day, the camera man—I've never seen as many camera men as we had in Victoria that day, they said they even went into the side-streets trying to find somebody who would say, what we were doing was wrong. And, it was a young camera man and he said, you know, Jinny, today is the day I can't get anybody to come on camera—except the Liberals—to say, that what you're doing is wrong. He said, even if they don't agree with you, they don't want to go on camera, saying that what you're doing is wrong, because they can see the support that you have. And even non-unionized workers in Victoria walked off their jobs. I know that because I talked to some of them. And that was truly, truly amazing, that day. Yeah, quite something.

[01:30:39] KN: Jinny, you mentioned the role of the CTF, could you expand on that a bit? Having in mind the courts' ruling that the BCTF cannot give strike-pay to its members, could you talk about the fund, the emergency fund that Canadian Teachers' Federation had set up for BC teachers?

[01:31:00] JS: Well, you know, there were a number of court rulings during this time trying to cut off our funds, and, as you know, we couldn't pay strike pay; and we told our teachers that. We were upfront with them; but there were many people who were struggling. And, the Canadian Teachers' Federation, through the central but also through all the affiliated unions in the CTF, they were incredibly generous, and made sure we had money, as were other unions, who gave us lines of credit or said, we could use their money. But here, in the building, the government put—I don't know what they called his, I'll call him a supervisor; or a snoop;

[01:31:44] JS: he had

[01:31:56] JS: to make sure we weren't using and abusing the BCTF resources for our strike. Right? But we managed despite that. He could do all the snooping he liked, but politically we did what we had to do. But during that time we had some money sent to us by other

[01:32:09] JS: unions—

[01:32:10] JS: quite a few other unions—don't want to start listing ones, because might lose the others, but the people were very, very generous. But you know what, people were generous in their ridings and locals as well. Because even in locals, other unions offered financial assistance and food, and all kinds of other help. And it actually warmed your heart to see the labour movement come together and the most poignant thing I heard from most workers was, we wish we had done this much, much earlier. For the leadership, they were a bit challenged at the time, they wanted to support us, and did, labour leadership, but they were also in a dilemma—they had settled their own collective agreements, and now they were out there, fighting for something more for another union. And a lot of their own members were not happy that they had settled; so there was this fear of this kind of grass-roots (opposition). I remember one provincial leader saying to me, Jinny, you have to hold this off, because I can't hold my people back. They all want to just walk out.

[01:33:31] JS: And I had a number of them saying that to me; saying it's not us, we're having to hold them back. And that was big fear... I was surprised at this, but the biggest fear was for the organized labour of the day was, what if this turns into a general strike? I'm more naïve, not as experienced as them, my point was, how wonderful would that be, right? But theirs was, well, no, we don't have a common ask, we don't have this, so it could be a disaster. And, I don't agree with that, but that's how the feelings were of the day. But the labour movement came through for us through the zonal and regional strikes, they supported us in many, many ways. And as a matter of fact, the Lower Mainland was all scheduled to be shut down, if we hadn't settled the day we did. And that was a very tense day for everybody, because the courts were really... the fines were increasing daily; we couldn't pay strike-pay and there were many, many other pressures. And as you know, Vince Ready was in at the time;

[01:34:50] JS: and Campbell kept saying, he wasn't going to talk to us, but I still remember Vince Ready saying, you'd better find a way to talk, he said, because this group isn't going back. He said, you're going to have a statue of Jinny Sims and the BCTF on Cambie Bridge, unless you start talking. And, we settled, you know, we knew we had to settle sometime; and we got some stuff out of it for our teachers; and we didn't have to take a mandated agreement, which was really, really important. We got a pool of money out of it for class-size and class composition; and we got something significant for our teachers on call.

[01:35:55] KN: Could you talk a bit about that settlement in terms of... I believe one of the provisions was the establishment of the government body, that would review with the BCTF, look at class-size and other issues, and how that unfolded after the strike; I want to come back to the strike, but just while we're on the settlement...

[01:36:20] JS: There were \$20M if I remember correctly, that went into a pot to address class-size and class composition; or was it \$40M? I can't remember the number exactly right now. But it went in there and for us it was really important; that it not be part of the regular staffing; that we should be able to track the extra teachers that would be hired with that, and that money was just for teaching. For teachers. Additional teachers. And between the two parties, they did

sit down and negotiated how that was going to be distributed to each local; and in the first year we were able to track that to a point. But like any system, after a while, the tracking gets more difficult;

[01:37:20] JS: and,

[01:37:23] JS: really it belongs in the collective agreement. I don't think class-size belongs on a side-table, there at a whim of a government to see how much they can put in. It needs to be either in legislation, or it needs to be in a collective agreement. A pot of money—after a while, you know the games that get played with a pot of money; you don't know if it's really there, and what else... You see, when the boards started to get further cuts how do you differentiate between that pot of money and the further cuts? And, how does it get used? I've never been fond of a moving target of money that can be applied here and there, if the government is absolutely adamant. And I said this at the time not to have this (pot of money) in our collective agreement, they need firm numbers, and I mean, firm numbers that are realistic in legislation; not averages, not ridiculous numbers that have to average out across the whole district or the whole area.

[01:38:40] KN: So, one of the things that played a role in that strike, was the role of courts. And, particularly the Supreme Court of British Columbia and Madame Justice Brenda Brown who had been the judge that looked after the case. Can you speculate why, under the circumstances that it was illegal, and as you said everybody knew it was, because it was legislative as opposed to agreement, which was technically a legal document, why did the court allowed the strike to go on as long as it did? And you indicated the fines, and being fined, in retrospect the fine of half-a-million dollars was not incredibly large; the strike was allowed to go on—why do you think that happened?

[01:39:46] JS: Public opinion (laughs). It wasn't that we weren't solid on the picket lines, we were solid. I think that plays a critical part. The fact is, they couldn't break the teachers. Right? And, we had support as well. But at the end of the day, the public was on our side. And we even had Liberals on our side. I mean, if you think of West Vancouver, where teachers were on strike, and in the past they said, West Vancouver's rarely been on strike, let's be honest, right? But when they have had job action they said they've been abused at the picket lines by people, by the locals. And this is the one where people were bringing up their RVs and giving them their house keys and saying, oh, if you need to go to the washroom, please use our house. And, one of the jokes I told to my Dad, when my Dad asked, how is it going, how is the public; I said, well, limousines are delivering food in West Vancouver, right? Because it wasn't really a limousine, it was a person's really spectacular car delivering, you know, with their chauffeur; delivering food to the picket lines. But we had people, like, in Kitimat where the storm got so bad; there they were tied to the rope to make sure that they are not being blown here, and there, and everywhere;

[01:41:17] JS: and they had parents coming to join them. Even in that terrible, terrible weather that they had for a day there. And, we had that all over. I don't think I visited a picket line where there weren't parents or other union members with our people. And you know, the amazing thing was, everywhere you went they were singing songs. They weren't standing around saying, poor me when can I get back to work; they were actually, singing songs. And there was energy there. And the court system is not immune to what is happening in the public arena. I would say, for the first time in the Ethnic communities we had support for our strike. I would get callers calling in, and I think, in Surrey, when callers were calling in over an hour, we had one person who spoke against the strike. Everybody else was saying, teachers, we need to help teachers, we need to help teachers. And, I wasn't there in Surrey at the time, I live there now, but the number of restaurants that were just delivering food, and the gurdwara here, across the street; they had dhal, rice made, they delivered samosas, they did food every afternoon.

[01:42:35] JS: Women would go and cook in the temple; and then they would take the food to the picket lines. You know, they didn't just say to people, come and eat here; they actually, took food to where people were. So, the court knew that the support was there. I remember at the time talking to people, who were in the judiciary; and couple of them were judges; and they sort of said, you guys are doing so well! (laughs) But, everybody knew it had to come to an end sometime,

[01:43:04] JS: right?

[01:43:05] JS: The courts were very lax with us, but it wasn't always going to remain thus. It was going to (change)... But—yeah, at the end we were able to even negotiate where our fine would go! Like, that fine didn't go into the Liberal coffers—it went to give scholarships to kids who need them, who were going to go into the teaching profession.

[01:43:33] JS: So, what did the BCTF lose out of it? They paid half-a-million dollars in scholarships. Right? To students who need them, so that they can become teachers. And I talk to young teachers now a lot. And they don't know what they have; they don't know the struggles that we had, so they can have what they have. And I think

[01:43:59] JS: a lot of them owe what teachers gave up during that time to the teachers themselves.

[01:44:08] KN: Let's see—it's now almost 11 years after the strike; looking back, do you have any thoughts about that whole event in terms of the history of the province and the history of the BCTF in terms of what happened, and just reflections?...

[01:44:21] JS: On the

[01:44:34] JS: personal level,

[01:44:38] JS: if I'd had my way; I wouldn't have gone back at that time. I would have been voting "No", if I was out there. But, knowing everything I did, both about the table and the

negotiating that was going on; and about the government and about the rest of labour; based on all of that, and about our so-called acceptance got made public even before we had said anything, did put us in a bit of a corner. And so, when I recommended—and I did vote “Yes” by the way—because I felt I couldn’t possibly vote “No” if I was recommending “Yes”. At the end looking at everything, and knowing the fact that we had gone the number of days we had already on an illegal strike; and looking at the fact that Campbell did have to back-off; and he did have to pull back his imposed agreement; he had to negotiate with us; the fact that we got something for class-size; the fact that we exercised our right to strike; and that no legislation could stop us;

[01:46:07] JS: and

[01:46:10] JS: the fact that we did get a grid-lift; it, sort of, made the decision that I could live with recommending a “Yes” vote. But it was not an easy decision—Ken, you know that, you lived it with me; it’s one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made in my life. It was more difficult than starting the strike. But I’m proud of the fact that in our Federation our members vote to walk out; and I hope we never ever give up the fact, that our members will vote to end a strike. We gave our members all the information, the pros and the cons; we didn’t go in heavy-handed with one or the other. And based on the information we had, and why I was recommending “Yes” at the time, they accepted. And you know what, when they went back to work, they didn’t go back with their heads held low. They walked back into those schools with their heads held high. Because they made progress on every one of their three demands. It wasn’t perfect, it wasn’t everything they wanted. But, under the circumstances they made huge gains, and I think, even labour was shocked at what we were able to get at the end of the strike, and that the strike ended

[01:47:52] JS: as positively as it did. Has it been a struggle since? Absolutely. But have we won lots more cold-cases? Absolutely. Are things going to change that much? No. Not unless we change the political face in this province. And if we think, we could just focus on our classrooms, we’ll just do our union work, we’ll just file grievances, we’ll go to court, we’ll win some grievances, we’ll lose others; and we turn this into a technical exercise, teaching will never be what it has the potential to be. I feel, that both, our profession and our practice has been diminished, as has public education. You can just see that out there, with the growth in more and more funding for private schools. That in order to fight for quality, inclusive public school system; in order to fight for our rights to bargain; and to be a collective; and in order to bargain for our students’ learning conditions, we have to engage beyond the technical contractual stuff. And that’s the only way we’ll ever going to be able to truly bring about change. Because once we have a government that is a bit more friendly towards education, more friendly towards humanity, more friendly towards building a just Canada, BC, addressing child poverty; and a government that actually believes that education is a cornerstone of a democracy;

[01:49:46] JS: unless we change that, our fight’s over here. We’ll win the odd skirmishes; but we will not win the war. And we have to juggle here (points to a space aside)—the contractual stuff,

the bargaining stuff; and we have to juggle political engagement in order to create the kind of BC we want.

[01:50:19] KN: So, later on in that same year, in 2006, because the settlement was for one year; we participated in negotiation of a successful multi-year agreement with the government, as did every other public sector union,

[01:50:44] KN: that actually had some salary increases in it, and that put upon us a very successful round of bargaining. So, the only question I have with respect to that, is do you see what happened there a result of our strike of 2005?

[01:51:11] JS: Absolutely. See, our strike gave the Campbell government the black eye. They used every tool available to them to get us to go back, but we didn't; we actually ended-up sitting down and negotiating a settlement; and they had to back-off. They knew our strength. So, when we went to that bargaining table we had our strength. They had hoped that in the mean time we would have lost some of that; but at the same time, they didn't want to chance that. At this time, you know I was at the negotiating table the whole time, for the last little while, in 2006. And, we had some givens; we did, actually, in that settlement did way better than even we thought we would; I would have liked to have done even better, as you know; the minimum that teachers got was 16.5%; and some got way beyond that once you got the grid lift. We had teachers in Surrey, who were saying, oh my god, I've received a jump, combined, close to 23%. Some did really well. Some only got 16.5%, and that was over a longer period. I didn't want to give them the longer period,

[01:52:34] JS: to tell you the truth, I don't think any agreement should be more than 2 years; but in order to get what we did, we have to give the government a face-saver too. Just as, in 2005 we ended the strike; there was no way we were going back without something concrete in our hands. And Campbell knew that, so we got that. In a similar way, yeah, we had to swallow a longer agreement; but what we got out of it, was a lot of catch-up for our teachers. Now, we've fallen behind since then; but that was quite something. It did cause some tension between what teachers got and what labour felt they got in a five-year-term, but sometimes those things just happen.

[01:53:32] JS: They made up for it later.

[01:53:38] KN: Jinny, is there anything else, that you'd like to mention; something that occurred during your presidency that you'd like to talk about?

[01:53:45] JS: I think, the key thing for me is about our members. It's about our teachers. Teachers come into teaching because they love to teach; and some come in because they think it is going to be easy. But the only ones, who stay in teaching and become good teachers, are those who have a passion for teaching. So, my thing is, we have to keep that passion for teaching, alive. And it becomes more challenging when the resources are limited; and class-size and class composition is becoming impossible. And, I think, for us, our biggest challenge is to

engage our younger members in a meaningful way; not just to say, oh yeah, we got some young faces now sitting on some committees; but for us, as a Federation, we have to be the strongest advocates for the teaching profession. I think, sometimes we forget that. Now, especially, that it is all under the government summary kind of thing. We can't let the teaching profession be diminished. We have to be the flag-holders for teaching as a profession. We also have to be the flag-holders for our students learning conditions. We can never ever back away from that. I know there are working conditions, but there also are students' learning conditions,

[01:55:12] JS: because I will tell you, teachers will walk on glass for students' learning conditions, because they care that much about them. And we always have to remember, that we are part of a larger collective. And no matter, how much we focus on our classroom, unless we open our door, and hold hands with others, to make the communities we live in, safer. I think, as a Federation, we have a lot more work to do on the "-isms". In the 1970s we were very good at that. Whether it was the women's issues, whether it was—even in the 1980s—whether it was racism issues; right now, I would say that we are not seen as a player, when it comes to issues as major as racism; which I would say, is huge out there; huge out there, and yet we are not seen as major players in that anymore. Same way, when it comes to a lot of issues on women. We, as a Federation, have done an amazing job on the LGBTQ file. I think we need to look at the other "-isms"; and put that same kind of energy and revitalize those commitments because in my life as an MP I visited lots and lots of schools,

[01:56:42] JS: and I would say—and I've talked to lots of young kids; things are far worse now for our kids, than when I was teaching. And it shouldn't be like that. And we need to tell that story; we need to say how things—it's not about talking the Good Old Days— it's talking about how we had this and your children don't have it; and your grand-children are going to have even less. And we have to fight for the funding; for public schools, and more importantly than anything, we have to fight for the survival of our public school system. Because, under the name of religion, and many others—choice—we have more and more young kids entering into private schools. I see that in the ethnic communities. But I also see parents who are absolutely frustrated with the public school system; because their kids are not getting the help they need. And they don't blame the teachers, by the way; they blame the government. And we are not capitalizing on that. I think we need to keep telling our story to our younger teachers—they think that paid maternity leave is a given thing! And when I tell the story of how it entered into our negotiations, and how recent it is, they find that hard to believe.

[01:58:17] JS: Now, a teacher thinks I've smoked something, if I tell them, we used to have a collective agreement that wouldn't allow an employer to put the third identified special needs kid in the class. Wouldn't allow it. And I tell them how we won an arbitration in class-size in Nanaimo. Remember that, Al?

[01:58:36] JS: Even when the BCTF told me, we couldn't. Right? And said, don't do it. So, we have to give them that courage that you have to go out there and fight for what you believe in. But it's your classroom that's worth fighting for. But unless we instill in them a love for the

teaching profession; and a commitment to public education, you're not going to be able to achieve the rest.

[01:59:05] KN: Would you like to say anything at all, Jinny, about your experience on staff?

[01:59:10] JS: Yeah, this is an amazing building. Actually, before I even get to my experience as a staff, during my presidency we had incredible staff. Not going to mention anyone in particular; both, in TFU at the time, and in CEP. They worked round the clock with us, they were committed; and I will be forever grateful for the work they did during that strike and the work they do now. Like any other organization we're under the same kind financial restraints right now; and thus we're feeling the same kind of pressures that many other organizations are feeling, but I loved my experience and do as a staff member; it's an amazing organization. But I just love the teaching profession; so any role I have played; I love being in the classroom, I love it when I get invited even now; I loved teaching, I loved being a counselor; I had an amazing, amazing presidency, made some great life-long friends; and I had a wonderful experience as a staff member. So, to me, I still without any reservation recommend teaching as a profession; I have no regrets. I've had people saying to me, how can you say that? I said, but go into in with your eyes open.

[02:00:47] JS: Go into in knowing that you're going to have to fight, and to struggle, but that fight is worth it. If you're going into teaching to shut your door and to just going to teach your kids, you don't want to know what's going on in the world around you; then please, don't come into the teaching profession. A) You won't survive; because the pressures of teaching are too high; and secondly, you won't have that passion for teaching that we need for our young people to inspire them. So, for me the biggest thing for teachers is to keep that love of teaching alive; and keep fighting. And for elementary teachers, it's easy to come up with those magical moments, but people had asked me how come during the toughest of times I could still keep going. I wanted to leave teaching many, many times. Anybody, who tells you they didn't are lying.

[02:01:45] JS: Right? They're not telling you the truth. There's always a time you say, oh, why am I doing this? Because we've got incredible pressures on us, but you know what keeps you going? All of you will have your own story. For a Kindergarten teacher, it's just a kid holding your hand and saying, you're the best teacher I've ever had. The fact that you're the only teacher they've ever had, doesn't matter. The fact that they say that, makes you want to hug them, and stay in teaching longer. For me, if I have time I'll tell you the story of David; it was always David. When we were on strike, whenever I reached those moments in my life, it was the image of David. David was introduced to me in my first year of teaching. I had a classroom next to the discipline room in England; this is where I had the deputy headmaster, whose only job was to cane students—and the school I was at had students brought in from the local juvenile centre. He took David yelling and screaming into the caning room, and he was caning him. And David wasn't going to stop swearing;

[02:02:52] JS: so Mr. Fryer, opens the classroom door, my room—new teachers got the room next to the caning room—because nobody wanted to have that as a classroom. So, I'm teaching Hamlet. And the door opens and Mr. Fryer throws David into my room. And David, of course, is "effing" and "blinding"; he starts throwing books off my students' desks, and I've got university bound students, A-level, they're shocked. And they're saying, Mrs. Sims, what are you going to do? And I said, what do you do when it's the deputy headmaster, who's throwing somebody in your class, and he goes Mrs. Sims, I'm leaving Mr. Trotter with you, because if I take him, I'll kill him. That's literally what he said. And I thought, oh my God; and so, I'm a new teacher, I'm wearing this little mini-dress, long hair. "Mr. Trotter, will you please, go and sit down?" He tells me to eff-off, right? So, I try my teacher voice again, saying: "Could you please, sit down over there, please, there's an extra chair there for you?" He starts throwing things around, and by this time the kids are getting a bit rowdy too.

[02:04:06] JS: And this kid is now kicking one of my kids; a student sitting there, a young woman; and I'm telling him, will you stop kicking her? And I've asked a student, will you go and get me a principal, or headmaster, or somebody? And they go off, and in the meantime Mr. Trotter is just swearing at me, and I did something no teacher should ever, ever do. Mr. Trotter was wearing a blazer, we had school uniforms, and I held him by the blazer; I said, if you don't sit down I'm going to throw you out of that window (laughs). And as soon as the words were out of my mouth I almost break-out into a sweat. Because I am a new teacher, this is my first job. And, fortunately for me, he goes, no, you wouldn't. And the class goes, just try her, she's got a black belt in judo, and she teaches judo; I taught at the youth club. And he goes: "Really?" I said, just try me. But I was shaking inside, I'll tell you I was jelly. And he kicked a few more kids on the way to the back and he sat down.

[02:05:20] JS: And by the time Mr. Fryer came back, he goes, Mrs. Sims, Mr. Trotter likes you. I think you will keep him for the rest of the term. And I looked at him; what do I do with Mr. Trotter? Anyway, I got to know Mr. Trotter fairly, fairly well. Sixteen years old, came from a dysfunctional family; dad was in and out of prison; Mom made her living by taking different men in; and he didn't know how to read. Couldn't even read his name. Couldn't even write a name. Right? His Dad was in and out of prison, so his Mom had to be on the move all the time, he was one of 11 children; and he was always moving around. They never knew where they were going to sleep at night. At the age of 12 he was pimping for his own mother—going to the Laundromat and bringing back (clients)... I'm a high-school teacher, I don't know how to teach anybody how to read. So, I went home, and said to my husband—he was a middle school teacher—can you please teach me how to teach somebody to read? And he gave some games and things;

[02:06:34] JS: and Mr. Trotter sat quietly at the back of my room for the whole time I taught English; taught Macbeth and Hamlet; I did both that year. And I worked with him after school was finished and everybody went home, and he learned to read. And the very first day—and I had to make games with him, those match boxes, where you put the picture at the top, put the word inside—so he didn't interrupt me during the day. And the day he learned to read, and it was Jack and Jill, and I cried, he cried. And David and I have become life-long friends, we still are;

and he would often end-up in prison, and in England teachers could go and get him out of prison, because his Mom could never be found. So, many times I would have to go and get him released, because he'd get picked up hanging out. He's now a mechanic, owns the mechanic shop back in England, has a family, and so, whenever I wanted to quit teaching, I remembered David crying because he learned to read. And I cry every time I think about it,

[02:07:47] JS: and so for me, every teacher has that magical moment in their teaching. And they need to hold on to that to help them to do the fight for public education and for their kids. And for their profession. So, find your David, and hold onto him.

[02:08:06] KN: Thank you very much, Jinny.