

Interview: Larry Kuehn (LK)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN) and Al Cornes (AC)

Assisted by: Lesley Harrington

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Note: This interview is presented in two genuine parts (Part 1/Part 2), recorded on separate days.

[00:00:09] KN: Afternoon. It is November the 12th, 2015, and we're interviewing Larry Kuehn, who was the BCTF President between 1981 and 1984. The interview is being conducted by Ken Novakowski and Al Cornes, with technical support from Lesley Harrington. There. I understand that you'd like to begin the interview by giving us a narrative about your teaching experience, and teaching conditions, and bargaining and how it involved over period of time, so—over to you, and we will ask questions as necessary as we go along.

[00:00:51] LK: Great. I started teaching in BC in 1968, in Kitimat. That was the 51st year of the BCTF, now nearly a half a century ago. At the time I started teaching, BC had the highest teacher salaries in the country; and next-to-the-worst class-sizes in the country. And that was a situation that grew out of some of the realities of the province. The salary part of it was a function of the compulsory arbitration system that was in existence. And the arbitrations did really track the IWA amounts of increases that they gained by strikes, frequently, and by hard bargaining. And the skilled part of the IWA was the baseline which was generally used in the arbitrations. It was an arbitration system that had a very tight timeline, you would only have to go out and get very few locals to get their boards to agree to something; base it as a goal for the general community, and this worked well in terms of getting the salaries for teachers. However, on the other side of class-sizes there really wasn't a structure for teachers getting, through the BCTF, the improvements in class-sizes,

[00:02:55] LK: so the funding really went to one side and not to the other side. The class-size campaign in 1968 was the "Under 40" campaign and this was really the start of attempting to pull people out into what weren't really strikes, but the claim was, or the promise was that if a teacher had more than 40 students in their class, that they could walk out and the Federation would ensure that they were paid. And that was sending a signal, that class-sizes were a really significant thing. By that stage six districts had adopted working and learning conditions contracts. They were not the contracts that were part of the legal bargaining system, but they were a part of mutual agreement between the local and the school board. And it happened in a few districts, where there were more progressive trustees, and locals that were prepared to undertake to get those. However they had the fundamental problem, that they were not

enforceable; that they were really policy commitments, not really collective bargaining. And so, their impact was really limited, and the initiative to gain them was really lost.

[00:04:48] LK: And I think, that was the most that we ever had, was the six (initial) districts, six of those in the province. The Federation was organized at that time in what we would now call silos, I think. It was reflected in the fact, that various segments of the Federation had summer training programs that were based on a particular area. So, there was a presidents' training, and agreements' training, and eventually others that were added on, as the Status of Women Program came on, and etc. And it was very fragmented, and there really (was a) significant competition between the Learning Conditions Program and Committee, and the Agreements, or the bargaining area of the Federation. And that was something we tried to address as we moved to attempting to get an expansion of our collective bargaining. There certainly was an improvement in class-size after when the NDP was in power, after the Surrey strike—an effective strike, where they went to Victoria and put pressure on the NDP government, which then agreed to improvements in class-sizes. Again, those were not in the collective bargaining, they were additional funding that went towards (them), but not on the kind of joint agreement basis, that was needed.

[00:06:43] LK: The Learning Conditions Committee attempted another approach, and the Federation adopted this—the other approach—to try to address the issue of working conditions—and that was to adopt a Working and Learning Conditions Declaration. So, the concept behind it was that we put forward what we thought should be in the collective agreement, and we would create our own grievance system; so that we were effectively simulating the process that would take place in a genuine collective bargaining type of situation. There were various ways that we looked at in terms of how to move some of those into the formal collective bargaining that took place every fall by finding—and this was Don Walmsley's approach in particular—and it was to find ways in making working conditions into payments of some kind, so that they could be negotiated in the kind of limited bargaining structure, that we had. We had some success with that, there were some grievances and we used various kinds of pressure to respond to those grievances: there were appearances before school boards, publicity. Generally the kind of political action at a local level that characterized a lot of what we did around improving conditions in the absence of a full collective bargaining system.

[00:08:44] LK: One of the other approaches that was used in that era, was commissions, where we would identify a particular thing, usually in working conditions areas, and identify some high profile people in the community, who would go and, in effect, hold hearings, invite the school boards to participate, and come up with a report, that tried to frame the improvements that were needed and to use these as an impetus for that. So, before collective bargaining, we were not absent. Other approaches in getting improved working conditions (were used) and they mostly fell into the approaches of the political action, but sometimes got going beyond that, as with the Surrey strike during the NDP period. Some of these issues came ahead at the point, in which Al Blakey was elected President, and I was elected Vice-President, and Al Cornes as 2nd Vice-President. And there was a dispute in Revelstoke, where the board had made an offer, the

grievance people had essentially said, you have to accept this, and the local leadership said, we're not prepared to do that, and we're prepared to challenge. And this was, I think, a really important water-shed in the development of bargaining, because it brought into conflict the approach that had been held by the Agreements staff and Committee, which was to get everything finished in the short-term and not to push the boundaries used in that system.

[00:10:58] LK: While, on the other hand the Working and Learning Conditions Committee was trying to always push the boundary in those areas. So, there was the dispute in Revelstoke, there was the pension conflict that we had; the government was bringing in a new pension system, and we focused on the need to have the amounts every year increased by inflation in order to maintain the value of the pension. And this was an era, or a period, where inflation was quite significant and it was consequentially, a significant concern, increasingly, after that. The concerns that we had turned out to be not the worst we have imagined—that didn't happen for a variety of reasons within the economy, interest rates and returns on investment, etc. But, what it did do was, again, provide a basis for us trying to produce a more militant stance by the Federation that would lead us to having more of a process, where we were able to influence in a more direct way on the wide range of concerns, that teachers had, not just those around compensation.

[00:12:51] LK: In 1981 I was elected President, and we made a number of changes at that stage. They were aimed at changing the nature of the organization, to be more integrated and to be more focused on building the base for collective bargaining. So, one of the things that we did in 1981 was to have a joint Summer Conference, that brought together local activists from all of the various programs, where we had summer training, again, to try to build a sense of commonality, rather, than silos, and conflicting, sometimes, objectives and approaches. And we pushed for, and made policies that were aimed at, kind of, bringing together throughout the structure of the organization. And, I gave a speech at the Summer Conference, that outlined the strategy, that we were following, which was one of saying that, if we change the reality, the law will change. We had to find ways that pushed the approaches which collective bargaining would produce—to find a framework for it, and the kind of approaches that you would use for influencing that kind of a system.

[00:14:50] LK: And that's what we really set out to do at that stage, and it was really a continuation of the longer-term strategy. First with the working and learning conditions, contracts with school boards, and then, from there, to the Declaration of the Learning and Working Conditions. So, we were trying to shift the way in which we thought about the processes that we were going forward with. We decided to push this forward, to have a referendum around the collective bargaining.

[00:15:17] KN: Larry,

[00:15:45] KN: before you get there, I just wanted to comment on the role, that the Terrace strike of June in 1981 might have played in your thinking with the expanded scope idea...

[00:16:02] LK: OK; so, I guess there was a strike in June of 1981.

[00:16:12] LK: It

[00:17:05] LK: was about six days and it was about a personnel matter in a district, and the teachers went on strike there for six days. It created a sense that there were these other tools of collective bargaining, and helped to set the scene for the approach that we were moving onto. And Al Blakey went up; he was President, but his term was ending; he went up and spent the time there and the local got a lot of publicity. And, again, there was a commission afterwards that went in to look at the personnel issues that were in that district. And I believe it was an administrator, who was involved and who was interested in the shape that collective bargaining would take in terms of the role of the administrators in that. The old collective bargaining system—before 1981—involved the President of the Federation holding a press conference at the end of August each year, and, basically, announcing what the Federation's goal would be in terms of getting an agreement on salaries.

[00:17:58] LK: In 1981 we had the traditional press conference, but I didn't talk once about money. The talk was about the things that we needed in terms of working and learning conditions. And it was part of that process of trying to change the mindset of what we were about in this, and we set a proposal for a referendum on the right to strike. We had a report done by David Yorke, outlining, what different options would be, and we put forward a motion in the referendum question on, whether, essentially we would want the right to strike in a situation similar to that in Saskatchewan, where, either arbitrations or a strike could be used. And that was the focus of a lot of discussion around the province. I spoke in forget how many locals, but certainly in many, in the fall of 1981.

[00:19:18] LK: And the

[00:19:20] LK: referendum was scheduled for February of 1982. And the reason for the timing of that was to have a chance to have the bargaining system go ahead and see whether we'll be able to make some gains; and if not, well, that would be an argument for reason that we needed other tools in order to get the improvements in conditions, that we needed in the schools and in class-sizes in particular. On the other hand, if we did very well, that might actually, undermine in terms how people thought about this. So, it turned out that, although we didn't talk about money, we got an 18% increase that year, the largest that one, I'm sure, anytime in history of the Federation. And some of that went back to, as I mentioned before, to the role of IWA as the benchmark, and they got a very large increase; and interest rates at that stage were at about 15%. There was this massive increase in interest rates; so it wasn't such an outrageous settlement, but getting the money was actually, very easy that year, because we weren't talking about money.

[00:20:56] LK: We were talking about—our local people went in asking for the various kinds of working conditions proposals, and the boards would, essentially, respond by putting more money on the table. Because they wanted to maintain the system that existed and didn't want

the changes in it, so salaries were not a big issue for us at that stage, even though there was this huge amount that we gained that year. So, we had the referendum in February, and the right to strike was defeated in this, with about a 60/40%, I think, 59/41%. And, over the years, in so many of these kinds of things we've been a 60/40% organization. And I was very discouraged at that stage, wondering how we were ever going to get the kind of changes that we were looking for, having had the negative vote. I recall the CBC morning show, which I've been on frequently, called and wanted to do an interview with me the next day, and I said, no I don't really want to do an interview.

[00:22:24] LK: But the CBC reporter said, you know, most of our audience is your members. And that's probably was the case, that the CBC morning shows, both the Interior show and the Lower Mainland show were... a large number of their audience were our members, so I had an obligation to go on and talk about what the implications were of this. And I wasn't sure what the implications were going to be, because it seemed to knock us off of what had been a strong campaign, where we've been making some gains, where we'd soon be in a place where—if we could get the kind of changes, that we were looking for—and that some people in the NDP said, that it had been offered to us, actually, when the NDP was in power, but it had been rejected at that stage. But, a week later, the provincial government brought in a restraint program and, suddenly changed the situation again, where we had to take strong stance and where our members would be on those kinds of things.

[00:23:55] LK: So it was a classic example, I think, of what Naomi Klein talks about in the “Shock Doctrine”, that in a sense you have to define—what the Right has always done—is to define a program, and have it sitting there, waiting, and something happens, that is dramatic; and you have something to put on the table, as a way of dealing with that. And, very clearly, the restraint program was going to undercut the kinds of conditions that we have been building in the system, and so it gave us again, a focus of the kind of militant and aggressive approach, that we needed to take, in order to get collective bargaining and to take full advantage of the collective bargaining.

[00:24:59] AC: Larry, wondering if you could just go back, just a little bit; and talk about funding prior to this time in the province and how that affected teachers, because you talked about how the wages were largely incurred by the IWA standard, which was true, because the trades were in store and to some extent, quite dominant in the economy, that we've somewhat become a pattern—even though it took only few small groups of teachers to settle—that became the pattern, for the outer group, up to 75. But in terms of funding, and what was going on there, and how that distorted what was happening as well?

[00:25:40] LK: Yeah. The funding approach in British Columbia has actually been one that produced a fair amount of equity. Certainly, if you look at the situation in the US where the property taxes are the sole source of funding for education, and so, the nature of the community that you're in affects what resources you've got to offer. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the funding system was based partially on the amount from the property tax. And there

were two kinds of property tax: one was on houses and homes, and the other one was on business corporations. And that, obviously, produced different amounts in different districts. But there was an equalization formula, which meant that the richest districts, you know, such as West Vancouver, because of its housing costs and values; and Kitimat, because of the really significant industrial base there; and a few other, you know, probably Powell River and Alberni, that had major industries that produced a lot of revenue from the corporate side, often were allowed to spend less money than they could take in, or they did take in. That got essentially redistributed through the province.

[00:27:39] LK: It was a kind of an equalization process that went on. And the boards were allowed to increase their expenditures year to year, based on percentage increase, and, if they wanted to go over that, they had to go to a local referendum, and there were some of those around the province. So you had some inequalities; and, you know, I taught in Kitimat, as my first teaching job in BC, and there was always pressure to spend more money on the schools, basically, because of Alcan. It was a one-industry town, and the Alcan aluminum smelter was the one industry there. And Alcan had to attract management to their business there. And high quality education was one of the things that they had to offer. That was at least the approach that was taken, so you would get some inequalities because of those kinds of things, but a fair amount of equality on an overall basis. The funding—that shifted more and more towards provincial funding over a period of time, and in the early 1980s, essentially, the property tax base on corporations was taken over by the province—that corporate taxes would go into the provincial general revenue, and expenditures come out of the

[00:29:35] LK: general revenue. And those shifts in funding clearly were a part of the kind of context in which bargaining would take place.

[00:29:44] AC: Thank you.

[00:29:54] AC: Larry, you talked a little bit about leadership; started with the scope of bargaining campaign, there was some internal resistance to it. Then you had the Terrace strike in June of 1981. The trustees, actually, tried to come out with a document, which defined the “third wave”, which says, that teachers could talk to their school boards about the development of school board policies dealing with the issues that were being tabled by the teachers in negotiations: (those) around preparation time, class-size, leaves, personnel practices and a range of other things. Why was that strategy not successful? Why did it turn out the way that it did? What happened to that idea about developing a policy? Why was it rejected by the teachers?

[00:30:45] LK: Well, implicitly, that’s what the learning and working conditions contracts have been in the late 1960s. They were, essentially, a negotiated policy framework. And there clearly hadn’t been much of a taste for that on the part of most school boards. And, I think, what was attractive about collective bargaining, was the fact that it was a contractual agreement, that there was basis, that just because the board changed from one election to another, that the

collective agreement was in place between the corporate body, not just the individuals, who could easily change things, if they no longer agreed with what had been negotiated by a previous board.

[00:31:56] AC: Can you comment, Larry, then, on what you thought of the success of the expanded bargaining campaign in the fall of 1981? Did it succeed; did it achieve anything that was remotely close to what we were looking for?

[00:32:11] LK: I don't think it did. We didn't build the new system, in reality, in that year, because, as I said, what happened at the tables. And that was, that the boards would not talk about putting those things, the working conditions element, into the collective agreement. Of course, they always would fall back on the legal framework. They talked about salaries and bonuses only, and that had been the basis of bargaining for 40 years by that time—40 or 50 years—in that system.

[00:33:03] KN: So was the restraint period that you talked about that started in the early 1982, was that a precursor to what happened in 1983? Can you tell us about what happened in 1983?

[00:33:16] LK: It was definitely a precursor. Out of that, when Bill Vander Zalm became the education minister, which would have been in 1982; the government insisted that there be a reduction in the pay of teachers. And eventually it was negotiated that there would be unpaid days where the schools were going to be closed. So, everyone would lose. And, I think it was a minimum of 5 days that every district lost. And some of them lost more than that, so, again, that created a part of the climate of saying, that the current system wasn't working; that we had to continue to work to have effective

[00:34:25] LK: campaigns, of effective means to protect all of the conditions—you know, salaries and the other conditions. The election in 1983, of course, and Bill Vander Zalm didn't run in that election, but Social Credit was re-elected and almost immediately brought in a series of 26 Bills, that essentially, lead to the creation of Solidarity in 1983. The BCTF was very much a part of all of the elements of the Solidarity movement and of the Operation Solidarity, working with the BCFed and other non-affiliates that were joined together in Operation Solidarity and in the Solidarity Coalition. Which was with some unions and lots of community organizations, civil society organizations, that were opposed to the whole package of bills, which included taking away rights and for teachers, not having seniority rights, and saying that there had to be a reduction in a number of teachers. And giving boards, in effect, the ability to fire anybody that they wanted to, which presented

[00:36:09] LK: a

[00:36:10] LK: danger to all teachers, but particularly to those, who were in any kind of leadership position within their unions.

[00:36:19] AC: Can you talk a bit of the growth of the Solidarity movement through the summer and into the fall of 1983?

[00:36:27] LK: Yeah, there were a number of protests. There was a Lower Mainland Coalition Against the Budget, that really started the process and the demonstrations were held. That was the start of the whole series and, I think, it drew about 25,000 people in only about 3 weeks after the legislation was brought down, so there was a very quick organizing, and the range of bills that were brought in was so extensive, that it was really shocking. In a way, if they had brought in (the bills) one at a time, it would not have been—you know, much like the Harper regime, you know; we're finally rid of it—it would bring in a piece at a time, but change overtime the fundamental basis of a social contract in effect. And that's really what happened in 1983, but all at one time, with many of the elements of a government, that had grown up in a post-war period, and particularly, in the 1970s, when the NDP was in power, and basically modernized government from the very limited kind of perspective on government, that existed before that in this province.

[00:38:04] LK: And, I think, it was that shock of a break of a social contract, with no discussion, nothing that engaged people that allowed people to express the concerns that they had; that generated on such an immediate basis, a very large demonstration. And it happened during the summer, when teachers were not accessible through our usual communication and networks, but we were able to get many teachers engaged in those events over that summer. They built through the fall to the largest of the demonstrations, which was circled around the Hotel Vancouver, where Social Credit party was having its convention, and it became the symbolic confrontation between the government and this community, that was reflected, not just in labour, but all of civil society as well. And throughout that fall we were looking at what other kinds of steps can we take, and there were lots of proposals for a general strike. And the BCTF Executive agreed to take a resolution to the members for another referendum, this one on whether we would be prepared to take part in the Operation Solidarity and the strike that included the union movement and labour movement in general.

[00:40:09] LK: So, we were then in a place of having to go out and talk to our members, again, about not just what was happening, but about a possibility of a strike and the vote that we were going to be taking. One of the important points of difference from the referendum the year before, was some of the people, who had been the strongest in opposition to the right to strike, were supporters—they came out in support of actually going on strike in 1983. And the vote, that was taken, was, again, about 60/40%, but 20% had moved from the No side to the Yes side. That was not a strong strike vote; the meetings that I was in with other leaders of Operation Solidarity, they thought we were crazy to think that a 59% of vote would mean that teachers would actually go out on strike. But there was a sense in our organization amongst teachers, that if a majority decides something, then that's the decision of the collective. And we were able to have more than 90% out, and that was when we still had administrators in the organization, and most of them didn't go out.

[00:41:53] LK: They felt that they had obligations that were higher than those to the union that they belonged to. And that was obviously, part of the stage of the later separation that took place when we did gain full collective bargaining rights at the end of the 1980s.

[00:42:17] KN: You stayed with Solidarity for a while there. Can you tell us about that, because, as you described it, it really was a unique situation for the BCTF. Throughout their history they did take provincial action of one-day strikes in 1971 around pensions, but to all of a sudden embrace this idea that we're going to go on strike, potentially indefinitely over legislation; and you were the President, you were in the hot seat, and at the centre of all of this. Can you talk a bit about what you went through, personally, during that period of time? It must have been pretty stressful.

[00:43:01] LK: It was certainly stressful (laughs). There was basically, a month between when the Rep Assembly agreed to put the strike to referendum, and when the strike was scheduled to take place. I traveled around the province, and spoke to about 15,000 people in various meetings during that period of time, and that's almost all that I did during that period of time. Other people were in the office, working, as you were, Ken with the Solidarity Coalition; working in locals and etc. It, obviously, was the time when we had personal threats, and

[00:44:01] LK: eventually the police told us, we had to get a new phone line; and we put an answering machine on the public phone line. So, that was there, because my family was threatened, there were threats at the BCTF as well. There was a very volatile social situation that we were caught in, and it personally had, obviously, an impact as well. And, Art Kube was the really, the key person in Solidarity in recognizing that there was a possibility in creating coalitions, and of reaching beyond the traditional labour movement. He was President of the BC Federation of Labour at that time, but he had a broader view as well, about the community. That really grew out of his social democratic background in Northern Europe, and he brought that kind of vision of what we could do. And, of course, he was under more pressure, than I was. And he really collapsed after the Kelowna Accord, when (he) was simply, quite ill for a period of time. So, when you get in the middle of these kinds of things, and the pressure is so great, it really becomes a personal kind of thing, as well as a political situation, that you're involved in.

[00:45:59] KN: So, the teachers did go out on strike, for three days, in November and you've referred to the Kelowna Accord—can you tell us a bit about that? What was it, what happened there,

[00:46:15] KN: also, about your involvement in that resolution?

[00:47:10] LK: Yeah... Let me go back from that to what was happening during the lead-up, during the last few days of before the strike started, and one of the issues for us was the one on if there were going to be reductions of staff. Then it had to be (done) on some fair basis, and seniority being that, rather than the boards being able to single out the people that they wanted to get rid of. And there were attempts that you were involved in, as well as other people, to actually get an agreement—a collective agreement provision—that would bring seniority into

the regime of rules that had to be abided by. And Jack Munro actually played quite a significant role in trying to get that agreement. Because he was in a position, where his members had a strike vote; they could go out on strike; he didn't want them to. He didn't want the whole public sector strike to expand into a general strike, and to bring the people in his own union, who were taking a more militant position, to bring IWA into that.

[00:48:06] LK: So, he spent a lot of time, and the kind of resources he had, you know, of favours back and forth, within the world that he operated in, in trying to get, actually, the seniority agreement, that most of the people felt, would bring us, or take us out of the escalating strike, kind of approach that was being taken. And, even right up to the last days; the last day before we went out on strike, Jack Munro, Art Kube and I were, in a sense, locked up in a room down at the Labour Relations Board, with the people on the board trying to find a resolution. And it came to 6 o'clock on that day, November 8th, I believe, when most of the media in Western Canada was sitting down at the Labour Relations Board to see whether teachers were going to go out on strike, because the escalation of the strike involved the GEU, which was already out on a legal strike. And we were to come on it the third day, which would have been November the 8th. And we were, as I say, sitting in the room, and we had the television on watching the news.

[00:49:54] LK: And there were a bunch of teachers being interviewed, and they were being asked about what the strike was about, why they were thinking of going out on strike. And they talked about human rights, and the range of kinds of social contracts, social goods that were being destroyed by the government, and what it was doing. And Jack was very disturbed, because it was so clear to him, and rightly, he was right, that what we were talking about was not a traditional collective bargaining situation, which has a kind of closed set of rules around it. And, as far as he was concerned, it was totally a mistake to link these things—the larger social issues with collective bargaining and strikes. And at 6 o'clock it was clear, that there wasn't going to be any resolution, and I told Art, that I was going to go out and tell the press that the strike was on. The television was there, they had live broadcast, that's how the teachers were going to know whether the strike was on the next day, or not. They were going to hear it on the news.

[00:51:35] LK: You know, in those days we didn't have all of our other communications at the capacity that we have now. And, so I got up and went towards the door, and Art got up to come with me, and Jack Munro said to him: "Art, you cannot leave this room!" And it placed Art in this incredibly stressful place, I know, because he'd made commitments to us, to me, personally, but to teachers as a whole that he was supportive of what we were doing, of the role we were playing, in both, this coalition and Operation Solidarity. So, we had that personal commitment that he had made. But he also was President of the BC Federation of Labour, and Jack Munro was the most powerful person in the BC Federation of Labour. So, he faced a conflict that I didn't. I was in tune with my members, with the people I was representing, that this was a strategy that we had outlined, this was the mandate that we had from our members, and so, for me that wasn't a stressful point.

[00:53:03] LK: I could go out and say, we're doing this. But, for Art, and I am sure, that his collapse was a physical manifestation of what happened in that room at 6 o'clock

[00:53:20] LK: in the evening on

[00:53:24] LK: November 7th.

[00:53:26] LK: We designed it to start in a way that would give us a week of being on strike with only three days, because of the holiday on the 11th.

[00:53:46] AC: It was a Friday. What happened then, thinking, to move from that... Can you talk a bit about teacher participation in the strike, and then, of course, the Accord?

[00:54:02] LK: Yeah. The participation was substantial, 90% or so. It was the case all over the province. We had the Envoy 100, the first electronic communication system, and in every local there was a big container, three times the size of a laptop, but it allowed us to exchange messages about what was going on. So, you could be out on a picket line in Burnaby, and be getting a news report from Peace River, where there were truckers, that were protesting against the teachers, and building the sense that this really was a collective thing, we were a part of. On the picket lines you got your bulletins that told what was happening elsewhere. So, there was a very strong sense of solidarity in that, but there were also other pressures. Some of them legal, as many of the boards went to court to get injunctions, to prohibit picketing by teachers, and in some cases judges gave those, and in some cases they didn't. In Vancouver this led to teachers picketing liquor stores, and government employees, who were on strike picketing schools,

[00:55:47] LK: and there was this kind of cross-organizational element, that was implicit in the whole idea of Operation Solidarity. But there were a lot of pressures too, such as were teachers strong enough, were they prepared to stay out more, than the three days. There was this long weekend, what's going to happen after that? So, we had pressures from within; not really being able to test the ground of how far our members would go and stay on that. But at the same time, I am sure, as soon as Art and I had walked out of the room at the LRB, that Jack Munro was working the contacts he had. The direct pipeline to Bennett's advisor, who is really, a key person in all of this—

[00:57:00] LK: he

[00:57:01] LK: later worked for Mulroney... Jack had those connections with the government, he clearly had gone in and negotiated an agreement with them. There were meetings of the Fed at that stage that I wasn't invited to, Art wasn't there to essentially try to maintain the Operation Solidarity, and, something had been negotiated that I was neither a part of, nor was I ever really told what it was that Jack had agreed to. And they went to Kelowna, he and Jerry Scott, who was the communications person for the FED at that stage—they went to Kelowna and there he and Bill Bennett had announced the Kelowna Accord; the agreement, that basically, would end the strike. You know, and, with that announcement that's what happened. The strike ended. There

was not a vote on our part, we weren't even at the leadership level consulted in what was there; and in the discussions, that had been held during the week or so coming up to that, one of the things that had been on the table, was, if there was to be a settlement, was that the money that teachers had lost in terms of their salaries for the three days they'd been on strike, would be returned to the system. And it would allow for the kinds of cuts, that were a part of the overall program to be ameliorated,

[00:59:20] LK: but Munro agreed to have the money from teachers' strikes to go into the apprenticeship programs, to make sure that the money didn't come back to teachers.

[00:59:38] AC: What were the other elements of the Accord?

[00:59:45] LK: Quite frankly I don't recall all of the other things, that...

[00:59:50] AC: Was there a part of this that gave us the right to negotiate seniority provisions?

[00:59:54] LK: Well...Yes. That was, for us, the for-sure thing that came out of this, was the seniority. Which was important, again, in the expansion of the collective bargaining. It was the first break, really, from the salaries and benefits, that had been there as the frame for bargaining. And, so it created— just as the vote to strike, and going on strike, were key in— building blocks to a collective bargaining system. Actually, to be able to negotiate a specific area that would be legally binding on the parties was another important building block for what came later in terms of full scope of bargaining.

[01:00:47] KN: So, how would you assess the teachers' reaction overall to the Accord and the end of the strike?

[01:00:58] LK: The reaction was mixed, I would say. There were certainly, many members, who simply didn't feel comfortable being on strike, nor did they see it in any capacity. If everyone else had settled on the labour side, that would have left us alone out there, and there was also no way of communicating in the timeframe, to test the question with members; you know, taking another vote: do we stay out or do we go in with the others, who had been on strike and were going in. But there was also lots of reaction, that over the next decade made it impossible for us to join the BCFED, because people said, well, we've been undercut and been abandoned, you know, whatever. And that was done without a vote of the members, and (it) really lead to the pattern that we've had in the strikes, in the provincial strikes that we've had since then, where there were votes in many stages.

[01:02:33] LK: And we developed ways in carrying out votes in very short period of time. No one else can carry out a ratification vote in 24 hours, which, in effect, we have the capacity to do now. And, politically, that's an important factor and a strength of the union, in those kinds of conflicts to be able to have a collective decision in a very short period of time that gives the leadership the capacity to make decisions about where things go.

[01:03:16] AC: So, distrust of the BC Teachers' Federation was one legacy of that dispute...

[01:03:23] LK: Distrust of BCFED.

[01:03:24] AC: Yes.

[01:03:25] AC: Were there any other legacies that you can think of, that might have been more positive?

[01:03:29] LK: Yes,

[01:03:33] LK: well, there is actually, a very positive part of it. It created a different sense within the organization, it was a significant transition from the very narrow scope of bargaining kind of approach. It created the basis for the decision later, when Bills 19 and 20 came in and the government gave us a choice of either a non-union or union option. And I think, that by that time we were already a union to such a degree, in the traditional sense of unions that it was not surprising that it was what teachers opted for—the union option. And not the non-union option that might have won in 1979, if there'd been a vote on it, the non-union without the right to strike, probably—quite possibly—would have been the option, that was taken by teachers. A decade later, with that whole range of experiences by the Solidarity and the internal changes in the organization structures that we had built, to try to build the basis for that in the law and in our way of operating,

[01:05:22] LK: I think, that was important in making a success of the next stages of actually, gaining full collective bargaining rights.

[01:05:33] KN: Can you tell us a bit more about structural changes that you refer to?

[01:05:39] LK: Yeah, growing out of the kind of division between those, who saw (themselves as) the “professional” type—the classic issue that all teacher unions face, of whether we’re professionals or whether we’re unionists—was a significant element in the 60/40% votes, that we had. The 60/40% reflected a different self-concept of who we are and who we should be. So we created a task force on professional and bargaining rights, and appointed to the task force people, who were on both sides of that. And so, it became a place, where, through deliberations, and looking at examples from other places, through almost, a negotiation there, about how can we find ourselves between these two positions of a development conception, of a union of professionals, which is the designation that we adopted for ourselves out of that. It really helped to create—and the fact that it went through various kinds of meetings and through the AGM—

[01:07:27] LK: meant that we had collectively dealt with what was a contradiction, and found a way through that contradiction, that allowed us to have a conception, that was no longer “we’re either this, or either that”, but we can be both of those. Structurally, we had our committees that for example, would have an input into the bargaining objectives. And, as I mentioned before, the Summer Conference—Summer Conference in the 1980s became very important, because there were people from all of the various programs, taking part in the discussions that

were going on. And in 1982 and 1983 they were a key part of the building of the solidarity within the organization, by having everybody there, and developing a common message; other than translating it into various pieces of where people were working within the organization.

[01:08:52] KN: So, Larry, we've talked a fair bit about your role in the whole campaign of the expanded scope of bargaining, Solidarity and all of that in that respect. Is there anything else about your presidency—your three years in that job, that you wanted to comment on, that you think might have been significant from the Federation's perspective?

[01:09:18] LK: Two things. One of them is that Bill Vander Zalm was the minister of education, when I was President. And that was an interesting experience in itself. When he was appointed minister, we always sent a letter of congratulations to a minister. So, I sent him a letter of congratulations in French (laughs), as he, of course was complaining about French on the cereal boxes. So, he wrote back in Dutch. (Everybody laughs). And it was sort of typical of the incredible things, that... Well, when he was the education minister, the people, worked in the Ministry had to listen to the news in the morning to find out what was happening in education—you know, what decisions he's made now, or whatever. When he was appointed, he came to our building to meet with us, and it was very cordial, he's a very gregarious guy, etcetera, and we had this interesting meeting, where we just talked about what we thought was important. Then, we'd go out of the meeting, and he goes immediately to the press, and makes outrageous statements, that had nothing to do with what we had been talking about in the meeting (

[01:10:55] LK: laughs).

[01:10:56] LK: A couple of my favourite stories with Vander Zalm: one, was when we were on the Gzowsky show, the radio program, that...

[01:11:25] KN: This Country In the Morning"?

[01:11:55] LK: This Country In the Morning"! And we were to go down to the CBC to do the interviews from there. So, we show up down there, and he's wearing his "television suit". He didn't know that this was radio, CBC Radio. He'd never listened to the CBC Radio before, he said (laughs), which really captured for me the many aspects of him. And I always had to be prepared on a "slow news day" for the fact, that I was going to get a call from the press, because he has this incredible capacity, to know exactly when to say something outrageous, that would get him some coverage. And, it was like clock-work. I always knew when it was that he was going to do this. And one evening I was in the office and the phone rang—we had this system, where you could pick up the phone, and so,

[01:12:25] LK: I pick up the phone—it's Bill Vander Zalm on the phone—calling me and asking me of the addresses of all teachers in the province (laughs). Because he wanted to send a letter to them. And just so classic. When he came to visit with us, he did not bring a deputy minister, or anyone from the bureaucracy, he just came on his own to do that. So, that was always an interesting time, during his period.

[01:12:58] LK: And he, actually, said at one stage that—and there is a quote in the press (of him) saying that— that all of the Executive members of the BCTF were incompetent teachers, and that's why they were union activists. And so, we sued him. And, eventually, settled with getting a letter of apology for each of us, like the one that I've got on the wall in my office. And we probably wouldn't have agreed to that if we'd known he was coming back as the Premier of the province, but he had already left as the education minister. He wasn't in the government, when he wrote a letter to us. So, that's you know, some of the interesting times. Also, there was a different approach to this in terms of relationship with government. Essentially, before Solidarity, the first two years that I was President, there were frequent meetings with the deputy minister. And, Jim Bowman, from staff, and I would meet with the deputy and a couple of people from the Ministry. And it was a place where we could talk about the kinds of policies and issues that were there, and

[01:14:35] LK: that really came to an end with Solidarity. I think, and it's only been quite recently, that we really established a relationship with government that we could actually, sit down and talk about things, before they get announced by government. And, those are mostly things around curriculum issues, around program changes, creation of the Consumer Education course, and array of those kinds of things. And in many ways that was what I was the most interested in—to be engaged in the policy issues around education, and we had limited opportunities for that, at that stage. And one of the things, that I like about what is happening right now, is that the Federation, and the Ministry have the best working relationship in the time I've been active in the leadership and the staff of the Federation. I think, (the relationship is one) where we can actually have a discussion, and have some sort of influence over the policy decisions that are made—not about the working conditions, but about the work that teachers do in their classrooms.

[01:16:07] KN: OK—

[01:16:08] KN: so, Larry, when we started this interview, we started off with your first teaching job in Kitimat, 1968. And we'd like to end it further back than that; and have you tell us a bit about where and when you were born; and where you were raised. And can you talk a bit about that?

[01:16:32] KN: And also, perhaps a bit about your family background: anyone involved in a union in your family; or in the rest of the family, and where did you get your political take on these things? From your experiences perhaps, or...

[01:16:39] LK: OK,

[01:16:46] LK: I was born in Tacoma, Washington. And, mostly, grew up in the state of Oregon. I lived in a little tiny town, called Elgin in Eastern Oregon for 10 years. And then, in Redmond, in central Oregon. My family were... my father owned a Five and Dime store, and equivalent to Dollar Stores now, and my mother was a teacher. They were very conservative; my father in particular. A lot of my values and social attitudes really came from my mother, who was raised

in the social gospel tradition of Christianity. And, although we never talked about it explicitly, the things that she would say, the attitudes she had, the approach she had to teaching, that was really, the main influence in forming my value structure, I think. And, the most significant book that I've read that influenced my thinking was—when I was about 16—I read John Dos Passos' "U.S.A." trilogy. And, I think, it woke me up from, or sort of gave me another perspective, because, living in the United States in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, there was just an obsessive anti-communism

[01:18:52] LK: that I used to have dreams about Stalin beating people over the head, because that was so much the atmosphere. And my father—we lived in this little tiny town in the corner of Washington, Oregon and Idaho and this town had a watchtower. And my father would go one evening a week as a volunteer to go up on this watchtower, and watch for Russian bombers. It's hard to believe (laughs), but that was the reality, that I grew up in. Then I read John Dos Passos—and one of the things I've always heard was, rightly, about how Stalin erased people. You know, you're in any picture with Trotsky, and Trotsky would be wiped out, as people were wiped out, who were disagreeing with him. And, I think, that's why Dos Passos' book had such an impact on me, because the book is basically about the period of World War I and just afterwards. And the IWW, the Socialist Party, Eugene Debs got several million votes for president in 1920 running as a socialist;

[01:20:36] LK: and I realized, that that wasn't anything that I learned anywhere else. And, in fact, what was happening, was, essentially, the equivalent to Stalin erasing people from the pictures. That the whole experience of America had been wiped out of the memory, and you couldn't ever learn those things, unless you, as I did, ran across the book, because my mother went back to the university, to be able to upgrade her teaching credential, and so, I had a summer in university library. And, just wandering down the aisle of the library, I found this book. And I realized as well, that my father had had to quit school, when he was 16 to support his family, his brothers and sisters. And his first job was in the forest industry in Washington State. And he was a whistle punk. And I realized, that the whistle punk, and the bull cook, I think, they were called, were, actually, people, who had these jobs because of IWW went on strike to get better safety and better conditions in the bunk-beds—you know, the bunks, where they lived. And, my father's first job was obviously, because of the IWW. But he had no conception of that.

[01:22:31] LK: He just didn't know that part. His own experience was absent from (that); so that made me start to question everything about the society, that I lived in, and I became "un-American" in the sense of "un-American" activities committee. Un-American. And, I went to the university at the Reed College, Portland. And Reed had two traditions. One was a very powerful academic tradition, producing world scholars and Woodrow-Wilsons fellows, and so on; but the other one was of a political activist background. And I went there, primarily, because of having read this book, and discovering that there was the college, that actually, drew onto those traditions, that had been wiped out of most of the understanding of most Americans, of their own history. When I finished—I did a Political Science degree, and planned to become a lawyer;

and was accepted into a law school in San Francisco and the Hastings School of Law, which is the University of California's law school that, basically trains street-front lawyers.

[01:24:12] LK: It is the social justice of legal work, that particular place, law school, looks at. But I decided to join the Vista, the Domestic Peace Corp, before going to law school.

[01:24:22] KN: How did you become a teacher?

[01:24:33] KN: What lead you to teaching?

[01:24:35] LK: What lead me to teaching was the experience in Vista, in the Domestic Peace Corp. I had been asked to be on a legal project, and so I was working in a public defender's office in Miami, Florida, and going into the Dade County jail every day and interviewing people, who had been in jail for at least two days and were charged with some minor crime. And the fact that they were still in jail, it indicated that they were too poor to pay bail. And so, our job was to go in and identify people, who, we thought, would return (to society), and go to court and ask the court to release them in their own custody. And in the process of that I had found that, the Dade County jail, which is a high-rise, it's a 14 storey-high jail, and it had all these people, who were either awaiting trial or had a sentence that was less than two years. And there was absolutely nothing for them to do in this jail. And so, one of the other people working in the bail bond project started a set of courses to, essentially, help prepare people to take the GED, the high-school equivalency exam.

[01:26:10] LK: And what struck me, really, was one particular set of people—a father and a son, who were both there, and they were illiterate. And clearly, the education was the potential of trying to break out of this multi-generational situation that they were in; and it just made me think, that, probably, education was the place to have more impact, in terms of the social values, that I had then, than being a lawyer was. So, I then, went back to Reed College and got into a Master of Arts and Teaching, and taught high-school in Portland and in Washington. High-school... The Master of Arts and Teaching program was one where you have your own class, and you get paid for teaching, but a very low salary, but enough to live on. So, I was teaching American History. And, because of John Dos Passos, I was teaching a different American History, than most of the people were. And so, I included a part about slavery, the nature of slavery; and the class structure.

[01:27:53] LK: And I used Buffy Sainte-Marie's song about "Where Have All the Buffalo Gone?" to talk about what happened to Native Americans. And, that's what I thought, teaching was going to be. However, the principal of the school I was at saw me teaching—came into a role-play, that I was doing, and it had some of the black students engaged, who were not engaged elsewhere, in their other classes. And he came in when I was doing the Buffy Sainte-Marie song about genocide, as well, so, he wrote a reference for me, which said, that I would do well teaching "Negroes" or "Indians", but "would not fit into the American public school system". So, I was never going to get a job! I couldn't get an interview anywhere, except for the Bureau of

Indian Affairs' schools because of that, so I felt, I wanted to teach. A number of my friends had come to Canada, because of the draft. And one of my friends, actually, Bob Skelly, out in...

[01:28:41] AC: Alberni.

[01:29:29] LK: Actually, on the coast...

[01:29:30] AC: Ucluelet.

[01:29:32] LK: Ucluelet, yes. And, I was told, all I had to do was to look at the newspaper, and he sent me a copy of the Sun, and I put in an application, and a week later I had a teaching job in Kitimat. So, that's what brought me to Canada, it was the fact that I wanted to teach. And I wasn't able to teach in the US. So, I had often thought, that I should really send a letter of appreciation to the principal, because I am sure that I'd feel much more comfortable teaching, you know, having taught in Canada, and working for the Federation in Canada, that I would have been as an AFT member, had I been able to get a teaching job in the US.

[01:30:21] KN: Can you talk a bit about your experience in Canada? You taught in Kitimat, and where else did you teach in BC?

[01:30:27] LK: Yes, I taught in Kitimat. I was hired to teach in the Occupational Program, which was a kind of Special Ed at the time. And then I exchanged programs with some other people, teaching Social Studies and English. I decided to leave Kitimat, and got a job in Kettle Valley, in the Boundary Secondary school. It was a new school, it was just opening. It had been built as an open-area school around philosophy, and they started with summer—one week of talking about the philosophy of open education, etc. And it was great. A wonderful place to teach, from my experience. But in those days, the provisions for getting hired were that you were on probation for two years. And within those two years you could be not re-hired without any rationale being given, you just didn't get another contract. And I thought I was very successful, I got a satisfactory (review) from the superintendent, but the board decided that I would lose my job. And most of the people in the community felt, it was because I was married to an African American, as well as I was, clearly, a leftist.

[01:32:24] LK: And the chief person on the school board, who was the chair of the school board, the postmaster, the only store in Midway, and also was, clearly, a racist, who had gotten rid of other teachers there, because they were black, and this was what people thought was at issue there, and why I wasn't going to be going back for another year. So I called the Federation, and asked what I could do about this, and so, the Federation, as it acted in those days, the Assistant General Secretary called the superintendent, because that's what Federation did at first. When they knew there was a conflict, they went to superintendent to find out about it. And all the support I got from the Federation, was that I was sent an article from a magazine about how you can't challenge the values of small, rural communities.

[01:33:38] KN: You can, or can't?

[01:34:19] LK: No, you can't. As in you can't challenge (those) and continue to teach. Those are incompatible. So, I thought, this is a strange union. But I was on the local executive; there were only 30 teachers there in the district at that time; and so virtually everyone was, actually, on the Executive of the union there. And I was mostly interested in professional development kinds of things, and curriculum development; wanted to do some stuff for lesson aids, and that part of the Federation I liked... But I couldn't figure out a union, who, essentially didn't advocate on behalf of its members. I did get a job offer then, in Kamloops the day before our phone was being disconnected, and we were going to go—I don't know where. I didn't have a job, didn't know what we were going to do next. And then I got this offer in Kamloops, and taught in Kamloops in a junior secondary first, and then at Kamloops Secondary at that stage.

[01:34:58] AC: So, you're talking in the early 1970s?

[01:35:01] LK: Yeah. Talking, 1970, was when I went to Kamloops, I taught there from 1970 to 1976, and then I was elected Local President 1976–78; I got active in the union, because I wanted it to be a different kind of union, than I discovered that it was, when I was in difficulty. And so, I was President of the union, and I applied to be on the Learning Conditions Committee, and then I was co-chair of the task force on the rights and responsibilities, and ran for the Executive in 1977, I guess, yeah. I then spent a year, in 1978–79 as an Executive member, and I was a faculty associate at SFU for that year. And then was elected Vice-President next year. So, since then, my life has been mostly at the Federation.

[01:36:13] KN: Can you talk a bit about your experience as Local President? Were you full-time?

[01:36:17] LK: I was a full-time President; we had, I think, close to a thousand members, more than there are now, I think. And it was still, of course, pre-collective bargaining days, and, mostly I had thought of the role of a President in a sort of, policy kinds of things, and not so much about the personnel aspects of it. Which of course, then was an important one, and even more so now, in the context of collective bargaining. But the first day that I came into the office, there was somebody sitting there, waiting for me, who said: "I've just been fired". You know. And so, I got a very early introduction—immediate introduction into calling Mohammad Shamsheer, and getting advice on how the union should properly represent its members in some kind of a conflict with the administration.

[01:37:32] KN: OK, Then you said, you've become active at the BCTF. Was your first entry into the BCTF as a Member at Large, or were you an LR before that?

[01:37:47] LK: I was a Geographical Representative, as we were then. But then, at the same time, I was elected President, I became a Geographical Representative as well. And I voted against the building of a new building—my first motion was seconding someone else's motion against that in 1976, I guess, it was.