

Interview: Susan Lambert (SL)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)

Assisted by: Al Cornes and Lesley Harrington

Date: July 20, 2016

Location: Vancouver, BC

[00:00:10] KN: We're here to interview Susan Lambert, who was the President of the BCTF from 2010 to 2013. Today's date is July 20th, 2016. The interview is being conducted by Ken Novakowski and Al Cornes, technical assistance from Lesley Harrington. Afternoon, Susan!

[00:00:28] SL: Good afternoon.

[00:00:30] KN: So we are going to ask you a set of questions that will give a bit of a background before we get to the part about the BCTF. We want to know where and when you were born, and where you were raised?

[00:00:43] SL: 1950, and I was born in Dalat, South Vietnam, at the time. It was Dalat, Vietnam. And we moved as that war heated-up, to England, where my Mom was born; and then to Canada in 1957. So, from the age of around 7, I was raised in and around Vancouver.

[00:01:15] KN: In Vancouver itself?

[00:01:17] SL: No, my parents were pretty nomadic. So, we started off with my aunt in North Van, and then we went to New Westminster, and then we went to Burnaby, and then, Coquitlam and so on. It was a very... I think, it's a product of the war. Our parents' generation were always trying to get things better.

[00:01:42] KN: Can you tell us a bit about your family, was it in a union, or progressive? Also, what did your parents do, how many siblings did you have?

[00:01:52] SL: I am the middle of three children, and no, they weren't a progressive couple, my Mom and Dad. They were very loving and they did their best to raise a family with good values and a lot of love. But they weren't union people. My father always thought, and always said to me, especially, as I got more involved in the union movement, that unions were valuable at one time, but they had out-lived their value (laughs). They were kind of, federal Liberals. They loved Jean Chrétien, they loved Trudeau. They were federal Liberals, that's the middle of the road, kind of, politically.

[00:02:44] KN: What do you remember about your school experience? You must have gone to schools in various districts.

[00:02:48] SL: Yeah, we travelled; we moved a lot. Don't remember being at any school more than two years. And that's a little difficult, when you come from another (country)... I mean, I

came from England, so I am a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and I fit-in physically, I am not a visible minority. But I did come with an accent, and a Mom, who tied my hair in tight braids, and the accent was something that was... There was some bullying and ridicule, when you're moving from school to school. That was difficult, but I also remember just some wonderful times with some teachers. I had a teacher in one of my schools that made me want to be a teacher, right? I think, from when I was in Grade 2 or 3. But, in particular I remember, a janitor, and this janitor—and anybody, who went to the F.W. Howey in New Westminster at that time would have known him—and I can't remember his name, but he ought to be remembered. He was an amazing, amazing person. He had the entire school population, I guess the intermediate grades now, that I think about it, in the gym during the winter, I think, twice a week, doing square-dancing, as he would call it.

[00:04:09] SL: And then, I can remember one time, where he had us all, at lunch time, bunny-hopping in and out of the classrooms, through the school, while he's on the PA, guiding us. So, this was a man that just loved kids. And one day, I was covered with warts—I had warts everywhere. And I fell, and he was the guy that you went to when you fell, and he bandaged our knees. And he bandaged my knee, and I happened to have scraped off a big wart on my knee, and he said: "You know what? You scraped off the mother-wart! And all your warts are going to disappear now". And they did.

[00:04:51] KN: Wow!

[00:04:53] SL: I loved that guy! And everyone in the school did.

[00:04:55] KN: And he was the janitor?

[00:04:56] SL: He was the janitor; but he was the heart of that school. Yes, he was. So, that of my grade-school time, he was the highlight.

[00:05:06] KN: And where did you graduate from high-school?

[00:05:09] SL: Centennial. Centennial in Coquitlam. It was built for 1968, and I graduated in 1968 from Centennial. In fact, I have an ingot under the school, I don't know if they ever dug them up yet, with all the names of the class that trekked to Centennial. So, yeah, and then I went to Simon Fraser for my bachelor in teaching.

[00:05:36] KN: Can you tell us about your university years?

[00:05:39] SL: You know what? Simon Fraser at the time, was the most politicized universities, probably in the country. There were student strikes and there was an anti-war movement that, was vibrant at Simon Fraser. It was where I started to learn about unions and about progressive politics. Through my associations and relationships I developed at Simon Fraser, I met my first husband, who was a red-diaper baby. And I think, that Simon Fraser was the furnace that turned my head around in terms of political analyses and social policy. So, I am very, very grateful for that—it was quite tumultuous to be at Simon Fraser in the early 1970s. I think, I graduated in

1973, so it was a wonderful, wonderful experience, and a very valuable one. One, that I think, many, many university students miss out on, if there is too much worry about taking the middle-line. So, I am very grateful for my experience at Simon Fraser.

[00:07:07] KN: So, where and when did you first teach? And tell us about your first teaching experiences.

[00:07:16] SL: I started teaching in Prince Rupert. My husband and I were into commercial-fishing that summer, because that's what he did, and I had just graduated, and wasn't able to get a job down here, in the Lower Mainland. So, I'd some student-teaching. I mean, what's that called?

[00:07:43] AC: Substitute teaching!

[00:08:10] SL: Substitute teaching! I did some substitute teaching down here, but couldn't get a job, so we were fishing out of Prince Rupert. And there was a newspaper ad, the Friday before the Labour Day weekend that I noticed, that they were looking for a teacher. And they were looking for a Grade 7 teacher. I graduated with High-school English. But, I didn't have a job and it wasn't that good a fishing season. So, I put on my Nor Westers, as it was raining—as it always is in Prince Rupert, and walked-up to the board office and applied. And I got the job. And that was the Friday of the Labour Day weekend, and I started on Tuesday—I was panic-struck. I was completely panic-struck. The Labour Day weekend, I was in that school, every day, for three days; except for the Friday afternoon, when I bought some clothes so I could teach on the Tuesday.

[00:08:37] SL: And it was trial-by-fire, that first year of teaching (laughs). But Prince Rupert was a great district to teach in. It was. It was a district that had to deal with the challenges of poverty, and racism. When I was given my class, I was told, that there were two Grade 7 classes, and I would take this class. And the very first reporting period, I was told, that I had to re-submit all my report cards, because I had given A's and B's in some subjects to some of my kids. And that was when they told me, that none of my kids were of A and B stature. They had all been... they were the lower achievers of the Grade 7 group. The smart ones were in the other class, and I wasn't allowed to give A's and B's. And that was my very first challenge, as a teacher. It was fighting for the right to give some of my kids the top grades. And, I think, I succeeded. In my memory, I succeeded. But it was a big fight, and I think that was very pivotal for me.

[00:09:58] SL: Yeah, because, of course, my kids were browner than the other kids (laughs). So, that was very interesting.

[00:10:06] KN: So, can you talk a bit about some of the further challenges, and some joys, perhaps, you had as a teacher?

[00:10:12] SL: The kids! The kids were the joys, yeah. And, the challenges. Kids were the challenges, and the joys. I had a little girl, and she was always like this (sits with her head down);

and she was one of the ones I gave an A to. And she was constantly not paying any attention to me. Because she was reading! She had a book tucked in there, and she'd be pulling it out and reading (laughs)! And I could remember myself doing that when I was a kid in school. But she bunked me, because she wasn't paying attention to anything I said. She was a smart little one. Yeah. No, it was the kids that were the joy. And, the challenge—because kids present with so many, so many backgrounds. Many of the kids that I taught said, you know when you ask them—like you asked me where I grew up—or where they lived, they would say: "I stay at"... And it took me a while to figure out what "I stay at" meant, because they were moving from auntie, to auntie, to auntie a lot; and had such dysfunctional home-lives.

[00:11:21] SL: But, they were all great kids.

[00:11:27] KN: So, you had a lot of First Nations students in your

[00:11:29] KN: class?

[00:11:30] SL: Yes, we got a lot of aboriginals.

[00:11:32] KN: And did you get to teach High School in Prince Rupert?

[00:11:33] SL: No, I never taught High School. Ever. In my whole career.

[00:11:36] SL: Once I got into, particularly, Grade 7, I fell in love with Grade 7. Grade 7s you can't even recognize once they get into the Grade 8 or 9, because, you know, puberty has kicked it. It starts at Grade 7, but by the time they come back to Grade 9 or 10, they're just completely changed. And, they were volatile and energetic and they challenged your views, which is a wonderful thing.

[00:12:06] KN: So, when and how did you first get involved in your local?

[00:12:11] SL: It was hard to get involved in Prince Rupert, because at that time—I was starting to teach in 1973–74—at that time the local was controlled by a cadre of men, mostly principals. The bargaining was done by them; they were in all the executive positions, and it was very difficult to break into the union activism, I found. I mean, I attended meetings, and I attended meetings of my union, because of the experience I had at Simon Fraser, and fishing; of the worth of unions. But I wasn't encouraged to attend. And I wasn't, oh, not for the first 4–5 years in Prince Rupert, there was never an opportunity to become a leader in that local, because all the positions had been occupied for many, many years, by this group of, mostly principals, but all men. And they were not going to listen to a pretty, by now, radicalized, I suppose—I had some pretty out-there ideas about how people should conduct themselves, and society should be run. And they weren't about to listen to that. I was a member, with a friend of mine; we brought a motion to a General Meeting, the local General Meeting, to join the BC Federation of Labour and the CLC.

[00:13:55] SL: And this was about 1976, I believe. And we fought it through the General Meeting, and it passed. And then we brought it down here, and we were told that it wasn't going to make it down here, at the BCTF Convention, the AGM of the BCTF. But that was something to kind of, break into that structure. And then, some of us, many younger teachers—and many teachers up there in Prince Rupert are young, because the turn-over is so great—we had to kind of work hard, to get into those positions, yeah.

[00:14:35] KN: So, while you were living in Prince Rupert and teaching there, you got involved in the North West College,

[00:14:43] KN: which was based primarily in Terrace, but it was a regional college. Could you talk a bit about that experience?

[00:14:50] SL: Oh yeah, that was quite amazing. I had written a letter to the editor, because they were putting in a new library. And they had two sites that the city was considering. One was in the downtown mall (there was one mall in Prince Rupert, it was down by the coast); and/or uptown, in a suburban neighbourhood. And it seemed to me, that if you wanted people to actually, use the library, you should put it in the mall, where there was the most people. And so, I wrote a letter to that effect. The library was built uptown. But, that letter caught the attention of Len Minsky, who was employed by Barrett. Dave Barrett—if anything comes out of this interview, we have to laud Dave Barrett. He did so many things for this province, but, one of them was the system of community colleges. And, so, he had hired Len Minsky to set-up a chain of community colleges around the province and they were going to do one in Terrace. It became the North West Community College. And he saw my letter to the editor, and personally approached me to be the very first councillor of this brand-new college.

[00:16:18] SL: And... wow! That was a wonderful, wonderful opportunity; we said, the people he had brought in together to be on this college council; John Jensen, from Terrace was another one. We said that this community college was going to be serving three purposes: women; aboriginal peoples and workers. And we would have three foundational programs to service the needs to those three populations. And we set, as its charter, that those were the goals. I mean, how often do you get that opportunity? It was a very, very exciting time. And we did, we started it that way. And then, Barrett, after three years, lost the provincial election, and we were fired the next day (laughs). So, but I think we set that foundation; and we set it solidly; and I think it endures. The early childhood education program, was the sub-set of that: that was one of the women's issues programs. Apprenticeship program for workers, for forestry and engineering and fishery careers, is a huge part of the North West Community College. And the Aboriginal program there is huge. So, I think, even though we were fired; we were able to chart the course for that college that endured.

[00:18:06] SL: And it was an amazing experience for me. Very wonderful.

[00:18:14] KN: So, let's try and re-trace your teaching career then. When did you leave Prince Rupert?

[00:18:21] SL: Left Prince Rupert in 1984–85.

[00:18:26] KN: And when did you start working for BC Teachers' Federation?

[00:18:29] SL: That's when I came down. And I worked for the BCTF for four years, on a term appointment; and then I got a job in Burnaby, and taught. So, I taught in Prince Rupert for 11 years; 4 years on staff, and then 11 years teaching in Burnaby.

[00:18:50] KN: Could you talk a bit about your experience on staff? What did you do, and what did you learn from that experience?

[00:18:56] SL: I was hired and charged with developing the Staff-Rep Training Program. Gail Tyler had conceptualized it; I think she had learned from other unions, and I was charged with developing it. And it was Gail's idea, but when I saw it advertised, I thought, this is the way to go. This is what any union should do: is to make sure that everything starts with entry-level positions. No issue is tackled, unless it is an issue that came up from the grass-roots and the foundation of the union. And that's what the staff-rep program training is all about—is bringing a union-representative up in each school, and having that representative. The representative to have dual obligations, of communicating staff-members provincial issues, and bringing concerns of staff-members to the union. So, in my view, it's the most important thing we do, the Staff-Rep Training Program, because creates a strength of the union.

[00:20:30] KN: And, were you the first person to hold that position?

[00:20:33] SL: Yes, I was. The job was posted to develop that program.

[00:20:44] KN: So, after that you went onto teaching in Burnaby. Can you talk a bit about teaching in Burnaby, and your experience teaching; and also, your activity in the Burnaby local?

[00:20:51] SL: Burnaby was the opposite almost, of Prince Rupert. It was a suburban, large local, very well established here in Lower Mainland. And therefore, provincially, as a union, it had a leadership role. Prince Rupert also had a leadership role; it was known as a very active union local. But, Burnaby was a big one, and very suburban. I left Prince Rupert as a teacher-librarian, and started in Burnaby as a teacher-librarian. And so, the local was one that had a very strong teacher-librarian program; and language in its local. It was one of the local agreements that was very, very progressive: in that it had class-sizes and it had limits for, in each classroom of students with special needs, so you could, actually, attend to their needs. And it said, in the local collective agreement that teacher-librarians had to be teacher-librarians. Not just give prep time. They had to develop library programs, and so that was my joy. So, in that sense I was much more professionally involved in Burnaby, than I had been in Prince Rupert. Prince Rupert was where I learned how to teach, but in Burnaby I became much more committed to the teaching profession, especially the teacher-librarianship.

[00:22:42] KN: What

[00:22:43] KN: about the local? Activity in the local?

[00:22:46] SL: Yeah, the local—it was such a strong local. And I was so appreciative and I felt that the leadership in Burnaby was something to admire. They were very, very strong and had a very developed sense of values about what the union should be. And so, there was very much of a pull for me to get into the leadership in Burnaby and become active. It was something I was very proud to be part of. But I was also kind of pushed out of the teacher-librarianship in Burnaby, because of the administration in Burnaby. It was, well, I guess, all across the province, that the administration was getting increasingly

[00:23:49] SL: authoritarian.

[00:23:51] SL: I wanted to automate my library. I felt like I had to have quills stuck in my hair, because I was still signing-out library cards. Computers have been around for a long time, and I was signing out—and the kids were signing out library cards, and I was stuffing... oh! I mean, it was crazy! And, I thought, I had to get this library automated. And the district had assured me that there was a five-year program to get every library automated. Well, five years came and went, they had done two. So, I started to raise funds: I did the casinos, I raised \$30,000 for our library automation project. I had a bank of computers for kids to use, my computers, all were raised by the parents from my school. All I had to do was buy the library automation software. But the district never ever settled on a particular software, and wouldn't let anybody buy software, until they settled. So, it was Catch-22 and I was getting so... this was about 4 years, or 5 years—and I just got so frustrated

[00:25:11] SL: by this, that I finally bought my own program and got it established. But that kind of... how much effort every teacher has to put in, in order to improve the program they're doing. And mine was just, you know, the Library Automation Project. There was every single classroom teacher, going through the same kind of frustration, trying to build quality programs for kids. And being stymied, by, seemed to me, the administration, where there was some kind of a layer that appeared opaque to me, of decision-making, that was dysfunctional. And so, that kind of drove me into the arms of the union, and out of teaching. Because I wanted to be somebody that got things done. I was chafing under that restraint, and so I became—well, I was always staff rep in Prince Rupert, but I became a full-time release office, a Vice-President. Never a President, but a Vice-President

[00:26:21] SL: of the local.

[00:26:24] KN: So, during this period of time, did you become active in the BC Teachers' Federation, or could you tell us about becoming active in the BCTF?

[00:26:31] SL: Yes. I am sure I did. I was always a delegate. When I was in Burnaby I had much more opportunity to be a delegate to the Annual General Meeting, to be a Local Rep to the Rep Assembly; to be active in committees in the local. So I was very active in that sense. And, the more I became involved with the union, the more I wanted it. You come to one Annual General

Meeting, you want to come to every one after. The nature of debate in the Federation on how policy is developed and honed through debate, and how everyone takes the development of the policy seriously, because that policy will guide us. That policy will guide our practice. I was just listening to the Republican Convention, and apparently the platform is being adopted, and it's as you would expect, ultra-right wing. But, apparently it doesn't matter, because nobody pays attention to the platform and it doesn't matter—and that is not what happens in the Federation. We are guided by your policy, and the policy is very carefully crafted, with values incorporated. And it's the practise of crafting that policy through debate; through sometimes long and tedious debate that is so precious, and so valuable, that I loved.

[00:28:20] KN: So, when and how did you become a member of the BCTF Executive?

[00:28:25] SL: I was trying to recall how I decided to run for the Executive, for the Second Vice-President. And I just think it was a natural progression. I think there was an opportunity. I was a member of the Teacher Viewpoint caucus, and we always held meetings to identify candidates, like all caucuses do; and there was an opportunity at one point. And I was Vice-President in Burnaby, full-time release anyway, so it just seemed the natural progression to take on the leadership. I just felt that it was the right thing for me to do at that time.

[00:29:25] KN: So your first position on the Executive was, actually, a full-time Table Officer?

[00:29:28] SL: No, no—sorry—I was one year as the Member At Large.

[00:29:33] SL: That's

[00:29:36] SL: right: I went one year as Member At Large, and the next year, as a full-time. And I was a Member At Large at the same time I was Vice-President in Burnaby.

[00:29:40] KN: Do

[00:29:44] KN: you, during your years as Vice-President; first, the Second Vice-President; then the First Vice-President; and then, President—during that whole period of time, there were lots of things happening at the BCTF. And can you talk about the whole overall, political, social climate in British Columbia during your period of leadership overall, that you have been in Federation?

[00:30:16] SL: Yeah... in 2001 Gordon Campbell was elected. And so, January 28, 2002 Christy Clark brought in the legislation that stripped out collective agreement. And that legislation was an assault on democracy (smiles). And it was fundamentally an assault on democracy; and on our rights as citizens, and as teachers, and professionals in this province. It was such a pivotal point in our history, that many of us, whose activism spanned that day, were injured by it. We were injured by that legislation, in a very profound way. We lost our naivete, I think, in terms of a democratic institution being one that fundamentally protects your rights. We lost the ability to... there is a word that begins with C—

[00:32:08] SL: Complacency! We lost our complacency! And we realized, I think, and this is my own kind of digesting of it, I guess, after many years, because that injury, I think, stopped us dead for a while. We didn't even... we had a one-day strike. I think, later on we would have had far more than that, and we did, later on. But, at that time we were stunned. We were injured. But that move on the part of the provincial coalition of Liberals and SoCreds, and Conservatives, was enough to shake us out of our complacency about our democracy and the role of teachers, and teaching in public education, in that democracy. And I think, in hindsight, it galvanized us over the next... well, up until now—into a much more active agency in shaping this province. And in the end, I think, that that was pivotal in shaping our union. In a way that is fundamentally correct.

[00:33:35] KN: So, can you talk Susan, about some of the specific events that have occurred in the next period of time, that you have just been talking about, for example, during that period of time we joined the BC Federation of Labour; we joined the Canadian Labour Congress? And then, in 2005, when you were a full-time officer, we had this very dramatic event, we had this 10-day strike. Do you want to talk about that a bit, and why, do you think that happened, and what you remember about it that was significant?

[00:34:11] SL: It is a two-week illegal strike. And it was a strike, that was a product of the 2002 legislation, I am absolutely sure. I think the anger that was a result of that legislation, culminated in the 2005 strike. And it culminated in the determination that we would stay out. And what was so fascinating about that strike, was that we built strength. We built strength internally—we had so many different votes, to go out and stay out, to stay out in the face of the various legal and political interventions that the government tried to throw at us. And each and every time we voted, the vote got stronger. But we also built increasing public support: parents' support, but more than parents' support. So many people in this province understood what we were fighting for. And, why, and how fundamentally undemocratic the legislative power of the provincial government—or the use of the legislative power of the provincial government was. And so, we built support on the lines from everyone: we built support on the lines, from the judicial system; I think, we built support on the lines from the chartered accountants... You know, there were so many different groups that in different ways indicated their support for teachers, that we were able to stay out for two weeks, despite an injunction,

[00:36:13] SL: despite having our assets frozen, and so many different things. And that experience taught us, that laws are made by people, and that people can un-make those laws if they have the determination to do so. Justice is not just a word, it's dynamic. And democracy is dynamic. And you have to—you have to—have an agency within that democracy, in order to maintain its dynamic nature. It's constant change. It always has to change, because the needs of people change. And if it's not responsive to the needs of people, then it's not a democracy. So, I think, that whole notion of agency and the role of public education, and teachers in creating agency in students, was something that the Federation, over that decade, or more, embraced. We became, truly, a social justice union. We were afraid, I think, many of us, of becoming a business union, especially when we considered—and I was one of the first ones to advocate

joining the BC Federation of Labour and the CLC... But, when we started really considering that avenue, many of us were concerned with the history of, kind of business unionism: a unionism that was very narrowly focused on improving the rights and the economic status of the members of the particular union.

[00:38:21] SL: Yes, that is a very important aspect of unionism. But for us, I think, we have a much deeper, and more compelling task, and that is building agency in students. Building the strength of the public education system and making sure that every student, to the best of their ability, has the confidence and the skill, to be able to insure that our democracy is vibrant and it's not just a once-every-four-years voting practise or exercise; it is responsive to the needs of very articulate citizens.

[00:39:14] KN: You remember that in 2006 you had actually negotiated a settlement, with the government, without any job action. Why do you think that happened?

[00:39:26] SL: Well, there were two things that were involved. One, was Jinny Sims, and she was a consummate negotiator, and the other... Well, it was more than two things. Well, you know, we were a determined union. We've just been out the year before on a two-week illegal strike, and this was another opportunity to improve the lives of teachers and the lives of students. But we also had a very pragmatic Minister of Finance and that was Carole Taylor. And she, somehow had the authority and the strength within her own Liberal coalition caucus or government, to put some money on the table. And she did. So, it was a realistic bargaining, it wasn't the austerity bargaining that we've had ever since. It was bargaining with some ability to improve and some give and take. There was negotiating on both sides, there was an actual process of negotiating, and one that respected both parties. It was hard (laughs). I know you remember, you know? The 24/7—well, it wasn't 7, but it was a week. And there were several 24 hour goes there. I can remember sleeping in the lobby of the Coast Hotel. So, I think, there was a respect of the process of bargaining, that Carole Taylor brought to the table. That allowed us to actually negotiate a collective agreement.

[00:41:13] SL: It took both sides, and both sides were present, and it was a very hard, but very effective negotiating process, that we both were able to sign at the end of the day, with pride.

[00:41:39] KN: So, can you tell us about the FSA campaign, which have been simmering in the Federation for a number of years, but really came to full blossom when you were First Vice-President? And, subsequently carried forward. Can you just talk about that overall, and what were the issues involved with that?

[00:41:58] SL: I think, the FSA campaign was the most important, in terms of our development as a union, in recognizing our role to defend public education itself. I think, that that legislation in 2002, we clearly defined as an attack—not just on us, but on public education; the stripping of collective agreement language, of every shred of protection around class-sizes, and students with special needs and so on. It was an attack on public education. The FSAs were also an attack on public education. They were fundamentally an instrument that was used in so many different

ways, and it is complex. It is not just an instrument that was used by the Fraser Institute to compare scores, and to elevate the scores of private schools, and to denigrate the schools struggling with poverty, and class and race. That was one public face of FSAs, for sure. But the other evil of FSAs is that, it meant that you had to circumscribe curriculum. You had to make sure you taught to the test. You had the double-edged sword of the publishing of the scores, which meant that if you didn't want to be in the Vancouver Sun as one of the poorest schools of the province, you had to improve your test-scores.

[00:43:54] SL: I taught in a school, and this is my own experience, where we... I have to get the sequence right—we were a school known for our academics. It was an elementary school, but we were a school known for our academic success. We were in a middle-class neighbourhood in Burnaby. And, our students were successful. And we had some very good classroom teachers. And so we had good test-scores. Not because we were teaching to the test at the time, this was early on. But that success brought us the attention of real estate agents, who started to advertise the neighbourhood of the school as an academic catchment. And that attracted a lot of South Asian immigrants, who were looking for academics for their children. And we had an influx of children with no English, who were looking for a good academic experience. Well, we had several years in a row where our test-scores plummeted. And you know what our administration did? Our administration ordered us the next year to excuse our first and second level ESL students from the tests.

[00:45:24] SL: So, the test-scores rose again. That's the manipulation that would happen within populations, in order to attain and achieve higher scores. And that's when I knew how phony it was. But it was more than that, because when you start to test certain areas of the curriculum, then you're teaching to the test. You're making your curriculum narrower and shallower. So, in a very fundamental way, you're devaluating the education you're giving students. So, it's not just the publishing of the scores, and it is not just the odious comparison between struggling schools and Crofton, or York House. But it is this narrowing and shallowing, making shallow the curriculum, that is fundamentally the evil of FSAs; and that's why we took on the FSA campaign. We understood that. And our policy, if you look at our policy, it very much describes our opposition to the FSAs as being much more than just the one layer. And so, that way, when we took on the FSAs, that was our heart on our sleeve for public education. It was the Federation as a union, working not just for itself, and for its members, but for an institution that we felt was ours to defend, because no one else in this province was doing it.

[00:46:56] SL: So, for me, that FSA campaign was the most important campaign that we undertook.

[00:47:04] KN: And how did it end? Did we succeed?

[00:47:07] SL: I thought we had succeeded. And I hope we have succeeded. There is a new generation of FSAs being developed right now, which apparently scores will not be published, so that aspect may have been achieved. But if you have any tests, that are universal in nature, of

any curriculum, then—and this is my warning—then you are not eradicating the evil of the FSAs. And I hope that we remember that, and I hope that whatever tests are being developed now, at this moment, apparently, I hope that they address that issue. Because if they don't then we have failed. And, any test that is universal in its nature does that. It takes curriculum and it devalues it. And it is in complete opposition and contradiction to what I understand to be the policy of the Ministry of Education right now, which is personalized, individualized, students creating their own curriculum. And I think, that's the way to go. I think, that students creating their own curriculum, has to be central to public education. You cannot have universal testing. So, I don't see how we could be doing both, but right now, I think that there is a basic contradiction and it is going to work its way out.

[00:49:07] SL: And let's hope that a creative, vibrant curriculum, one that recognizes the kind of challenges, that face our next generation, is the winner. Comes out successful. And that means, no universal testing.

[00:49:27] KN: So, you went on to become President for three years.

[00:49:34] KN: Can you identify—and I am sure that the testing issue was just one of them—but can you identify what the major issues were during your period as President?

[00:49:47] SL: Well, we had the court case. So, that was a huge challenge for us. Because, it seems to me there are about three ways that you can change the world. And one is politically, by electing good government; and one is legally, through the courts. And thank god for the Supreme Court of Canada during the Harper administration, because that was our only bulwark against those policies. And, the third being, you know, political action. Grass-roots political action. And so, when we put our faith in the court system, around the stripping of our rights to bargain class-size and composition,

[00:50:50] SL: it was like putting all the eggs in one basket. That was very... it's very difficult. But we had failed to un-seat that government, so we had no choice. We went to court. And we won; and we won, and we won. And then, at the appeal level, when I left the presidency, we lost. So, that took a lot of attention, and it took a lot of money; and it took a lot of very, very smart lawyers, to get us to that point, and a very astute judge. And that was consuming. It was a very consuming aspect of my presidency, for sure. That, and the austerity measures, that the provincial government laid on all the public sector in the province. We found out at the court case—I went to the court every day—in session. And we found out, and this is amazing to me, that with every draft budget, this provincial government has it vetted by the Standard and Poor's and Moody's, the rating agencies, that brought us to 2008 crash. They vet the draft budgets of every Ministry before they are adopted; and they advise in terms of austerity measures, what this government will be doing in each and every Ministry.

[00:52:27] SL: This was testified at the Supreme Court. So, that fight for public education funding was another (issue). Becoming President of the BCTF is high job; and those issues... we tried as hard as we could with advertising campaigns, with political action, with everything we could to

convince this government—this succession of governments, where now Christy Clark is Premier—that it is so short-sighted to under-cut public education. And yet they have managed to get away with it, which is so... And that for me is my greatest regret, that we weren't able to undo that. But, we will continue to fight, we have the determination, this is a strong union, and it is not going to give up. And, I think, for that, we can be all so grateful and so proud. I want to talk about something else, though, that is less, kind of has less of a public face. The FSAs was one aspect of it, but there were two other aspects of this government's... I believe that this is a conscious decision, by this government, to break down community. Maybe it is easier to govern, when you don't have strong communities. And, maybe I am being too paranoid, but when you combine FSAs, which fundamentally destroy the health and quality of public education, with a very—it is a sleeper clause,

[00:54:37] SL: nobody seems to be very aware of the really important and the negative consequences of open boundaries; school boundaries. If you take away school boundaries, and allow students to shop around for schools, then you're increasing that competition between schools, which in my view is contrary to achieving high quality education for all students. And, also makes it absolutely impossible to budget, if you're a school trustee. So, you have the FSAs which sets school against school; you have the open boundaries, which increase the competition between schools, and destroy that neighbourhood children going to that neighbourhood school, and developing community and learning how to live with each other. And then you have stranger danger! Stranger danger! And we know that the danger for children is not with strangers; we know that the vast majority of cases of sexual assault and abuse is with family members or people you know. And yet, we had this stranger danger policy. I had a school where the very first day of school we had a new principal and he had an assembly. And he talked to all these little strangers! K-7—about stranger danger.

[00:56:15] SL: Come to me, he said, on the first day of school. Kids no longer play in the neighbourhood parks by themselves; they no longer walk to school; they no longer know their neighbours; they no longer trust their neighbours; they no longer have any respect for their neighbours. We have had three policy decisions by this government that are attacks on building community. And, I think, as public educators and teachers, we know that building community is part of being socially responsible to everyone's needs. If you don't know your neighbour, you don't know what they're going through; you don't know their needs. If you don't have in your class the child who lives three doors down and is blind; you don't know how to deal with that child, and how to be a neighbour for that child. I think, these were the three things that the Federation recognized—well, except for the stranger danger one, which I don't think we ever understood—but if you put the three of them together, I think, we, as a union are trying to build community. And in the face of this government, our success was, we didn't let them destroy it in its entirety.

[00:57:51] SL: We were there trying to get walking, school busses, and various programs in place, that would keep children within their neighbourhoods, but that I think, is something, that

we, as a society, need to recognize that this government is responsible for. And hopefully, vote them out of office next year.

[00:58:20] KN: Thank you. I want to raise a couple more issues, just briefly, I think, after your presidency, what was going on with College of Teachers, and what happened there?

[00:58:35] SL: Well that was another institution that was set-up and used by this government, to try and put teachers in their place. To try and rob teachers of their professional autonomy, and to narrow the role of teachers. And the responsibility of teachers. And, that was, to again, attack the quality of public education—you can't have high quality of public education without autonomous teachers. Teachers have thousands of decisions to make every moment, as they're teaching. And if they're not allowed; not encouraged to exercise professional autonomy and that decision-making, then you have a shallow, superficial and a robotic teaching. You have what they have in the United States. So, the College was established as an organization to erode the professional autonomy of teachers. But, it is more complex; and I think, we missed the boat in our relationship with the College. Because, it seems to me, that we ought to have been a bit more progressive in our understanding, that if we are to be respected, and granted the authority—and that authority is never with licence—it's a very, very responsible mindful authority.

[01:00:34] SL: But if we are to be granted that professional autonomy and authority; then we have to earn it. We have to acknowledge, that we must maintain our continuing education. We have to undertake professional development. The problem with what the College wanted was, they wanted to dictate the professional development of teachers. Which is such a flipping on its head, that it becomes completely contradictory to the term "Professional Development". You don't professionally develop someone. They do it themselves, they do it from understanding of their inadequacies on teaching a particular subject, their self-reflection in teaching a particular child, or a particular problem. Then they design their own professional autonomy to grow in that area. If you don't have that, you don't have Professional Development. And that's what the College wanted to do, was to dictate the Professional Development of teachers. And that was fundamentally wrong, so, we had to oppose it. Had we had any kind of thoughtful presentation for the government at that point, I think, we could have engaged in a process of developing a Professional Development program. We had one in Burnaby, which allowed teachers the time and the funding to develop their own Professional Development programs. Individually developed, for themselves, and we would have taken that on, I think, had there been that offer on the table.

[01:02:26] SL: But instead, the College, supposedly, of Teachers, was not a College of Teachers at all. It was an instrument, by political design, to attack the professional autonomy of teachers; and in that sense we had to oppose it. It was another one of those struggles. But it was one, where we had a one step forward, two steps back; two steps forward, one step back; we won, we lost in various reiterations of legislation. And now, I think that there is an uneasy truce, a bit, because the College has, I hope, backed off its goal of dictating professional programs for

teachers. So, I think that that's a good thing. I think that we have evolved somewhat maturely in that way, so, I think, that that was a successful program, and struggle.

[01:03:43] KN: What about the last issue while you were President, which was the strike that you had during the bargaining.

[01:03:50] KN: Can you talk a bit about that, and its resolution?

[01:03:55] SL: Yes, we had a... it fades in my memory now... but the resolution was very, very interesting. We had a strike and, of course there was a legislation to impose a... was he called an arbitrator?

[01:04:15] SL: I think, he was called an arbitrator, Dr. Jago. And, we were incensed, because we knew he was appointed by the government to do the government's bidding in that round of negotiations. And the government's bidding was to hold us to a zero: any improvements that we were to get that round, were to be taken from the current collective agreement. So, it was what was called the Net-Zero mandate. And it was to maintain the unequivocal position on our right to bargain class-size and composition, which we thought the court had given back to us, cos we had won the court case at that point. And it was going to impose a bargained program of professional "direction". I am going to call it, (professional) development, of teachers, dictated by the collective agreement. And, we were supposed to accede to this. So, what they couldn't get through the College, they were trying to get in bargaining, as well as some other strips to the collective agreement. So, it was an untenable position at the bargaining table; we were getting nowhere. And so, Dr. Jago was appointed and initially we opposed his appointment, because, for one thing he had no experience as an arbitrator, and for another, we supposed that he was going to be an instrument of government will.

[01:05:58] SL: But he listened to us, it was interesting; we had many sessions with him. And he did listen to us and he listened to us respectfully. And he made it clear to us, that first... at first it was a stand-off and we had a couple of weeks where we were meeting with him every day for 2-3 hours, but it wasn't getting anywhere. But he started to indicate to us, that he recognized that the government had gone too far in some of the proposals on the table; and so he removed some of the stripping clauses, that were on the table at the time. He also indicated—and at this point we ended up with three table officers, supported by Richard Hoover and John Wadge,

[01:06:55] SL: and Marie Franco. He indicated to us that he respected the professional status of teachers. He was a college Dean and a college teacher, so he was a professor and he recognized professionalism in teaching. And, when he started to talk in those terms, we began to understand that he was earnestly trying to find a solution. And it wasn't simply a solution that was going to impose government will. And that's when we really started to talk. We had BCPSEA bargaining agent in one room, we were in the other room, and Dr. Jago and his assistant went back and forth. And it became productive. We started to develop language on about 45 outstanding issues, we started to actually craft language on them. We left the biggest issues to last. There was no funding for salary improvement; we recognized that, but then, we also didn't

have anything gutted from the collective agreement. We did make a small improvement on our benefits, which was above and beyond, it wasn't Net-Zero, which was amazing thing; no other union had done that. And, at the very end, we were bargaining this professional development clause language that government wanted.

[01:08:41] SL: And it got to the point where Dr. Jago and our teacher team, recognized that if we were going to get this language in, it had to be funded, we had to have time off, to do professional development. That had to be funded, courses had to be funded, and it had to be professionally autonomous. Teachers have to be able to chart their own professional development based on their own needs. So, those three values, those three philosophical values, were imbedded in our language, and Dr. Jago accepted that. BCPSEA didn't. And we thought, at the deadline—well, it was way beyond the deadline, I don't know what time it was in the morning—that we had lost the session. But, BCPSEA finally did back down, and came back with a draft that didn't have any language in it. And so, we were able to sign it off. And I have Dr. Jago to thank for that, he earned my respect. He was an honourable man and I would like to publicly apologize for the grilling we gave him when we first met him, the first meeting, because we did, we put him through the coals, and he was very patient. And that made that successful.

[01:10:18] SL: I am very proud of having been able to achieve that—it was a good, hard, but good session.

[01:10:28] KN: So, you talked a bit about some of the challenges you have faced as President. Can you talk at all about any joys of being President of the Federation?

[01:10:39] SL: Oh, it was the best! Being President of the BC Teachers' Federation was the best job I ever had. I remember being a full-time officer and realizing that I could do full-time what I used to do off the side of my desk, as I taught. And how relieving that was, and how amazing that was. But being the President of the BC Teachers' Federation... Sorry, I can't remember what the movement was... what was the movement with the tents down

[01:11:21] SL: at Art Gallery?

[01:11:22] KN: Occupy.

[01:12:13] SL: Occupy! Being the President of the BC Teachers' Federation during the Occupy Vancouver movement, Occupy the World movement, and the definition of the "One Percent" and all of that social analysis that was being done by all these other groups where neo-liberalism became a kind of... I used to say to people, neo-liberalism is too big a word, it is too difficult of a word to bring into common usage; we have to think of another way of describing this. But now it is there, and the occupy movement was so powerful... Being President of this union and I think, this union only—the BC Teachers' Federation—was a unique experience, because we were so attuned. We had an International Program that Larry Kuehn runs, where we were aware of the struggles of teachers in Mexico, and El Salvador, and Honduras, and South Africa and Namibia, and all the struggle... Just yesterday almost 17,000 educators were purged in

Turkey. It is educators, who hold the lines in these states, where the democracy is imperilled. And it's educators, who often have to pay the price. And we recognize that, and we, as the BC Teachers' union, have built bridges of international solidarity with those other teachers in those other countries;

[01:13:05] SL: and that has made us so outward looking—we are not a business union at all. We are so compassionate and aware of our role, not just in leading kids to know, and not just in leading kids to think, but in leading kids to discriminate and act on building a better world. What better job in the world could there be? Than being the BC Teachers' Federation President? There is none. I was energized, I was learning every day, all day. Best years of my life, I loved it. Recommend it to every teacher out there.

[01:13:59] KN: Is there anything else you'd like to say about any of your experience in the time with the BCTF?

[01:14:03] SL: laughs)

[01:14:07] SL: I don't know, I think I could go on for ever, Ken, but I think, I should shut-up, I don't know how long it's been. Let me think—I'll see if there is anything I've missed.

[01:14:54] KN: To wrap this thing up, do you have any message that you would like to pass onto someone, who is just entering the teaching profession at this time?

[01:15:08] SL: Yeah... teaching has always been a vocation, it has always been a career, it has never been a job. So, I think, kids who come into teaching, their hats are turned on the right way. They're all—and one of the lovely things I was able to do when I was President, was talk to university teacher-training classes. And, it seems to me, that you are coming to teaching not expecting to get rich; which is great thing. You come into teaching with a passion for kids and for education. But, for young teacher entering, I should say, entering the public education system—today—they have to be aware that their role is so important, they have to be aware that they are entering a struggle unfortunately. Because, we still have the same provincial government, we still have the same austerity measures. We have a school-board in Vancouver that it is now under a watch-dog with respect to their ability to balance their budget, and to close schools; or whatever it takes to comply with the lack of funding; that is being hoisted on them by the provincial government.

[01:16:40] SL: So, as a new teacher coming in, they have to be aware, that they cannot simply, close their doors and teach. They have to be active in their union, and to be active in their union is rewarding. So, it is not an onerous thing, although it is hard work. It is rewarding, because when you become active in your union, you fulfill your obligations—your full 360 degree obligations that you undertook when you became a teacher. And that is an obligation of not simply the instruction in your classroom to make it the best that it can be; but to build public education. So, when I talk to young teachers, I talk about that it is not prescribed curriculum that you are teaching. Its kids, and those kids deserve individual programs. And you deserve, as

a professional, the autonomy; the classroom climate, that allows those students to create that curriculum. And you deserve a salary that is commensurate, conditions that are commensurate, class sizes that allow you to do that. All the materials you need, you shouldn't be begging—like classroom computers—you shouldn't be begging for automation programs, or whatever the latest technology is, it should be there for you; so you can teach kids.

[01:18:21] SL: And, in order to do that, you have to be active. You have to build agency. If you are going to build agency with your students, you have to take it yourself. And that's what I would tell student-teachers today. And when you do that, you come out smiling.