

Interview: Mary LaPlante
Interviewer: Patricia Wejr
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Transcription: Joey Hartman

Patricia Wejr [00:00:00] All right. It's July 8th 2019. My name is Patricia Wejr. I'm here with Bailey Garden from the Labour Heritage Centre and we're delighted to interview Mary LaPlante today.

Mary LaPlante [00:00:11] Thank you for having me. Appreciate that.

Patricia Wejr [00:00:13] You're welcome. So. I'd like you to think way back. I'm interested in a little bit about your early life, where you lived, and in particular were there any influences during that time that led you to become an activist?

Mary LaPlante [00:00:29] Actually, early on, and I mentioned this to my family, I was adopted from a baby - a tiny baby - and then I went to pursue looking for my birth mother years after and they'd opened up the adoption rules and whatnot and she'd passed looking after my brother but I found four siblings. My name is Mary. Her name is Mary. So Mary, sister Mary. But my birth mother had named me and my adoptive parents had named me. So when I'm around the family I'm Mary Katie. Anyway, so when I mentioned them to them last week that I was coming in for this interview and they said "is there any history of the family?" She says "Not in a bit!"

Mary LaPlante [00:01:09] I mean, she and I are almost complete opposites as far as anything to do with labour unions. She's strictly management, high-tech. And so clearly absolutely nothing to do with family. My father that raised me, he was very proud of what I did when I got involved with HEU but he couldn't understand it. He was a Social Credit way back and he cannot understand how I got involved in the union. And I do remember back in between high school and university I went up to work in the fish plant in Namu which is on the west coast of B.C. and I went up there to work for a summer. I started hearing these stories about what happened in the fish plant in Prince Rupert and the struggles and the families pitting against one another, and it was just a horrible situation. And when I was working there and the awful hours that they were putting us through, and the working conditions, and I started asking them about it and they more or less said, "you're basically young and you're here to work and if you're not wanting to work we'll send you back home." OK. So I clammed up and I left it at that.

Mary LaPlante [00:02:25] Then I went back to do my first year university and went back and I lived in Prince Rupert. When I went to Prince Rupert I worked in the fish plant and I met some very feisty women and they said "come on - we're off on a break". I said "What break?". She says a "biffy break" and I said "what's a biffy break?". And she says "Well, that's a break that we can just go to the bathroom. If you want to go and have a cigarette...go and have a cigarette, go to the bathroom.... Do what you want, but it's a break that we kind of imposed on the employer." I says, "oh, so interesting." And so anyway, we got chatting away about the working conditions and what they did and how long of hours they used to have to work, and

the benefits. And, to me, a lot of that - I didn't care. I was up there just trying to make some money. But to them it did. And there was one woman that had a handicapped child and she was trying to make good for both she and her family, and trying to make a living wage. And she was having a hard time because she was doing the same kind of work as a filleter on the other side of the table, but he was a man. So those kinds of things would have got me going and I just said this isn't right. This isn't fair.

Mary LaPlante [00:03:13] So then when I got on at the hospital and the same similar kind of thing. We were non-union - it was one of the last remaining hospitals in British Columbia that weren't unionized... the office.

Patricia Wejr [00:03:13] Which hospital was this?

Mary LaPlante [00:03:13] Prince Rupert. They had CUPE in the main hospital but they didn't have anything in the main business office, so there was some women there... they were very nice women... they were very strong and they'd been there for a zillion years, and I mentioned to them that we should be bringing in a union, because I said, somebody was denied vacation or somebody was denied a shift or something like that, and they said it doesn't matter, just leave it go...and I said why is that, it's not fair. So I said "we need to bring in a union" and she kind of ignored me, and I decided I was going to do it anyways. And I did. I contacted the Hospital Employees' Union at that time and I said I wanted to organize the clerical. And I'm new and very green at that and very young, and they said they'd be happy to help me and give me any kind of resources I needed. They were very good. I didn't need their help but I can remember standing on top of toilet seats in the women's washroom trying to sign up cards 'cause I could'a got fired if they'd caught me. Oh boy. I just got involved with it because I thought we were being treated very poorly and when you see other counterparts in the rest of the province in the business office, and they were making much more than we were, and they had different benefits that were awarded to them because they were under the Hospital Employees' Union or CUPE, so then I got involved and we formed the union...

Patricia Wejr [00:05:34] Can you recall what year was?

Mary LaPlante [00:05:41] Yup, that was in the '70s. It was in the '70s because it was clearly before my son was born, so it was in the early '70s I'm thinking.

Mary LaPlante [00:05:55] I should've written it down. But anyway, no I don't know the exact date.

Patricia Wejr [00:06:00] So this was a pretty strong union town.

Mary LaPlante [00:06:04] It clearly was. But the rest of the hospital was union but the clerical was not, and I don't know why they were missed. I've no idea, but they were missed and they said "well you're not going to be missed anymore." So I kind of got myself into a couple of situations with the employer and I phoned up the union and I said "I kind of almost got myself fired" and they said "What did you do?" Then I said I was standing up for some workers and they says ... "Why didn't you just leave." And I said I couldn't because the administrator was on one door and the vice administrator was on the second door and I said I couldn't leave and I said, "this is inhumane." I said, "how can this happen." So anyway we had a long issue over that.

Mary LaPlante [00:06:45] And negotiating their first contract, and it was a tough battle because they didn't want us to be union ...never did want us to be union. They said "you'll get whatever HEU gets and whatever HEU gets you'll get"... and it wasn't true. So that's how my early days of kind of organizing started. And then I went on to organize the long-term care, which was not part of anybody. And it was newly built and I organized them as a young activist.

Patricia Wejr [00:07:15] You were working, that's all the while you were working that you organized long-term care?

Mary LaPlante [00:07:18] I was. I was working in the business office at the time and just went on my own time to go and organize the workers because I said "you need to have a home, and to have a home you need to have a union." And the more I read about unions, the stronger I was, and it was incredible, just incredible. I loved it.

Mary LaPlante [00:07:41] When I got the job at HEU, and I'm diverting a bit. I said "It's not a job... It's a career, it's a lifetime, it's a dream." I loved it. You know I worked with my accounting because that's my background. I worked with the membership, which is my love. I just loved it. So when I retired it wasn't because I had to. It was because I thought it was time. But anyway, that's diverting it a bit.

Patricia Wejr [00:08:05] So were you a shop steward then?

Mary LaPlante [00:08:09] I was a shop steward and I was going to say, when we elected that first local, I was elected as vice chair. And then the chairperson had some serious attitude problems so they kind of booted her out and they made me chair and I went to my first, very very first, Wage Policy Conference in 1981 in Vernon. The northern ... in the Hospital Employees' Union in the province is divided into different regions and the North was a very small region but we had ... It was a vast majority area-wise. So there was a woman that took me under her wing and, "come on you.... off we go." And her name was Alberta Dorval and she still lives today - She's 92. And I got chatting to her and they were looking for people to run for the bargaining team, and "I want to do this, I want to do this!" and she says "Look, you can't do this. Your son is only 5." And she says "You don't know the number of hours and days that you're gonna be spending away from home to become part of the bargaining team." And I said "Well, I want to do it" and she says "just back off and wait until the convention the following year, and if you're still interested in the union, join the provincial executive." So that's how I sort of got involved in the union. I was completely adamant about the union. We had meetings -- everything was run by the book. We had education we were trying and learning and it was just a grand experience for everybody because everybody was in the same predicament as me. We were all new.

Patricia Wejr [00:09:51] HEU has got very good education, doesn't it, for its activists.

Patricia Wejr [00:09:59] HEU does? Yes, HEU. When I was an officer I thought "We've got to put in a comparison the dollars coming in and the money going out and where it all goes." And I did a calculation way back a number of years ago about the dollars coming in, and there was about -- I know it sounds very high -- but it's still about ninety-two, ninety-three cents on the dollar went back to membership whether or not it was in rebates, legal,

education, conferences, conventions All of that. And the remainder was for staff and that actually for them too, because we didn't overpower ourselves with staff. And as you know, HEU's office is just over there . And I was one of the three women that built that building with a project manager.

Mary LaPlante [00:10:48] But yeah, we're big on education because we figured that if you've got education - you're going to have strength. And if you have strength - you can have a bit of solidarity. And even the last convention, because I'm an honorary member of HEU I was there, and their slogan for the convention was Power of Solidarity. And that's exactly what it was. But the labour movement these days is weakening. It's not as strong and vibrant as it used to be. And because they don't have the fights that we used to have. And, believe me, we had to fight.

Patricia Wejr [00:11:23] Yeah. So I was just gonna. Your first was. Was that an elected position? Finance. So you were first elected?

Mary LaPlante [00:11:31] I was first elected as a financial secretary in 1984.

Patricia Wejr [00:11:37] You were a bit of a groundbreaker.

Mary LaPlante [00:11:38] I was a bit of a groundbreaker because I took the position from a man. He'd only been in there a couple of years and he didn't know anything about money. He didn't know anything about books. He relied on staff. And when I was on the provincial executive, I didn't mean to but I asked too many questions I guess, and he was way out of his league. He'd taken the position over from another man who had been sitting in that seat since the beginning of time - a man by the name of John Darby. And I took it over, and everybody so deep pockets and whatnot. Well I said I'm a woman and I can do it too. And I don't need affirmative action. I can do it because I'm strong.

Mary LaPlante [00:12:22] I got sort of shunned by some of the staff because I was young and I can remember being sent to a meeting of the trades and there was a staff person there, and I went in and sat down at the head of the table. And he says "And who are you?" And I said "I'm the acting Financial Secretary" and I was acting for about six months until convention. And he just says "what's this world coming to?" and kind of threw his papers all over the place. I thought "really?" And I was quite offended that I thought "I'm an officer, you're not, you're just staff -- not to say staff are bad but how come you're treating me like that?" I didn't appreciate it. And so, anyway, I soon had a sit down talk with him through another officer. So anyway I said "Yeah, just because I'm a woman and I'm young doesn't give you the right to talk to me like that." And he said "OK, all right, and so I apologize." And it took a while for him to sort of start respecting me because I was a woman and he just kind of said "you're being put in that chair." And I said "No, I'm acting... the members will decide in October." And this went on from May to October, and from then on I've gotten respect and dignity and everything I needed from all of the officers and all of the staff. Everybody was perfect. I loved them and they loved me. It showed at the end of the day.

Patricia Wejr [00:13:57] So you were mentioning earlier those fights that you went through and I and I saw in your final speech to the final convention you mentioned three big campaigns and they were all Bills. Maybe we could go in chronological order. So the first one I think was Bill 3 which goes way back to Bill Bennett and that was all the Solidarity action?

Mary LaPlante [00:14:29] Yeah. I can talk a little bit about that. That was when I first became involved and I think that was probably around the days when Operation Solidarity was formed. The Hospital Employees' Union was not part of the House of Labour. We were, and then there was a big falling out long before I got involved. And so we weren't in the House of Labour. So that's when during all of this kerfuffle and all of the upheaval was going on. They actually got a Solidarity Coalition together for the unions that weren't part of the B.C. Fed or the CLC, so that we could be involved and there was a few unions that were in that same situation but we wanted to help. We saw what was going on. We saw what was going on with Bill Bennett and - our union. we kind of, you know, boots came a'running and somebody said "what are you doing?" We said "well we're beating the bushes to bring up the information about Bill Bennett, and we hired a bus, and we were all around the province trying to say "what Bill Bennett is doing is wrong. He's taking away jobs. He's taking away job security. He's taking away everything that's rights for workers" and that was a huge huge fight that was in early days. And I can't remember a lot more other than that.

Patricia Wejr [00:15:55] Where you a part of ... there was a group called the Women Against the Budget I think?

Mary LaPlante [00:15:57] No, I wasn't part of that one. I could have been but I wasn't.

Patricia Wejr [00:16:04] I think it was mainly that was a community coalition, the community end I think.

Mary LaPlante [00:16:10] Yeah it could have been. I got fiercer as I got onto it but I know that's not part of it, but I can remember going in the Okanagan and walking over the bridge and we'd be chanting stuff about Bill Bennett. And it was just those days that he was just a horrible, horrible person. And they said "how can one person sleep at night after doing this to so many workers and cutting jobs and just doing all the rest of it." It just didn't just didn't make any sense.

Patricia Wejr [00:16:45] Well there certainly was a huge mobilization. It's a bit disappointing in a way sometimes when mobilizations starts, and then something happens which... I know that has happened.

Mary LaPlante [00:16:58] It did happen to us. It did.

Patricia Wejr [00:16:59] On several occasions I think ... and then the next Bill that you mentioned of course was Bill 19 under Vander Zalm. Were you in the Fed by that time?

Mary LaPlante [00:17:13] Yes, I think we were because we joined forces and became the Health Care Coalition. Sorry... The Hospital Employees' Union were ... I'll get it right. For heaven's sake, we were the Health Division of CUPE. And that's how come we got in and that was, even getting in and making ties and negotiating with CUPE BC and CUPE National, there were some issues and tough issues that we had to get over to just sort of get back into the House of Labour. We knew we needed to get back and we wanted to get back in. And it was a proper way for us to get back in was go in through CUPE. So we were back in the House of Labour when Bill 19 and Bill 20 came -- and Bill 20 was for the teachers -- but Bill

19 affected so many other people all of public sector unions everything from the cutbacks and just everything was just huge and I'm trying to think of the year that was, but I can't.

Patricia Wejr [00:18:17] 1987.

Mary LaPlante [00:18:19] 1987? Okay, and we were fighting the government because they don't like public sector unions, they don't care about public, they don't care about patients, they don't care about residents. And I don't know if we had a strike then or not. I don't think so. Not in those days. We had a bigger one in 2004.

Patricia Wejr [00:18:44] I know this because my brother-in-law was a family support worker in the schools, and all of those positions were eliminated.

Mary LaPlante [00:18:52] Oh I know. And you know, and in particular some of the uh. And I can remember people coming from the laundry and losing their jobs, and people in housekeeping and losing their jobs, and they just didn't understand why. Why them? I mean, they were family they'd been there for years and years, and could not understand why the government was doing this to us. And the madder that the members felt, the more agitated they were, that just gave us the ability to take on the fight stronger. And that's exactly what we did. And I think we called it the "Three Bad Bills. And I think with Bill Vander Zalm then at the time I think, and there was Bill 19, Bill 20, and Bill Vander Zalm and we said Three Bad Bills, and that's when we did, I think, our zero campaign that was a zero budget campaign that our Union did about the green hospital funds and all the cutbacks from closures. Am I getting ahead of myself?

Patricia Wejr [00:19:51] That might have an into....

Patricia Wejr [00:19:53] Yeah, that might have been into Campbell.

Patricia Wejr [00:19:55] I think we can probably move on to 2001, Bill 29 and Campbell, which I mean...

Mary LaPlante [00:20:02] Oh yes. Uh yeah I'm probably moving on. This is probably more to my recollection. When we had a staff person go and consult Gordon Campbell he said "Do you have any intention of ripping up a collective agreement". And Gordon Campbell clearly said "No, that's not my mandate." That he wouldn't do that - That's not fair. And he turned around did it and we could not understand and believe that one man, has that kind of power to destroy lives. All of the people that were affected by this, by that privatizing of care, it was just horrible. Our union really had got mobile and we were very very active, both politically and our members who were upset. They're mad, they're crying. You know a lot of people would ... All our members would come and talk to me and say "Mary, I can't handle this - it is too hard on me. I've got to.... I'm a single mom. You know, I'm now going to be tossed it out or I've got to re-bid on my own job."

Mary LaPlante [00:21:12] And you know we fought Gordon Campbell tooth and nail and there was a couple of instances I can remember. One, I was up in Revelstoke. It was when our members were at Moberly Park they were given their notice that they were going to be closing the door. And this is a seniors care that looked after, I'm guessing, about 50 or 75 residents and they were going to close the door. And so myself and some other members of

the provincial executive, we went up and we said "No, we got to stop this. This is just not gonna happen. It's just nonsense." And so we were up there and we were trying to make a difference. We tried to do flyers, we did leaflets, we did buttons... We tried to show the community. The community was on our side but they couldn't do anything because it's small - Revelstoke is just a small community. And you know we did letter writing, we did petitions.

Patricia Wejr [00:22:13] Moberly was the only long-term care as well

Mary LaPlante [00:22:19] It is. And you know, I went up there and it is a nice little place and very friendly, very homey, and you know just the staff knew all the residents they just treated them like home - it was a second home. But it wasn't like an institution and it was just really nice. I've been to most of the facilities around B.C. and that was clearly one of the best ones.

Mary LaPlante [00:22:39] I think it was on that same trip - we'd heard, we knew that Gordon Campbell was going to be making an announcement on the Vernon Ski Hill. So, OK, we're gonna go up and confront Mr. Gordon Campbell. And so I park my car and it's in the middle of winter and it's cold out and snowing out I guess. And I got told that Campbell was coming up in his entourage of cars and I says "you're not going beat me up to the top" so I went flying up the hill ploughing through all this snow. "I'm going to get you" and I'm waving this letter in front of his face as the car is going by. "I want to talk to you." I said "I need to talk to you about what you're doing." And he wouldn't stop, wouldn't open his window, wouldn't do anything. And he goes on and gets up on the platform and he just says how good he is. Anyway I'm chasing him up there and I'm talking to him about this and he didn't want anything to do with me. Absolutely nothing to do with me. And I'm waving this at him and I say "Okay, I'll calm down if you just talk to me" and he just treated me like a piece of garbage and just walked right by me -- opened the door and (unclear) it up. I thought: you're a disgusting man. So we got in...I found the plane in Kelowna and I'm near the back and heading home. There was a short flight and I someone reminded me about this one the other day and I've forgotten about it. But the staff came up to me, or somebody came up and told me that Gordon Campbell was up in the first row of the same plane. I say "Really? Oh really." So anyway I waited for the plane to land because I didn't want to get into any federal laws, and I hightailed it out before anybody else got out of their seats and his bullies just stood there in the aisle and you know blocked his arms at me. "You're not going anywhere and they're going to call federal law" and all doing this stuff. And I said "listen, I'm here -- I'm allowed to do this. And we've landed .. there's four wheels on ground -- whatever." I said "I want to talk to Gordon" and they wouldn't have anything to do with me - absolutely nothing to do with me.

Mary LaPlante [00:24:57] And you know I'm trying to explain to them about what he's just done with Moberly Park. And he didn't care, he just didn't care. He had no heart, no soul. And the plane landed and I'm still chasing this guy through the Vancouver Airport. And everybody said go get him Mary! And I'm the more that they're yelling at me and I'm chasing this guy down a corridor of the Vancouver airport. I don't care. I want to talk to this guy and tell him to rescind what he's doing. And it was just disgusting. He was a disgusting man and that's what he was going do. He was going to rip things up and tear things apart, and he didn't care.

Mary LaPlante [00:25:39] And we always said that when we had any kind of job action, we want to have the least impact on resident's care -- residents, patients and care, but we want to have the most impact on the employer. And we've done that in a couple of different strikes and job actions that we've done, and that way it did hurt the employer because they had to

actually pitch in and see what a worker does on a work shift, and how long the work shift is, and why they needed to go from a nine-hour day or whatever was -- we were down to a seven and a half hour a day, but we wanted to get it lower - but we didn't win that. It was taken away.

Mary LaPlante [00:26:21] And you know when you think about some of the other things that Gordon Campbell did in his time and tenure, I thought; he doesn't care about anything except what he thinks to be a dollar and cents. When you've got contracts that are awarded to Sodexo, or the likes of Aramark, they turn around and they hire staff at a much less wage than what they would be making when you're unionized. They hire them; we organize them; we get them a contract and then the contract gets sold out - cancelled. Flip them. And we have to start all over again. And these workers are - they're sad. I've never seen so many women just affected so poorly because of contracts being ripped up, privatizing services. And when they do work for a company like Sodexo or Aramark, they are working for a company that has a huge turnaround because nobody wants to stay. So of course the quality of care goes down. People say "Oh yeah, hospital food." Well hospital food used to be good. But now, when they turned over, they try and do everything low quality and just try and do it by volume. It doesn't work.

Patricia Wejr [00:27:39] Now there's another incident. Another had a little brush with the law with K-Bro in Chilliwack. Would you like to tell us about that?

Mary LaPlante [00:27:51] Sure. I did. Again, the government, and Campbell is clearly not a friend of mine. He was trying to privatize all the laundry services and taking laundry to go to Alberta. Our staff were coming back and telling us, and me, that they're finding syringes in the sheets and bedding weren't dry. And they said they're taking away our jobs, and other people's jobs... They took them away and look at the kind of service that they're getting. And we said.... I mean, we're hearing these horror stories one after another.

Patricia Wejr [00:28:24] They had to truck it to Alberta.

Mary LaPlante [00:28:27] They did. They put it in a warehouse in the Fraser Valley. And they would truck it to Alberta and then wash it and bring it back. But it wasn't coming back clean - it was coming back soiled. And again, our members had lost all their jobs because they privatized, so we decided as a union - the Hospital Employees' Union - we decided "Well let's try and slow this process down." So we decided to do a blockade out in the warehouse out in Chilliwack. Well, we did. And we had bales of hay and stopping trucks from coming in or going out and we said we need to stop this privatizing of laundry services. They can get better quality done with the members of our union compared to sending it off to somewhere in Alberta and coming back. And so we did the blockade, and yeah we got arrested for it. Myself and two other officers. I thought "OK, you've done it this time, Mary." because they got me in a squad car, and they just pulled up and around the corner, and just me, because they had to get me separated, and I'm in a squad car and there's plexiglass and there's plastic covers on the seats, and Oh Mary, you really did this time, you really did it this time. And so, anyway, went in there, did all the paperwork. And I thought I was ready to go. And then there is a woman officer standing in the doorway and she's snapping on rubber gloves. "Oh no you're not." What I did wasn't that bad - and she just wanted fingerprints. But I thought "oh... OK!" But that was something that. I told my partner at the time and said "Just a blockade - just a blockade," I said "I won't get into any trouble." And then it happened. But you know what, I

don't regret it at all. If I had to do it again, I'd do it again. So we were released and we did a rally out at the site that night. And I just couldn't get the words out of my mouth fast enough that night. I was so mad and so angry at what was happening with our laundry services, what was happening with membership.

Mary LaPlante [00:30:50] Members are the strength of our union and they're just being depleted, demoralized, and it was disgusting. And I just let all fire and burning brimstone that night because I just said "you know, Campbell, you're just not going to be getting away with this." And we fought... We fought a big hard long fight. And getting arrested wasn't something that I wanted to do -- it wasn't in the intent when we started out the morning, but if you feel strong enough about protecting your membership, you're going to do what you gotta do. And I did feel strong and I did but again, but I was the only female so was a little different.

Patricia Wejr [00:31:31] Now a positive thing that happened during during all of that contracting out, which I don't know if you were involved at all, was the laundry and the Kootenays that Chris Mazurkewich, who was the chief financial officer - he allowed the workers to develop a plan that proved that they could do it as well, correct?

Mary LaPlante [00:31:51] Yes that's correct. Yes. I was still there and we said "yeah, we'll prove to him that we could do it more efficiently" and we did it. Everything from timing, from transportation, to washing, to folding, to drying and delivering. Besides, all of the stuff that goes involved with it. And they were quite impressed because they were going to contract out those services in the interior. And because of that... That happened in the Kootenays, they put a hold on it. He says "OK, well, you're showing that it does work." And of course we said it works, and we stood by our decision that our members' work is profitable, and it is meaningful, and we won. It was a huge victory, I mean besides the Bill 29 victory, but that was a nice victory to say "We're not telling you tales - it does really work." And we could prove it to them. I had forgotten about that but yeah. And then they kept trying and trying to do Interior Health and trying to get the laundry. And again, we said, I said "send me out there I'll do a blockade. I don't care" because if you're going to continue on with this bizarre behaviour, we got to tell you somewhere that it's got to stop. And so, anyway, the Interior Health was really on again - off again but because of the Kootenay area, they really did a fantastic job to show that our members' work does count.

Patricia Wejr [00:33:31] Now, HEU around that time - that was a great victory but HEU certainly got slammed during the contract negotiations in... Was it 2003?

Mary LaPlante [00:33:48] 2004.

Patricia Wejr [00:33:51] I imagine -- I often think about you and your role in the union. First of all unbelievable rollback which amounted about 15 percent for your members...so that there was a reduction in dues and also fines. I mean that, if I recall, that was the biggest fine a union had ever received in BC?

Mary LaPlante [00:34:11] It was - the biggest fine that a union could receive and we got it. And it wasn't just a fine to the union -- that's one thing -- and hitting us hard, but to take a rollback for our membership, that's what really hurt. Myself as an officer, I took the rollback too. It really hit the entire union's budget and whatever. But again it's two-part: the membership lost it, and so did the union lose it in dues when they're trying to fight the good

fight. That strike was an ugly, ugly, ugly strike. I mean, we're out on the picket line and our strike pay... it works for a week and you have to do so many hours of picket time to be able to be eligible for strike pay. And so everybody go and do their amount of time - they do 10 hours here and 10 hours there - their time is up. Then they didn't have to come back to the picket line. Some did... Many did. But we had to keep those lines strong. So we kind of bumped up the incentive for strike pay. So we said "OK, it's now into week two, but after you do so many hours we're gonna pay you for that." And that kept the line strong because our members were into this fight. They knew that they were in for the fight but they also needed to have some money. So, I know that we doubled-up on the strike pay, and I know I signed each and every one of those strike cheques and signed every single one of them, and proudly actually.

Mary LaPlante [00:35:57] And when I think about the night that it all happened, and we'd been in negotiations a couple of different times with the government, and we're ready to try and call on the rest of the labour movement for setting up a general strike. And we know that it's hard to do. Everybody knows it's hard to do. General strike is not something you can pull off overnight. We're in negotiations and we're at the Hilton in Burnaby, and a lot of the unions were brought together to find out where our support was, because of course everything was escalating and the teachers, and everything was going on at that time. And we said we needed everybody's support - we're not going to go back to work unless we get a settlement. And that's when we had various different things that we'd negotiated with the government about how many cutbacks and how many closures and that was also very hard. It brought tears to my eyes when I had to go and report it out... it was just horribleabout how many people can get laid off and oh. Just disgusting. It was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. You are always promoting "we've got to get more" and here I am trying to talk them into saying "oh, this is the best we can do." But all this upheaval was happening, and the teachers and us in the public sector. We wanted to get together with the other unions and find out if we had support to pull off a general strike, because it had to be all - it did. Then the government was involved and they're trying to get us back to the table. And we did the best we could that night. We were there hours and hours and hours trying to negotiate - trying to figure out whether or not we can do something better ... something different ... something creative to get the government to back off what they were doing. And we couldn't, so we negotiated what we thought was the best that we could do. About how many layoffs, about all the closures. It kind of ended about midnight or so, maybe a little bit later. So in the morning, members were back out on the picket lines strong and heavy, and we were having to tell them to pull the lines down. And they didn't understand. They're angry -- they're upset -- they're mad. "And look. This is what's happened. This is why we did it. This is what we got. It's the best we could do. We couldn't mobilize an entire general strike - we just couldn't. It's just too hard." Members got really angry, really upset, and they actually occupied our office. Anyways, we talked to them and we said "Had the clock gone the other way around - had that happened at 6:00 in the morning - it might have been a little easier to swallow, but it happened overnight." And so, when they come up to get ready on the picket line, singing Solidarity and all... "we'll hold the line", and finding out that they couldn't. And I know that I was sent over to Richmond because I lived there, and they said pull down the lines -- pull down the lines -- and I'm trying to explain it to them and everybody's angry and frustrated and screaming at me. And I said "Well, because we can't get any better than that." And anyway it was just an awful horrible, horrible event to say that this is what we had to do to you.

Mary LaPlante [00:39:35] And I remember them saying "Well, we've been out on the picket line for 10 days." I know that. "And that's all you can do?" Well yes. And at the time that's all

we could do. We negotiated the best we could. And it was just - it was the best we could do. But man, was that a tough go. You know, members were screaming at me that used to come up and give me a hug and a hand shake and they're mad. They're angry. We want to stay on the line. Can't, because we're going to start being imposed even more fines. The fines weren't the worst of it. There were still going to be more layoffs, more cutbacks, more closures, more of the rest. All of the bad stuff that was gonna be happening was going to still continue to happen.

Mary LaPlante [00:40:20] And so we had a convention that year and I was tempted not to run because I was an elected officer. And I said "I'm not going to bail like this, I'm just not. Going to see this one through." And so we kind of diverted our agenda for a convention off so we could sit down and do a one-on-one with our membership. And we did. And they were still angry and really upset. And we just explained to them what happened and then they calmed down a little bit but they were still hurt. You know after being out on the picket line, they wanted more and they didn't get more. We weren't able to get more. It was just an awful time ... Just a terrible time. So we tried to settle everything down and it never really went away. I mean the hurt was still there and people were still trying to recover from some of these bad things that had been going on but we couldn't do any more than that. And so I ran in that election and I won, but I said, the next year I left in a good position and that's when I did retire.

Patricia Wejr [00:41:40] It certainly didn't help.. all the hurt and the people that lost their jobs. But at least Bill 29 ended up a victory.

Mary LaPlante [00:41:50] Right. When they went to court - the Supreme Court of Canada -- and myself and a few other officers of the provincial executive went down to Ottawa. It was in the wintertime and I've never been to the Supreme Court. And it was very prim, very proper, very timed, very precise to whatever. All the judges were lined up and this last judge - his name was Judge Fish. And anyway they're... they had counsel for their side and counsel for our side. And this counsel for the employer side... I'm sitting at the very back in the guest section and I have a water bottle in my hand, and the employer side got up and was starting to explain about the reasons why they tore up the contract and why they ripped it up and why they (unclear) contracting out. And I told Judy Darcy that I'd behave when I was there, and I had this water bottle, and I said "Honest to God, if this employer doesn't shut up and start telling the truth I'm going to chuck it because you're telling a lie." It wasn't the truth. And I sat there and I'm in a flaming red suit and I says "you bastard" I said, "You're lying right through your teeth", and our side then went after him and he then buckled down and realized that what he said wasn't quite true. But I was so upset and I'm listening to this and thinking "oh my God, how can you be saying these things and still live to see another day." Anyway that was the day that it went to court and then the day that we won that victory. Unbelievable. I mean, I remember we got some money they got some education they got some severance... But to try and distribute that, I wasn't there then, but it was still ...the hurt was done. Yes it was a victory.

Mary LaPlante [00:43:49] And yeah, it made sense to take on the government and saying you're not allowed to do that and don't you try again. And I just said, a great victory but again it was a huge hurt. It was just a huge hurt. But anyway the government got slapped and, live to tell another day I guess, but it was the victory was awesome. But like I said the money that members were out of pocket and, yes, we gave them money but it wasn't enough to cover it.

Mary LaPlante [00:44:22] And it was never enough. Not when you see how many members were affected by everything that was done - you know, everything from contracting out and then you see the bumping chain. This person would bump into that, and that person would bump into that. It's like a chain reaction. So the whole hospital, the facility, was all up in upheaval. Are you qualified to do this? Well, yes you are....so you're going to go here. And it was just terrible, just terrible, and how it affected peoples' lives. People that used to work a straight shift - there was fixed shifts and there was mixed shifts - and people that worked a standard shift and then they got thrown onto weekends and nights just because that was the only job to have. It just was pretty sad. It was really sad.

Patricia Wejr [00:45:12] And HEU had -- I mean up until that point -- your members had living wages, and after that point ...

Mary LaPlante [00:45:18] We did. It was gone, and our union is part of the living wage campaign, as you know, and we're trying to support that, but it's really hard when you get these contracting out companies that are coming in there and taking away jobs and then saying, okay, we're going to hire you back but we're going to start paying even less. And how do they do that? So it just means a kiss and a promise when you're going through a ward trying to clean it, and it's not right because they haven't got the time they haven't got you know they haven't got the ...

Patricia Wejr [00:45:52] Well they were no longer part of the team.

Mary LaPlante [00:45:56] They weren't part of the team at all because the team just was split. I mean everybody was just gone. It didn't matter ... People were disintegrating, and then they couldn't find people to work in those positions because the working conditions and the hours were deplorable, and just getting sort of into a contract that started building up their wages and then they flip 'em, and members are, even though that they're strong, there's only so much you can go through. And those fights, I can remember....

Patricia Wejr [00:46:40] I think that might maybe over now.

Mary LaPlante [00:46:41] Pardon?

Patricia Wejr [00:46:41] I think those days may, like the current government maybe?

Mary LaPlante [00:46:45] Maybe. Yes. Oh yes the current government yes. And yes, you think about what the current government has done compared to previous governments, and the lies that the previous government said, and the province that this government is now committed to. I mean it is a remarkable change. It's actually livable.

Patricia Wejr [00:47:10] HEU did a remarkable job reorganizing over and over.

Mary LaPlante [00:47:15] Over and over and over and over again.

Patricia Wejr [00:47:16] Incredible strength.

Mary LaPlante [00:47:17] It was, and it also was very difficult on the budget. You know myself as financial officer. I mean, how much money do we have to fight these campaigns? How much money do we have that we can sort of offer to assist the membership? And we tried and ... but we just sort of get them turned over and then they'd swap the contracts all over again. When you think about the contracting out, the privatizing of the different services and what's left, our union was basically everybody including the trades except the RNs, but then the LPNs went to the Nurses' Union and so our union was simply cut in half by the loss of the LPNs, and then the contracting out was even more devastating. And it obviously affected the bank account of the Union because we had a little lesser income. But we still had to fight the fight. And I know that when I first got involved in the union, a political education fund -- it was used for political fund and we'd use it for anything and everything and I said "Well, you know what? We better start calling it a strike fund and put money aside because you're going to need it some time." But then later in the years and all of this was going on, when our money was being depleted and you think "where are we going to get the money from?" Well we did. I can't say volunteer because we didn't volunteer but members just stepped up and says "you know, we're here to take on the fight." And they did. They did very well. And the union fought very hard and we fought wisely. And we regained some of our steps. And to do that it you know they've done very, very well. They've done well but it's taken a long time. And again, you know we've got a current government that is sympathetic to our ear. Yeah. What could I say?

Patricia Wejr [00:49:37] So I was going to go back to a few of the interesting and more positive things that HEU was doing and one thing that I was very interested in your approach when you did the theatre work, the play "The Heart of Health Care".

Mary LaPlante [00:49:56] The Heart of Health Care with Heidi. That was done under the sanctioning of our provincial executive because we wanted to do it so that we could get the message out to our members to their families on what they do in their lives and how tough it is to do those kinds of jobs. And when I think of the Heart of Health Care, and the words to those songs. "Going one hand tied behind your back" ... I mean that's exactly what it was. And you couldn't do everything that you could, but the Heart of Health Care and that was in the days of...

Mary LaPlante [00:50:39] She was a Premier for a very short period time and her name is just escaped me...

Patricia Wejr [00:50:43] Rita?

Mary LaPlante [00:50:43] Rita! Rita! And so we had a skit, and it was all about Rita and the guy kind of took off his wig and put on another wig. It was a way to bring families together to say that the members' work counts, and it did. And so our Provincial Executive said well we'll do it - one in every region - and then when the other members said "no, we've got to do it all over the place." So then we thought "Oh my God, some more money" or whatever, but you know every time I saw that show and then the skits and the comedy, but the political undertones as well, I think "Holy, you know, it was well done." And the Heart of Health Care, the song that Heidi sang - it was very powerful, a powerful song and you'll hear ... you start humming in a way and members will now still chime in today and say what it was about ... But again, I can remember the provincial executive saying "Well, we can't just stop here. We've got to go on. And I'm thinking "Oh my God. Where are we going to get the money." We've got

to put it on, and the Provincial Executive want to go to every single show. OK, more wages, more this, more that. How are we going to do all this. They said it. They called it. Anyway we did what we did but, it was a funny way of putting political action into focus. And it was.

Patricia Wejr [00:52:17] And on another very positive thing, HEU created an award in your name.

Mary LaPlante [00:52:27] Yes they did.

Patricia Wejr [00:52:28] What a lovely honour that was.

Patricia Wejr [00:52:30] It was a true honour. As an officer we get all of the resolutions and constitutional changes into our office and them get printed up exactly verbatim as it comes in from the Local. And there is one constitutional amendment in there to put my name forward for this Sister Mary LaPlante Award. And the Constitutional Amendments Committee, they did it as a giggle, they said no. Well. Anyway the membership started up and - How dare you do this? Why are you doing this to Mary? And they did it just to get people going. And the Award was created because of the work I do with women and trying to mentor women, trying to bring women into more of a focus to say "you can do it". And that's why I brought Rosie because we can do it as women. We can be there and we can fight strong, still have a family, still have our jobs, still have our husbands. And still do what we need to do, but a lot of women when I was mentoring them, I'd sit and talk to them. I said "well, how come you can't get involved in the executive?" "Well, I don't have time so-and-so I've got to take to hockey and so-and-so has got to this piano, and..." But I said "this is for you. This is not just for that's gonna just stop here you or your family. It's going to help everybody because you're going to be bettering everybody because you're being a stronger woman." And everybody says, "No, Mary, I can never be like you." And I said "yes you can." And you just talk to them and just give them a bit of strength and power and freedom, and the willingness to want to go on. And I didn't push. I just wanted to get them involved because, of course, our union is very strong women - about 90 percent women, about 80 percent women, I guess. And when you're trying to say why won't you support women, and I'm seeing women officers and executive members nominate a man for a job that should have been quite likely given to a woman. And you know, okay: you talk about affirmative action; you talk about pay equity and work for equal pay, work for equal value. I got all those reasons. You know what? Women are their own worst enemies. I mean they just don't want to, sort of, take on those struggles. "Oh, my husband like it." You know what, sometimes you need to do it for you. My husband at the time, he said I was married to my job and I said yeah, I probably am. And I said "I'm quite proud of that actually." I mean I walked away from him. But you know I just didn't like what was happening to my son with him. You know I've got empowered to stand up for what I believed in and I got other women to stand up for what they believed in. And if you do that, you're not just saying words -- you're gonna make those words come true. And to become a woman in today's standards, you need to fight because women haven't got the same rights as others and haven't got the same pay as men. And, in fact, I think I'd heard the other day about it was a soccer, baseball or something, that the women were being paid less than the men for winning, and I said "Whoa, where did that come from?" And so I'm thinking that women have strong voices, and those voices just need to be heard. And we need to help them bring out those strengths and put some of those weaknesses aside, so I've always mentored women. I've always tried to help them along. And when I was presented, and it did go to the floor and it did pass, of course, I was honoured, clearly and absolutely honoured to have an award in

my name because of my mentoring of women. But it's something I believed in. And if you believe in something strong enough, you're going to fight for it, and I did. It was very strong.

Patricia Wejr [00:57:03] That took you up to 2006 but you haven't exactly been sitting around doing nothing since you so-called retired.

Mary LaPlante [00:57:13] Well, I sit on Pacific Blue Cross board and have for quite a number of years, and I sit on the Investment, Lending and the Audit and the Foundation Board. That's all there.

Mary LaPlante [00:57:31] And then I also sit on the Community Savings Credit Union Board which is a unions' credit union. That's what our -- our motto is --our slogan. Our Union's Credit Union. I'm very proud to sit on that board and I was kind of selected, even though it's an elected board, I was selected to put my name forward. And I'm very focused on those two boards. But during that one time on Blue Cross board there was a strike of the CUPE staff and I supported that CUPE strike completely but I couldn't go out and walk a picket line because we were under charges that were brought forward on us because myself and six other Union Directors were named in a lawsuit to say that we had an unwarranted, unwelcomed, unwanted meeting. And it wasn't a meeting - it was a conference call to try and find out how we can settle the strike - because the information that we were being fed by the CEO -- and I don't mind saying it, the then-CEO wasn't accurate and he caused the strike and the strike was an awful strike, and it was just caused all sorts of tension and morale was down ... and you know, when you think about Pacific Blue Cross, it's not for profit. They should have never been into that kind of a situation. Never ever. And we couldn't stand up for ourselves because we had to go and get a lawyer because of all these charges - they wanted to not allow us to vote on anything to do with a collective agreement. And we fought it and we won. Thank the Lord. And Blue Cross we fought that and they had to pay for the lawyer fees, but I had to sit on the other side of that table and it wasn't a nice feeling. And two years ago, or a year ago now, my term was up for re-election and I went to the chair of the CUPE Local and I said "Do you want me here? And I said, I need to know because I said if you don't want me in here I won't put my name forward because my term is up this term." And so anyway she got back to me she says I'm welcome. And so I ran and I won, and I will still sit on that board as long as they want me because I do believe in it, and it keeps me busy. I enjoy doing what I'm doing - being with all of the communities and the Foundation. Because again, the Foundation helps people as well, give money to different organizations for the Royal Columbian or for other organizations. But the Royal Columbian was a big one.

Mary LaPlante [01:00:19] And then the Credit Union. And then I was sitting in my Strata Council, and then I did the books for a seniors' organization - volunteering - kept me busy. And then I went to work for a printing company where my husband did, completely out of the blue. And so I just go in there when they needed help and 6 - 2... and I'm out of there... six in the morning to two in the afternoon... Bye - See 'ya! And you know, I love them and they love me, and then the company went into receivership. And my husband was a tradesman so he went somewhere else. Long story short, so did I because I wanted to do something, so now I work at a printing company just two days a week - keep me, it's just something to do during the day so I work two days a week doing quality control for a large printing company here in Burnaby. So anyway it keeps me busy and I like it.

Patricia Wejr [01:01:22] You've got quite an interesting working life haven't you.

Mary LaPlante [01:01:26] I've loved it. I've loved it. I mean you know there's some days that you know you can chew nails and spit brass but most days that are really really rewarding.

Mary LaPlante [01:01:37] And I saved a lot of my retirement cards. I saved them all, and I read them when you asked me to come today and I was reading them. People said thank you for remembering my name. And thank you for your fight on this. And thank you for this. And I thought back and I went, really I did all those things and it wasn't work, it wasn't hard. You know. I'd try and get members mobilized be the front of a picket line and you know trying to get the members to come and join me on the line and, you know, come start chant with me and it's cause a little ruckus, and they were there, they were there. And the members gave me strength for sure. I know that when you're trying to crunch numbers all the time and you think "Oh God, members you know -- you're taking a beating so much ... how can I help?" So I'd say "OK, I'm going up to visit a Local." And that's exactly what I'd do, and they give me a lot of strength and a lot of solidarity and a lot of willpower to continue on with what I was doing.

Mary LaPlante [01:02:49] And it was very worthwhile and I'd do it all over again, all over again today, if I did. It was rewarding for sure. So I don't know if there's anything else I can add to you.

Bailey Garden [01:03:04] I think that was a fantastic interview. Thank you very much.

Mary LaPlante [01:03:06] Oh, you are welcome.