Interview: George Heyman (GH)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
Date: Dec 14, 2023
Location: Burnaby, B.C.
Transcription: Cathy Walker

KN [00:00:06] Good morning. It's December the 14th, 2023. I'm here at the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre to interview George Heyman, who was for many years the president of the BCGEU and active in the labour movement. The interview is being conducted by Ken Novakowski with technical assistance by Donna Sacuta. Good morning, George.

GH [00:00:30] Good morning.

KN [00:00:32] Can you first tell us when and where you were born?

GH [00:00:36] I was born in Vancouver, right in the heart of the constituency I currently represent, Vancouver- Fairview, at Vancouver General Hospital in 1949.

KN [00:00:50] Where did you grow up, go to school and have your young years?

GH [00:00:56] I grew up in Vancouver, partly in Kitsilano, partly in Kerrisdale and a little bit in East Vancouver. I went to elementary school and high school kind of in a little valley nestled in between Kits and Kerrisdale. That's pretty much it.

KN [00:01:21] Your parents were Holocaust survivors. Can you tell us a bit about your parents and about how this experience actually might have shaped some of your views about the world that you were growing up in?

GH [00:01:34] It's hard to know. It's always hard to pick out parts of your parents or anyone's personality that influenced you. I certainly grew up knowing that my parents were Holocaust survivors and knowing a little bit about what happened in Poland, where they were from during the rise of Nazi Germany, but not as much as one might think. I learned later that it is not uncommon for Holocaust survivors to talk to their children very little about it. It's been studied by psychologists. It's more likely that people talk to their grandchildren. I was aware of it. I was aware that my parents were immigrants. I was born in Canada shortly after they came. My mother talked to me often about the trek she took from Poland to Lithuania to meet my father, who had already left so they could get transit visas from a Japanese consul named Chiune Sugihara, who was responsible for literally thousands of Jews being able to transit out of Europe through Japan against the orders of his government. This is a story I learned later in life. It's an instructive story about people who do the right thing in the face of orders from authority to do the wrong thing.

GH [00:03:05] My parents instilled in me a pretty strong sense of social justice. We were middle class, although my parents certainly had to work their way up from the bottom again. My dad was a engineer with papers from his time in Poland, but became a machinist when he came here and worked for quite a long time as a member of the IAM before his credentials were once again recognized, something that will not be uncommon to many current present day immigrants as well. They participated in the community. They participated in parents' groups around education, what are now called PACs. They taught my sister and I that we were fortunate and we should share—something that sticks with me. I think what being a child of Holocaust survivors meant is something I've thought about

much later in my adult life for a variety of reasons. I grew up influenced by my parents. It's hard to say which of their values came from being Holocaust survivors, which came from their parents, which just came from who they are. The context of what they'd been through I didn't really begin to fully appreciate until I was probably in my late forties, early fifties, other than intellectually.

GH [00:04:47] I think as a child it is very difficult to grapple with or grasp unless you're experiencing it very directly, as many of course, are every day, what it means to be persecuted, to be the victim of racism or anti-Semitism in my parents' case, because we just want to fit in as a kid, basically. My memory of being a child was knowing the ways in which I was different, knowing the ways in which I wanted to be different, but also having this just wanting to kind of fit in, have friends, get along. The experience of my parents was so markedly different from virtually everybody I knew as a child, except for maybe three or four other kids who are part of a Polish Jewish community in Vancouver who also largely were here because of the generosity of spirit of Chiune Sugihara and the risks that he took. That was kind of my childhood.

KN [00:06:05] Your first experience with being a member of a union was while you were in high school and you had a part time job. Can you say a few words about that experience?

GH [00:06:17] I got a job two nights a week stocking shelves at Safeway on the midnight to 8 a.m. shift. I will tell you it is brutal to do that job two days a week when they're not adjacent days. I would just get back to a regular sleep pattern in time to go back to work at midnight and try to sleep before I went there, usually unsuccessfully. I'd catch up on my sleep, usually around 10:30 in the morning in history class. At Safeway it was the Retail Wholesale Union. I joined and I was pleased to join. I learned a lot from talking to the full time workers who were on that shift with me and were amusingly hospitable to a high school kid and tried to teach me the ropes, how to do the job right, how to stay out of trouble and who to turn to if something went wrong.

KN [00:07:30] You did go to UBC for a while. Can you tell us a bit about that? Which program were you taking and why didn't you complete a degree? What happened?

GH [00:07:39] I was working toward a Bachelor of Arts. I was writing at the time. I was writing poetry. I was active in the university in the B.C. arts community. I was studying a combination of English literature and East Asian history. I had to take a year out after my first year and went back for a couple. It was the late sixties, so there was a lot happening on and off campus that ate up a lot of my time. At some point I looked around at the courses I might take for my fourth year for my B.A., and I wasn't that interested in any of them. I thought I'd taken the courses that I wanted to take, so I started to think, (this is a luxury, frankly, that I think many young people don't have anymore although we're now turning the corner again and the value of different kinds of education in the trades is now being amplified) what am I going to do with a degree? Don't take offence at this, Ken, given your background, but I thought the only thing I can do with it is to be a teacher and I don't want to be a teacher. I decided that I wasn't going to go back. I ended up living in a small community up the coast doing a variety of jobs like tree planting, clam digging, odd jobs. That led me through basically the next decade of my life.

KN [00:09:12] That would be your experience as a hippie, I take it, writing poetry and sort of living that life off the land, right?

GH [00:09:22] They're not necessarily the same thing. Being an artist, I was never hugely fond of the term hippie, but I did live off grid for two years in a little bay up the Sechelt inlet and got around by boat and learned to work hard.

KN [00:09:50] How about poetry. Do you still have your poems?

GH [00:09:56] I still have them. I published a book many years ago. I used to do a lot of public poetry readings. My favorite one was one at the Vancouver Art Gallery, accompanied by a jazz trio. I still read a lot, but I stopped writing at some point. I think I stopped writing because it felt to me like the things I wanted to talk to people about were social, they were political, and I was not very good at turning those things into good poetry. You can write, you can write essays and you can write or give speeches, but that's a different thing than turning it into art, something that many Latin American poets excel at and a number of North American ones and European ones do as well. I kind of got better at it later in my life. I did occasionally go back and write some poems, but most of my poetry was kind of impressionistic.

KN [00:11:07] Interesting. You also had some early employment experiences that brought you into membership in the BCGEU. Can you say a few words about that? What were you doing? What was that experience?

GH [00:11:22] One of the skills that I developed when I was living off grid was I did a number of jobs, as I mentioned. We would get recruited into forest firefighting occasionally because in those days, if there was a fire, the Ministry of Forests would simply go and collect able-bodied people, give them minimal training, give them some gear and send them out. I also learned to use a chainsaw fairly well so at some point I got a job on Mount Seymour, clearing the right of way for the sewer line up to what's now the lodge in the ski area. It was in the couple of years before the BCGEU actually was certified with collective bargaining rights but it did exist. It transformed from an association into a union. There was a shop steward. I was there and I was aware that there was a union and you could join it. I had a chance every morning to track down the shop steward before we got into the truck and went out to work. I'd say, 'Are you going to bring me a union card so I can join?' It was, 'Yeah, yeah, I'll bring it to you tomorrow.' I went through this for a couple of weeks. For whatever reason, he never brought the card. I did join eventually. I found another way to do it.

GH [00:12:58] I had leftwing values. I had socialist values, and I believed in the labour movement. I'd learned obviously in my first job about the importance of a union. For me, one of the big advantages of that job was the opportunity to join a union, so I was eager to do it. As it turned out later, my first grievance was filed from that job. When I was working, I was bucking some logs and I hurt my back. I could not continue. I took a day or two off and I went to get some treatment and I got X-rays. It was basically an ongoing chronic injury that I still suffer some pain from. I filed a workers' compensation claim for which I got fired. As we all know, that's not the appropriate response to somebody filing a workers' comp claim. I got on the bus and I went out to the union hall on Canada Way. I had made an appointment. I met one of the staff reps and filed the grievance forms and said, 'Well, this should be pretty easy because it's a violation of the law. By the way, I've been trying to join the union now for several months. I can't get the steward to bring me a card and take my money. Can you do it?' We signed up on the spot and that was the beginning of—there was a break between that job and coming back to the union a few years later, but that was my first experience at the BCGEU, which I will say was a good one. I got good service and I learned firsthand how important it is for working people to have good representation and

to be able to act collectively with people who have the knowledge and skills to navigate what happens when some arbitrary bad boss decides that you're a slacker rather than somebody who's injured, and the best way to deal with you is to get you off the payroll.

KN [00:15:08] Can you tell us—you lived in Terrace for a while, working and living there. How did you end up there and what kind of work did you do in Terrace? How did you end up in Terrace?

GH [00:15:22] Accidentally, actually. Sometime around 1976 I bought an old GMC four wheel drive panel truck and I converted it into a mobile home with bed and storage and everything else, and I headed off with my partner. We were going to go to the Yukon and see what life was like in the Yukon. Got a little bit of a late start in the summer, we worked our way up camping along the way and realized when we got up around the Yellowhead Highway that it was getting maybe a bit late in the year to get up to the Yukon and try to get settled. I'd gone all the way across Highway 16 to Prince Rupert and was starting to work my way back, our way back, and figuring Prince George would be the best place to spend the winter and look for work or find some way to survive. I was in Safeway getting some ice for the ice chest. I looked at the lineup next to me and there were a couple of people I'd known down on the coast from fishing boats. We yakked away and they said, 'Why don't you just come over? We're staying with friends. Why don't you come over and have dinner?' We went, had dinner, had a great evening. The guy I met, just a log cabin they were staying in, said, 'You know, I'm working on a logging crew. If you're patient and you stick around for two or three days, I'm pretty sure I can get you on.' Three days later, I got hired setting chokers and spent the summer working, logging in Terrace.

GH [00:17:09] I did go to the Yukon the next summer, but came back to Terrace because I'd grown kind of fond of it, made some friends, saw some opportunity for work there and ended up essentially living there for full time for close to ten years. Off and on, as I got more and more involved in the union and more and more dragged down to meetings and bargaining and other activities in Vancouver, I kept my home and Terrace for quite a long time, in fact, until I was elected president of the BCGEU.

GH [00:17:45] I became a member of the BCGEU. One of my experiences logging, which is not uncommon for many young people, logging was a number of what we humorously called close calls but were really near-death experiences. I had about three of them in ten days. I thought about them and I realized that none of them were anything I could have done anything about. They were just things like the logs being hauled in, catching a dead branch and sending it flying two inches from my head, very close. Another case, it was somebody else's error who thought I was free of the logs I was setting chokers on when in fact I wasn't, and blew the whistle. I was very, very lucky. Very lucky. He was more in shock than I was. My shock came later. I didn't stop logging.

GH [00:18:54] We got laid off in the winter, but I did start thinking over the winter about if I wanted to do something that was maybe a little bit safer. I'm not sure what. In some ways, what I chose may or may not have been safer, but I heard about log scaling, which is work that was then done for the Ministry of Forests to grade logs as well as measure. Sometimes that happens at truckloads of logs going to a mill and sometimes it happens at dry land sorts. Then a lot of it was happening in booms up the Douglas Channel off Prince Rupert Harbour and Haida Gwaii. I ended up eventually licensed for all of those. I started out just licensed for Interior scaling. I got a job part time at first backfill for vacation, eventually full time. About three weeks into the job, my mentor was a crusty guy named Finn Ferguson, who had been a former member of the IBEW, a very solid New Democrat,

very leftwing New Democrat, just totally committed to workers' rights, probably about a good foot taller than me, really strong at the end of his career and kind of took me under his wing. We had a shop steward who got transferred so I remember going to Finn, and I said, 'You know, Chris has transferred. We're going to need a steward. Who's it going to be?' He just looked at me and he said, 'You, stupid.' That's how I got elected shop steward. That was the first official position I held in the union. It was shortly before the 1982 strike and of course, the 1983 Solidarity movement and strike. I landed in a good position to learn something about organizing and being active early in my career.

KN [00:21:05] Immediately after that, in 1984, you got elected to the provincial executive. What prompted you to get involved provincially?

GH [00:21:15] A whole bunch of things—my experience organizing around the strikes. I just thought it was important that we stood together and I was eager to do that in the Solidarity movement against Bill Bennett and his legislation and its attacks on public sector workers, on teachers, on health care workers. There was a massive movement, as you of course, remember, Ken, that's I think, where we first met. My job initially was to travel back and forth across northwest B.C. from Haida Gwaii all the way to Houston and organize people in workplaces to be ready for strike and to be ready to participate in community events and opposition to those bills. At first it was not something that came naturally to me. I was feeling pretty shy. I was nervous about talking to groups of people. I was nervous about a whole lot of things, and I overcame a lot of that over time. I just forced myself to put myself out there.

GH [00:22:28] As I mentioned, I always considered myself a socialist from basically late high school on. I kind of learned the theory of it as I went along. One of the things that I wanted to do, it was always in the back of my head, I wanted to be in a position of more influence in the union. First group I was elected to was the provincial executive for my occupational groupings. Then shortly after that I was elected head of that group, which put me on the union's provincial executive. I basically thought my union was too conservative. I thought it should be more progressive and more active. I thought the way to do that was to get on the executive and push hard as well as push hard from the bottom up, so that's what I did.

KN [00:23:35] Before we pursue that, can you talk a bit about the, you have spoken a bit about the '83 Solidarity protest and strike. Is there anything specific you remember about—where were you in '83? Were you still in Terrace or were you down here for any of the big events that occurred here, and a bit about perhaps the strike, because the GEU was at the centre of the strike, which then expanded and included others. Do you have any memories of that Solidarity experience?

GH [00:24:10] I have lots of them. I remember talking to large groups of union members. As I mentioned I was organizing across the northwest. I was pleased to play a role in bringing people together and giving people a sense that we didn't have to take what was being dealt out. The other thing I remember was there was, I can't remember, there was a bundle of bills, 30 some bills, and they covered all kinds of things. Some of them had to do with unions. Some of them had to do with social rights. Some of them had to do with renters' rights. I remember some of the meetings, some of the people I was talking to, saying, 'Well, hold on, like, it's not quite as absolute as you think.' Having to engage back and forth with people, not just say, this is all bad and we're going to oppose it. As we all know, workers, like everyone else have a range of opinions. It taught me respectful listening and dialogue because you can't just tell people what to do.

GH [00:25:23] Later in my union career, that translated to me as—always believed unions had to be involved in politics. There was this widespread belief that public sector unions were nonpartisan. I would say the BCGEU was never nonpartisan. Well, maybe it was at one point, but not since the '70s. Definitely, the Constitution said 'shall not be affiliated to a political party.' My experience was that telling people how to vote didn't help. Telling them what the issues were and where people stood on the issues, which invariably was not the right wing parties, was very helpful. Partly that was informed by my experience of talking to people across northwest B.C. about what the issues were and what we should be opposing, and also helped define what the priorities should be in those meetings and in our action.

GH [00:26:27] I guess I was reasonably good at it because I got a call one day saying we're trying to do more organizing down in the Lower Mainland over the summer, Metro Vancouver, to really build opposition. Do you want to come down for a couple of weeks and help out? That couple of weeks turned into about two and a half months. I was billeted with Tom Kozar, who was then the treasurer of the union, and so was John Shields at the time who was over from Victoria. Tom famously said, 'You can sleep here, but no grub. You're on your own for grub.' I did that. I kind of got the assignment of organizing ad hoc events, and our kind of slogan was 'An event a day to get attention.'.

GH [00:27:22] The culmination of it was we meticulously planned and this was definitely not something that was supported by the union establishment at the time, so those of us who were organizing it didn't tell them. We planned and organized and executed an invasion of the PNE parade right in front of the grandstand, when Grace McCarthy, then a Social Credit senior cabinet minister, was presiding as the parade marshal. We just waited for a little break in the parade, and then we moved in with our banners and placards and marched in front of her. She was so shocked that this was happening that she actually left the stage and hid. I think that was a highlight. Of course, after it was a successful event, it had the full endorsement of the union establishment.

KN [00:28:21] You did mention that you wanted to see a more progressive union, the GEU. John Shields soon got elected as president, and shortly thereafter, I believe you got elected as vice-president in 1987. Can you tell us about that whole experience with John?

GH [00:28:46] When Norm Richards was set to retire in 1985, there was a three-way race for president. At that time it was pretty much a staff-run union. Staff play an important role in the union. I don't want anyone to think that that's not the case, but I think unions function well when they have a strong democratic centre of people elected directly from the membership. There's a lot of responsibility that goes with that. I've learned through politics that not everybody takes the responsibility that comes with the position, but that's the system we work in and many do. Many bring the important grounded voices of people from the workplace. Those of us who felt strongly that that was the direction the union should take kind of rallied around John and he ended up getting elected. I actually in 1985 tried to, with some backing from some of my colleagues, get on the slate as one of the vice-presidents. It just didn't quite happen for a variety of reasons. Two years later, however, I did and I spent 12 years as vice-president before being elected president. I think we did see a shift and we saw a lot of tension in the first couple of years, both between John and the membership in some ways, because shortly after that election and Bill Vander Zalm's attack on and moves to privatize large amounts of the public service, much of it unfortunately successfully, happened again. That was when good organizers were worth their weight in gold in the union.

GH [00:30:51] I should go back a step here. There were many in the establishment of the BCGEU who were extremely nervous about me, thought I was far too left wing and wanted to make sure that I never got elected to anything. When I first ran for local chair, the person who was leaving as local chair told me, 'I was told that you weren't an appropriate choice to replace me when I told them you were going to be the person to replace me.' Staff representative at the time later told me he was given instruction to make sure that I didn't get elected, and he said, 'Okay, I'll do my best, but I'll tell you right now, it's not going to work. He's too popular.' That's the background. We were trying to change that and did. I've always been a strong supporter of democratic principles in the union, ensuring that members have a voice and a vote. Oftentimes, people sometimes on the elected side were less committed to that than I thought they should be, because people get comfortable in their positions. I actually had a lot of fun.

GH [00:32:13] I remember campaigning a couple of times to be a delegate to convention and calling all the shop stewards and talking to them and maintaining those networks. I think it made me a much better representative. It's probably at the root of everything that's informed my political electoral politics activity in all the years that followed. There was some great opportunities in those few years. In the '80s, there was lots of work to do. I ended up being booked off the job to do union work far more than I was actually back at work, although I did make a point of going back, both to do my job and also to be on the ground with the people I represented. I found that people had a lot more tolerance for some of my more progressive ideas if they thought two things: that I was always there to represent them if they had a grievance or a problem; and if I was as good or better at my job than they were. They didn't think that I was just doing this union stuff because I was too lazy to do my job. I made sure nobody had that impression of me.

GH [00:33:36] As time went on, large organizations are bureaucratic, they get centralized. I get that. It was probably centralized to a fair degree when I was president as well. I learned part way through my presidency that I needed to shake things up a bit because otherwise I was going to lose touch with and support of other members of the executive. It was a time of transformation of the union, a transformation that has continued during my presidency and since my presidency. There was an opportunity for me to connect in many ways with members of the union throughout all the components, with other unions, with other members of the labour movement to become skilled in areas that I was working in, like occupational health and safety, to have the great pleasure of becoming a union trainer and helping people develop skills and confidence in their work. I mentioned that I and others supported John to democratize the union and make it a more progressive union. Over time I decided that the best way for me to do that was to make sure that I stuck around long enough to become president of the union myself, which is a bit egocentric, I'll freely admit that. I think if you want to make change, you have to have confidence that you can do it and enough humility to engage with others and hear their ideas about what the best ways to do that are.

KN [00:35:26] You did you did become president in 1999 and served till 2008. For most of that time, the B.C. Liberals were in power in British Columbia. There were pitched battles, particularly with the government going after social service workers, hospital and long term care workers, community health workers, public service and teachers. How did the BCGEU fare during that period of time in terms of, given all those attacks?

GH [00:36:07] The first two years I was in office it was an NDP government. I think shortly after I was elected pretty much everybody in British Columbia assumed it was the last two

years of the NDP government. As you'll recall, in 2001, the NDP was reduced to two seats. I remember on the eve of the election, I spent quite a few weeks trying to think about how bad it was going to be. I knew it was going to be bad. I'd been through 1983. I knew how bad it could get. I knew how hard it was to organize people to stand up. I also knew the limitations. In 1983, many people thought we could overthrow the government. That obviously didn't happen and probably was never going to happen. We managed to protect a lot of people and to protect some programs but were we over fifty percent successful? Probably not. I had that experience and that knowledge that there were limitations to what you could do with a government that was determined to implement anti-labour legislation to single out particular unions. I used to wonder if I was going to be president of the union as it was completely destroyed and if I would have the skill or the team or collectively we'd have the wherewithal to withstand that. It was a very real fear because I had no illusion that these guys were vicious and deeply ideological and likely were going to be handed a crushing majority.

GH [00:38:09] The first couple of years were brutal. They were not afraid to ram things through and they were not afraid to try to drive wedges in the labour movement, which they did very successfully in some ways by passing legislation that removed labour rights from certain public sector unions while leaving private sector unions alone and offering them opportunities. The then-IWA was offered the opportunity to represent groups of contracted out, privatized former HEU members and former BCGEU members in hospitals and long term care. BCGEU had members in long-term care as well as the HEU. It was divisive within the IWA. There were local presidents who wanted nothing to do with it, and there were some who saw it as an opportunity and took it. It was very difficult in the Federation of Labour. It was very difficult, frankly, to fight that kind of action when the Liberal government could say, 'Well, you know, they're unionized, what's the issue here?' In terms of how to deal with that, there was health care, there were social services and child care.

GH [00:39:42] We had just in late 2000 achieved sectoral bargaining for community social service workers who were the lowest of the low in the public sector in terms of treatment and wages, and that included child care workers. Through an arbitrated settlement with Don Munroe, we entrenched a sectoral table and a sectoral agreement, which frankly is in the interests of the public sector as well as the workers. The Liberals just took that apart. They set up a situation where if you remained unionized, you were stuck with an agreement that was basically rammed down people's throats. I remember speaking to groups of workers and going to them and saying, 'I'm just going to be honest with you. The choice is, here. They're going to contract you all out. We can fight that but they are currently government and they've passed the laws that allow them to do that or you can take a wage rollback.' We always tried to just give an honest choice to members, say, 'We'll support you whatever you decide, and it's your decision.' People often decided to, not always, but often, that they would, as we sometimes like to say in the labour movement, take the rollback and live to fight another day and stay in the union and stay with a form of collective agreement. The Liberals and the Employers' Association next move was to allow non-unionized operations to raise wages above unionized operations, which was a further incentive to throw the union out the window.

GH [00:41:40] There were all kinds of tactics we had to deal with. We were faced with the privatization or proposed privatization of large groups of workers within the direct public service, as well as contracting out of workers in the broader public sector. There were kind of two schools of thought with some shades in between in the labour movement at the time. I want to be clear, it wasn't that the BCGEU and I were not willing to fight this in the

public arena and in fact, did fight it in the public arena, but also we had to make a difficult decision. Do we try to negotiate the best deal possible or do we assume that if we go on strike long enough, we'll get what we want and the Liberals won't be able to succeed? I think as history showed, there were a number of strikes that had some success but all of that success at the end came through some form of negotiation to end the strike. We also found that sometimes we could get a better result by trying to get the result early. That was controversial. Some on the left called it selling out. Some of our members didn't understand it, others did, and others appreciated it.

GH [00:43:15] I had members at our first convention following some of those agreements that were reached in long term care where the HEU was the lead union who stood up when people criticized what the BCGEU had or hadn't done in that period of time and said, 'We are the workers who are impacted and our union always talked to us about what we were doing and always gave us a choice. In the end, the union did what we asked them to do. Would another course of action have been better? Maybe. But we appreciate that the union asked us and kept in contact with us and let us know what they were doing every step of the way.' That stuck with me. That's important.

GH [00:44:04] You can never know for sure if the decisions you're making are right. They're hard choices. If you go to war, will you be destroyed or will you be successful or will you be partly successful? Are there other ways to carry on a fight? I was in the heart of all the negotiations that we had, not just with government service, but with community health, with community social services. We pushed hard and we had some success. I will hold out as one example, and I don't say this with pride because I don't think any of this stuff should have been privatized, but somehow we managed to keep liquor store workers in the public sector with a major collective agreement with virtually no permanent changes to it while health care, which is a core public service, was fragmented and privatized. I wish we could have done that for both sectors.

KN [00:45:15] Can you talk a bit, George, during that period of time about your work in the GEU and the events that you had to deal with. Can you talk a bit about your involvement in the BC Federation of Labour during this period of time and the struggle that was going on beyond in the public sector overall in terms of the role of the BC Federation of Labour?

GH [00:45:45] Jim Sinclair was elected president of the BC Federation of Labour about a month before I was elected president of the BCGEU. Jim and I were old friends. We'd been rabble rousers at Fed conventions and in the labour movement from our respective lower rung positions since about 1981 when we first met. It was difficult. There were some schisms between the public and private sector, not big ones, not public ones. I think the private sector unions felt in some ways that some public sector unions were not being pragmatic enough and were asking for private sector unions to go on strike when they would in fact end up, the public sector unions, would technically be on strike, but largely be working as essential services. As you can imagine, they were not unsupportive but wanted a more sympathetic approach to the issues they were dealing with with their members. Then there were the splits between the HEU and public sector unions and the IWA that was appearing to profit over the actions of the—not just appearing to profit, were profiting over the actions of the Liberal government. There were very hard discussions at the Federation of Labour. In many cases, some officers would simply not come. It was difficult to hold a unified labour movement approach. Jim and I and some others knew how important it was to try to maintain that as frustrated as we were with some of the actions of some unions on both sides, and tried to find ways to bring people together.

GH [00:47:55] It was a very difficult time because when labour is under such severe attack, it can respond by absolute unity or, and I will confess that there were times when I'd walk into meetings and the only thing I cared about was how the BCGEU fared, but not all the time, obviously. I think I do and did understand that we all do better when we're doing well together but sometimes people would just say, 'My primary duty here is to take care of my own membership. What you're asking me to do isn't doing that.' We had to find ways to bring them together. That's not a very lengthy answer, but that pretty much sums it up. I think as time went on one of the things that we did do was led by Ken Neumann of the Steelworkers when the NDP was down to a caucus of two. He came to a number of us and said we will not survive and we'll have no opposition if we cannot support this caucus of two. That's all the opposition in the House. We have to provide researchers, we have to provide support. That's something that a number of us banded together to do. That's one example of working together. There were other examples. The other thing about that time is when the official opposition, which wasn't even an official opposition at the time because you have to have more than two members, is only two members. There has to be effective opposition to government policy outside the House. I and a number of labour leaders found ourselves in that position much more of a public role than labour leaders would have on issues that extend far beyond what most people think of as core labour issues like collective bargaining or workplace issues, although I think the day when labour was only concerned about workplace issues and not what affects working people in government policy in society were over decades ago.

KN [00:50:16] One other area that you might have been involved with somewhat is with the ferry workers who were affiliated with the BCGEU. Are there any issues, events related to their work during this period of time while you were present that you can recall?

GH [00:50:33] At one point, the ferry workers were actually part of the big public sector bargaining unit, public service bargaining unit and part of direct government service. Then at some point, I think around the mid-to-late seventies, the Ferry Corporation became a crown corporation and they became a separate but affiliated union. The affiliation has to do with the way the Canadian Labour Congress and the BC Federation of Labour works. They were essentially autonomous. They would come to BCGEU conventions, we'd maintain relationships with them. When I became president, I worked hard to maintain a good relationship with both the Ferry and Marine Workers and a couple of the other affiliated unions to the BCGEU. At some point during the early years of the B.C. Liberal government, there was a change in leadership and the Ferry Workers there was kind of a somewhat similar, I'm not sure the issues were the same, but similar to when there was a major change in leadership under John Shields. I think most of the executive were very new. They were distrustful, obviously, of their employer, obviously of the government, but a little bit of the BCGEU as well and maybe of the labour movement as a whole.

GH [00:52:05] I worked hard to develop a relationship and they were going into bargaining. I know partly from the time and partly from conversations later that the goal of the government and the Ministry of Labour was to force them into a strike that they could then legislate them back from. In the course of legislating, basically rip up their entire collective agreement because it was thought to be too costly and restrictive. The leadership of the Ferry Workers had run appropriately on being strong and militant and resisting the demands of the Crown Corporation.

GH [00:52:49] The strike began. It became heated. We stayed in touch, both Jim Sinclair and myself with Jackie Miller, the president. At one point they were in mediation with Vince Ready. Jackie trusted both of us enough to ask us to come over, give them a hand, give

them some advice and meet with the committee. We did, both of us, Jim and I. We were both aware that we should not walk into that situation saying we know what the answer is, just do what we tell you to do and everything will be good. That was not the mood of the executive and it wasn't in the mood of Jackie, although she trusted us. What we did was, we both had good relations with the mediator and we both had knowledge of what the government was trying to do. We had the ability to warn the Ferry and Marine Workers of what the end game of the government was, what some of the paths to achieving a successful mediator recommended settlement might be and what the options were, to help them get there on their own by kind of walking them through it.

GH [00:54:09] It was a very tense time. There was a lot at stake. They were on edge. I would have been completely—I've been on edge. I've been in situations like that. In the end, they had the courage to go to their members and say, we're going to accept a mediator's recommendation knowing that the government didn't want them to. That then put the government on the spot, of the union having accepted the mediator's recommendation, which was pretty good. It was a good package. Vince was a fair guy. They accepted it and the government had to make a decision about whether they would reject it in the face of the union having accepted it. They decided they had no choice. But they were furious. They had expected they were going to destroy this union and this collective agreement, and they'd been outfoxed by a whole bunch of people. It was a source of great satisfaction to me that that union was saved, that their collective agreement was saved. Their executive maintained support. We continued to have good, respectful relations. I think that's an example of how a good affiliation agreement, both with a central labour body and with another union, can work. Don't try to run things, but try to be helpful.

KN [00:55:51] During your time as president, George, I think you had a lot to do with this in terms of your social justice outlook. Your union increased its support for progressive community and social action initiatives and organizations quite a bit. Can you talk about that?

GH [00:56:16] I actually restructured the union and one of the departments to have responsibility for building relations with community organizations, for building alliances. A big part of that was funding them. The first director I hired reminded me after I hired her that I had first started talking to her about coming to work for me as president five years before I was elected president. Apparently, I planned ahead a bit who was somebody who I thought had the skills and the temperament to do that, Mary Rowles. It was important to me. It was important to me that the labour movement be part of the community, the labour movement not be apart from social justice organizations, but be integrated with them. I learned how important that was during the Solidarity years, because I think labour and social justice organizations started that way. It became fractured at the end. There's some responsibility on both parties. I think expectations have to be realistic about what the labour movement is capable of, particularly in situations of bargaining for its members but there also has to be on the labour movement side an understanding that we are an expression of organization and solidarity. We don't exist in a bubble. We exist in society. Some of the things that we fight for have to be for the society in which we live. That's what I believed and that's what I tried to help the union become. We became better at that. We had good allies as a result of that work in many struggles that we had to come. Also, we helped support people who were doing work in the community that they were better situated to do than the union was, but that are important to our members, whether it is poverty reduction, fighting for better health care, environmental issues. We were part of good alliances. I'm proud of that.

KN [00:58:55] Given all of that, is there a particular highlight that you can identify during your term as president that comes to mind?

GH [00:59:04] A couple of them. You remember in I think it was 2006, Carole Taylor was finance minister. The Liberals had a giant surplus. They didn't want a strike so they held out a $1 billion bonus fund to encourage people to reach a ratified collective agreement by a certain date. Sounded good in theory, but the template they had for settlement I thought was weaker than it could or should be, so unlike some unions, we took a strike vote in the public service and as a result of that, we got a better deal. We were also bargaining for community health workers, bargaining association of a number of unions, but in which the BCGEU was the largest union, also in Community Social Services, again, same situation. The government was used to getting cut rate agreements and that was not acceptable to us. We needed better benefits. We needed to move more toward equity with workers doing the same kind of work. I got involved in both those sets of negotiations after finishing the first round.

GH [01:00:25] One of the things that stuck with me was the last agreement to be settled was Community Social Services. Their bargaining association, employers' bargaining association was just incompetent. They could not make a decision. They could not make a move. It was incredibly frustrating. I came in at the end to try to make things happen. Deputy Minister of Labour, sorry, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labour came over to see what was wrong. I ended up in in a meeting with him in which he said, 'Well, this is the only mandate we have.' I managed to convince him that it was not going to be good enough, bonuses or not, and it needed to move in a couple of areas. The most significant one was a pension plan for those workers. He got the mandate moved by being convinced that I was crazy enough to go on strike in face of the bonus. The second piece of that was we ran out of time. The mandate was get a ratified collective agreement by the drop dead date or there was no bonus. I was on a CBC radio interview and I was being asked about that and said, 'Well, it's not going to happen. We don't have time. We're going to take it out to the membership for ratification. We need more time than that deadline but I can say to the finance minister that if we have a tentative agreement, I'm confident that we have the trust of the members and they'll vote for it, but it's their say.' They then brought her on following me and asked her 'This was what the president of the union says. Are you going to give them an extension?' She agreed to it on the spot. That felt pretty good.

GH [01:02:29] The other thing that really stands out for me was actually my last convention when I was leaving. They organized a very nice tribute, people who were organizing the convention. This is not uncommon for people who are leaving of their own accord as opposed to being voted out of office. Part of it was having a number of people go to the microphone from different elements of the union just to talk about their experience with me. There was quite a string of shop stewards, some of whom I couldn't actually remember talking to, but who talked about how I'd come up to meet them at a stewards' banquet, or I'd been on a worksite tour and I'd spent time talking to them and encouraging them to get active, giving them the confidence to do it and what a difference that had made to them. That really touched me because it's not like I was trying to impress them at the time. I was just having conversations. If that's the impact I had on some of them, that just made me feel like I'd done a good job. That meant more to me than anything anybody else could have said.

KN [01:03:52] After stepping down as BCGEU president, you took an active leadership role within the BC section of the Sierra Club. Can you talk a bit about that, why you took it on and what was the nature of the work that you were doing in that role?

GH [01:04:11] At some point before I became president, the union established its first environment committee. I can't remember if it was a resolution at convention or I and others encouraged it to happen, but it was established. I was the first chair of it. I took it seriously. I always cared about environmental issues. I think the BCGEU played a role in both supporting environmental organizations, interacting with them, discussing those issues at conventions. Once I became president, the issue became climate change. We discussed that quite a lot. I had members of the committee coming and urging the BCGEU to be more outspoken on it.

GH [01:04:58] At the end of my presidency, I was at a conference and the outgoing executive director of Sierra Club BC was there and I said, 'Who do you think's going to take your job?' 'I'm not sure the board is going to post it. You should apply.' I laughed and I said, 'They're not going to hire me. They're just not going to expect that anybody from the labour movement is going to be the right person to run the organization.' She just said, 'Don't be so sure. You should apply.' I thought about it, and I did. As I suspected when I was interviewed by the board, some of them were exceptionally cynical about the possibility of me leading the organization, but in the end they offered me the job. I took the job. I applied for the job because I left the BCGEU thinking one of the things I wanted to do was find ways to build more bridges between the labour movement and social justice organizations like the environmental movement, although not just the environmental movement. I thought there was still this artificial divide and I thought we'd be more successful if we had better communication and supported each other in a number of ways, because all of the issues are interactive.

GH [01:06:17] Working people are impacted by environmental damage or climate change in many ways, whether it is the failure to deal with the issues in a timely manner leading to major job disruption or just what gets left to our kids and our grandkids, or what happens to the impacts we're seeing today from heat domes, flooding, drought and wildfires. Although back then, the impacts of climate change were something we thought were a couple of decades in the future, we learned differently, unfortunately. I wanted to do that. I thought if I could bring some of the skills and connections that I developed in my time in the labour movement to the environmental movement, maybe I could help do that. That's basically why I took the job.

KN [01:07:10] In 2013, you ran for nomination, the NDP nomination in Fairview and won and then ran in the subsequent election in 2013 and won as well and had become an MLA. What prompted you to seek public office in this way? Do you remember the 2013 campaign? You want to comment about that as well?

GH [01:07:37] I'd been urged to run by many people previously. Previous leaders had tried to recruit me for the 2009 election. I just wasn't ready. I'd just left the labour movement. I wasn't ready to jump right back into another elected office. I wanted to see what else was out there, but by 2011 I was so appalled at what the Liberals were doing. I've been an active New Democrat almost my entire adult life. I wanted to help the NDP win. I wanted to win, and I wanted to be part of that. I thought if I can help the NDP win, I will. I thought the best way to do that maybe was to use whatever profile I had and run in a marginal seat, so I decided in 2011 to seek the nomination. I assumed that people still really wanted me to run. What I didn't realize at the time was that my friend Geoff Meggs had been, who was a

city councillor at the time, had been wanting that nomination for some time, and was kind of laying low but wanting to walk into it at the last minute so he didn't have to give up his council seat. We had a 15-16 month nomination campaign in which I was campaigning for the nomination, signing up members, going door to door, trying to get a nomination meeting to happen, because at one point we thought the election would be late 2011. Christy Clark almost called one, but then held off to 2013. That was about three times as long as the actual election campaign in 2013.

GH [01:09:25] I did win the nomination and Geoff went on to play an important role in our government in 2017 as chief of staff to John Horgan. He and I worked closely together from that point on as an MLA and a councillor, we worked together. That was the election we were supposed to win and should have won. I don't say this because I think that we made major mistakes that caused us to lose. I think it's just the way things work. I remember thinking, I'm going to run here. If we win in the province, we should be able to win the seat. If we lose in the province, we're not going to win the seat. It was held by the health minister. David Eby was running next door against sitting-Premier Christy Clark. We lost the election and both David and I won. In retrospect I attribute that to the fact that we had smart campaigns that were focused on not only doorknocking on the ground, but also targeted doorknocking in those areas that we knew people were likely to support the NDP but maybe not so likely to vote, as well as areas where people were maybe on the fence. It was a very gratifying campaign. I was surprised at both results, but pleased. That began four years of opposition, which I hope never to repeat, although I will say it's made me a better member of government having served in opposition.

KN [01:11:11] You've alluded to time in government since 2017, you're elected and the NDP soon formed the government. You became the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change Strategy and have held that position since then. Is there anything you would like to say about your experience in this role?

GH [01:11:31] Apparently nobody will let me out of it. It's in some ways unusual to hold a ministry that long, but there's a handful of us who have held our ministries for the entire time we've been in government, Harry Bains, Adrian Dix, Mike Farnworth, myself. I think I'm in pretty good company there. I have learned that it's important to be on top of things. It's important to be ambitious. It's important to bring people along with you and that change in government happens far more slowly than I had thought or hoped it would. But it is still possible to make change.

GH [01:12:14] When I look back over six and a half years, not just in the field of environment and climate change, we have, I think, one of the leading climate and most holistic climate change strategies in North America, but whether in health care, we've brought outsourced and privatized workers back into the central medical system, they've repatriated them. We've made significant headway on child care. We have more doctors per capita now, despite the fact that people think correctly that it's hard to find a family doctor. We have made headway on that front. We're making headway on the housing file and we're making a difference in people's lives. If you have patience, change happens and it's important to be both grounded in what you can do to ensure that you're communicating well with the public about the reasons you're doing things, and how it's benefiting them. And to be relentless and creative.

KN [01:13:22] I'm wondering, George, if there's anything else you would like to say about your experience in the BCGEU or B.C.'s labour movement overall.

GH [01:13:36] I could name any number of individual experiences that were challenging, that were frightening, that were exciting, that felt like great victories. When I look back at the union that I was part of and I see the changes that have happened in the 15 years since I left as president and the changes that happened over the period of time I was president, you see an evolution, just as you do in society. I'm pleased to have had, an honour to have had the opportunity to be trusted by people to represent them, to interact with them. The same is true about being an MLA. I remember at one point when I was running for the nomination, I wasn't sure if I'd be nominated. I'd finished an evening of doorknocking and talking to people and I thought, whether I win this nomination or not, I'll always value the fact that I spent time talking to people in the community and hearing what their concerns were. They weren't always the same concerns I had or the ones that I thought they should have, but they were the ones they had. I learned this in the labour movement. I learned this as an MLA.

GH [01:14:59] If I want people to listen to my ideas, I have to listen to their concerns and their ideas. Then we have to find a way to have a conversation about how those fit together. It's maybe not the easiest job. It's certainly not a nine to five job. But it is. It's not a job everyone would want but I'm glad that I seem to have the temperament for it because I've been so rewarded by it in so many ways. On those days when I wonder if I'm making any difference, or if I've been reading too many comments on social media from all the people who think I'm useless and worthless and should get out of the way, I'll run into somebody on the street.

GH [01:15:54] I'll close with this story. I had gone through a period of time where I think the various attacks on what people perceived I was doing or not doing as environment minister were particularly heated and particularly dispirited. It was a very rainy day and I stopped into a corner grocery to buy some flowers for a dinner I was going to. I watched, a woman was coming in, got off her bicycle, head to toe in rain gear, in her high vis stuff dripping with rain. She walked in the door, sort of looked at me for a minute, went back to shopping and then looked over again. I could feel my kind of armour going around like, okay, am I going to get attacked here? She came over as I was leaving and said, 'Are you George Heyman?' The armour closed entirely. I said, 'Yup.' 'I just want to thank you for everything you've done. You've done such a good job and I really appreciate it.' The armour fell off. Those are the days that make it worthwhile. It makes me want to keep working hard and doing good things.

KN [01:17:06] Thank you very much, George. I really appreciate your time and your comments. I think it's a great interview. Thank you.

GH [01:17:12] Thank you.