Interview: Lee Loftus (LL)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
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Transcription: Pam Moodie

KN [00:00:05] Okay. This is March the 19th, 2024 and, we're here to interview Lee Loftus. My name is Ken Novakowski. Lee, perhaps we can start by you telling us where and when you were born and where you spent most of your young years living and going to school.

LL [00:00:26] Thank you for that question. I was born on an Air force base in France, on a Canadian Air Force base in France and traveled the world in my younger years with my parents as they were stationed from base to base and, arriving back in British Columbia. Well actually British Columbia, probably the early '60s and then spent most of my time, traveling up and down the west coast of North America from San Diego, all the way up to Kitimat, living in, living and following construction. My father was a construction worker, so I found myself wandering the west coast of, of particularly Canada, mostly Canada, and running through a number of different elementary schools. I think it took me eight elementary schools to get to grade seven, and where we finally landed and had some stability, here in Burnaby, where I did my high schooling and my trade school.

KN [00:01:29] And what year were you born?

LL [00:01:30] Born in 1956.

KN [00:01:34] So when you eventually got to B.C. and as you said, your dad got involved in construction work and you were moving around a lot and stuff. But before we go any further, could you tell us a bit about the history of your grandfather and his involvement in the construction work and the early days of construction unions?

LL [00:01:52] So my grandfather, and I don't remember a lot of him. I remember a bit of him, and that's unfortunate. My grandfather, I'm told, was, about a five-foot five Irishman with curly red, flaming red hair, that was a union organizer. He spent most of his time during the late '40s—in the late '40s it wasn't a good time in British Columbia to be a union organizer. He was always in trouble with the law for violating all kinds of different things and contempt of court. And he spent more time hiding in the bush and shacks trying to avoid the police back then. But he was a union organizer. He was that guy that was, a little crate box, that he would stand on a podium, this flaming red Irish hair. And he was a hell of an orator, I'm told. So some of my, some of my stuff, I come by naturally, but, you know, he was organizing in the construction sector. He was a bricklayer, and he was a, a lagger, as they called them in in the UK, better known as an insulator here. So he started, he started the Bricklayers Union in British Columbia. So he was a charter member of the Bricklayers Union. And as well, in 1954, he was able to take the insulators that had found a home at local 170 of the UA Plumbers and Pipe Fitters, and he pulled the, he pulled the insulators out of Local 170 and was able to secure and start the local union here, Local 118 of the Insulators in September of 1954. And he was their first business manager, first negotiator. And like many other construction unions, he was dispatched, dispatching out of some of the beer parlors, just finding work, finding workers to go to work. So that was my grandfather. And, he actively did that until he passed in the mid-'60s.

KN [00:03:56] And what about your father? What kind of construction work did he do?

LL [00:03:59] Well, my father followed in the footsteps when he got back out of the Air Force, in the early 60s. Spent a good time as a bricklayer but ended up being an insulator. And by the mid '60s, he found himself traveling British Columbia. And during the '60s and throughout the '70s, you know, we were building industrial plants everywhere. We were oil refineries and pulp mills and chemical plants and ships and office towers in downtown Prince George and, you know, in Vancouver. So, you know, he was an insulator by trade. He preferred that over bricklayers. Sorry, bricklayers. But, you know, he, that's where he landed. He liked that work. And, I'm pleased to say that he was, he was a quality tradesperson.

KN [00:04:50] So it turns out that construction work and unions were a big part of your life. What about politics? Was there much political discussion at the family dinner table?

LL [00:05:00] So my, you know, the dynamics around politics in my household was, was interesting, challenging and sometimes entertaining. So, you know, my mother was, was a, an Orthodox Jew growing up in the Ottawa Valley where my grandfather was the Mayor, the butcher. He ran the general store and that big business person, well-respected individual that ran all the way from Ottawa to North Bay providing services. And my mother grew up in a, in a above average income type of relationship. And quite conservative in their, in their beliefs and where my father, of course, was, you know, born in Powell River and, in and out of the bush, hiding with my grandfather, avoiding the police, you know, because he's, you know, one of those goddamn Commies of the day, you know, out there organizing trade union labour and the rest of that. And, you know, the dynamics that that filtered into my house as a child is that my father was a federal Liberal instead of a Social Democrat, or a Communist, because the Communists, of course, were alive and well then. And my mother was a Social Democrat instead of a Conservative. So they had switched roles. And, you know, during election time, whether it was provincial or federal elections, not so much municipal elections. One side of the, if you looked out the front yard on the sidewalk, it divided the front yard. One side had a liberal sign on it and the other side had an NDP sign on it. And so that same conversation used to come to the dinner table and the debate would be underway. It would carry on after dinner. And, you know, my mother would be drinking coffee, my dad would be drinking beer, and they'd be spouting, you know, the benefits of their political parties. And us kids used to just sit there and went, "What the hell was that?" So it was entertaining, but it grounded us. You know, it give us an opportunity to actually think about the benefits and the participation in regards to that. So it was, it was interesting.

KN [00:07:12] Okay. It sounds like you can legitimately lay claim to being a third generation insulation worker and union activist. When and how did you actually get started and work in union activity in the B.C. Insulators Union?

LL [00:07:30] Well, I mean, as I said, my father, my grandfather was the first business manager, and that's the term that we use for presidents within the construction sector in our constitutional pieces. Right? The operating officers, they do that. And, my father, of course, had a goal and objective to be in it and to be the Business Manager. And in, in the early '70s, he, he actually was an active officer and elected individual on the Executive Board. Sitting with the structuring of the new pension plan and the introduction of an apprenticeship plan during that time. And he ran against the existing Business Manager, Anthony Ceraldi, one of my mentors. And if we get a chance, we should talk about that. And, was unsuccessful, but, as a result of that, the politics allowed him to be part of how they crafted and what the B.C. Insulators were going to look like into the, into the future.

So Local 118, then, was actually, actively known as the Heat and Frost Insulators and Asbestos Workers, Local 118, and he became a key component in regards to that.

LL [00:08:40] So, during all of those years, he'd be traveling in and out of town. And, it's funny because as you grew up as a kid, you know, they'd come home on a Friday night after being in Kitimat or Kamloops or Campbell River or, you know, Castlegar or, you know, they'd come home, once a month if they were in Cranbrook, or some other place, or Fort Nelson and, and, the boys, would end up in my living room at home on a Friday night drinking beers and whiskey and talking about how they were going to overthrow the world. And the labour movement was going to champion these causes, and these things were going to take place, and we were going to beat them down. And, you know, they, we were going to get our rightful part of the pie. And, you know, that's how I grew up. I mean, that was my Friday night or Saturday night and in the living room, you know, and and whether I was eight years old or whether I was eighteen years old, those were the conversations happening at my place. So, I was destined to follow in those footsteps. I don't think I had a choice. I, I found myself involved in the Insulators Union when I was 17 years old. I quit school, I climbed on an airplane. They dispatched me to beautiful downtown Taylor, B.C. I got off the airplane in Fort St. John and onto a bus and headed nine miles south from there and found myself in an oil refinery, Pacific Petroleum. That's when Canada actually owned part of our Petro Canada system. And, they were, they were rebuilding an oil refinery and I found myself helping the tradespeople up there prep and set up for the next expansion of that oil refinery. So, I am a third generation Insulator. I'm not sure I should say this, but I think I was born with a salamander and a heat and frost tattooed on my left ass (laughter). So, you know, it just completely rolled in there. You know, by the time I got my journeyperson's papers in 1980, I was elected, on a number of different committees. I was a pension trustee. I was, involved with entertainment committees. I was involved as a trustee. So I've been, I've been an active union member and held every position in the local unions since 1980.

KN [00:11:12] So maybe you can talk a bit about some of the highlights that you can recall in your various roles in the Insulators Union over time. Like what? What, you know, can you just sort of recall any?

LL [00:11:27] Well, you know, I mean, you know, if I, if, if I think about the pension comment that I just made, in regards to that. You know, I was elected, I was elected as a Pension Trustee as a campaign. Is that. "I'll get you your goddamn money back." What the hell does a trade union know about pension contributions, and what should they be doing? You know, it's your $0.10 an hour, because that was the contribution rate at that time. And I said, you know, you can do better. And I was listening to one of the, the president at the time, Brother Jerry Gerard, saying his accountant said, you can do better than this and you could do better than that. And, you know, $0.10 an hour on a $6.50 cent an hour wage rate, you know, it was substantial back then. And so one campaign was to, you elect me. This young kid will get you your money back. And, so they elected me.

LL [00:12:18] The challenge with becoming a Pension Trustee is that they had to send you to school, so you had to learn about defined benefits. And they sent me to school. I did some stuff. I did some stuff with the International Foundation. I got in, and eight months later, I come back to the membership floor and said, "I resign." And they all looked at me. What are you talking about? "I resign. I told you I was going to give you your $0.10 back, but it would be wrong." You will not do better with an RRSP. You will not do better with buying your personal annuities. You will not do better managing this money yourself. Only 1 in 10 people can manage money. And I like, if we continue with saying that you should

get your $0.10 an hour back, none of you will be able to retire. You'll have to depend on Social Security and Canada Pension and all of those other things. Well, I resigned. They wouldn't accept my resignation. I found myself being a Pension Trustee for four decades. And, we have one of the best models of a defined benefit plan. Now, a targeted benefit plan in British Columbia often is used as a model in the construction sector of, of what should be done on contribution rates and how it's done. And I have to tell you that, it served me well. I'm on pension now. I you know, our model, when we were talking about crafting it, it was, you know, make sure that our members were going to be able to retire with dignity. I can tell you that I've retired with dignity. I'm proud to be part of that plan. And for a 500 person Local, 600 person Local at the level that's at and the benefits it pays, it is second to none. So I mean, that's one of my achievements in regards to being, being that one of those individuals.

LL [00:14:06] But, you know. The stuff that I really did, was I got involved with health studies. Of course, back then, I became the safety officer for the local union. And the Safety Director was my title, with all the other elected positions that I got. And I became, I became a resource to the local union about occupational health and safety. What was needed, what those next steps should be? Of course, then you think about, about that timeline, all kinds of things were happening. You know, in the early '80s we had the Bentall tragedy where we lost four carpenters off the top of the Bentall Tower Four. We went into a Commission, in the Construction Industry Advisory Commission and, and which is better known as CIAC, and it came out with 60 recommendations and, about changes to regulations and things like that. So I participated in those things, you know, the old days of Cry Stairs and Roy Gauthier and all of those issues. I mean, I was at the table with them discussing those, what's next steps.

LL [00:15:21] And, that was my expertise, as well as I started bargaining collective agreements when I was, I don't know, 23 years old. I was bargaining in the construction agreement. I was employed in the shipyards at the same time, at Burrard Drydock. And I was bargaining the Joint Shipyard Conference, traveling back and forth to Victoria on a regular basis. And you can think of the economy as we can right now. But interest rates went from 7% to 18% within a six month period. You know, we were looking at, COLA clauses in a construction agreement, which was unheard of. We were seeing, you know, increases, to the collective agreement of 10%, 10% and 10%. And, you know, all of those things were taking place. And I was part of that, that original dynamics, I mean, the Bargaining Council with the Construction Labour Relations Association, we'd find ourselves in the University of British Columbia taking over half the campus. There would be a hundred of us sitting at the table, fifty trade unionists and fifty employers, and we'd be throwing rocks and insults and spitting on each others' shoe and doing everything we could to piss each other off. And, you know, it took months and months and months to bargain a collective agreement. And it was chaotic. It was, interesting, but grounding. I mean, I learned lots, I learned lots about business. I learned lots about economy. I learned lots about the construction sector. I probably understood better, about the motivation of why people take those positions. And I learned lots about people. So it was a very educational time for me.

KN [00:17:15] So from everything you said, Lee, it would sound like construction unions were doing very well in many respects. However, in our previous discussion on this, you characterized the 1986 construction union strike—that would be the Expo strike—as a major turning point for unionized construction workers and the beginning of the unionization of the trades. Can you tell us what happened and what this meant for construction unions to this day?

LL [00:17:45] I mean, that's a troubling time, right? As I just said, you know, we'd just finished coming out of a recession. Our house prices, you know, my mortgage went from $350 to $850 overnight. Virtually. We were able to secure some solid collective agreement increases in, I say, ten, ten and ten over three years. And, you know, a number of different changes were done with our collective agreement and coming out of the CIAC report and, we added the B.C. Health and Safety Council, we added the construction industry rehab plan, we added a whole bunch of funded things that were, you know, there to to provide some supports to the construction sector, but it increased costs. So there's a substantial increase to the cost of labour at the same time. And our employers had somewhat abandoned us around that. You know, let's be clear, the pendulum swings in the collective bargaining, you know, the challenge and the trick is to maintain a relationship on both sides. You know, I was always taught to make sure you leave something on the table when you walked away so that the next time you sat down, it was still a relationship and not a war. To try to move away from that. Well, we were not successful with that. I mean, we were at war with our contractors and they were at war for us.

LL [00:19:09] And, you know, in 1986 EXPO was in place. We couldn't supply labour. There was more construction happening in the City of Vancouver. We had five pulp mills under reconstruction. You know, there was, there was three times our Local working in British Columbia. We had travel cards from across the country. And not only were our employers out to get us, but the clients, the purchasers of constructions were furious at the cost of construction. You know, it's 2024 now. We hear that today about the cost of construction, and I'm fearful what that might bring in the future because if history repeats itself, the clients, you know, the oil companies and the developers and the business community will have an influence on a government in the future, where they will undermine all of the gains that come out of this collective bargaining process, the Labour Code changes. Cause that's what they did.

LL [00:20:13] In 1986, it was the last strike that's ever happened in the construction industry in the province of British Columbia. Thirty-seven years ago. But if you listen to the narrative coming out of a business person or a politician, "You guys only go on strike all the time. You guys are always fighting about your jurisdiction." We don't have jurisdictional disputes. We don't have strikes. We haven't. You know, the provisions now found in the Labour Code make it virtually impossible to go on strike. I think we've been stripped of our constitutional rights to withdraw our services and exercise our ability. There's no way that the Insulators Union within the Bargaining Council and under the B.C. Labour Code can exercise its autonomous rights to withhold services from its contractors. Can't do it. It's impossible. I have to get 14 other international trade unions to support that. And then I have to go to the Board to try to get it done. It's virtually impossible to do.

LL [00:21:14] So, that was the downfall. I mean, if you think about Pennyfarthing, the Expo site, they literally put a fence down the middle of the Expo site when one side was non-union and the other side was open shop or was unionized. So open shop versus non-union, the first time in B.C.'s history. Prior to 1986, we had a closed shop environment. You walked on to a construction site, you know that somebody was going to walk up to you and ask you for a union card. You knew that you didn't dare walk onto a construction site without being a member of a trade union. It didn't matter if it was a construction site, a shipyard, an oil refinery, a pulp mill, a chemical plant. You didn't get on site without a union card. That all changed overnight. That changed as a result of the changes in the labour legislation. The attempt to doublebreast our contractors, where they could be both union and non-union. That never did come into light, but that was part of the conversation.

LL [00:22:12] What ended up happening is that, you know, the major general contractors virtually disappeared from British Columbia. One of the provisions put in the Labour Code was that if you were a non-active contractor for 24 months or greater, you could cancel all your union certifications. So the PCLs, the Dillinghams, the, all of the general contractors of British Columbia left B.C. for two years, went to Ontario and Alberta and Manitoba and elsewhere, canceled their certifications and come back. I think there's only. Thirty-seven years later, I think there's only two general contractors that are left. The rest are all open shop. Virtually, in downtown Vancouver, if you walk downtown and look into a construction site, they'll be union contractors on site. But there won't be union generals. There won't be union carpenters.

LL [00:23:11] When I left the Insulators 5 or 6 years ago, there was, at one time there was a thousand plumbers on a daily basis downtown. The last headcount that I got there was 70 plumbers downtown that were unionized. The B.C. Insulators Local 118 has strived to make that change. We've gone back after that commercial market. But it's, it's really made a significant change in what we do in construction.

LL [00:23:36] And, you know, if you leave, even lead that further politics from that time, British Columbia has been de-industrialized. We've seen 23 pulp mills reduced to seven, only three that are in full production. We've seen seven oil refineries reduced to two. We've seen seven chemical plants reduced to one. We've seen 12 shipyards reduced to two. We've seen 550 sawmills reduced to 42. So you think about that in the type of work construction workers used to do. It's much harder. And now we, now we chase that, that shiny ball when someone says, hey, let's build an LNG plant or let's, you know, put a pipeline in and, you know, we find ourselves chasing that ball. So construction is very different. And that was the turning point. You know, the Socred government was not friendly to labour. The Socred government dismantled labour. And not just the construction sector. The forestry has been dismantled. All the major players are gone. Fishing industry has been bought out, when there's only a single player, and destroyed. The labour movement and the dynamics of the workforce and the economy that's taken place in British Columbia changed that day in 1986.

KN [00:24:56] Very significant. One of the other issues I wanted to ask you about was the building trade unions leaving the Canadian Labour Congress. They left for a period of time. Can you tell us what that was all about? What happened, why did it happen, and what eventually was the outcome of that experience?

LL [00:25:19] Well, that was an interesting time. So, you know, the Canadian Labour Congress, of course, had all of us members in the building trades were part of the Canadian Labour Congress. And, there was a couple of organizations and, you know, and I'll use Steelworkers as an example. Steelworkers, were moving into the construction field, and the steelworkers would come with an all-employee bargaining unit collective agreement. We, of course, are craft unions. So we would have our craft designations and we would be doing our work and our certifications under craft. And, there was encroachment into our jurisdiction. There was always a relationship there. You didn't walk on another trade union's jurisdiction. That belonged to them. You respected that. And, a number of complaints were filed with the Canadian Labour Congress and the Canadian Labour Congress sort of danced around the edges. It wouldn't find solutions and wouldn't challenge any affiliate that was moving into another affiliate's jurisdiction. Wouldn't challenge that, that confrontation. Wouldn't find solutions, you know?

LL [00:26:26] So, the building trades, I mean, the vast majority of the building trades already said, "To hell with you. We're out of here. If the CLC won't find the solutions that needs to be done. And you won't protect us. Why are we paying you dues? Why should we be, you know, involved? Sending you per capita? Why should we be participating? You know, you're just feeding, you're just feeding the big players and you forget about the rest of us." So that was the attitude, and the IBEW or the insulators, the plumbers and pipefitters, were, a big player in regards to that and determined that we're going to start our own Federation of Labour. And to hell with the Canadian Labour Congress. We're going to start with the Canadian Federation of Labour. You know, that was the early '80s, again, it's the same time. There was so much happening. We had a lot of work in the front end of this.

LL [00:27:15] So, I guess you could call the CF of L a competing trade union association. I don't like the word competing because we weren't really competing with one another. We were just providing services that was more aligned to what the vision was of that organization. So. Here I have, here I find myself, due to my organization's affiliation, part of the Canadian Federation of Labour. We, we're funded under the educational component out of the federal government, both Canadian Labour Congress. And when the CF of L, the Canadian Federation of Labour, was established we got half that educational funding. So, I mean, that certainly irritated the labour movement in general across Canada, but we were able to develop shop steward training programs, officer training programs, occupational health and safety programs, collective bargaining programs. And we were delivering it to our members from a construction perspective rather than a public sector or from an all employee bargaining unit, because that's what we were. We were a craft union. So it worked and it lasted for about ten years. Yeah, about ten years, maybe ten years, maybe eight years.

LL [00:28:35] You know, I found myself sitting at the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety on the board of directors representing the Canadian Federation of Labour, with my CLC counterparts. They were a little irritated the day I walked in the room. I can remember that, you know, the animosity and the foulness. But the commonality of taking care of workers made that disappear quickly. And, again, I was at that time an occupational health and safety specialist. I had credentials, I was teaching certified health and safety training across Canada. I was curriculum development at BCIT and helping Canadian registered safety professionals get their credentials, and doing that instruction. So, you know, I walked in the room with a little bit of credibility and, you know, some of those things sort of disappeared. Ultimately, at the end of the day we had health care unions, we had the construction unions and a couple of others that were irritated with the CLC. We finally said, you know, enough's enough and we wound that all down. And I know that when I became the Business Manager of the Insulators in 1993, my first agenda was to re-affiliate with the B.C. Federation of Labour, convince my international organization to affiliate with the Canadian Labour Congress and make sure that there's only one House of Labour in B.C. and one House of Labour in Canada. And strove towards that. And as a result, found myself on a number of other executive tables.

KN [00:30:12] And so at that time, most of the construction unions did the same thing?

LL [00:30:16] Yeah. I think the only one that's never coming back is the Teamsters Union. The Teamsters Unions are still not part of the CLC. Well, they're part of the CLC, but they're not part of the B.C. Federation of Labour. So not always. The provincial House of Labour has not always been able to successfully do that. But, yeah, most of the other construction, I think all but the Teamsters have finally returned and they're finally driving

towards that common goal of representing union workers in the trade union movement in one House of Labour.

KN [00:30:50] Okay. You were President of the B.C. Building Trades organization from 2008 to 2018. Can you give us some of the highlights of that particular experience [unclear]?

LL [00:31:07] Yeah. Becoming the President of the B.C. Building Trades was an undertaking. There's always conflict in the construction sector. There's always conflict with construction trade unions. You're always competing in regards to a number of different things. And every one of us in the construction sector thinks we're better than the other. I mean, that's just the nature of it. Whether we're better trades persons or we're better trade unionists or whether, you know, you know our craft, our skill is better than your craft and your skills, you know. I mean, that competition's always in play. So, those dynamics find themselves into every one of the labour leaders, and that also reflects itself in the make up of the Executive Board of the building trades, who then provide instructions to an Executive Director under the current model.

LL [00:32:08] You know, we at one time had an elected President and elected Secretary Treasurer. And that was during that time in that turmoil in the '80s. But we moved away from that model. And so when I became the President there was a transition in leadership. There was that succession of leadership. And, you know, some of the old going out with the new. And I was sort of in the middle of the old with some good experience. So I found myself at the table. I think, whether I wanted to or not. I don't think I had much of a choice. They said "No, no, Lee, you're going to be the president." Well, I don't want to be the president. I run a tiny local. Leave me alone. No, you've been around. You know the history. You know this. You know that. You bargained agreements. So here I am sitting at the table and, you know, and managing the turmoil.

LL [00:32:57] I mean, some of the biggest pieces. I think that in my time there was, the times were slow. There was a lot of unemployment. We were in collective bargaining. We were trying to maintain provisions within our collective agreement. You know, we had the B.C. Bargaining Council of Building Trade Unions, the BCBCBTU, and is part of what our council is that comes out of the Labour Code. So really all that is, is the affiliates of the building trades in a council that's designated under the Labour Code and has a different constitution, operates differently, operates with a different president, a different secretary. So it became a competing council for a while, and trying to managing the dynamics of the bargaining council, because those that have the most members dominate that structure, and the building trades, they don't have that same relationship from a political perspective on votes.

LL [00:34:01] So if you look at the bargaining council that say for every member you have a vote, in the building trades, there's 14 votes. So, you know, the domination of the Operating Engineers at 12,000 members or the Pipefitters at 6,500 members, or the Carpenters, depending which carpenter you're talking about as they split up during the '80s as well. You're probably looking at 4,000 votes. The Electricians were our dominant player as a result of their headcount. So you always saw the dynamics of saying, "Hey, I'm bigger than you. Let's vote. You don't like my position? Too bad I'm bigger than you. Let's vote." So, I mean, that of course comes to the Building Trades table and every conversation that we have on anything that we did. And my job was to — I'm not sure I should say this. My job is to manage the monkeys some days. Some days I had to hide the key and keep them in the cage and try to get them to play nice and do that stuff.

LL [00:35:06] I mean, traditionally under our constitution, we had a responsibility to develop relationships with industry, with government, to do government relations stuff, the industry relations job, advance the interests of construction sector, unionized construction sector, speak with clients and do all that stuff. And that's sometimes competed with the Bargaining Council because the Bargaining Council says you can't talk to them because now, you know, they think you're going to negotiate a collective agreement with you, and you don't have the authority under the law. So again, that's another piece that undermined us from from the 1986 era. So, you know, if we were going to have discussions with LNG players or pipeline players, we had to do that referral and that was very hard to do.

LL [00:35:52] If you remember the Christy Clark government, at one time she was promising to build 17 LNG plants up and down the west coast of British Columbia. And they wanted to enter into conversations with us, but not with the Bargaining Council. So I'm here myself, Tom Sigurdsson and myself and you know, a number of other executive members, Jim Paquette out of the Sheet Metal Workers, found ourselves in conversations with government and industry partners, talking to us about what project labour agreements could look like and how we can tap our resources and how many people would be available. And that conversation went on in British Columbia for three years. Three years, maybe four years of my tenure there, about how we were going to saturate the West Coast with liquid natural gas facilities and, how we were going to be part of the extraction through fracking and other methods throughout the northeast of British Columbia. But mostly those were the pieces. My, my biggest piece of course, was government relations. And ensuring there was harmony and the best that I could provide at the table. Challenging times. Interesting conversations and no fistfights. I don't know why, but none.

KN [00:37:19] So you've also indicated, in various contexts, throughout your whole experience in the building trades. There were various political tendencies that you could categorize within the building trades. Can you talk a bit about that and how this might have affected the growth and development of unionization in the construction industry?

LL [00:37:45] You know, it's funny, as I think back, how the building trades have changed and some of the dynamics around politics. I entered into the construction sector in the middle '70s. The Communist Party of Canada was alive and well. The Communist Party was actively involved with the Electricians in B.C., the Plumbers and Pipefitters, the Shipwright Joiners, the Marine Workers and Boilermakers and very much, you know, they had their own little cells within the trade union movements, where they set the directions. And then you had your typical social democrat type individuals, you know, with the Plumbers, or not with the Plumbers, but with the Painters, with the Bricklayers and, and then you had, then you had your Liberal contingent. So you had a number of federal Liberals sitting at the table. The Boilermakers, the Insulators. Anthony Ceraldi was an elevated individual within the Liberal Party in Canada. And then, of course, you had the Conservatives. So you had the Conservatives. Back then, the Ironworkers were very much attached to the Conservative Party of Canada and very much involved with those types of things.

LL [00:39:19] So you had all four of those parties, sitting at a boardroom table with 36 people all trying to push their agendas. You know, I just loved my debates with the Communist Party as they were handing out the Pacific Tribune, telling me all the pieces in regards to that. And I've been a social democrat my whole life. And I fit and fall within that piece. You know, sometimes I'm a little left and sometimes I'm a little right, but I'm always falling in the middle. I never made it to that center in politics. And so, you know, listening to

the far left in regards to some of the conspiracy theories and my relationships with them. You know, I've pissed them off many times in the past. I know that in the Shipyards, when when my single vote challenged their collective bargaining and undermined what they were attempting to do with my single vote to their 500 votes. Pissed them off. I found the Communist Party in my Insulation shop at Burrard Drydock, with six of them cornering me in their office and having me by the scruff of the neck and picking me up off the floor and, you know, telling me they were going to blow up the building and they were going to do this, and they were going to do that. And, you know, it was entertaining. And, I'm glad that I experienced some of that stuff. But then, you know, the other side of the politics is to listen to those members that were spewing an employer and a business philosophy from the conservative perspective. You know, and as I said earlier, as we had started this conversation is that, you know, my dinner table was loaded to start with anyway. So none of this was new to me. It was always an experience and often entertaining.

KN [00:41:26] Okay. Thank you. Another thing that, came out of our discussion was that you have sort of characterized yourself as the only climate zealot in the B.C. Construction unions.

LL [00:41:41] Canadian construction unions. I'm the only zealot in the Canadian Construction unions when it comes to climate and the actions around that.

KN [00:41:50] Can you elaborate on that, can you tell us about that?

LL [00:41:52] Oh, that's a story! That's actually it's not a hard story to tell. It's pretty simple to tell. I'm an Insulator. I've spent my whole career capturing energy, storing energy, transferring energy, and delivering energy from one location to another location. That's what I do for a living. I mean, I know more about heat transfer and energy storage than most people do. So, you know when, when I hear the conversations out today and you know, it's 2024 and climate crisis in place and, you know, Lytton burned down two years ago, and the tides are rising and all of these things are in front of us. And the youth, the youth is concerned. Even my wife last night, who is the same age as I am, you know, we're just about 70. Even my wife last night she says "I'm worried about this!" You know, so even even my generation is starting to pay a little more attention to what's happening in regards to climate change and the impact it is having. I mean, it comes out of the conversation on the news last night about meeting the forest fires and what we're going to do in regards to British Columbia and how we're going to manage that.

LL [00:43:04] So, I mean, I've been involved for a long time about using the B.C. Insulators, the Heat and Frost Insulators in British Columbia as a solution to your climate change issues. If you want to save energy, you need to hire qualified Red Seal tradespeople to deliver what you need to meet your goals and objectives if you are you going to do a climate thing. I like to remind people that in the '70s, when OPEC started to restrict resources on oil, the price of oil went up, the price of gas went up, even to the point that there was concerns about supply around the world. The speed in our highways were lowered to conserve gasoline and energy. So that was one of the biggest components when I started to get involved with climate issues in regards to that, how we were going to conserve energy, how were we going to do that? And I have become that conversation in the room when people want to talk about pipelines and building and expansion of the oil sands and expansion of this and expansions, saying, hey,"Hang on, hang on, you missed the boat." You know, the boom from the oil sands started in 1978. We haven't built an oil refinery and upgrader in Canada in the last ten years. There are none on the plans. Stop talking about a pipe dream. Stop looking at winning the lottery. Let's start talking about

tomorrow's employment and tomorrow's employment will see us building more dams, bigger infrastructure, net zero buildings, biomass plants, solar farms, wind farms. And we will be capturing those energy pieces and delivering it in a different way. Our buildings are going to be energy efficient. The envelopes of the buildings are just going to be contained, but the mechanical systems inside are going to be managed. There's going to be a label on the door one day in Canada that's going to say, this building uses this much energy, so that the clients and residents will know what the cost is going to be and what's being done, and the amount of work to secure that and move into that direction is enormous.

LL [00:45:24] I undertook a study with the Columbia Institute, five years ago. They developed a document called Jobs For Tomorrow. We're estimating there's going to be 18 million jobs to get to the goals and objectives of 2030, 2050 and 2080, in the construction sector alone. That's exciting. We haven't heard that kind of numbers in I don't know how long. So I'm at every floor, every convention, every room. I've written papers and I will continue to tell the world, and the construction sector, that as we move and transition to new energy sources, we are the solution. Let's stop trying to be the problem. Let's build tomorrow. Let's make sure that infrastructure is done right. Let's make sure there's Red Seal technicians and tradespersons doing that. Let's build a workforce through apprenticeship development. And the youth is interested. Let's make sure that we're developing that youth, and let's make sure that we're not importing temporary labour at the needs and the whims of employers that will want to do something quick and fast. Let's do it right, as we are the solution.

KN [00:46:38] Thank you. Earlier in the interview, you referred to an individual who was one of your mentors. But I would like you to do is is to talk a bit about some of your mentors that you've had throughout your whole experience in the labour movement. And what you learned from them?

LL [00:47:00] Well, of course, my father was a mentor. I mean, it always starts at home. You know, the politics, the dynamics and all of that stuff. Probably the biggest piece is that what I learned from him was that, treat people as you want to be treated. My parents came from different religious beliefs. You heard me say earlier that my mother was an Orthodox Jew in Ottawa. My father was a Roman Catholic. Getting married in the early '40s created a problem in the family dynamics. Family disowned both them and all the children that were raised. So, my parents always believed in religion. Always believed in a god and all of those things associated to that. But they always advised us to be very careful of organized religion. It can be damaging, can be disrespectful. And everybody should be treated the same, no matter whether the religious beliefs or colour of their skin. And so it wasn't something that was being taught a lot back in the '60s.

LL [00:48:22] I know that my time I spent in the United States that, we were known as a family that were, N-lovers. That we were, you know, hanging out with the wrong people. I'm sorry. Kids are kids. I mean, people are people. And that's one of the things that we learn from my father. And it's is it's taken me, has benefited me even to this day. Outside of that, from from work people, one of my mentors was, was Ollie Olsen in the shipyards, and he was an old Swede tradesperson. He was a caring, thoughtful individual. And he, when I started in the shipyards in the late '70s, he was my supervisor, and he took me under his wing and he taught me how to be a world-class craftsman. He brought that technique that came in from the European community about how a journeyperson at the time was taught to be the best and to leave behind. And so he had a significant impact on me, in regards to making sure that I had everything I needed, And that sort of was reinforced by a similar type individual who was, W.F. Bleiker who was my apprenticeship

instructor at BCIT. A Swiss gentleman identical to Ollie Olsen, but W.F. Bleiker, or better known as Pablo in British Columbia, also taught me that same focus and detail of being a tradesperson and making sure that you were the best of that skill set you could be. Being at work every day, all of the qualities that you needed to do to be a successful person in the construction sector.

LL [00:50:13] But as I became involved in the politics and the local union, Tony Ceraldi was probably the greatest impact on me in regards to the labour movement. Even beyond my grandfather and my father, you know, from the organizing. He taught me empathy and compassion. He taught me to how to manage people. He taught me how to think, how to look down the road, rather than being a crisis management person. How to think three years out from now, how to think five years out to now, how to think ten years out from now, from the labour movement's perspective. And, you know, an example of that is that he was part and parcel of bringing in an apprenticeship program, establishing a pension plan, looking at what the health and welfare, health and wellness benefits would look like into the future. How were we going to maintain the life insurance and how were we going to fund that? He had a vision about moving out of the basement of the Labor Temple and having our own union office and about how we would be key leader pieces in regards to that. I learned all of those things from him, and I was able to take his education, his mentorship, and not only maintain some of the directions that he went, but made them better and enhanced them and built some other pieces in regards to that changed what our local union looked like, changed our market share, did all kinds of things based on his education and components. I mean, not only do you serve as a member, not only do you be a hiring hall, not only a provider of benefits, but to be that friend, to have that compassion. And when people are in trouble, to go down to Main and Hastings and find that member that was missing, to be that person that helps them with their mental health and substance use issue, to ensure that if they got hurt on the worksite, that you made sure their worker's compensation claim went through, and you visited them, you visited them at night, you did those things. To be a caring and effective, labour leader was something I learned from him.

KN [00:52:41] Okay, I recall the first time I think I met you, Lee was, from ten years ago when I was chair of the BC Labour Heritage Centre and we had this program with WorkSafe BC to produce all these health and safety videos. And there was one on asbestos that you, you chaired the event where we actually released the video and you were a big part of that video. So it was clear to me at that time that you had a lot of interest and, because of the nature of your union, had done a lot of work on the issue of asbestos. Can you tell us about your experiences over time, dealing with the asbestos issue as it relates to the work and well-being of your members as well as other construction workers?

LL [00:53:33] Well, I mean, the asbestos conversation in the construction sector is travesty. It's the leading cause of death in construction, not just in British Columbia, not just in Canada, but in North America. The impact that it's had. The loss of life. The destruction of families. The burden on health care plans and pension plans and life insurance plans has been enormous. I don't know if I can ever explain how impactful it's been. And we've only just banned asbestos in Canada in 2018.

LL [00:54:19] My story with asbestos goes back to my father. My father was, one of the things that he did and one of his specialties was spray-on asbestos, on on structural steel and on substrates, on ceilings and things like that. And he would come home from work after a day of working in downtown Vancouver, with his black curly hair and, you know, his stature, about five-nine or so. He'd come up the back stairs and us kids would run up and

jump around his legs, and he would be brushing off this dust and brushing his hair like this, and all the asbestos would be falling out all over us. And he'd walk through the kitchen and he'd be taking off his work clothes as he went down the hallways, and he would throw his dirty work clothes in the laundry room, on the floor. And my mom, of course, would pick them up and laundering. I don't know how old I was. Six, eight, ten. And, you know, those are my memories. I've been exposed to asbestos my whole life, as a result of that.

LL [00:55:32] In 1972, when we were building the Pacific Center in downtown Vancouver. My dad was there on that jobsite doing exactly what I just said, spraying the asbestos on the structure. The asbestos was laying in the lunch rooms. It was laying down the hallways and down the stairways. It was being blown outside of the building structure, landing on the cars below on the street, and the people, the pedestrians walking down the street. And there was a bunch of research that was being done at the same time. And Doctor Irving J. Selikoff had crafted a couple of documents starting in '69, but around '71 produced a document that our international union, the Heat and Frost Insulators and Asbestos Workers, embraced and it talked about the link between asbestos exposure and death, and premature death. It established that, you know, the likelihood of being exposed to asbestos would cause similar types of impacts of health effects, like silicosis for silica. And ultimately, it would damage your lungs to the point that you would likely die of asbestosis. And so asbestosis was the big thing. So as those documents started floating around, this building was under construction. My father was there. And they coordinated the first North American wildcat strike over the concerns of asbestos and shut down downtown Vancouver. They had picket lines around the buildings. They had awarenesses in place. The Workers Compensation regulations allowed for it to take place. There was no restrictions in regards to that. It would fit into a nuisance dust category. And as a result of that wildcat strike, they started to contain it. They started to build plastic films and to contain it into the areas that were being used. They didn't provide any personal protective equipment to the people doing applications, but they started controlling the dust content in there. And that was the start of that conversation in regards to that.

LL [00:57:46] So knowing this, I entered the industry two years later. And as I mentioned, I found myself in downtown Taylor, B.C., on a new oil refinery or not, on an oil refinery they were putting a significant addition to. And my job as a green, first year apprentice was to remove the asbestos from the pipes and the vessels that were, where the tie ins in the expansion were going to take place and either dispose of it, or in the case of some of the materials that were being trialed that were that were already trialed on the tanks and vessels, I was to peel it off, and put it into 45 gallon drums, and store it, because you couldn't buy it anymore. I wonder why you couldn't buy it anymore? Right. This was crocidalite asbestos, blue asbestos. This is the most dangerous asbestos out there. Known to cause cancer and asbestosis. But my job was to save it, peel it off, put it in those drums, store it until we needed it later, bring those drums back out, put them into troughs and get my hoe, pour some water in it and mix it all up so we could put it back on. And I asked for a respirator and I remember they said, what? We don't use respirators. What are you talking about? Don't be a goddamn fool. I've been doing this for 20 years. Well, I learned enough about asbestos during that time that I knew that it was dangerous. I knew that asbestosis was an issue. I knew that it created lung function stuff, and I became involved in that campaign, following my father's activism to change how asbestos was treated and handled, disposed of, not just in British Columbia, but in Canada and even in North America.

LL [00:59:54] Today, as I said, it's still one of the biggest causes of death. But, the Insulators rewrote the regulations in British Columbia, changed the laws in regards to that,

myself and many other people in my organization were instrumental in how that looked like. You know, in 1978, you can contain it with sweeping it up and containing it. In 1981, after our involvement in some pieces, we started to get, it now can still be used but it had to be cleaned up wet. It had to be wetted so it didn't become airborne. And then we changed regulations. We brought in consultants from across North America. We helped design a building management system to contain friable asbestos. And we did that through the Ministry of Environment. We also changed and crafted the regulations. And in '82 and '88, '91, and again in 1999 to have some of the most stringent pieces, in regards to the management of asbestos containing material and the containment of friable asbestos.

LL [01:01:11] Even last year our organization in a campaign that I started when John Horgan recently took over, and picked up a majority of the government in British Columbia and displaced Christy Clark, a commitment from the Minister of Labour, Harry Bains, to put in regulations on education and training and licensing of contractors to do it. So I'm still active with that file. I still manage that file in Canada. I'm proud of what the labour movement has done to address that, but I'm sickened and saddened at the loss of life. It has been unnecessary, and it's only been driven by greed. And people that ignore that. Only last night President Biden, the United States, signed a presidential order banning asbestos in the US. That doesn't mean it can't be imported for certain things, but it's the same move that we made in 2018.

LL [01:02:15] North America is a better place today, but we still have lots to do. We have to manage asbestos from cradle to grave. We need to make sure that the existing inventory in asbestos in British Columbia, in our buildings, is identified, controlled. And when it's displaced or when it's disturbed, that it is done in a way that it doesn't expose workers, families or the public, and that when it's removed and disposed of, that its disposed of properly. We still don't dispose of it properly. We still throw it into bags and ship it off to other countries to put it on barges. And we take it out in the ocean and we dump it and we do other things. We still have some to do, some work to do, but today's a better place as a result of the the Insulators' Union and the opportunity that they gave me to do that. I mean, on a side note, we're not known as the Heat and Frost Insulators any longer. We're known as the Heat and Frost Insulators, but not as the Asbestos workers. And in 2002, we had to change our name, and remove Asbestos Workers from our, our organization's name. And that's done because we couldn't buy life insurance. Not because we weren't working with it. But we couldn't support our family after our death. That's the tragedy.

KN [01:03:51] Okay. So you've also talked about health and safety in respect to other issues. Is there anything you want to say about that? You became a well known health and safety specialist and, first go to person. And we talked about asbestos and are there other other issues that...?

LL [01:04:16] There's lots of other issues. I mean, you know, we talked about the Bentall tragedy earlier. We talked about the CAIC Report and the 60 recommendations that came out of that. And, you know, and, you know in 1981, '82, you know, that's when I got started in there. And I specialized in occupational health and safety. We were able to craft and design, joint health and safety committees, workplace participations, change the laws and regulations in British Columbia and do all of those things, and I have to tell you, that made a difference. There are, there are people alive today because of those changes. And, there are families that have families. All of those things take place. I'm concerned today that, you know, we're reverting back and forgetting about some of that stuff. I, of course, spent, as a result of my experience in occupational health and safety, spent six years as the Vice

Chair of the Worker's Compensation Board here in B.C. or WorkSafe BC as they call it. I'm not sure why it's WorkSafe BC. Shouldn't it be, Safe Work BC? Shouldn't it be or should the, the onus be put on us by, you know, just WorkSafe right. I know that my little quirk in regards to that used to irritate my board members at WorkSafe BC. You know, you know, why is it my responsibility? You're the one that tells us what to do, and, you know, the regulations and the legislation. It just reinforces the master slave relationship. You just do what the hell you're told and shut the hell up. And I'm offended by that. I've always been offended by that, because I know that my input and our input, in British Columbia, when it comes to workplace safety, has had a significant impact and change. We have some of the best regulations in Canada. We compete between ourselves and Ontario. There isn't a regulation in the province of British Columbia that I haven't put my finger on at one time or another. So I've been involved in two royal commissions, five different regulation reviews. I've made submissions on behalf of the Building Trades and the Insulators, the Canadian building trade unions. I've represented the B.C. labour movement at the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety, and I've had the privilege to champion on their behalf across the country to make our workplaces in Canada a safer and better place.

KN [01:06:54] Since, since you retired from a full time position in the union, and even before that, you've been involved in numerous boards and organizations, a very busy person. Can you tell us a bit of what you've been doing since retirement?

LL [01:07:09] Oh, geez. I struggle with the word retirement. As I said earlier, you know, I've been privileged enough to be involved in the pension structure in British Columbia in regards to, to pension plans. And so the pension plans of British Columbia, the defined benefit plans from my International, my time at the Operating Engineers and my time at the Insulators Union has provided me with a comfortable, decent living. Not that I need much. I mean, I am fortunate enough to be a homeowner in Burnaby and have defined benefit plans, so I have, I have resources that doesn't make me go back to work. I was able to retire, you know, prior to 65. Normal retirement age, actually, for an Insulator is 60. We did that on purpose because we don't normally live that long.

LL [01:08:03] But, you know, I've been involved in municipal and provincial politics. I've been an advocate in the city of Burnaby. Burnaby has provided so much to my family, from sports to all kinds of different things in the development in, my children in the school piece. So I've given back, spent time as a Library Trustee, as a Heritage Commissioner on their Museum Board and as a Commissioner on the Parks and Rec Commission. So I've finally wound down that stuff into my retirement, but just. I just came off the Heritage Board, recently. But the other stuff that I continue to do is, I continue to carry the asbestos file for the Canadian, construction industry in Canada. So if there's an activity on legislation or on repositories or something to do with asbestos, I'm generally included, and funded by the local union if I need to do that. If I need to travel to Ontario to talk about inventories, of how we going to do these types of things, Local 19 has always been generous enough to make sure my, my travel and my retirement is funded.

LL [01:09:18] But I also sit, in regards to that, as a board member of the Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation and I haven't mentioned mesothelioma but mesothelioma is an asbestos cancer, it's directly associated to your exposure to asbestos. And it's pretty, it's so rare that it usually only takes place through asbestos exposure. So we call it the asbestos workers' cancer. So I sit on the Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation as a board member. I participate in fundraising and research. I continue with the cancer control agents here in British Columbia and coordinate all of the early detection in mesothelioma. And I participate in those health studies that are in place and secure funding for it.

LL [01:10:10] As well, I spend time here at the BC Labour Heritage Centre. I love to talk about history. I love to be involved with it. I love to have conversations around it. And I love people that, that will tell stories like I can tell stories in regards to what their experience has been. And as I mentioned, being a climate zealot, I'm currently working with the Canadian Building Trade unions, the BC Building Trade unions, under a grant that was given to us by the federal government to develop climate literacy in the construction sector and the roles of what our work that we do today is beneficial for tomorrow and how we make those connections.

LL [01:10:54] One of my other loves, where I spend probably as much time, is I'm a board member at the Construction Industry Rehab Plan. And the Construction Rehab Plan is an exclusive, three pillar program used to manage substance use and mental health in the construction industry and provides support, through education, treatment, and then a care model that goes out to 12 months. So I'm trying to champion that model across the country to be a best practices. It is the best practice in North America. I find myself in many rooms with many politicians, and with many service providers talking about how we can better service. And, you know, if we take a look at the toxic drug crisis in British Columbia and the loss of life, construction industry impact greatly by that. And it's not about, it's not about junkies. It's not about terrible people. It's not about the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. These are our neighbors, right? These are people that live in Mission that, have upper scaled houses. These are, these are people that use occasionally, or these are people that are trying to manage pain because of a workplace injury and find themselves in the bathroom, at night, using a toxic drug that kills them in an overdose situation. It's outrageous. So. So one of my other passions and my other loves, in which I participate a lot in. And I, of course, anything to do with community. And it keeps me out of the house. You know, I'm, you know, with all due respect to those people that, you know, think of the old school retirement is that you hit 65, you go home, you start a fire in the fireplace, you put your feet up, you grab a newspaper. You, you know, you watch TV all day. Ain't gonna happen. My wife's not going to drag me into the garden. You know, and I got projects in my garage. I've got old collectible cars and motorcycles and things that I used to do from old days. Retirement's treating me well. I love volunteering anywhere from 30 to 40 hours a week, and I'll continue to do that.

KN [01:13:14] Okay. Just to wrap this up, Lee, maybe, I'll just ask you this. So are there any other comments you would like to make about your experiences overall in the B.C. labour movement?

LL [01:13:27] Well, I mean, the only thing that we haven't talked about is, is my role as an adult educator. Right? So as an adult educator, I've taken my life experience and used it to facilitate, face to face. To be able to connect with people and attach their work to what we're attempting to do. I'm very good at talking to a shop floor. I'm very good at blue collar communication and education. Being a tradesperson and and watching travesty, watching people die, experiencing that. To take my health and safety training and being able to emphasize why they need to think first. Why they need to make sure that if they don't know the answer, they shouldn't be doing it. Exercising their right to refuse. If I've been able to take my experience at the bargaining table and teach other officers how to prepare and be managed for that idiot across the table that says, "You don't deserve that.", and you can pull out the cost of a pair of work boots in Dawson Creek, and put it on the table in front of them and saying, "That's why we deserve this, because this is what it costs. When's the last time you tried to get a motel in Chetwynd? When's the last time you tried to buy a piece of property in Kelowna? Don't tell me it's not worth it." So that type of prep work and

being able to do those types of things. I'm currently teaching still. That's another thing that I'm still doing. I'm teaching now. I teach jurisdiction in the construction sector. Through one of the programs on mentorship, I teach a program called Mentorship Matters. I travel across North America as one of the train-the-trainers and train instructors and train schools on how to develop and deliver mentorship programs to both mentees and mentors. I love being in a classroom. There is nothing better and more rewarding than standing in front of a classroom, and watching the lights turn on as you tell the stories and deliver the material.

KN [01:15:56] Okay. Thank you very much, Lee. That was a great interview. Thank you.

LL [01:16:00] Good. Thank you.