

Interview: Sean Griffin (SG)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
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Transcription: Cathy Walker

KN [00:00:06] It is April the 9th, 2024. My name is Ken Novakowski and we're here this morning to interview Sean Griffin. Good morning Sean.

SG [00:00:15] Good morning.

KN [00:00:17] We'd like to start by having you tell us when and where you were born.

SG [00:00:22] Born April 16th, 1946 in Chatham House, private hospital in Vancouver, which is one of the many puzzles in my life as to why it was there, because we didn't live anywhere near. I grew up in Burnaby. We moved to Burnaby fairly soon after I was born, and I grew up there.

KN [00:00:42] Can you tell us a bit about your growing up? Tell us a bit about your parents. Your actual parents as I understand it, separated soon after you were born. A short time later, your mother died from cancer.

KN [00:00:56] Can you say a few words about that?

SG [00:00:56] Yeah, sure. My Dad had been the long-time editor of the predecessor papers of the Pacific Tribune, and had reassumed that position in 1946 after having doing a stint, writing a book, actually, for the U.S. Army as part of their program to build the Alaska Highway. It was called Alaska and the Canadian Northwest. He came back to Vancouver. My mother had also written for the Pacific Advocate and later the Pacific Tribune. She was also a longtime worker in union offices and had been the assistant to the president of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers local here just before her untimely death at 36.

KN [00:01:48] Your father remarried after your mother died, after they separated I gather, and your mother died, and he remarried. Can you talk a bit about the early years in that particular family and talk about the discussions about union and progressive politics that you were aware of that began to influence you?

SG [00:02:09] My parents separated, I think, when I was about ten months old. From that time forward, my mother was no longer my mother. She was "Auntie Kay," which was another strange thing. My dad married a woman that he had known for a little while called Betty Dunbar, later, Betty Griffin that many people know. She had been a worker at Boeing's during the war. We still have one of the original relics of that, which was a giant, sort of TV-sized box that was a radio and record player combined. She used to drag it around, apparently, to various Boeing meetings. They would hold swing shift dances because the Boeing plant was out in Sea Island in Richmond, which is where the airport is now. Because it was a long ride home, a lot of the workers would stay out there for a while until the ebb came on the transit and they held dances, called swing shift dances. She provided some of the music for that. Definitely one of the things growing up with them. I had an older sister growing up. Much later on, Betty had her own child who was born 12

years after I was so there was a big age difference. We were a blended family growing up at that time.

KN [00:03:42] Can you tell us what it was like growing up in the '50s, when both of your parents were members of the Communist Party? This was during the McCarthy period. Do you remember any specific incidents during this time that happened that were noteworthy?

SG [00:03:59] It was a curious thing because by and large, Burnaby at that time was really an old school. We were on the top of Capitol Hill, and there were people all over the place. There were a whole bunch of squatters that had established whole neighbourhoods down on the waterfront. In fact, we had an old boat that my my Dad had resurrected, an old half-built cabin cruiser called The Leprechaun. It was run by this guy, Walter Stinson, who was a squatter on the Burrard Inlet waterfront. He ran a marine way down there. They were, for all intents and purposes, fully fledged members of the community. There were all kinds of political dimensions, too, so it was largely not an issue, initially growing up, but as the Cold War began to deepen, a lot of things began to happen that were extraneous to that. One of the key ones that I remember was, my mum had gone back to normal school. She had had a number of years of university and then went back to normal school to finish off her teacher training and completed it, then began applying for jobs. Suddenly the RCMP Red Squad showed up at our neighbour's house to inquire about her as to what she was doing, did they know who she was, all those kinds of things. They had lost track of her, I guess, during the period when she was just raising us younger kids and didn't realize that she'd found a new home in Burnaby. Fortunately, the neighbour just said, 'I don't know anything about this, and I don't really want to talk to you.' and just shut them down, so they weren't able to make anything of it. They went to the superintendent in Burnaby, where she had applied for this job. To his eternal credit, I think his name was Strachan, if I recall, to his eternal credit, he said, 'I don't care who she is. She's a good teacher, and she's coming to work here in Burnaby.' That was the end of it.

SG [00:06:02] During the time of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, there was a lot of anger around. There were a lot of people who had been brought here who were absolutely right wing forces and established themselves in the forestry department at UBC. All of a sudden we began to get a whole lot of threatening calls to the house, because my dad was then the editor of the paper, and he had talked about Hungary in the paper. There were all kinds of calls. I know there was a tension in the household because they didn't really want to tell us what was going on until much later, but clearly it was related to that sort of Cold War fear that went with it. Other than that, it was relatively uneventful for me growing up.

KN [00:06:56] When you were still a student from school, you ended up with an actual paper delivery route for the Pacific Tribune. That was quite unusual. Why and how did that come about? What happened?

SG [00:07:10] Well, that's interesting because as far as I know, I had the only known paper route for the Pacific Tribune anywhere. What it was was that there were a number of people who had come up here and settled in Burnaby. Many of them were blacklisted writers. Others were simply people who were working in jobs where they were in sensitive positions and didn't want it to be known, but they wanted to continue reading the Tribune. They arranged, through Harold Pritchett (I'm not sure what the connection was there) to get the paper in a way that didn't involve the post office. I would go and pick up—I had about 30 people on the route—I'd go and pick up the papers from Harold, one evening, and then after school, I'd go and take them around to these various houses and collect, I think it was \$0.25 for the paper each time, and then come back and do the same thing the

next week. I found out later that, one of them particularly was a blacklisted Hollywood writer, who had settled here in Burnaby and just wanted to stay under the radar, but really wanted to stay connected as well. It was an interesting combination of people. The curious thing was my friends, because sometimes my friends would go with me and for them it was just another paper route, like Vancouver Sun or any of those. But, one of them, I guess, had been told by parents or something that the Pacific Tribune was, well, a little sketchy. It occasioned the discussion with them about what this paper was, what it stood for, and it was very clear that everybody was yeah, we were all friends. It was no particular issue, but there were definitely those who were pro, and there were definitely those that were con, and it was as simple as that, it never went any further. We continued playing poker.

KN [00:09:04] I gather the paper was a weekly.

SG [00:09:06] Yeah. That's right. It was a weekly. The other thing that sort of introduced me to the working class at that point was that, when I was about 14, there were a couple of recruiters who came through the neighbourhood looking for, teenagers, basically, who were able to come and work for them on a one-day basis for really good wages, like double the normal industrial wage at that time. The job involved unloading sacks of carbon dust from a boxcar to this company called Ault and Wiberg, which used to be down where the new St. Paul's Hospital site will be. They made printers' ink. The problem with this carbon dust is it was a carcinogen. They couldn't have regular workers doing it because it would largely be embargoed by health and safety laws because the exposure was too high. I guess they figured we were sacrificial and that was only going to be for a day anyhow, so what's the big deal? We eagerly did it. I did it three times and a couple of others did the same. You came out of there looking like you've been working in a coal mine all your life, because it was totally this fine black dust. It was a study in work in those days, how spread around it got and who did it and so on.

KN [00:10:33] Your dad actually wanted you to pursue an academic career and an academic path, and he encouraged you to do this which led you to going to UBC. Can you tell us what happened once you went to UBC and became a university student?

SG [00:10:48] I think it was kind of the expectation for all of us, because my Dad had grown up with a Grade 8 education. He was a what you call a 'worker intellectual', I guess. He desperately wanted us to have that academic credibility that he lacked. I had gone on two-thirds scholarship, I think, to UBC at that time, actually in the science program, but so quickly after I went, began university, I got immersed utterly and completely in student activism and politics and all kinds of things. We had a big campaign that led off the year to bring down bus fares that BC Hydro, which then ran the bus line, introduced just before the beginning of the academic year. We were actually successful in winning that campaign. Thousands of students were involved in rallying outside BC Hydro's headquarters. The net result of all of that activism was that I didn't quite make it to class most of the time (laughter), so I flunked royally. It was a salutary lesson, as my dad put it, to realize that if you don't go to class, you're not going to pass. I went back into, at that time, a lot of jobs were union dispatch, that the union would provide the workers that they needed for various things. One of them was the Marine Workers & Boilermakers certifications, Burrard Drydock and Allied Engineering, Patterson Boiler Works, a whole bunch of them. They liked me down there. This old Scots woman named Margaret MacKenzie took a liking to me and arranged to get jobs for me at various certs for the Marine Workers. I began working at that point and started out at this one particular plant that I actually enjoyed working, although it was the later cause of some drama, called Allied Engineering.

KN [00:12:51] What can you tell us about your experience at Allied Engineering, anything of significance? Before you got there, I gather there was some stuff that was quite significant then while you were there.

SG [00:13:08] It's kind of a funny story because, on the one hand, in 1962, Allied Engineering, which was down on Granville Island, which was then a sort of an industrial hub at the time. There had been a very bitter strike. They made hot water boilers and hot water tanks. It was in the midst of the campaign that the labour movement had been waging against injunctions and labour disputes. There was always the comic meme of the judge who falls asleep during the baseball game and the umpire says, 'Strike!' And he leaps to his feet and says, 'Injunction granted!' That was the standard sort of humour at the time, because it was about that easy for employers to get injunctions that banned striking or banned picketing. That's what had happened during a strike at Allied Engineering in '62. I didn't actually participate in that one, but I was an observer to the events that took place. It was quite bitter. The injunction had been granted on the strength of the owner, Wally Husband, saying that he'd been spat upon by a striker and the injunction was granted, banning all picketing. Then they began citizen picketing. In the course of that, the police started bringing in dogs to chase off the strikers and to make sure that nobody gathered enough numbers to be effective. Somebody's brilliant idea was to counter that. They went around to a number of neighbourhoods and rounded up all of the female dogs in heat that they could and brought them down to the picket line. It created utter pandemonium, as you can imagine. It was a kind of a comic incident on the line, but it was somewhat effective in focusing the issue was for what it really was. Look, this has become stupid that we're doing this because workers can't picket properly. But at the same time, a couple of workers were charged with assault and later did jail terms for those.

SG [00:15:16] Then you fast forward to 1965, and I went to work in Allied Engineering. Shortly after I had started working back there again, bargaining began in the shadow of that 1962 strike, which was still a bit of a bitter memory for a lot of guys. We went into negotiations, and the officers of the Marine Workers came down and said, we need to hold a strike vote. I kind of counselled against that in the crew meeting. I said, 'Well, I don't think these guys are ready to do that. I think it's a little too early.' They were not happy with me. Later on, this same boss, Wally Husband, came to me in with my crew that I was working with on the machine crew and said, 'Oh, I hear you told them not to hold a strike vote. Congratulations.' I thought, oh, geez, what have I done here? It was part of his whole shtick. He made sure that there was always somebody that told him what was going on, and then he'd make use of it. We continued negotiations for a couple of weeks and nothing happened. Of course we made absolutely no headway. I said, 'Well, okay, this is crunch time, guys. We need to go and hold the strike vote.' Again, the officers came down. This time we held the strike vote and it didn't pass. We got ready to go back into bargaining. That night, I was working afternoon shift, and Wally Husband comes around to see me, this time by myself. I can see him coming down towards me and he's looking like a thundercloud. He stands behind me for a minute and he says, 'So I hear you took a strike vote.' I said, 'Yeah, that's what we did. And it passed.' He remained silent for a minute. Then he says, 'So I suppose you're going to bring the fucking Chihuahuas in again?' (laughter) About two weeks later, we got a contract and basically fulfilled most of the demands that were there. It was kind of a comical end to a bitter piece of history.

KN [00:17:34] It seems as though you developed a fairly early passion in your life for singing labour music, labour songs. Can you tell us a bit about that and some of the

highlights of your singing performances during that period of time, particularly those involving Carol-Ann Power?

SG [00:17:58] I grew up in the very sort of middle edge of the whole folk song revival. One of the things I got from hanging around with a whole bunch of people, young people on the left, was that they tended to get together for parties where a lot of people would do other things. We would sit around and sing songs from the Weavers and the Travellers and all kinds of folk groups that were doing sort of edgy political stuff. Tom Paxton was out there and Phil Ochs and various others. One guy stood out for me. He's still on the scene here, a guy named Steve Ghidorah. He was a teacher in Surrey. He still runs a little band called the Wheat and the Barley that he plays around. He played guitar and led singing. I thought, geez, I really want to be like that. I just want to do that. I set about doing it. I really didn't have much musical background. We had two records in the house growing up. One of them was a Paul Robeson record, and the other one was the Almanac Singers 'Talking Union', which was done (it included Woody Guthrie and various others) done in 1941. That was about the extent of it.

SG [00:19:10] I soon was absorbing whatever I can and trying to learn guitar and borrowing guitars from various people, to do that. One of the people that was around singing a lot with a couple of other women particularly was Carol-Ann Power, who was the daughter of Jeff Power, the leader of the Marine Workers Union. She and I really hit it off because she liked doing singing with women, but she really liked singing with somebody with a guitar, too. None of them played guitar. We really liked similar kinds of music. We sort of formed an informal duo and soon found ourselves singing at a whole lot of things. One of my favorite pictures is on my Facebook site, of Carol-Ann and I singing at the Peace Arch during the big rally, Hiroshima Day rally, in 1966 on disarmament and against the war in Vietnam. I just came across a photo the other day, which I had completely forgotten about with her and I, she and I singing at the big celebration at Fishermen's Hall in 1968, when Homer Stevens and Steve Stevenes were released from Oakalla prison for their contempt of court jail sentences. It really became something that I couldn't live without in my life. Everywhere I've gone, I've tried to get together with another group. Both of my wives, as it were, have been musical. One used to be a conductor of choir, was trained in the Ukraine. My current wife, Andrea, is a longtime teacher, music teacher in Burnaby. We've been together and singing together ourselves with the kids and everything else for the last 30 odd years.

KN [00:21:03] You also had some involvement in forming union choirs at this time?

SG [00:21:07] That's true. We formed one, which was quite an exciting thing in 1974. Karl Kobylanski, who was another one of the people who had been trained in the Ukraine at the conservatory there. He was the director of music at Capilano College. We talked him into becoming a musical director for this project. We had to create a union choir called Union Train. It soon attracted about 40 members, many of them young people from the college, many from young workers, and then also others from an older generation. We sort of brought the two together and sang at a number of events, including a benefit concert that we did for the striking CUPE workers at CKLG, that historic radio strike that they initially, thought they were going to win. Then it went skewiff but no fault of theirs, that's for sure. Later on, many of the people from that we got together, including my wife Andrea, to form a group called Reunion, which included some of the people from that. We had that for a while, too. Eventually what happens often is that people's lives diverge, children come along, that kind of thing and you have to reform somewhere else down the line.

SG [00:22:31] Over the last quarter century, I've been part of another big project, first of all, Solidarity Notes, which was formed in 2000, when Bill Saunders went down to the big rally, the Battle in Seattle, they called it in 1999, and came back and said, 'Why can't we have a choir like the Seattle Labour Chorus? We should do that.' He put out the call for a lot of people and about 50 of us turned out including Earl Peach, who was the director. I was with that for about 15 years. Then a number of us in Solidarity Notes decided we wanted to do more labour-focused stuff because Solidarity Notes kind of covers the whole political gamut and whatnot. We wanted to focus more on labour stuff so we formed the Left Coast Labour Chorus and that continues to this day. We've been at it for the last 25 years. It's still a huge part of my life and can't imagine not doing it. I guess that time will come.

KN [00:23:35] You must have continued to pursue a university career because you finally completed a degree in honours English at UBC and actually went back to work with Allied Engineering. At this time you seemed susceptible to a lot of workplace illness and injuries. This is all leading up to asking, when did you actually become a member of the staff of the Pacific Tribune? Can you tell us about the work you did as a staff member?

SG [00:24:18] Completing that degree I'd been working on and off, taking years out and going back and collecting enough money for fees and whatnot. I did go back to Allied Engineering for a year. It wasn't so much I was susceptible because it's an injury-prone industry. I looked around and thought, Jesus, half of these guys got bad backs. They can't pack the tools around anymore. Many others have got crippled arms and that sort of thing. I thought, I don't think this is going to work well for me. I enjoyed the work and I enjoyed working with them. Then the opportunity came, at the Pacific Tribune. There had been a woman who had been doing some labour reporting for the paper, but she really wasn't able to get around very much. She decided to step away from it. I said, okay I'm available and they jumped at it. That was in October of 1972 that I went to work there.

SG [00:25:16] It soon became apparent that if you were willing to go out there and start talking to workers on the job, in their meetings and so on, and especially if you went there with a camera, the opportunities for providing some coverage of their struggles, which were really beginning to emerge in the '70s, was an ideal one. I wasn't there for more than a few months before very quickly we were getting involved directly in going and covering the Shoppers Drug Mart strike, for example, that was launched in February of '73, I think it was, a very bitter strike again over injunctions and certifications and the strike at the Seagram's Distillery, where a young leader named Keith Sheedy had not only taken on Seagram's ownership, but had also taken on the International of the Distillery Workers who refused to support their local strike. They eventually won it. He credited our coverage because we were one of the few papers who went out there and covered their various meetings, covered their strike, rallies and that kind of thing. He was very appreciative of what was doing. The interesting thing was that in the past, I think prior to our coming on, the Pacific Tribune had been very much associated with an orthodox sort of position that a lot of the work that was done in labour was done by Tom McEwen, who by that time was getting elderly, and he would tend to pontificate in his column, but there was no really live coverage. Suddenly there was a newer generation coming along that was doing live coverage, actually going and talking to workers and not telling them what to do, but reporting what they were doing. It was a real shift, I think, for a lot of people, both on our side and in the unions and the workers themselves.

KN [00:27:20] I suppose that's probably why the paper earned the reputation of being the voice for workers.

SG [00:27:28] Right. I think it really did at that point. I think the real proof of the pudding in the sense for that was we used to have an annual fundraising drive to raise money to keep the paper going. It was usually a struggle, you had to make barely enough to kind of keep things going and then move money around here and there, but in 1975, we had a big anniversary. It was the 40th anniversary of the paper's founding, had a fund drive that year, and it was phenomenally successful. We'd raised more than twice what we'd ever raised in the past before. That's what it was. It was a lot of people on picket lines and various others pitching in support. A big part of that, too, was we used to hold a raffle, a very illegal raffle, I have to say, because you weren't allowed to have a lottery of any kind without a licence. We didn't have a licence. The editor at the time, Maurice Rush, had a nephew that had run a car dealership out in Maple Ridge, and he arranged for him to get a car at a discount, wholesale price. Then we would raffle that car off and it raised a lot of money. Surprisingly, no one ever challenged us on that. Just one time. We were told by the New Westminster police, they came to see us because we had decided to have a big event that year at the Queen's Park Arena because it was a nice big venue. We knew that we were going to get a lot of people that year. He came to us and he said, look, you guys are holding the lottery. We've been asked by somebody (he didn't say whom) that we need to pick you up if you hold your draw here. He said, I would suggest you guys take your draw, take the bucket, go to Burnaby. We'll make sure that you've gone. You come back, announce the draw. Everything's fine. That's what we did. The cop gave us the thumbs up as we went out the door with the bucket. We went to Burnaby, duly picked the prizes, came back to the thing and it was never an issue again.

KN [00:29:44] Interesting.

SG [00:29:44] Yeah, it really was, but it definitely was a very helpful thing. It was also a signal, I think, of the support that the paper had among the working people and unions in particular.

KN [00:29:58] By the late 70s, you actually had become editor of the Pacific Tribune.

SG [00:30:03] Right. In 1977, I think it was.

KN [00:30:06] You're following in your father's footsteps, it seems.

SG [00:30:09] I'd already done that, following him. He started out at the bottom, too.

KN [00:30:14] A major issue that you got your paper involved in when you became editor was a move by the then leader of the B.C. NDP, Bob Skelly, who began advocating for a wage labour accord such as that existed in Australia and New Zealand. Can you explain what this accord was all about and the role that the Tribune played in discrediting it as a policy option for B.C. workers and unions?

SG [00:30:45] This actually came quite a bit later in 1985, but I think the support that the paper had built up among working people gave it a voice and a credibility that we were able to speak during this particular incident with some authority and an expectation of support. What happened is that Bob Skelly had gone on a delegation with Jack Munro and Art Kube and John Laxton, I think, to Australia, where they had what's known as the Prices and Incomes Accord, which essentially had a commission that set wages based on what the prices would be and what the incomes would be. Art Kube said, well, it's just tripartism, that's all and I think trying to sell it a bit to the labour movement, but I don't think a lot of

people were buying and they were very skeptical about it. We sort of heard the rumblings of discontent. Skelly made it even harder because he went to the IWA convention and said, we need to look at doing this ourselves here, because if we're going to be elected to office, we need to be able to convince people that the NDP is not going to give the farm away to workers and their unions. In other words, we've got to have a price accord that's going to assure we're not just going to hand out wage increases right, left, and centre. I think that really set off alarm bells for a lot of people.

SG [00:32:18] I decided I'm going to see what the actual experience is of them down in Australia. I scrambled around trying to find phone numbers from anywhere I could for leading forces in Australia, and actually didn't have too much difficulty contacting a whole lot of people, including the secretary-treasurer of the Australian Federation of Labour, the Socialist Party leader down there, various other people, all of them saying this is a bit of a sham. This is really something that is providing wage control by another name and no worker, no union can specifically say that they'd benefited from this, but it has bought a certain amount of labour peace, which is probably what they're after. As a union, as a federation, we wouldn't support it again. It was pretty clear that it was not even broadly supported in Australia at the time. I wrote, I had two feature articles on that in the Tribune that preceded the BC Federation of Labour Convention by a couple of months, and they were widely discussed. I know people were phoning me up about this and asking for more information. Give me the number of this guy so I can phone them. Eventually, I think the discontent over it was such that when they went into the Federation's opening meetings, they preceded it with a statement to say, we are looking at possible discussions with employers, with government, but there will be no cap on wages of any form and made it very clear they weren't going down that route. I think they wanted to head off any debate. When the resolution came up to discuss that, they just said, look, we've already discussed this. It's been shelved. It was never ever heard from again. Bob Skelly didn't last very long as leader either, as I recall. I think it was definitely an indication of the authority with which the Tribune could now speak something that it probably hadn't to the same extent before.

KN [00:34:39] I want to go back a bit to 1983, as you pointed out, what you were talking about was '85. In '83 as you know, the Social Credit government came in with a budget that had massive cuts to social programs and introduced 26 pieces of legislation that basically destroyed the social contract that existed between labour and capital, following the Second World War. The result was working people did fight back in a big way. Can you talk a bit about your experiences during that what I would call the Solidarity summer and fall?

SG [00:35:31] The first thing I really remember was, initially there was going to be one particular kind of meeting that Art Kube had called. Then the Vancouver & District Labour Council, which had organized a Budget Coalition around the issues, said we've got more ambitious plans than that. We are going to be holding a rally. I think it was big enough that the BC Fed said, okay, go ahead with the rally. It was, I remember it being beyond anybody's expectation. All of a sudden there were literally tens of thousands of people in the street and something we hadn't seen in years, led by the Budget Coalition, clearly an indication that this was going to be a movement that was going to have huge ramifications. I think Operation Solidarity was kind of energized by that. When they moved they had to create Operation Solidarity it was really a phenomenal thing. I remember not so much for details, but running everywhere. We went to, we had to go and cover the rally at the legislature and the one at Empire Stadium. We only had a staff of two, Dan Keeton and myself at that time on editorial work. Josh Berson did some freelance photography for us so we could count on him occasionally, but we were just running everywhere. It was with a

great sense of exhilaration in doing that, because you knew that things were really beginning to mount. What was also interesting is that the Tribune was published at College Printers and so was Solidarity Times. We would often go and it was the old school at that time, galleys and proofs and whatnot that you had to go over and then put them—they all got laid out. We would get together basically once a week with Keith Baldry and Stan Persky and talk over Solidarity things as they did Solidarity Times and we did the Tribune. It was a lot of fun, but definitely very exhilarating, I have to say. I think that exhilaration, made it all the more crushing when the Kelowna Accord was signed. I think all of us, in the hindsight of history, probably look at that now and say that it was probably our expectations were way too high, and the possibilities were not what we'd hoped they'd be. But sometimes it's hard to get over that crushing sense of defeat and betrayal that you have.

KN [00:38:17] As we've discussed and as you as you've said, the Tribune played a very important role in the life of the left and then the trade union movement for a long time. Eventually, of course, it stopped publishing because of things that were happening in the world. I think April of '92 is when it actually ceased publishing. At that time you were out of a job, it would seem, and you tried some freelancing. Then Jack Nichol from the United Fish and Allied Workers Union approached you to see if you would take on the editorship of The Fisherman, which was their union newspaper. Can you talk about that and that experience taking on that job?

SG [00:39:07] Sure. Just back up for a minute, the paper, certainly the events of the world were essentially what sank the Tribune. There was, of course, a huge divide in the socialist countries around the world. A lot of us here were looking to the Gorbachev revolution to reform things, to make things better and more democratic. That didn't materialize, and it created a huge divide. We saw, many of us, particularly those of us on the Tribune, as an opportunity to change course a bit here, to become a more broadly based group. There was a decision made that we would declare sort of independence, because a decision that had been made by the Communist Party to have a joint editorial board of three from the Communist Party, or six from the Communist Party and six from the unaligned left, never was allowed to be implemented. We kind of took it upon ourselves to implement it somewhat unilaterally. Of course, that triggered a divide. We tried to establish a paper that was simply called the Tribune. It was successful briefly, but the funding is what finally killed you. If you've got division, you're not going to raise funds amidst division. Eventually we had to make, the decision was made to close the paper. I was left to fend for something. Initially, the job on the Fisherman we knew was coming up because Geoff Meggs was leaving the paper to go to work for the Hospital Employees' Union. I didn't initially apply for it because a couple of my friends, including some people involved with the Labour Heritage Centre, were going to apply for the job. I didn't really want to compete for it with them. I felt they were as deserving of it as I was. It was also a little close to the hewing, a little too close to my father's path. You left the Tribune and then you went here. I didn't apply, and I tried freelancing for a little while, and made minor amounts of money, but it's a tough gig to do that.

SG [00:41:28] Then, Frank Cox and Jack Nichol both called me up from the Fishermen, the UFAWU and said, 'Where the hell's your application? You're the only guy we can agree on here. Why aren't you applying?' I explained and they said, 'Well to hell with that. You got to get down here.' I mean, they just would not relent so I figured, okay, I don't have a lot of options anyway. I'm going to, I'll do that. I don't know if you knew Jack Nichol, but he was a very tall man. He also had this device at his office to seat anybody that he was talking to in these two pink easy chairs that were sitting in front of his desk that were

about this far off the ground. When you sat down, all of a sudden you're like this, looking up at Jack Nichol and, you know, he became pretty convincing.

SG [00:42:26] I must say, once I once I took on the job, I kind of threw myself into it. It's a very exciting union to work for when things are working. It's got an incredible history. It's got a group of people who are some really fine people who have worked for many, many years to try and bring these three disparate parts of the union together and succeeded in many cases. I really kind of caught up, got caught up in that and did everything I could. You don't just go there as the editor of the paper. You very quickly become, I became research director of the paper. I was kind of seconded for herring bargaining because they needed somebody who knew economics to do some of that. You're kind of doing a whole lot of things that really involved the union and its membership.

KN [00:43:24] The Fishermen's Union played a big role in running a number of campaigns to try and keep the B.C. fishing industry thriving in terms of the economy. Can you talk about some of those campaigns?

SG [00:43:39] The UFAWU, I think, has got a reputation, probably more than any other over the years as a union of campaigns. That's the only way that they've managed to survive because they never really had fishermen's bargaining rights. They were all de facto, simply by what they did they managed to establish some credibility, but legally, they were not founded until very late in the day. Back in the '50s and '60s, they had a huge campaign to prevent the building of the Moran Dam that would have destroyed the Fraser River sockeye run. They had campaigns to prevent offshore fishing by the foreign fleets, all kinds of campaigns.

SG [00:44:24] When I came on, one of the first things that we became involved in that another fisherman, Grant Snell, and I sort of launched based on our own research, was aimed at dealing with the Americanization, if you will, of the entire canned salmon industry as a result of the GATT ruling, which is something that took place in the '80s, that took away the right of Canadians to process their own fish, without competition. All of a sudden, the Americans saw an opportunity to build canneries in Alaska and then use that salmon to flood the markets here in British Columbia and in Canada generally. At one time, the market in Canada was about half what it was in the export, so it's a huge market. It had been served almost exclusively by Canadian canned sockeye, pinks and so on. Then all of a sudden, after the GATT ruling a few years later, in 1993, we started seeing American canned sockeye and pinks showing up on grocery shelves. A lot of people were really shocked by this because they really thought this was a Canadian product, the Canadian fish, so we decided to launch a campaign, a public sort of consumer campaign, saying, 'Buy Canadian.' This is what you should be looking for. Don't buy the American one. But within about a month, the fishing companies, Canadian Fish especially, was up in arms about this and absolutely infuriated that we were doing this, I guess because this was their big plan to basically continentalize the industry. They threatened the shoreworkers' side that if you don't get your fishermen to back off this campaign, then you're going to find you're not going to get bargaining on shore things. We're going to throw every brick we can at you to prevent that. The leadership sort of looked around this and said, okay, this is a palpable threat, and we don't really know what we can do in the event of this. We're going to have to back off and make a deal with them that they will bargain in good faith and won't challenge any of those things so long as we don't wage this campaign. We had to drop it. Whether it would have been successful, consumer campaigns like that, some of them can be successful, others can't.

SG [00:46:57] We've had campaigns around the whole issue of allocation, for example, of offshore hake. Offshore hake is a fishery that's fairly new. It resulted in the creation of three new plants over in the west coast of Vancouver Island processing this fish because it has to be processed quickly. It has an enzyme in it that if you keep it in cold storage for any length of time it rots the fish, literally. You have to get it, flash freeze it, bring it onshore and process it right away. It created these three plants, which we then proceeded to organize. Our Vancouver Island organizer did a bang-up job in getting those plants organized. Then the foreign fleets came in and worked deals with the federal government to have more and more and more of the hake allocated to them, as opposed to the inshore fishery, and processing. That became a campaign and again was briefly won. They succeeded in getting a good allocation of fish on shore but unfortunately the fishery itself began to diminish. Then one of the plants shut down and slowly as so many things go, it closed down.

SG [00:48:17] There was the huge campaign around the Mifflin plan. The Mifflin plan was something that took what had been a coast-wide fishery that allowed fishermen to fish everywhere from the Fraser River all the way up to the northern coastline without anything more than a single fisherman's licence. They divided it up into areas, and you had to buy a licence to fish in each individual area. The result was that many fishermen were forced into bankruptcy because they simply didn't have the money. It was probably the most broadly based campaign that's ever been waged in the fishing industry. It involved thousands of people all the way from the Nass River confluence, all the way down to the coast and everywhere else.

SG [00:49:09] At the end of the day, you were fighting a government that was bound and determined to proceed with this and had just enough support within within some sections of the fleet that they were able to get it through. Everybody remembers when they were holding big coast-wide meetings with the fisheries department, with all of the various sector groups and doing it individually. One of the government operatives came through and announced to one of the other section, the trollers have signed on to it, and that was the key, that the trollers had broken ranks with everybody else and were agreeing with the plan. The thing cascaded. Eventually they had a big transition program to provide some money to fishermen to cover their boats and enabled them to get out of the industry. By and large, it's shrunk it down smaller and smaller and smaller. Now there's all kinds of things like quotas that get in the way. Those campaigns have been valiant and well fought and involve people but sometimes the forces against you were overwhelming and the things that you need, aren't always there. I think the union is now focusing on things like one single policy called owner-operator, where if you own a fish boat, you have to fish it and you have to not put other people's quota on that boat. It's going to be a hard sell, too, but that's probably the most effective -- they have it in the East Coast, but they don't have it here.

KN [00:50:53] Sean, you talked basically about the gradual decline of the fishing industry for a number of reasons. Eventually that meant that the Fisherman newspaper would stop publishing in 2015, which meant you again were without a job. Sean, tell us a bit about the role of the Fisherman's newspaper in the life of the fishermen and union members. It played a fairly significant role and they were very supportive of the newspaper. Can you talk about that for a bit?

SG [00:51:34] The Fisherman has been a really effective organizing tool right from the beginning in 1937, when it was first established. A lot of fishermen would come to town, grab a bundle of papers and take them out to the docks and spread them around. It was

essentially their means of communication because they were spread all over the coast at that time particularly. It's continued in that role. I think one of the things that Geoff Meggs added when he was the editor is he broadened the coverage to include a lot of very insightful reporting and discussion about key issues like fish farming and that sort of thing, and broadened it beyond the union's membership. We got a whole lot of subscriptions as a result of that, because people would be observing the union and observing the industry through the eyes of the fishermen.

SG [00:52:32] When I came on, it had shrunk a little. We didn't have the resources that Geoff did. There was a greater need to have the paper as an organizing tool so we focused a bit more on the union membership, and those immediately around it, because we were trying to build up support for the campaigns. It became, again, an organizing tool, and people would take it out and use it wherever possible. When the time came, in the year 2000, (we had merged with the Canadian Auto Workers in 1996), but funds were getting pretty slim. The dues coming in from fishermen was shrinking, and the amount of work that people were getting was shrinking so the dues from the shore industry were less. They held a commission in 2000 to look at expenses. One of the decisions that was made by that commission, ironically, led by Geoff Meggs on behalf of the CAW, was that we had to abandon the paper, that it was simply too expensive to maintain. We kind of went with that but there was immediate rebellion from the membership, no, we can't do that. That's ridiculous. We're not going to let the paper go.

SG [00:53:49] We put together a proposal that we would, Dave Watt, the advertising director, and I would continue the paper, with money from this solidarity salmon campaign fund that we had had from selling smoked salmon and we were continuing to sell that. We put together a proposal that allowed for six issues a year instead of the usual 12. It continued like that for another couple of years. Then in 2003, again, the crunch hit. I was laid off at that point and I went and was about to begin working with a CAW local doing a newspaper for them. Then again, John Radosovic phones me up from the union, says, no, the fishermen have all rebelled again, they want to put the paper back together again. Is that at all possible? I said, well, you know, if we have something. He says, 'Well, we found another fund.' They found another fund from some government funding that had been put in for sustainable resources and sustainable fisheries. Again, we put it back, put the paper back again. Now it's reduced to four issues a year, so we're still continuing. It was clear that the union membership in general and the fishermen particularly did not want to lose this. Finally came in 1960 or in, sorry, I was 69 in 2015. I said, 'Look, I really can't do this anymore. It's just becoming--we don't have the money. I don't really have the resources to run around all over the province on my own, doing this.' They were horrified but they basically said, okay, because they didn't have any money either to come up with. There were some efforts to do some online reporting, but it's never going to be adequate for people in that kind of an industry. They depend on something they can hand out physically. Just doesn't work. Hard to read the internet when you're on a boat.

KN [00:55:58] When that did happen, when the newspaper ceased to publish, you spent some time working with the Labour Environmental Alliance with people like Mae Burrows and others. What was this alliance and what motivated you to take on this role? Can you talk about the kind of work you did while working there?

SG [00:56:21] I got a phone call from Mae Burrows, who as you might know, had previously been the environmental director for the UFAWU. I'd known her for some time there and worked with her. She had gone on from there to found the Labour Environmental Alliance Society, otherwise known as LEAS. It was essentially established, in that period of

the really severe 'War in the Woods', when there was a lot of bitter divide between environmentalists and workers. It started out as basically a bringing together of environmentalists with leading trade unionists and others to talk about outstanding issues and how they could be resolved, to talk about just transition and various policy initiatives that were being taken. The meetings that were held there at the Maritime Labour Centre were actually quite big. She, Mae is an amazing organizer, she's absolutely an amazing organizer. She kind of puts together pieces where others would never think to do it. She can get people to do things that you would never think that they would, very dynamic personality in that regard. She decided that there was a possibility of putting together this alliance as a working nonprofit society that would take on various projects. She asked me if I was prepared to come and do some writing and research for it on a part time basis. I said, sure, that sounds really interesting.

SG [00:57:51] Part of the motivation for me was that in a sense, this was the road not taken for me. When I had left high school to go to university, it was with every intention of pursuing a science degree and some kind of a scientific career that got derailed by my desire to write, but I'd always kind of wanted to do that. The advantage of this is it gave me the ability to do that. All of a sudden we're doing research on toxic exposure, for example, in hazardous buildings, mold, asbestos, and various things like that in campaigns that could be built around that on an environmental basis, where you're working with workers to explain to them the environmental benefits of this, and also the worker health and safety benefits that go with it. It brought them together and it became quite successful. We managed to get funding from a number of societies, foundations to do this work. One of the most successful pieces of work we did was this booklet that I wrote called the Cancer Smart Consumer Guide. It was linking a lot of the carcinogens found in environmental or in industrial sites with consumer exposures and saying these are the same ones that you deal with in your home as you deal with in the workplace. You can deal with them at both levels. By the way, there's a lot of them cause cancer. There was a program done by Wendy Mesley on CBC called 'Chasing the Cancer Answers'. All of a sudden, I remember sitting at my computer that night and I was the online ordering site on my computer, the orders were just coming in like this. By 4:00 in the morning, when I finally went to bed, there were 2,000 orders that had come through that night alone for this booklet, which we couldn't possibly—we didn't have that many. We were soon churning it out by the thousands. It went through three editions. We had it translated into French, and it sold in Quebec. We went on to do one on breast cancer that went to a lot of unions involved, with the assistance of the BC Breast Cancer Foundation.

SG [01:00:14] A lot of what I think was really good scientific work that gave me an opportunity to learn a lot of things. I was really scared out of my mind that I didn't have the cred to do this, but a lot of people said, of course you do. Here's the work. You go and read it. You can read it as well as anybody else. Do it, and you do. I also had the opportunity to work with some really fine people like Jim Brophy and Margaret Keith, who were leading cancer researchers back east with the Occupational Health and Safety Centres in Ontario. They'd done a lot of very cutting edge work on breast cancer exposures in Sarnia around the oil industry and the plastics industry. They were on our board. They worked with us. People like Larry Stoffman were part of it. It was really quite an exciting time. The only problem is, like anything else, it depends on funding. What really crushed us, finally, was the financial crisis in 2008, because one of our major funders was entirely invested in things that crashed utterly in 2008. They just said, look, we can't fund anything for three years. That was the end of that. We tried to hang onto smaller parts, but it just wasn't possible financially to do it. But it was a ten year run and certainly the work we did still stands, I think.

SG [01:01:47] One of the things we did was we did an environmental check sheet for the BC Buildings Corporation that had been started by a guy who was a UBC chemist, and then he handed it off to me. This is one of those times when you're, 'Just a minute, you're a chemist. I'm not.' He said, 'Oh, no, you can do it.' I had to sell myself to the BC Buildings Corporation as somebody—I did. But we did. We set up a whole standard which was used for them in terms of all of their purchasing and procurement, based on environmental standards. Unfortunately, when they privatized BC Buildings Corporation, what had been mandated now became a recommendation. It's still being followed to some degree, but not to the extent that it really should have been.

KN [01:02:38] Over the last number of years, Sean, you've spent some time working on various projects for the BC Labour Heritage Centre. Can you talk a bit about this work and why you think it's important?

SG [01:02:52] I've always had a fascination with labour history and I worked on a book in 1985 to do a lot of history, of a lot of organizing in the 1930's. In a sense, have been connected to a lot of the people who were the participants. I knew people like Harold Pritchett and Tom McEwen and others like that at the time. Their stories and their history has always held an enduring fascination with me, and I can't imagine why others don't. Many don't. I have to acknowledge that. When the opportunity came up, originally it was Al Cornes who approached me, 'How about doing some stuff with the Labour Heritage Centre?' I had actually been part together with Norm Garcia and David Yorke and others of the very first initiative to establish the Labour Heritage Centre. Then Jack Munro kind of took it, was going to have a central building in Burnaby and all kinds of plans. I sort of dropped out in that because it was beyond what I really wanted to do. I still held on to that interest and I continue to. It's just part of my heart and my passion and my connection with a lot of those workers, past and present.

KN [01:04:17] I'm going to ask you a fairly open-ended question. I'm wondering if there's anything else you'd like to say about your work in the B.C. labour movement or about your experiences in the B.C. labour movement generally?

SG [01:04:36] It's been a kind of a roller coaster in many ways, because number one I came from a very different left perspective and modified that significantly along the paths in my lifetime and then had to suddenly make significant changes when the world also end up on. I've come to realize that that looking at the world through the perspective of working people gives you a rootedness and a sense of direction, I think, that brings you back sometimes when you tend to get go off the rails. Working people have basic needs. They have basic interests. One of the things that we can't ever forget is that the work that people do is a fundamental part of their being. I think it's a huge part of why we have so much addiction and dysfunction is people have lost their purpose in work. They're either doing a lot of monotonous, utterly crap jobs that give them no sense of purpose or direction, or they're running crazily trying to become an entrepreneur. The old jobs that gave people a sense of working with their hands or working with their minds, working with others, are disappearing in many ways. I think labour history helps us to keep that connection. I hope to pass it on to another generation that this is valuable, and don't let it go.

KN [01:06:10] Thank you very much, Sean. Really appreciate it.

SG [01:06:13] Thank you.