

Interview: Chris Allnutt (CA), Jean Greatbatch (JG)

Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM), Natasha Fairweather (NF)

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Transcription: Jane Player

RM [00:00:05] So, Chris, just from what you're saying, even though it wasn't recorded, I mean, you've been an activist almost from the beginning.

CA [00:00:11] Yes. I have a very deep desire to fight for people who can't fight for themselves and to make the world a better place. It sounds highfalutin, but, I managed to do it. I managed to do what my heart wants to do, wanted to do, and get paid a living wage for it and be able to retire here in this palace.

RM [00:00:43] And is that what led you to the union movement?

CA [00:00:47] Yes. I saw an opportunity to take my research skills, which would look at something and then find the meat or the potatoes for something that would generate an understanding of the issue. That was my skill. I did a good job. I would summarize something and say, 'This means that you will get a wage increase enough to buy an extra Big Mac next year—that's all,' and then explain why.

RM [00:01:26] That would have been popular. (laughter)

CA [00:01:30] It would have been clear the employers were trying to pay low and mismanage—and they succeeded in both of those.

RM [00:01:40] You got involved in—it was pretty well all public sector unions, right?

CA [00:01:44] Yes.

RM [00:01:45] And is there a reason for that, or is it just the way it happened?

CA [00:01:49] It's just the way it happened. Although I worked for an organization called the Federation of Engineers and Scientists of B.C.—sorry, of Canada—FESA—Federation of Engineers and Scientific Employees or associations. They call themselves associations, not unions, and they were individual people coming together for collective bargaining. And I, there's all sorts of screening and political barriers that exist in the labour movement for someone like me because I wasn't from the labour movement. I worked and did research for them. I woke them up in terms of what they were facing, and I did a good job.

JG [00:02:43] So that was for, Ontario Hydro engineers, Atomic Energy of Canada engineers, so mostly Crown Corps.

CA [00:02:53] But including CAE industries. So, that's the private sector.

RM [00:02:57] Wow.

CA [00:03:00] I worked for them for two or three years, and then applied for a job here when Jeannie got a job before me. I wanted to come out with her. She got the first job. I got the job, the parallel for B.C. Hydro. I was helping out in their labour relations.

JG [00:03:28] Not Hydro, the engineers.

CA [00:03:30] Oh, the engineers. That's right—

RM [00:03:34] All good.

CA [00:03:39] BC Hydro decided to go private on its engineering capacity. It had built up its own team of engineers, and then suddenly they decided they would fire them all and hire a multinational engineering companies to do the work. They offered the people that served B.C. and BC Hydro for their whole lives a severance package, which was half the legal precedent, the common law entitlement. So, I arranged with the best lawyer for wrongful dismissal in Vancouver to be a—accept people from our organization to have a half hour consultation about what their rights were, and that worked really well. It doubled the payouts right away. Then some went to court and they got—I don't know whether they got more or less then they would've have gotten under my scheme. That was a brilliant move, if I do say so myself.

RM [00:04:52] Well, and little did you know, you would be faced with the same problem down the road with the HEU [Hospital Employees' Union] when all the people were fired.

CA [00:05:01] Yes.

RM [00:05:01] But we'll get to that. Then you ended up with the BC Nurses' Union, is that right?

CA [00:05:06] Yes.

RM [00:05:07] What was that like?

CA [00:05:09] It was great. They were an organization and union members who were waking up to the fact that it was good to be in the union. It was a defensible public, professional thing to do. They were represented by the RNABC [Registered Nurses Association of BC] in labour relations, and they did a poor job because they—their motivation was allegedly defend the public against bad nurses. But that wasn't what happened. They didn't. If they did that, they ignored the nurses' rights. I worked for the nurses' union for two years, and I was in the labour movement, sort of, but the BCNU was not in the BC Federation of Labour or the Labour Congress. So, I wasn't really working in the labour movement as conceived of how it was working. The RNABC was transforming itself, and labour relations was becoming the province of the BCNU, and I decided I'd like to work with them. I applied to work there and was successful. Nora Payton was the head of the RNABC at the time. She and I didn't see eye to eye on some things, and I was fired.

JG [00:06:44] No, you weren't fired. You quit.

RM [00:06:47] Constructive dismissal.

JG [00:06:49] No. You quit because you couldn't—you didn't like what Glen Smale was doing, the direction he was going.

CA [00:06:58] That's true.

RM [00:06:59] Oh, Glenn Smale? Yes. (laughter) I remember that.

CA [00:07:03] He was not a very competent person. He was way over his head.

JG [00:07:08] So, then you applied to HEU.

CA [00:07:11] Yes.

RM [00:07:11] Who was the head of the HEU then?

CA [00:07:14] Jack Gerow.

RM [00:07:15] Oh, Jack Gerow. Don't get me started. Anyway, so was that a better union to work for, the HEU?

CA [00:07:22] Yes, it sure was. Yeah.

RM [00:07:23] In what way?

CA [00:07:25] It took on issues. It's supportive of its members. It organized and was led by Bill McDonald at the time, and he was a good president. Jack Gerow was the secretary-business manager with—when I arrived. He's the one that hired me. He was not as effective as he should have been. I was hired as the research manager, and I did a good job there. I got two people to help me. We had a research team with a communications department that was developing that was becoming very powerful. I was under Geoff Meggs.

RM [00:08:26] I know that name. (laughter)

CA [00:08:28] Yes.

RM [00:08:30] Was Lisa Stewart there then?

CA [00:08:32] Yes.

RM [00:08:33] Yes. Okay. We're not going there. (laughter) Jack eventually, moved on, I guess. Is that the way to say it?

CA [00:08:40] Yes.

RM [00:08:41] And who replaced Jack?

CA [00:08:45] Carmela.

RM [00:08:45] Oh. That's right. Of course.

CA [00:08:49] Carmela Allevato. She did a good job.

RM [00:08:52] You got different positions within the HEU?

CA [00:08:54] Yes. But I was essentially a researcher. I was responsible for research that we did on health policy as well as the numbers crunching. How to calculate the employer's last offer. Peter Cameron was my advisor there.

RM [00:09:18] Really. There's another name from the past. (laughter)

CA [00:09:20] Yes.

RM [00:09:22] Whom I know well.

JG [00:09:24] You were assistant secretary.

CA [00:09:30] And then I was assistant. I replaced Lee White.

RM [00:09:34] White. When did Carmela—do you remember what year Carmela took over?

CA [00:09:42] Well, I came in '89.

RM [00:09:45] '89. Okay. Because I'm trying to remember—remember there was this social contract that when Peter Cameron was deputy minister, there was negotiating with the Hospital Employees' Union?

CA [00:09:53] Yes.

RM [00:09:54] That deal that was actually quite groundbreaking.

CA [00:09:58] Yes it was.

RM [00:09:59] Do you want to just talk a bit about that because you were there then?

CA [00:10:01] Yes, I was. That was part of the evolution of the tri union phenomenon—the three unions working together on issues. The NDP wanted to reorganize healthcare in a very radical way, and they didn't plan it considering the workers very much at all. They just said all would be good if we closed these and then consolidate these hospitals and move into—it's only half hour longer by ambulance to the nearest expert hospital, and the doctors are better there because they're more experienced in dealing with a broad range of illnesses as opposed to the local hospitals. It's—it ignores the close connection between the hospital and the community. It's like a post office. It's more important than a post office, but a post office is a symbol of that as well. That's our courthouses. What makes sense from a logistical point or a philosophical point of view or an anal point of view—

JG [00:11:06] A bean counter point of view.

CA [00:11:07] Yes.

RM [00:11:08] (laughter) Bean counters. Okay.

JG [00:11:10] They were going to close 15 hospitals, and we stopped them at Shaughnessy.

RM [00:11:16] Yeah. Shaughnessy.

JG [00:11:18] That's what led to the employment security agreement.

CA [00:11:22] Right.

CA [00:11:25] The employment security agreement was based on a progressive management approach to labour relations, and that is you take care of the workers that are affected by the change, as they're not responsible for it, and they shouldn't suffer from it. We fought a good fight continuously leading it in, for the BCNU and Shaughnessy, the tri union effort. We had good HEU members that in Shaughnessy that supported Jeannie when she was working for the BCNU. She'd soon be working for the HEU.

JG [00:12:03] I worked for HEU before I worked for BCNU.

CA [00:12:06] Oh, do you? Okay. So, we were both involved in what was happening in healthcare. Myself working at HEU and Jeannie working at BCNU.

RM [00:12:21] This this agreement was really groundbreaking wasn't it?

CA [00:12:25] Yes.

RM [00:12:25] In what sense was it groundbreaking?

CA [00:12:28] It said an employee is important to us, and we will take care of you if you are laid off or affected by the change that we have in mind. You have a valuable experience in the healthcare sector. We want to keep you, and we want that experience to go with you. We will hire people off the street to replace people that we terminated or moved, but we will also compensate you and make sure you're taken care of if you're redundant to the facility, and we can't find a place for you here. It had provincewide seniority. That was a tough one for the union itself because people had believed that the place that they work was the place that everybody wanted to work, and if they left, they wouldn't be the senior person and they would lose that job. That didn't happen, but they thought that everyone wanted to live in Kamloops and that this job that they've been waiting for was coming up because the person who's working in it is retiring. So, I'm not going to let somebody from Vancouver General come and take my job. It's not my job. We had some discussions. It didn't take too long to persuade people that the greater good of everyone was paramount, and it should be accommodated. I remember getting ready for a meeting with the engineers at—with the tradesmen at Shaughnessy. They were not very polite, and they were very angry. They thought that we would sell them out. I was asked by Carmela to take the meeting, and I went in and I said, 'We are getting—our agreement is going to be one that guarantees you employment, and everyone else who were currently working here is guaranteed employment somewhere.' They would first exhaust the local seniority, then they'd go to the regional seniority, and then they go to the provincewide seniority, and then if they didn't have that they'd get retraining, or they'd get retraining all the way through as options. That was a progressive move by the NDP to recognize the mistake of Shaughnessy. There was actually an investigation done by a third party, arbitrator, on what Shaughnessy did wrong. They came to the conclusion was that fundamentally they implemented things without thinking of the effect on workers, which is not good and didn't work. Jeannie was part of the fight back with HEU, and [unclear] and HSA to stop the closure of Shaughnessy, and we did.

RM [00:15:31] Yeah, I got that. I was writing, working for the Globe and Mail then as their health policy reporter. I got that on the front page of the Globe and Mail. 'Groundbreaking social contract.' And because it was it was, you know, it it was my background in labor that appreciated how significant it was, rather than, oh, some boring agreement. It was really—

JG [00:15:50] And it wasn't handed to the unions on a silver platter.

RM [00:15:54] No, there was huge negotiations.

JG [00:15:58] Well, it was because of activation of the members and also creating allegiances with organizations in the community. We actually worked with the doctors against the closure of Shaughnessy. So, basically raised a stink. The guy who owned London Drugs agreed to have petitions at the front of his store against the closure of the hospital.

RM [00:16:34] So, that was good, and then I guess at a certain point, Carmela left.

CA [00:16:39] Yes.

RM [00:16:40] And the contest was open for the secretary-business manager (that oddly named leadership position in the union). And you ran against Meggs—

CA [00:16:52] Yes.

RM [00:16:52] And beat him with a landslide of one vote, as I recall. Was it that—is that right?

CA [00:16:58] I think so.

CA [00:16:58] Yeah. What year was that, Chris?

CA [00:17:05] Well, I was involved in—

RM [00:17:06] Well, we can look it up if you can't remember offhand. It was in the nineties or—

CA [00:17:11] It was in the mid nineties or—

RM [00:17:14] Yeah, the mid nineties or something?

CA [00:17:14] Yes.

RM [00:17:14] Yeah. What was it like being the leader of the HEU in those days?

CA [00:17:20] It was hard work, but it was fun. At times, I would say I can't believe I'm being paid to do this. I love it. I would be available to Stephen Howard and Geoff Meggs on a moment's notice to talk to the media, so they liked me (Geoff and Stephen) because I was a leader who recognized the importance of communication, and I think I did a good job there as the spokesperson for bad things that governments were doing. So, I got to the point where as an assistant secretary-business manager. I enjoyed myself more sometimes because I didn't have to take part of the political crap in the background—internal union politics. Carmela did, and she helped bring women more into the union,

fighting for a WCB that recognized women's occupations. I also had a assistant secretary-business manager to me when I was named secretary-business manager. Zorica Bosancic. She was from the members. I'm not a—I was not a hospital employee.

RM [00:18:48] Right.

CA [00:18:49] I was an outside expert—negotiator—and Zorica was my assistant and helped me give the members' perspective on things and was very forceful in doing that. She took a lot of abuse for internal politics. I would, frankly, take the easy jobs, and she would have the tough job.

RM [00:19:16] (laughter) Good management. (laughter).

CA [00:19:17] Yes.

RM [00:19:18] And so, it was never easy because you're dealing with government and bureaucrats, the whole thing. But it certainly was easier under the NDP. Then everything changed when Gordon Campbell and the Liberals came in, and they really sandbagged you, didn't they?

CA [00:19:36] They did.

RM [00:19:38] All right. We're just getting to the good stuff.

CA [00:19:40] Yes.

RM [00:19:40] When Gordon Campbell and the Liberals came in and basically sandbagged the. Well, not just. Well, it was just the HEU. Do you want to just talk about that.

CA [00:19:51] Yes. They—Campbell didn't, and the Liberals didn't want HEU around. They wanted to get rid of HEU because HEU had been a pain in the butt for as long as it had been strong. They sought the opportunity to do us in, and they reorganization of healthcare again, this time targeting the workers and attracting multinationals to come in and take over, starting with support services and going to diagnostic services and then direct care. And that's—it's a big pressure on the public healthcare system in Canada and around the world, and it continues to be a big issue. But the target that they picked was to take up— negotiate with us—our regular contract was coming up for negotiations and they said that they wanted—they told us that they wanted to privatize and that we could work with them in implementing that. I said on behalf of the union that we weren't interested in privatization. We had a meeting with the deputy minister, who was—

JG [00:21:26] Lawrie McFarlane.

CA [00:21:28] No, it was the woman from—

RM [00:21:31] Not Penny Ballem?

CA [00:21:32] Yes.

RM [00:21:33] Oh, okay.

CA [00:21:37] We met with her and said, 'We're prepared to work with you. You've been re-elected.' This is in 2001.

JG [00:21:52] Anyway—

CA [00:21:53] In 2001—

JG [00:21:54] Keep going.

CA [00:21:55] And, we said that we would work with you in solving problems, but we weren't going to support privatization. She said, 'That's our agenda. You need to recognize that.' I left that meeting knowing that we were going to be in trouble. We found out how much trouble we would be in when we had leaked to us the list of places that they were planning to close. They calculated they would save—they would eliminate 10,000 jobs and save no money in the first year because they'd have to pay severance. We said—we publicized this—and said that the union had to stand strong and say, no concessions, no rollbacks. I got a call in a rally that I was having with members at Burnaby Hospital from the minister of health, who said that they were introducing legislation that evening to force a deal on us and compel us to go back to work. I then was invited to be the lead person at the news conference that—they asked if they could meet with us for a press opportunity. They had Campbell on just before me saying, 'We're going to do this.' And so, I was—it was not proper notice. It wasn't—it was designed in conspiracy with, in concert with television—BCTV—to arrange this to happen. They got the exclusive, and we got the deal announced to us.

JG [00:24:01] The deal. [Jean motions quotation marks].

CA [00:24:04] Yes, as if there was any negotiation.

RM [00:24:06] So, that's when they went into your contract and took out the contracting-out protection?

CA [00:24:10] Yes. With the language we had negotiated from—in the sixties, I think—was no contracting-out if it results in the layoff of an employee, and that was a barrier to the multinationals getting in and to their plans to close lots of places.

RM [00:24:28] There were basically was no negotiations. They just did it.

CA [00:24:31] They did. There was pro-forma negotiations. I remember getting a call at Saint Paul's Hospital and their labour representative in government said, 'Is HEU prepared to concede the 15 percent rollback in wages and the elimination of contracting-out protection?' I said, 'No, we're not'. He said, 'Thank you very much for being clear.' He went back, and then the legislation was introduced at night.

RM [00:25:12] And these were the members—you know, the cleaners and the immigrant workers. It wasn't the nurses or—not nurses, but the LPNs and the higher-paid people within the HEU. These were the people—and they were well paid—but that's why they went after them. I mean, they were your dietary workers. It was really brutal, was it not?

CA [00:25:33] Yes.

RM [00:25:35] I mean, you had a job at \$18 an hour and suddenly maybe you could get a job back for \$10 an hour?

CA [00:25:43] Yes.

JG [00:25:43] With no benefits.

RM [00:25:44] And no benefits. Absolutely.

JG [00:25:46] And no pension.

RM [00:25:47] What was the impact on the union when this happened?

CA [00:25:51] Well, we knew that something was coming. We didn't expect it to be as drastic, as draconian, and we didn't know it would take as long as it did to get it back on track. That was a waste of resources and energy and people's lives to solve the healthcare crisis. But it was a false solution, and that's I—that's one of my frustration was, 'Why am I spending all this time fighting you? We want the same thing.'

JG [00:26:23] Except you didn't.

CA [00:26:23] No.

JG [00:26:24] They wanted to let the corporations come in, and they were going to privatize all the support services.

CA [00:26:31] Yes.

JG [00:26:32] And you were in the way.

CA [00:26:34] Yes. And they were wrong in the solution that they had, but they recognized that they had to do something, and they tried this, but they wasted a lot of energy. That energy could have been working today. It is working today to improve healthcare in B.C. and for BCers.

RM [00:26:53] But you fought it, right? The HEU fought this.

CA [00:26:56] Yes. We fought them everywhere, and every time they tried it they encountered resistance. It was resistance that was—but had broad support amongst the public and the members because the members saw us fighting for them. They recognized that the union wasn't an insurance company, that we paid them if they had any problems, they were part of the union. They were going to solve the problem—I wasn't. So, that was a good, strong union reaction. We had a good base in our membership of committed trade unionists and social justice advocates, and that was good. So, it was great for me to come and speak to them and rally them more, and I did a good job at that. The other thing that we did was we tied working conditions to better patient care so that we concentrated on money because money attracts the appropriate workers for the jobs that are being done and, with benefits and pensions, because contented workers and workers who know their future is taken care of are better caregivers. Everyone that we worked with realized that and supported that. We organized rallies. We sought the support of the other unions. We had picket lines that BCNU (British Columbia Nurses' Union] had set up that we respected even though they asked us not to because we respected it as part of the BC Fed [BC

Federation of Labour] policy on picket lines. You don't let people in. They're not open picket lines. It's closed or it's not a picket line. Some people in BCNU didn't want that, and so they opposed behind the scenes, this view that a picket line could be open. That was a struggle, but they were on strike. They were out. They put up a picket line. We respected the picket line, even though sometimes they asked us not to.

RM [00:29:17] Then eventually you had your own strike, did you not? Yeah.

JG [00:29:20] Talk about that.

CA [00:29:21] Yes, and there we had solidarity with the other unions from the get-go.

RM [00:29:30] So, you went on strike, and then the government, as I recall, declared it illegal. They passed legislation. So, then you were on an illegal strike?

CA [00:29:40] Yes.

RM [00:29:41] And so, you didn't go back to work initially. Why did you keep it going?

CA [00:29:48] Because we were fighting for justice. What we were presented with was a violation of the social contract between unions and employers in Canada that if you have a contract, you can't go on strike when you have a contract which had been negotiated. That was the deal. In return for that, we will recognize your union, and we will recognize your right to have dues checkoff to support you. That was turned on its head, and we didn't have the right to strike because we had a contract, and we were about to lose our union because we were being asked to respect a contract that we didn't negotiate.

JG [00:30:32] That they imposed.

RM [00:30:33] They imposed.

JG [00:30:35] They imposed a collective agreement.

RM [00:30:35] Yup.

CA [00:30:36] So, that's just unfair and inappropriate, as we were later to confirm by the court—the Supreme Court of Canada . That's what happened. I get this call from the minister of health. Colin—

RM [00:30:57] Colin Hansen?

RM [00:30:58] Colin Hansen. I said, 'Mr. Hansen, are you Christian?' And he said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Well, you know what you've just done is as if you have pissed on our Bible, and we will react that way'. I mean, it was inappropriate. I don't know why I came to wanting to say that, but I did tell him that.

RM [00:31:22] (laughter) Good.

CA [00:31:23] [unclear] it was getting back to us Hansen said Allnutt said this. So, that happened on the Monday when Campbell announced the back to work legislation and, I was in—and [unclear] got the call, had the experience of being confronted with the news and developing a reaction. I just was very clear that we would not stand for it and that we

would take this on and win. Other unions came out in support of us. They were clear that that's not appropriate, and it was unfair. There was a united front amongst all progressive people in B.C. and Canada that this was—HEU was being picked on. HEU members were being picked on.

RM [00:32:29] Your members were very strong.

CA [00:32:32] They were. Didn't have to convince about anything. They knew what they had to do, and they had to do it quickly, and we organized. We sought allies and got allies in the community. There were examples that the legislation as introduced was—Geoff Meggs had the idea of putting bananas on the podium for our press conference announcing our fight back because this was a banana republic (laughter) and those kinds of things work in delivering the message. There were battles along the way as they privatized—they went ahead. They finally came down to saying there will only be 600 layoffs. We said, 'No, we're not going to allow you to do that.' We had multinationals bid on the contracts and get contracts, and they had contracts with cleaning and housekeeping and to support services that the representative of the Socreds in Kamloops called toilet bowl cleaners.

JG [00:33:56] Yeah. The Liberals.

CA [00:33:58] Yeah. The Liberals said that.

JG [00:34:00] Yeah. The MLA in Kamloops.

CA [00:34:04] [Kevin] Krueger.

RM [00:34:05] Oh God, Krueger. Yeah. What was his first name? Clive?

JG [00:34:06] Yeah. Referred to hospital cleaners as toilet bowl cleaners. (laughter) Then we had a little toilet brush pin made for everybody to wear.

RM [00:34:17] I going to interrupt this narrative for a second to make sure I get your version of this incident. When you were picketing out in Chilliwack to stop one of these private contractors coming in and carting away the laundry or something like that, and you got arrested. So, tell me that story.

CA [00:34:39] Okay. So, K-Bro [Linen Systems] was an Alberta based company that had taken over the Cumberland laundry here, and it was given the contract, or it was about to be given the contract doing Lower Mainland laundry. The hospital's laundry, local laundry, would be cut off. We did some surveillance of the area, and we decided to put up a picket line around that. Nonunion, low paid, isolated in the Valley laundry. We were at an ex parte injunction. And then we were notified that the court case just kind of any and imposed a, an order on us to vacate. We decided not to. It was just before the B.C. Federation of Labor convention. And the place was shut down for a week. We defied the legislation or the court order, and I was arrested on the picket line.

RM [00:35:58] You were out there picketing?

CA [00:35:59] Yes. Illegally.

RM [00:36:03] What was the arrest like?

CA [00:36:06] It was civil. We tried to delay it because they moved in when the media had gone. We tried to delay it so that the media could take a picture of it. They were just pictures. There was no media present, and I was fingerprinted and held in a cell for a couple of hours. I called Jeannie from the back of the police car and said, 'I'm in jail.' She and our son made dinner for me when I got back, and they were very welcoming, very supportive.

RM [00:36:43] (laughter) Is that the first time you'd been arrested?

CA [00:36:45] Yes.

RM [00:36:45] Yeah. And you weren't the only one arrested?

JG [00:36:48] No, you were—

CA [00:36:49] I was arrested in fighting against apartheid in Toronto when the Toronto Cricket club invited the South African Cricket club to come and play, and we went on and occupied the field. I managed to get caught by the police—

JG [00:37:12] You went further—

CA [00:37:13] But I went the furthest. I got onto the field.

JG [00:37:16] Yeah.

RM [00:37:17] All those days of apartheid protest. Boy, those were fierce. You weren't the only one arrested, right? There were a couple of others.

CA [00:37:24] Yes. There was Mary LaPlante who was the secretary-treasurer and Fred Muzin and myself. There was a senior who wanted to get arrested too, and we asked him not to. We asked him to move aside.

RM [00:37:39] Did you have hay bales out there and stuff like that? Trying to stop the trucks? I mean, that was quite a thing at out in Chilliwack, the hotbed of union activism. (laughter) Yes. I guess you in some ways, it's a badge of honor to have been arrested.

CA [00:37:53] Yes.

RM [00:37:55] Were you ever charged?

CA [00:37:56] No.

RM [00:37:57] They just wanted you off the picket line.

CA [00:37:59] Yes. The prosecution makes that decision, and they decided not to. It wasn't in the public interest to pursue it.

RM [00:38:11] Did they hold you in the Chilliwack jail?

CA [00:38:13] Yes.

RM [00:38:14] What's the Chilliwack jail like? (laughter)

CA [00:38:17] It's small.

RM [00:38:20] Were you in there with Fred?

CA [00:38:21] Yes.

RM [00:38:22] Yeah. I guess you had things to talk about. (laughter) All right, let's go back to the illegal strike and so on. The B.C. Fed got involved at some point. Jim Sinclair got involved.

CA [00:38:35] He was involved from the very beginning. He was very supportive of us, and I appreciate his support. He had some tough members to deal with who were—who had suffered badly in the eighties from the Liberal policies and weren't very sympathetic to public sector workers, not realizing that public sector workers work for them and provide services to them. The private sector unions were supportive, but not overwhelmingly supportive. There is a sort of an attitude that the union that's in trouble needs to take a lot of hits before other unions come in. Otherwise it'll be too much. I appreciate that. We had other public sector unions supportive—CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees] in particular.

RM [00:39:30] Yeah, CUPE was very strong.

CA [00:39:31] Yes. GEU [BC General Employees' Union] less so. We saw that we would need their support come the crunch time and we got it from the members of those unions, but not the leadership.

RM [00:39:57] Now, just so I'm clear, there was a deal that was being—trying to be negotiated, which was basically a wage rollback in return for a limit on the number of layoffs. Was that the deal?

CA [00:40:11] Yes.

RM [00:40:12] Which was even if that was the settlement, that's still a pretty tough deal to swallow, right?

CA [00:40:17] Yes.

RM [00:40:18] Because you both lose some members, and your wages are rolled back at the same time.

CA [00:40:24] You lose the right to stop them from doing it above 600 afterwards. Just the whole—one person laid off was something that was a violation of rights. Giving them a 600 limit was a move on their part, but it wasn't significant.

RM [00:40:47] You really were between a rock and a hard place weren't you?

CA [00:40:50] Yes.

RM [00:40:51] Now, just again to set the scene. As I understand it—so negotiations took place that weekend, and there was—if there hadn't been a deal, what was going to

happen on the Monday? There was going to be quite—like almost a general strike, was there not?

CA [00:41:05] Yes.

RM [00:41:06] Could you just—do you remember exactly what was being planned or how that would work?

CA [00:41:11] Yes, it would be, led by HEU members picketing other sites—non HEU sites—and asking those members to sacrifice their day's pay, risk getting fired for not showing up for work.

RM [00:41:28] But they were for it?

CA [00:41:30] They were for it. They supported us and Campbell avowed not to negotiate with us. The 15 percent rollback was going to happen, and the contracting out was going to happen. The PPWC [Public Private Workers of Canada] in particular in Squamish had agreed that they would put up picket lines or they would have picket lines, our members would be there, and we would ask them not to cross. And they didn't. They were threatened. They knew they were going to be threatened with fines by the employer, and because this wasn't a legal picket line. That happened, and they were fined.

RM [00:42:24] There was a private sector union that wasn't, you know, was supportive. Not enough of them, maybe. (laughter)

CA [00:42:31] Well, we got a call from, one of the GEU sites saying we don't have any picketers here. 'Can you send some?' We say, 'Sure.' (laughter) We headed out early that morning, to make sure—

RM [00:42:49] Sorry, Chris, where was that?

CA [00:42:52] Where the?

JG [00:42:53] The GEU site? Where was the GEU site?

CA [00:42:55] I think it was Pearson [George Pearson Centre]

RM [00:42:57] Where?

JG [00:42:57] Pearson Hospital.

RM [00:42:59] Oh, yes. Pearson. Yes. What were—what can you say about those negotiations? There was a lot at stake.

CA [00:43:05] Yes. The BC Fed had something to lose because, aside from members rights, the BCTF [BC Teachers' Federation] was looking—considering whether or not to join the labour movement. They were going to be into some tough negotiations in the future, and they would be loathe to join if the labour movement didn't come to HEU's support. The BCTF was very strongly—leadership was very strong in support for us, and we could depend on him—on them. The same wasn't true for all the unions though. We knew that. We knew where there were weaknesses and strengths, and the employer was preparing to fire people. That's when we knew that this would come to that. Sometimes it's

in the legislation. They could fine us, but they couldn't make us—I guess they could fine employees, but that wasn't an expectation that they would do that. But there was a possibility that activists would be fired. Part of our determination of what we could do was: what can we do to keep the union strong, to survive and reverse what they're doing, and keep united. The vote to go on strike—the illegal strike—was closer than I expected in the leadership. I expected it would be unanimous. It wasn't.

RM [00:44:50] Oh, that's interesting. I didn't know that. So that's behind the scenes?

CA [00:44:53] Yes. The Federation asked, 'Well, come on, make a decision. Time's clicking.' I said, 'I know it is.' Finally, we—I came to the conclusion that we have to reach a deal. We have to settle. We were hearing rumors of the Army being mobilized in Chilliwack. I know my phone was tapped, and I'm sure they were—there were intelligence people all over the place.

JG [00:45:40] So, talk about the deal. Well, the deal—

RM [00:45:44] Well, we can get to that. I just wanted to—one last question. I mean, you must have been under enormous pressure, and you must have felt that.

CA [00:45:55] Yes.

RM [00:45:55] Can you just say—talk a bit about what that was like because you'd never—nothing prepares you for that.

CA [00:46:01] No. Well, I had a medical condition, a racing heart, and I had a racing heart episode when Campbell introduced the legislation.

RM [00:46:12] Yup.

CA [00:46:14] And I said, I'm going to enter this disabled, but I recovered from that and came through it. I was at the Hotel Victoria alone that night and thinking about the fact that I was done, and I wasn't 100 percent, and that disturbed me. We had had a contract deal which had—which we took to the employer, but the union rejected it. The union members rejected it. We took a deal which had limited—a limit on contracting out and 15 percent wage rollback in it because we wanted to get rid of the layoff provision. We wanted that eliminated. We'd take the 15 percent and then go back to work. We reached a deal that had no reprisals against any worker for fighting, for being an activist during this period. That was hard to get, and I wasn't sure that the members would be prepared to go on an unlimited general strike or HEU strike at the risk of being fired because—or at the risk of coming to the aid of those who were fired.

JG [00:47:56] Well, Campbell threatened to fire 10,000 workers on that Sunday. Remember?

CA [00:48:05] No.

JG [00:48:05] Yeah, I do. If the strike continued, he was going to—they were going to fire 10,000 people.

CA [00:48:13] Okay, I was involved in negotiations and not the—

RM [00:48:17] But Sinclair was on the same wavelength as you in making that decision, right?

CA [00:48:21] Yes.

RM [00:48:22] That, in spite of everything, you're just going to have to call it off.

CA [00:48:26] Yes.

RM [00:48:27] Talk about the fact that it was voted on by bargaining.

CA [00:48:30] Yes. The bargaining committee voted on it and accepted it. They went, they made the decision.

RM [00:48:42] So, it wasn't just your decision?

CA [00:48:43] No. Definitely not. I was doing everything according to what they wanted. I'd have a recommendation to them. They would reject it or accept it and we would move on. They voted to go on strike. As I said, it wasn't unanimous.

RM [00:49:05] The decision was announced on that Sunday night, and it's fair to say I think, a lot of people weren't very happy—.

CA [00:49:11] That's right.

RM [00:49:12] With that decision. There was a real reaction. Do you want to just talk a bit about that?

CA [00:49:16] Yes. There was a real reaction. People set up picket lines at our office, and our staff refused to cross them, which was a disaster because they were cut off from being connected to their union. There was confusion for the whole day and the next day. I persuaded—I crossed the picket line because it wasn't a picket line, and it was a protest line. They needed to have staff to go in to protect the files of the office and to get people in touch with each other. It was a wild time.

RM [00:49:53] (laughter) It was—not the kind of time you thought you'd sign on for. (laughter).

CA [00:49:59] No. The decision to accept the deal and go back to work—I don't know it was, more than one—a margin of one.

RM [00:50:10] It was what?

CA [00:50:11] It was more than a margin of one.

RM [00:50:12] You mean the vote.

CA [00:50:13] The vote. I recommended to the bargaining committee, who in turn recommended to the provincial executive, that we return to work under the circumstances of no one gets fired or disciplined for anything during the strike and that we accept the—obey the law.

RM [00:50:39] Yup. Well, it's easy to be out on the street, you know, but then when you have to make that decision—it was the same kind of thing that Art Kube went through, you know. This is great. Everyone's there. But what are the implications? What about day six? What about day seven? As you're talking about, all sorts of people could have been fired. And then really, unfortunately, that was tough for you in the union, right? I mean, you lost your job over this. Is that fair to say?

CA [00:51:09] Yeah, I went on vacation to rest. Well, first of all, I was faced with a staff occupation of the office because I wasn't—because I'd let them agree to go back to work. They—the leadership decided to do that, and I was part of that leadership. I obeyed the leadership.

JG [00:51:37] Yeah. We got a phone call when we were camping with our son in our VW van on Hornby, I think. We're in the ferry line up, and Chris's phone went off, and they told him over the phone that he'd been fired.

RM [00:51:58] Boy. When you look back on that, I mean, it was just an incredible time. The HEU did survive, you know, to fight on. And we all know that there was that incredible ending with the Supreme Court, which in a sense, vindicated the fight back. But you must have felt you were scapegoated for everything, right? And it was really the fault of the Campbell government, not Chris Allnutt's fault. Did you feel bitter about that, or how do you look at it?

CA [00:52:29] I love HEU members.

RM [00:52:32] Sorry, say that again.

CA [00:52:33] I love HEU members.

RM [00:52:34] Yeah. They're special. What a what an honour for you to have led them for so long. I mean, you look back on that, that's with pride, right?

CA [00:52:48] Yup.

RM [00:52:49] Best job in the world for—up until the end? (laughter).

CA [00:52:52] Yeah.

JG [00:52:53] Yeah.

RM [00:52:54] Yeah. Well, you know, it is a special union. HEU, when I was a labour reporter, even under Jack Gerow. You know—

JG [00:53:06] I worked for HEU—

RM [00:53:08] The membership was always great.

JG [00:53:09] Yeah. Before Chris did, under Jack Gerow. That was certainly a great membership to work with.

RM [00:53:19] There was always divisions, you know, but part of the reasons there was divisions is people cared about their unions, and they weren't afraid to stand up at conventions and speak their mind.

CA [00:53:32] They [unclear] us.

RM [00:53:32] Yeah. Chris, thank you so much for going through this because I know that it's not—I mean, you know, that was a real nut grinder. I mean there's just no—but, and I guess we're forgetting too—like but—because you know we had to—couldn't just go on and on about it—but the fightback by the HEU, I think that's one reason the members were disappointed because the fight back had been so strong. You know, under your leadership and not caving in, and taking the fight and preserving the illegal strike. I mean, that's under your leadership too, right?

CA [00:54:11] And preserving the support of the public and the members in the union afterwards.

RM [00:54:16] Yes. And then the union got fined.

CA [00:54:21] One hundred thousand dollars a day.

RM [00:54:23] Yeah. I mean, if that strike had gone on, it might have been the end of the union. Those are tough decisions. There's no textbook that you read that will give you the answer what to do you know. So good for you man.

JG [00:54:39] But that's what leadership is.

RM [00:54:41] That's what leadership is.

JG [00:54:43] Making those tough decisions and standing by them when people start to criticize you for making the decision.

RM [00:54:54] Yeah. It's not easy.

JG [00:54:57] Instead of going, (pointing her finger) 'It's their fault. It's not mine.'

RM [00:55:00] Anything else you'd like to say, Chris?

CA [00:55:02] Well, I want to talk about that.

RM [00:55:03] Okay.

CA [00:55:06] One part of me is sad that I was fired because I wasn't there to hear the lessons that were learned from that. When I think about, I really don't want to hear them shitting all over me. I didn't want to hear the scapegoating, but I wanted to be there to have people discover their— what the stakes (doorbell rings).

NF [00:55:37] Popular guy.

RM [00:55:38] To discover what?

CA [00:55:40] Their strengths were, what the weaknesses were, what we could have done better.

JG [00:55:43] The lessons.

CA [00:55:44] The lessons, and that I wasn't part of because I was seen as—well, I was—the vote was one vote.

RM [00:56:06] Okay, we can call this. And I was just going to say, you know, it just it just occurred to me the similarities between what you were faced with and what Art Kube was faced with. Well, I'm the labour movement for Operation Solidarity, and they all got, as you know, very criticized. Jack Munro got scapegoated for that, in a sense, because they were—they all voted for it. They all were, rightly or wrongly, but they were all—I mean, you talk about your bargaining committee. They voted for it. You know, that's all forgotten, and it became Chris Allnutt. Whereas, you know, not to defend Jack Munro—we all have our opinions of Jack—but on that particular case, and he was strong to go back, let's be clear, but it was a unanimous vote by the BC Fed's executive, you know, and, so it's tough, but you led a great union for how many years?

CA [00:57:08] Six.

JG [00:57:11] You end up just in for six years as the SBM [Secretary-Business Manager]?

CA [00:57:14] I think so.

JG [00:57:16] Well, our next door neighbor was a GP, and he told me after Chris was fired that the union probably did us a favor because they added ten years to Chris's life.

RM [00:57:31] (laughter) Well, sometimes that, you know, you look back and something that was tough at that time, but then you think, well, you know.

JG [00:57:38] Well, and then he got the job working as a spokesperson for the environmental movement on the Great Bear Rainforest.

RM [00:57:45] Yeah, which is a great project.

CA [00:57:48] Yeah, it was and it's a great movement.

RM [00:57:51] And you're giving all this credit to Gordon Campbell for it. (laughter)

CA [00:57:53] Yeah. I got up and shook his hand because he was a champion of the great bear.

RM [00:57:59] He was. What a weird guy he was, you know.

CA [00:58:02] It's like Mulroney.

RM [00:58:04] Yeah, some good things, but a lot of bad things—but some good things.

CA [00:58:09] Okay. After this, the union had a choice. He could abandon the people who are laid off. And, if they came back to work, call them scabs—the people that were privatized. That's what the British labour movement did. They didn't organize the workers

who had been fired, privatized or laid off. We did. We're continuing to grow with those members, and they still voted to recertify with us, even though they were hired back at \$10 an hour. That takes a lot of courage.

RM [00:58:53] Yeah, it's been a great chapter actually that organization. Then as we all know, they'd organize and then they'd switch to another contractor, you know, which the NDP has put a stop to all that. But it's just reprehensible what went on. You can't even make it up. It's like, you know, that's Banana Republic. It was just unbelievable what the government did. These private contractors, you know, organized—.

CA [00:59:21] They were going to teach HEU a lesson. They're going to teach people that they felt entitled to things they're not entitled to. But we proved them wrong.

RM [00:59:32] Right on. Okay. Anything else?

CA [00:59:35] No.

RM [00:59:37] Then the great Supreme Court decision.

RM [00:59:39] Yes.

RM [00:59:41] It's funny to think that had a good result, but that decision by the Supreme Court of Canada now stands as this hallmark of charter rights for all unions across Canada.

RM [00:59:54] Yes.

RM [00:59:55] It's because of the HEU.

RM [00:59:57] That's exactly what prevented the Ontario premier from imposing his deal.

RM [01:00:04] Exactly right, and even in Saskatchewan, and these places.

RM [01:00:08] That's why Pol—what's the Conservative leader?

JG [01:00:14] Poilievre.

RM [01:00:14] Poilievre wants to invoke the notwithstanding clause.

RM [01:00:18] You're exactly right.

RM [01:00:18] He doesn't want to keep people in prison, he wants to free up—

RM [01:00:21] Yup.

RM [01:00:22] Business for private profiteers.

RM [01:00:24] Yup, you got it. That's exactly it. It's going to be scary times. All right. We could talk forever. (laughter)