

## Ep 7 Bea Zucco's Fight for Silicosis Compensation

Transcribed by Patricia Wejr

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:31] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a monthly podcast designed to shed light on British Columbia's rich labour history. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. Later this month, April 28th, to be exact, is Canada's annual day of mourning, a day set aside to remember that tens of thousands of Canadians who have died over the years on the job. They went to work and they didn't come home. Of course, industrial accidents are not the only risk that workers face. Occupational diseases brought on by hazardous workplace conditions have also claimed a terrible toll. One of the worst has been silicosis, a coating of the lungs by deadly silica dust inhaled by generations of hard rock miners. To mark this month's day of mourning, we bring you the story of Bea Zucco, a miner's wife, ordinary in many ways, yet absolutely extraordinary in her determination to see justice prevail and secure a WCB pension for her husband who was stricken with silicosis. You will hear directly from Bea Zucco herself, looking back on her life at the age of 90, and another voice telling us what she said at the time.

**Music: 'Silicosis Blues' written and sung by Josh White** [00:02:11] I said silicosis. It made a mighty bad break of me. O silicosis made a mighty bad break of me? You robbed me of my youth and health, all you brought for me was grief. Now silicosis, you're a dirty robber and a thief. O silicosis, dirty robber and a thief. You robbed me of my right to live...

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:03:02] Bea Zucco was born in 1922 to a third generation pioneer family near Grand Forks. By the age of 11, she was already taking on a full share of duties to keep their hardscrabble farm afloat. When she was 16, she met a tall, handsome, hard rock miner, 12 years her senior. In a presentation to the Boundary Historical Society in 2013, Bea remembered those long ago days.

**Bea Zucco** [00:03:32] We were settling up the North Fork that I met Jack Zucco. And I used to go down and clean Happy Mulcair's house who was living in a [unclear] house. And I would go down and help him clean his house. And then we'd start playing cards. And then my husband and another friend of his, they came over and then we were playing four people instead of two. Anyways, then he walked me home. And that was the beginning. And I don't know, I suppose it was maybe a year, year and a half later that we got married. We got married in this very building, at the [unclear] office by a Mr. Harrison, who was the government agent. And I think it took all of three minutes.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:04:39] So began her life as a miner's wife, travelling with Jack from mine to mine, from Bralorne to the Red Rose Mine outside Hazelton, to the Fairmont Mine near Oliver. And finally to Salmo in the West Kootenays, living in unwinterized tents and log cabins, trudging through the snow to hitch a ride to the small local hospital for the birth of her first child. Of course, for B.C. miner families in those days, this was nothing remarkable. It was a way of life. But unbeknownst to Bea and her husband, his years of breathing in silica dust underground were taking a toll. He began feeling weak and short of breath. In 1949, in Salmo, they saw the doctor.

**Bea Zucco** [00:05:31] We weren't in the house very long. Jack got sick again. So we finally went to the doctor and we saw him in Salmo. They sent him directly to Nelson and I don't know, a couple days later, I drove to Nelson, and that's when he told me that he had TB.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:05:54] Tuberculosis was not uncommon in those days. And Jack was soon sent to a sanatorium. But other doctors thought that Jack might also have the dreaded miners' disease, silicosis. They advised him to make a claim to the Workers' Compensation Board for a pension. He did. The Board's X-rays found no evidence of silicosis in his lungs and turned him down.

**Music: 'Silicosis Blues' written and sung by Josh White** [00:06:22] I was there digging a tunnel for six bits a day. I was there digging that tunnel for six bits a day. Didn't know I was digging my own grave, silicosis eat my lungs away. I says, Mama, Mama, Mama, cool my fevered head...

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:06:58] This was not a surprise. The Workers' Compensation Board was set up 30 years earlier to provide financial support for workers and their families in the event of workplace illness or death. But over the years, the WCB had developed into an unfeeling bureaucracy with a cold, cold heart. Instead of being on the side of workers, the Board became a total stickler for the rules. If there was the slightest reason to reject or reduce a worker's claim, they did so. While workers suffered, they pinched pennies.

**Music: 'Cold, cold heart' written and sung by Hank Williams** [00:07:36] ... your lonesome past keeps us so far apart. Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart...

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:07:51] Well, let me give you an example from my own family. The father of my Auntie Irene was also a hard rock miner. In his case, the WCB did accept his claim for silicosis. However, the Board, in its wisdom, did not feel he should be compensated for the few years he spent mining in Idaho. So they carefully reduced each of his pension checks by 2/15, which the board estimated was the amount of foreign silica dust in his lungs that they felt they should not have to pay for. And get this, they also applied the formula to his expenses, travelling from the Fraser Valley into Vancouver for medical appointments. Yep. Compensation for each bus ticket he bought was also reduced by 2/15. So you can see the problem. For Jack Zucco, the problem was the Board's insistence that silicosis had to show up in X-rays before they would grant a pension. But the presence of tuberculosis in the lungs often obscured evidence of silicosis. Jack and Bea went to several specialists. All said he had silicosis, but the Board continued to say no. Finally, they pooled their meagre savings and went to see a lung specialist across the border in Bellingham. He, too confirmed that Jack was suffering from silicosis in addition to TB. Once again, they submitted this diagnosis to the Compensation Board. Once again, the Board said no. As the man she loved wasted away at the George Pearson Sanatorium in Vancouver, with four kids and very little money, Bea Zucco said to herself, enough is enough. It was time to go public.

**Bea Zucco** [00:09:55] That's when I decided -- we were living in New West -- and so I decided to go and sit on the Compensation steps. I took the three kids with me and we sat on the outside steps and then we moved inside.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:10:12] On February 23rd, 1956, Bea Zucco took three of her kids with her down to the headquarters of the Workers' Compensation Board and sat down on the front steps. They wore big 'on strike' signs. Later, they moved into the lobby where they munched cheese and lettuce sandwiches. The kids kept busy with comics and colouring books. When reporters showed up, Bea told them.

**Lucie McNeil, voicing Bea Zucco's statement** [00:10:39] I want the regulations so that if a man works in a mine, as my husband did and then gets T.B., it should be accepted that T.B. was probably brought on by silicosis. We're here to stay until I have a satisfactory answer.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:10:54] A few days later, she took the overnight ferry with the kids to Victoria and staged another protest, this one on the steps of the legislature. One daughter worked on her homework. A younger daughter cuddled her doll. Her son played with his yo-yo, while Bea knitted and answered questions from the media, who swarmed all over the story. Touched by her pluck, Social Credit Labour Minister, Lyle Wicks, promised yet another review of her case.

**Bea Zucco** [00:11:24] And of course then they had a commission, whatever that is, I don't know what it is. They had a big commission. I imagine they got together with a cup of coffee and said, do we or don't we. And they said, we don't. So that was it.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:11:37] Yet another no. But Bea was far from through. In April, she farmed out her kids, sold her diamond wedding ring and set out on a tour of mining communities across the province in what she called her 'car for crusade'. Accepting donations along the way, she campaigned to raise awareness about the need to change the regulations. In September, she returned to the steps of the legislature. This time, she stayed for nine days. She had a sign that read: 'the score -- one sick husband: TB and silicosis. One mother: B.C. Product, four children: B.C. products. Seven years of struggle: zero compensation. One B.C. Disgrace'. With her parka, moccasins, small portable radio, thermos of coffee and distinct features, Bea became a cause celebre across the country. She spent her time on the steps reading newspapers, writing letters and knitting. She told reporters, "I've got lots of time. I haven't much of anything, but I have lots of that". After nine chilly days, Bea ended her sit-down, calling the government's response a bucket of whitewash. In the meantime, with Jack continuing to waste away, she had to scrounge out a living. She sold cosmetics, knitwear and other products door to door. For a time, she was the first woman cab driver in Kitimat. To help care for her four kids, she sometimes had to rely on the kindness of strangers and relatives. In June of 1957, she lost another round. This time it was an independent board of referees set up by the WCB that concluded there was still no evidence of silicosis in Jack Zucco's lungs. Claim denied for the sixth time. In early April of 1958, with Bea holding his hand, Jack Zucco, by then weighing less than 100 pounds, passed away. His years of suffering were over. Looking back 55 years later, Bea summed up all their rejections into a single narrative.

**Bea Zucco** [00:14:09] No. Every time I did something, there was always another commission. Then I took my husband out of san, we drove down to Bellingham. How I made the arrangements, I don't know. But anyway, we went to a doctor there. Maybe he was a specialist, I don't know. Anyway, he took x-rays, and I have a letter from him that states that my husband definitely had silicosis. And, of course, they paid no attention to that. Then I went to another doctor in Vancouver who who didn't care about the medical association because he owned a lot of Vancouver. And I wrote to him. He x-rayed Jack and he said he definitely has silicosis. I got a letter from him and still nothing. So I don't know. I think that's about all I did. And then eventually he passed away.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:15:31] Yet ironically, in death, Jack was able to leave something to his grieving widow and children, his ravaged lungs. Now, there could be a private autopsy. And lo and behold, the autopsy found unmistakable evidence of silicosis. He and Bea

had been right all along. The WCB capitulated, but only after ordering a second autopsy to confirm the finding. In a letter to Bea Zucco, WCB Chairman, J. Edwin Eades intoned.

**John Mabbott voicing Eades letter** [00:16:11] After careful review of all reports and examinations and discussion with our silicosis referee, it has been decided that your husband should have been entitled during his lifetime to compensation, from March 16th, 1950, being the date of the first examination.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:16:37] Bea received a retroactive cheque that headlines referred to as \$13,000. In keeping with the WCB itemizing everything to the last penny, however, it was actually \$12,998.87. She was also granted a monthly pension of \$75, plus \$25 a month for each of her four kids. Down to her last \$30, Bea went out and bought her first white hat in ten years and put a down payment on a trailer. At the same time, Bea told reporters it was a hollow victory.

**Lucie McNeil, voicing Bea Zucco's statement** [00:17:17] I was afraid Jack would have to die before he could prove he had silicosis. I think how much happier this occasion would be if Jack were alive to know about it.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:17:27] An editorial in the Vancouver Sun applauded what the newspaper called Bea Zucco's long, tough, uphill struggle.

**John Mabbott voicing Vancouver Sun editorial** [00:17:37] Bea Zucco can't be compensated for years of grief and misery, but she may derive some satisfaction from knowing that her fellow citizens regard her as a woman of heroic character. Her victory shows that there is hope for the individual who has the courage and the persistence to tangle with bureaucracy.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:17:58] Nine months later, Bea Zucco's victory was complete. The Workers' Compensation Act was changed so that silicosis claims would no longer be based exclusively on x-rays and suffering miners like Jack Zucco would now have, finally, the benefit of the doubt.

**Bea Zucco** [00:18:17] And another thing that I'm very proud of is, our case is in the law books in B.C., not federally. But it's nice to see your name in the law books.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:18:33] Later that year when a writer for a national magazine asked Bea how she kept going when decision after decision went against her.

**Lucie McNeil, voicing Bea Zucco's statement** [00:18:43] People would say to me, listen, an ordinary Joe doesn't stand a chance. You should know that. I never believed it. I would get quieter and quieter outside and madder inside. And I'd say to myself, they just can't do this to ordinary people. Not in Canada. I know they can't.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:19:04] It should be pointed out that Bea did receive some help from the labour movement, particularly the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Union, which offered legal help and fundraised. At one point, the union showed the powerful miners movie, Salt of the Earth, at the historic union owned, now demolished Pender Auditorium. But mostly it was her own lonely quest. Bea Zucco died in Grand Forks in 2018 at the age of 95. All these years later, her valiant fight continues to resound as an example of how one determined woman can bring the most unyielding of bureaucracies to heel and change the law.

**Music: 'Silicosis Blues' written and sung by Josh White** [00:19:49] Take me away from my baby, it sure done wrecked my soul. Now I tell all my buddies, tell all my friends you see. Now tell all my buddies, tell all my friends you see. I'm goin' way up yonder. Please don't weep for me.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:20:24] Thanks to Lucie McNeil for providing the 1950s voice of Bea Zucco. And to John Mabbott, who was WCB Chairman J. Edwin Eades and the Vancouver Sun editorial writer. The song Silicosis Is Killing Me, is by the great Josh White. The clips of Bea Zucco are from a recording by Les Johnson for the Boundary Historical Society. It was one of a series of living books events that took place early in 2013, hosted by Gallery Two in Grand Forks. Teachers and union educators can download a lesson plan on the Zucco's Fight for Justice at [Labourheritagecentre.ca/Zucco](http://Labourheritagecentre.ca/Zucco). And finally, thanks to Bailey Garden and Patricia Wejr of the podcast crew for all their work and help in putting this together. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next month, On the Line.

**Theme Music:** [00:21:38]