

**Interview: Shan O'Hara (SO)**  
**Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)**  
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**Transcription: Cathy Walker**

**RM** [00:00:09] Here we are with Shan O'Hara, lifelong carpenter.

**SO** [00:00:10] Well, actually, I'm a floorlayer, a member of the carpenters union.

**RM** [00:00:12] Well, that's the same, surely? Or you're a joiner? Shan I'd like to go back to early days and I noticed the tragedy that happened in your family, when you were just a kid, when your father who was a carpenter— well, you talk about it.

**SO** [00:00:33] He wasn't a carpenter. He actually worked for many years on James Island for the CIL plant, where they made dynamite and explosives. When they closed down, he started working at Yarrow shipyard. He was kind of a scaffolder, stage builder sort of thing. That was where it happened, in September 1963. He was throwing some staging down and it caught in his coveralls and took him with it. He did a header into the wharf and into the water, and didn't survive it. I was just about 12 years old.

**RM** [00:01:11] An industrial accident.

**SO** [00:01:13] Yeah. Industrial accident. Now, it's not likely that would happen because we have so much in fall arrest and railings but then it was just stand up there and do it yourself.

**RM** [00:01:26] Went to work one day and didn't come home.

**SO** [00:01:29] That's right.

**RM** [00:01:31] What kind of an impact did it, I mean?

**SO** [00:01:34] It's interesting because I have two older sisters and a mother and it sort of made me be what we then we called the man of the family. That gave me a little different outlook on life, it's fragile. I think that was an asset for me because I learned how to take care of things and look after things and just keep on going. You miss a lot of stuff when you lose a parent like that. He never got to see me get married, have kids, have my grandkids, all those sort of things. It's kind of like something is stolen from you. That's only a few of the tragedies that people have in life.

**RM** [00:02:30] Was he a union guy?

**SO** [00:02:32] Yeah. He was. When he was on James Island, he was the vice-president of a union that they had there. I can't for the life of me now, remember what their union was or find out. I used to go to some of their meetings. A fellow named Bob Barry was the president. I think that the meetings were somewhat clandestine because they were at Bob Barry's house, which is now the Bird of Paradise out in Saanich. We did evening meetings I would go 8 or 9 years old and hang around while he had the meetings so that was my first introduction to unions.

**RM** [00:03:15] At an early age.

**SO** [00:03:16] At an early age but I didn't know much about it. Of course, shortly after that he was gone, so not much to talk about. I guess that was the first part of me having some inclination. I know that he had been somewhat concerned about the government looking into what they were doing. Those years there was a lot of concern about communism and unions were considered to be somewhat communistic.

**RM** [00:03:50] And some of them were.

**SO** [00:03:51] Yeah. Many were, wasn't without reason. I remember there being some concern about that with my mum.

**RM** [00:04:05] Was your dad a communist?

**SO** [00:04:06] No, no, no, he was an Irishman. (laughter)

**RM** [00:04:10] You could be both.

**SO** [00:04:11] Could. That's right. No, he was an Irishman. He left [RM: O'Hara, of course] Ireland when he was about 17 years old and went to join the Royal Air Force and never made it back to Ireland. What they call the Irish wake is when the young guys would leave Ireland and they never made it back. It was kind of sad for him.

**RM** [00:04:41] I've got one question. Where's James Island?

**SO** [00:04:45] James Island is an island that is just off the east side of Sidney. It's a long island. It's now owned, privately owned, by a really rich guy from Seattle.

**RM** [00:05:06] Maybe I've read about it.

**SO** [00:05:06] Yeah, it's a nice little island.

**RM** [00:05:09] There was a CIL plant on James Island?

**SO** [00:05:12] A CIL plant on James Island for many years. I think that the plant had started in Nanaimo and it was too dangerous because too many people around or something blew up. Then they moved to James Island.

**RM** [00:05:26] It's okay for the workers to work there.

**SO** [00:05:28] It was okay for the workers. My wife lived on James Island. Her father also worked there. She lived on James Island with her family, seven kids, until they were about 13 or 14. Then all the families had to be moved off and all the houses removed off because it was deemed to be too dangerous. It was interesting. He'd be up at 4:30 the morning. Somebody would pick him up and take him to work. Lunch kit had to have tape on everything blacked out. You couldn't have anything reflective.

**RM** [00:06:02] It's a funny connection you have with your wife, though.

**SO** [00:06:05] It's interesting because we were both born in a little hospital in Sidney called Resthaven Hospital. It's no longer a hospital. It's a condominium. We were both born there

and our fathers knew each other — the Legion in Sidney. Her father's a little younger. I think my older sister maybe even babysat my wife one time. When we got older and became teenagers, we didn't really know each other until we met when we were teenagers and got together and 50-some-odd years later, we're still married.

**RM** [00:06:47] Something worked. Now let's go talk about your work history, Shan, when you first entered the workforce.

**SO** [00:06:54] My first was mowing lawns in the Brentwood Bay Autocourt because we were short on income my father being gone. That was about 12 or 13. That was my first introduction I was working for a bit of a living, but then school. Actually my first real job was with the BC Forest Service, Experimental Station. A friend of mine made a connection there and got me working. We worked up in the Sooke Hills and that was quite good, worked there for a few years. I worked in Campbell River as a cook as a young guy, 17, 18 years old. It was kind of neat with a crew of guys up in Strathcona Park. Then they moved on to the mainland. I didn't want to do that so I started working in Victoria, as a plasterer's helper, making stucco for houses. Everything was stucco in those days. Yes. That was a hard job. I was a big guy and strong.

**RM** [00:08:13] Was that nonunion?

**SO** [00:08:14] It was nonunion somewhat, but it wasn't long before the main company that I got a job with was union and I became a member of the Labourers' Union. That was the first time that I joined a union, was the Labourers' Union.

**RM** [00:08:29] And they represented the plasterers.

**SO** [00:08:31] They represented the plasterers. There was the Plasterers' Union and then there was the Labourers' Union. I was a labourer because I was the guy making the cement and getting it up to them. That was my first introduction. Don Strank, called Stretch was the BA at the time, a big guy, a really good guy. Then I moved on from that to installing floors, carpet laying. I was working on a job downtown. Making stucco is really hard on your hands. You're working with lime, cement and water and sand. You're sore. It's a dirty, hard job. A fellow I knew came out of the building all dressed nice and warm and said, 'Hi, what are you doing?' He said, 'I'm a floor layer inside. My carpet is nice and warm and cozy and safe.' Off I went and started working with that.

**RM** [00:09:46] Did you need a ticket or apprenticeship?

**SO** [00:09:48] I did. I got hooked up with another company that was a union company. I went into the union because I knew about unions. I went to the union hall and became represented by the union. They signed me up in an apprenticeship and I started work.

**RM** [00:10:06] This was the Carpenters Union.

**SO** [00:10:07] This was the Carpenters Union, Local 1519 in Victoria. A guy named Rick Farrell signed me up, great guy. I was working at that point in time for a company called Donald Floors out of Vancouver. I went through my apprenticeship with them and did quite well. Then, Donald Floors moved on and I moved into onto a company called Island Floors here in Victoria, just up the street here on Denison, as a supervisor and main guy for them. Looked after a couple jobs in the flooring company industry. I obtained a certificate, went to B.C. vocational school in Vancouver which was a three year apprenticeship. I'm a

certified floor covering installer. What happened then was the provincial government began to make some changes to the labour codes.

**RM** [00:11:20] What year was this?

**SO** [00:11:22] It was probably in the early 80s, late 70s.

**RM** [00:11:29] We're talking Social Credit.

**SO** [00:11:30] Social Credit. Bill Bennett Junior. I can't remember what the bill was. I think it was Bill 19, but what effectively it did it said that a union company could start another union company with a similar name, but wouldn't be signatory to union agreements. With the floor covering industry, which has always been a subcontracting type of business, a piecework business, all of a sudden all the different stores say, listen, everybody's getting out of this. We got out of it. That became a situation where Island Floors said to me, we can't have you working as an employee anymore, but we will give you a subcontract business. Okay.

**RM** [00:12:17] Sorry, I didn't follow that. Why couldn't you work as an employee anymore?

**SO** [00:12:22] Because they were—

**RM** [00:12:23] Starting one of these dummy companies.

**SO** [00:12:26] Dummy company. Island Floors, which was union agreement.

**RM** [00:12:29] Suddenly they were nonunion.

**SO** [00:12:31] It was put on the shelf and Island Floors Industries was a nonunion company and only hiring subcontracted— subcontractors.

**RM** [00:12:46] They didn't have any actual employees then?

**SO** [00:12:48] No, they did office staff and sales, but not for installing.

**SO** [00:12:56] I became a company called Best Floors. Bernie was a guy that I'd gone to school within Vancouver. He was also a certified journeyman and one of the salesman sons named Tom was there. Bernie, Shan and Tom so Best Floors. We started a company, did okay for a while. Things were tough. In that business, you're bidding against all the other guys that you would normally have worked with. It's the lowest common denominator.

**RM** [00:13:33] The union could do nothing about this, right?

**SO** [00:13:35] The union couldn't and so it was a problem. I actually met with our representative then, Heinz Corn, who was a great guy, talked about me signing an agreement, and I read it over and I said 'I can't. If I signed this, I'd have to either cheat on you or I couldn't work.' I said 'I'll do work. I won't do any union work. If you got any union work, I'll stay away from that.' That was where we went, went for quite a while with that. Things started getting really tough for us. I had a bit of a union affiliation. I came back to the union and said, floorlayers are having a tough time in Victoria. We should see about

getting things going again. The answer was, look, there's not enough guys, it's economically not right.

**RM** [00:14:32] It was a recession I think, in those days. It wasn't a great economy.

**SO** [00:14:35] It was kind of a recession. We can't help you much. What happened was then we, with the help of a few of the floorlayers, we started a thing called the Guild. We couldn't start a union because of the labour code but we started a guild, which is much the same.

**RM** [00:14:51] It's like the old medieval guilds?

**SO** [00:14:53] Kind of like that. That's right. I progressed to become the president of that to try and make gains. We made a few gains. We got all the employers together and said 'we're doing this' and stuff.

**RM** [00:15:08] Did you function as a union?

**SO** [00:15:09] We functioned as a union, but not as a union because we couldn't.

**RM** [00:15:13] Didn't have certifications.

**SO** [00:15:14] We didn't have any certifications so we wouldn't be recognized, but as a guild, you can still do it. I became president, and we made a few inroads. We tried to raise the unit prices all across the board.

**RM** [00:15:30] The members of the guild were these all these subcontractors?

**SO** [00:15:33] Subcontractors, individuals. They knew that I had a union background.

**RM** [00:15:40] This is interesting. I never heard of this.

**SO** [00:15:44] We started to get somewhere. We told all the contractors, all the stores in the city that we would want to raise the prices on a certain date. I delivered all this information in a package to them. They wanted to meet and the strategy was we asked for way more than what we thought we would get. They came back and we got a raise. The guild was going somewhere. We started having meetings and getting people joined up and started making a bit of noise but it became a problem. These guys would come to me and say, 'Listen, Shan, I'm sorry but I got to take this job for a little cheaper.'

**RM** [00:16:27] Yes, exactly.

**SO** [00:16:29] There's 'they're starving' stuff. During that time, there was a floor covering show in Vancouver. I attended and knew some of the people from the Local 1541 Floorlayers Union in Vancouver, Bill Kessel, mainly and Mike Hodson because I'd worked with them before when I was a union member as an apprentice. They became aware of me. I think I became a concern that we were going somewhere because we were going to try and expand. What happened next was meetings with the local and stuff, Heinz. Then they offered me a job, six months to become an organizer. I think that they thought, if they took me out of the guild—

**RM** [00:17:26] Yeah, are we ever clever.

**SO** [00:17:30] Yeah. That's right.

**RM** [00:17:32] These guy's causing this problem, so buy him off.

**SO** [00:17:35] I said, okay, that's good. Let me try.

**SO** [00:17:38] I went and worked for the Carpenters Union, that was back in September 1989. My object was to try and get the floorlayers going, but also to learn about the Carpenters Union. I seemed to fit in pretty good. At the end of six months, they wanted—

**RM** [00:18:01] Who were you organizing?

**SO** [00:18:02] I was trying to organize carpenters and floorlayers, trying to get them—

**RM** [00:18:07] Where were you based? On the Island?

**SO** [00:18:09] Yeah, it was just on 2750 Quadra Street here, where the Union Hall is. It was—

**RM** [00:18:15] Were you trying to organize your old guild pals?

**SO** [00:18:17] Yep. Tried to organize some of them and got some of them signed up but companies, to work and sign an agreement, they were in the same boat that I was in when they asked me to sign. It was like, there's not enough work. At that time, if you were signed as a carpenter senior contractor, you meant you also were signed to only use union drywallers or floorlayers. It made it kind of difficult. That continued on and I was offered the position of a salaried position and, there we go from there.

**RM** [00:19:05] This was a time too, when under Social Credit. Basically just about everything used to be union construction.

**SO** [00:19:14] It was.

**RM** [00:19:14] Then they lost the Expo fight. Kerkhoff and all these nonunion contractors came in, the ICBA. It was just like night and day, wasn't it?

**SO** [00:19:26] It was a really a paradigm shift, from things being pretty good. If you worked in a school, you'd be a union contractor. What was attractive to me was look at pensions, benefits, health care, stability, fairness. Those things were important. All of a sudden when you're out on your ear and you're a subcontractor and you're having to do everything. It's a quick learn about business and so that needed to change. It was a tough time. We had a general strike then. I remember I was marching down Blanchard Street, down the government. There was a lot going on. It's kind of a little fuzzy to me now after all these years, but that was interesting.

**RM** [00:20:20] The unions lost so much more clout. Used to be about 85% union. And then it was like 50-50 or even less.

**SO** [00:20:29] Oh yeah, even less.

**RM** [00:20:30] Deliberate government policy by the Social Credit.

**SO** [00:20:32] It was deliberate government policy, and again, some of the concern about the communism was a big concern and about how much we were doing to devastate the economy. I think, they wanted to have lower prices, lower wage rates. Everybody gets into these modes and so that was what happened.

**RM** [00:21:02] But you were still organizing.

**SO** [00:21:05] Still organizing.

**RM** [00:21:06] Who were you organizing?

**SO** [00:21:07] I was organizing carpenters mostly.

**RM** [00:21:12] Like job to job?

**SO** [00:21:13] Job to job. Go on job sites and try and talk to carpenters and floorlayers. The floorlayers became tougher and tougher for me because I did not have a company to offer them to go to work for, because everything had been gone. I was trying to form new ones. The only company that we could really offer was Donald Floors, which I'd done my apprenticeship through, and they weren't doing much in Victoria at all. It was trying to organize some of these small companies into being union companies and trying that way but it was difficult. The union realized that you got to kind of pay your way. By organizing more carpenters, bringing more members in, dues paying, we switched me more into that. That was an interesting thing to do.

**RM** [00:22:09] Were you a good organizer?

**SO** [00:22:11] I think so. I was determined, but, mostly just talking to guys, as you probably understand, I like to talk, but lots of times guys didn't really understand what was going on. They were busy hammering nails and building things. They need to talk about what the future is going to be, and carpenters don't think much about that. They just think about getting to work every day, getting home and having dinner or a beer, whatever the case may be, so to talk to them about what we need to do and how that goes together. I think that I kind of have being union in my genes. Let's make things we all stick together.

**RM** [00:23:02] Some of them were probably past members of the Carpenters Union, sticking their union card in their pocket and going to work for nonunion because they needed the work.

**SO** [00:23:09] They were. They had to be. But also too, the union was at fault as well in that time. Unions were exclusive. In other words, if you wanted to join the union, you probably needed to be somebody's nephew or son. We were, the union was trying to keep it into a smaller box.

**RM** [00:23:31] When you say the union, you're just talking specifically about the Carpenters or are you talking about all the building trades?

**SO** [00:23:36] I think for most of the building trades. Some of the building trades are still that sort of realm. With the Carpenters, we were shrinking. Things started to turn around for us as the economy turned around and we had a new general president for the Carpent—, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America.

**RM** [00:24:00] Who was that?

**SO** [00:24:01] The old president was a guy named Sig Lucassen. He was sort of with his old ways. The new guy was a fellow named Doug McCarron.

**RM** [00:24:10] Are you talking about internationally?

**SO** [00:24:12] Internationally. Yeah. At that time we were basically under the Carpenters Union, and that was the same time as the B.C. Provincial Council of Carpenters sort of became more prominent. They were a subgroup of the UBC, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. We were all part of that.

**RM** [00:24:36] I want to get this straight. There's the B.C. Provincial Council of Carpenters. Yeah. Then there's a United Brotherhood of Carpenters?

**SO** [00:24:46] Yeah. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. It's an international union, headquarters in Las Vegas. Out of that, there was different provincials: Alberta, the B.C. Provincial Council of Carpenters which when I started that's when Bill Zander was the president of that.

**RM** [00:25:16] He was president of the BC Provincial Council. Had they broken away from the international?

**SO** [00:25:22] They hadn't at this point in time. They were beginning to. There was anti-American sentiment and we're not going to be part of those guys.

**RM** [00:25:33] Maybe with some reason.

**SO** [00:25:35] Bill was, pretty much, he's—

**RM** [00:25:37] He's on the left.

**SO** [00:25:38] He's on the left and quite proud of it. I didn't realize that until we were going. Victoria and as things progressed, there was Wayne Cox, who was the financial secretary, a good, strong guy that was there before me. Actually, that's not true. I was there before him, and then I had to drop out of the union for a while, and I came back. He was actually there when I rejoined the union. We with Heinz Corn, who was the president of the local, would go to Vancouver and we'd see things are sort of progressing in the wrong ways. This is not good. We weren't into the commie sort of idealism. A group of us weren't into it so there started to become a divide.

**RM** [00:26:35] You didn't like the influence of the Communist Party on the union.

**SO** [00:26:38] That's right. We wanted to look after union members, and go in doing the political thing and sway and go in another direction was not really in our bailiwick, wasn't something that we wanted to do. There became some divisions and it progressed and we became, Local 1519 Wayne and I in particular, with Local 527, 1325 and Floorlayers Local 1541. We became a bit of a sore spot for them and they wanted to kind of eliminate us. I think was so they could go their own way in, which would be to break away from the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. Different things started happening. At that point in time, because the economy was so tough we started doing enabling. What that was, was we



could apply for a reduction in wage rate for our different job sites to be able to be competitive with the nonunion sector, which was eating our lunch. Basically, it was taking over. We would have to—

**RM** [00:28:00] You'd have to negotiate at job site to job site?

**SO** [00:28:02] Yeah.

**RM** [00:28:03] The wage rates?

**SO** [00:28:03] Yeah. Difficult thing to do.

**RM** [00:28:05] Yeah.

**SO** [00:28:06] But it was, before you would go to tender and they'd come to the union, say, if we have to pay those wage rates, we can't do it. I would know that because I'm out on the job site asking what those guys are earning so I know what their wages are. So we would ask for enabling to be able to reduce the rate for that project.

**RM** [00:28:29] I hadn't heard of that. Oh, that's tough.

**SO** [00:28:31] Well that's how you have to survive. We started to do that and we started to get some jobs going and keeping our guys working in Victoria. The same thing was happening in Vancouver. Then, things started to change and we'd start to get denied enabling when we'd go for it, no real reason, or they'd wait. The writing became on the wall that, listen they're trying to take us out.

**RM** [00:29:03] You blame the people in Vancouver?

**SO** [00:29:05] Provincial council.

**RM** [00:29:06] How could they? How could they influence an enabling agreement? Because they'd have to sign off on it?

**SO** [00:29:12] They would sign off on it, because the provincial council owned the collective agreements. What we figured out to do— at the same time, I had been elected on to the board of trustees to replace Wayne Cox. The board of trustees for the benefit and pension plan, which was really going quite well, ran by administrator named Wayne Stone. He was a good guy but things became a bit problematic there because different locals weren't doing that well. They started to want to use some of the funds to finance some of the projects in these different areas that were kind of losers. That was a problem for us because when your fiduciary duty is take members' money and do the best we can with it for a pension and invest in something that's not a good idea, was not a good idea. I began to make some noise about that.

**RM** [00:30:24] It's a real split, right?

**SO** [00:30:25] There is becoming a real split. This was when Zander was leaving and Len Embree came in and took over. Len Embree and Bill Zander were good friends, and their political leanings were pretty much the same. Len was an okay guy, but he wasn't tolerant. What started to happen for me was politically, anything that I would bring up at those meetings, I would be foo-foo'd and, it wouldn't happen. For me, it was scary because if it

was a good idea or a bad idea it wouldn't have mattered. Politically they were hoping to get rid of me.

**SO** [00:31:15] I remember, one point in time when I was also on the board of trustees for the Bamberton project, which was a big project we had in Bamberton that the building trades had bought together, and we were in as well. There was a problem with building trades. Bamberton was being run by a fellow named David Butterfield of South Island Developments. We've built some nice buildings around town here. He was trying to go in a certain direction with it. It wasn't going real well. The building trades wanted Greystone, which is Cowichan Properties, to take over the project. At that point in time, it was really becoming a bit of a problem. I remember in a meeting with Len Embree in Vancouver and the committee was going on something. I called for a caucus and went into another room with Len Embree. Maybe it was Wayne Stone that was with me and said, if we do this, this is going to collapse this whole thing. We should vote against that. They said, yeah, you're right. Okay, good. All three of us in the same boat. We go back into the meeting and they call the question and all these guys vote for it. The one guy voted against it going, I just got railroaded here. Len Embree said to me when the train's coming through to get off the railroad tracks. That really bothered me quite a bit.

**SO** [00:33:05] What happened next was my term came up and I wouldn't run again. We appointed a fellow named Fred Brown who was looking after the Nanaimo local to take my place. They wouldn't seat him. These sort of things, we said, the writing's on the wall. What do we do? Wayne and I got together and I said, if we raid ourselves for our own bargaining rights, we can split from the Provincial Council of Carpenters. It made sense. We can also do something about the mismanagement of the pension. As we started to do that, we went around to all of our contractors and our members and said, we want to have the bargaining rights. We applied and we won the bargaining rights.

**RM** [00:33:59] Did you have a different name or how did you?

**SO** [00:34:03] That was the start of the BC Regional Council of Carpenters. It was just sort of the Local 1519.

**RM** [00:34:08] Did you get certified?

**SO** [00:34:11] We got certified through the labour board because we had raided and we had done it all properly.

**RM** [00:34:18] Was it just your local? Were there other locals?

**SO** [00:34:23] It was our locals. The other locals that came on board with us, just agreed to was 527, which is Nanaimo, 1325 Kelowna, 1541. We were still having some problems with the Building Trades. They thought we were doing something crazy.

**RM** [00:34:42] You would be out of the Building Trades once you did this.

**SO** [00:34:44] Yeah. We kept friends with them and that sort of thing. It's tough to do a split like this.

**SO** [00:34:54] Actually it was a freedom that you can go, 'Lookit, we can do what we need to do now.' The question came up about what do we do about pensions? All our members were in the pension plan. We could see that the writing's maybe on the wall. This was

going to be a failing thing. At that point in time Provincial Council was talking about becoming CMAW, Construction Maintenance and Allied Workers Union which was a different thing than the Provincial Council. There's probably lots of gaps in this. We continued on to get all of our guys to withdraw their pensions and put them into an RRSP that they could—

**RM** [00:35:48] Boy, that was a leap of faith for them, wasn't it?

**SO** [00:35:51] Well, what we did was Len and I went around to different unions and talked about pension plans and different actuaries and said how do we do this? They said, if you start a pension plan, you're too small. It will go tits up. You don't have enough. That was good advice. That's why we said we can put that into RRSPs. Our guys went along with it. The RRSPs were a temporary spot to put places, put the money that they had. We didn't want them to lose that money. We were concerned that under the CMAW and the Provincial Council and stuff, that things could go down the drain. Leadership was not that good. There was huge problems with the administration. When Wayne Stone left the pension plan, we hired a lady named Jane Ritchie, nice lady who was quite competent. But as we would go through meetings when they were trying to get rid of me, I'd ask for the minutes of the last meetings. Oh, they haven't, we don't have them ready yet. She was supposed to be taking them, and she wouldn't. That would happen meeting after meeting. I go if we passed motions we need to know what they are. Where are they written down? That wasn't happening. That was my biggest concern as to this is going really haywire. That was under Len Embree.

**RM** [00:37:26] Was it a real bitterness between the two factions?

**SO** [00:37:29] Yeah. There was a hate on for Wayne Cox by Len Embree. They were fire and ice and a few other people. That really became a big concern. If you're in a benefit plan and there not many minutes being taken. At one meeting when Len was not there, Jane Ritchie spilled the beans that he had instructed her to not take minutes. At that point it was too much for her. She had to leave the meeting. She went and called back and said I just phoned my doctor and my doctor said, I have to take a leave. They left it up to me and we had to let her go. She had confided in me and so I asked to be the one to let her go. She was a great lady. That was a tough, tough time to be able to tell her that we had to let her go, but it was the best thing for her and the best thing for the plan.

**SO** [00:38:44] That was when we said we need to get out and it's tough because as a trustee, there's some things you're sworn to secrecy. It was a tough time for me because people knew what was going on and asked me questions and I couldn't divulge the information. I took notes all the time but I couldn't divulge some of this information because if people knew that the pension plan was going belly up or thought it was, that could cause them to pull their money out and go somewhere else. It was a tough time. I think it was the only time in my life that I ever considered the only way out would be to suicide. Obviously that didn't happen. I got some good advice from some doctors.

**RM** [00:39:46] That's pretty sad when the union movement gets to a situation like that. The other side had strong feelings too.

**SO** [00:39:56] They thought we were going down the wrong path. We thought we were going down the wrong path. Together with Doug McCarron of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters who chartered the BC Regional Council of Carpenters. Doug McCarron

appointed me the inaugural president. Big honour. Big honour. A lot of trust. We got everybody together and started it up. Then we had our own agreements.

**RM** [00:40:28] Did you undercut the other union's agreements?

**SO** [00:40:34] No, we tried to stay the same because luckily things were getting a little bit better.

**RM** [00:40:40] Did CLRA [Construction Labour Relations Association of BC] still exist then?

**SO** [00:40:42] Yes.

**RM** [00:40:43] So were you negotiating with CLRA or individual companies?

**SO** [00:40:47] When we were with the Provincial Council, Wayne and I went to a CLRA negotiating meeting, of which Len Embree was the leader, and they wouldn't let us be part of the negotiations. That was another situation. The CLRA recognized that the Provincial Council was haywire. They realized that we were sort of a new chance, so we began negotiations with CLRA.

**RM** [00:41:18] They probably preferred you guys than all those lefties.

**SO** [00:41:22] We had a different view about how the world operates. The number one thing was to get our guys working to keep the contractors that were signing union agreements competitive and to grow with training. What do we have to offer? We had to offer benefits and pension for the guys. At that time there were there were RRSPs, but the guys could do some stuff with their RRSPs.

**RM** [00:41:50] But the Provincial Council, they wouldn't go on your job sites, would they?

**SO** [00:41:53] The Provincial Council did sometimes in trying to organize.

**RM** [00:42:10] Did they try to threaten or intimidate anybody?

**SO** [00:42:10] At one point in time, one of the companies, it was a framing company, Ron Leir. They were guys I'd known for a long time and they were all in favour of this. When we came to the vote, they all voted against us, so they weren't part of us. I called them up and they said, well, I voted for you. You're lying to me because I counted the votes and everybody voted against us. What happened was the Provincial Council came out and sold them, these guys a bill of goods.

**RM** [00:42:39] Which they're allowed to do.

**SO** [00:42:40] Which they're allowed to do. It's all perfectly fair. I didn't know it, and nobody told me, that was one that I'd missed or we had missed. I should say not I. What happened was a year later, they came hat in hand and said, can we join back up again because they weren't getting any representation. Things come our way.

**RM** [00:43:03] What about the other trades? What did they think of all this?

**SO** [00:43:07] The other trades was kind of looking back.

**RM** [00:43:09] Family squabble.

**SO** [00:43:10] A little bit and sort of stayed out of it. The Carpenters Union at that point in time south of the border was creating a little bit of a hassle, too, because we were breaking away from some of the other trades that were in the sort of other traditional exclusionary stuff. We were trying to break out. Under Doug McCarron it was kind of getting in a new direction.

**RM** [00:43:32] We you able to negotiate non affiliation clauses?

**SO** [00:43:36] We didn't really need to do any of that. With the Building Trades, we just kept on paying into the Building Trades.

**RM** [00:43:45] You were still members of the Building Trades? How did this finally resolve or did it finally resolve?

**SO** [00:43:54] What happened is, CMAW became their thing and the BC Regional Council became our thing, which actually for the membership was kind of a good thing. If I don't like what the BC Regional Council was doing I can go to CMAW or CMAW could come to us.

**RM** [00:44:11] I'll give you a better deal.

**SO** [00:44:13] That's right. It became good competition which made us have to do more for our members. That's not a bad thing. Some of the problem was that we wanted to be recognized with the international union, and the B.C. provincial government wouldn't recognize international unions. That's why we became the BC Regional Council Union as a separate union. It took some finagling to get that through.

**RM** [00:44:47] You mentioned Kelowna. I mean, it wasn't just Vancouver Island.

**SO** [00:44:51] Kelowna, Prince George come around so these locals could come in and join.

**RM** [00:44:56] Keep going. Then eventually what happened?

**SO** [00:45:02] We began to make some ground talking with the Building Trades. One of the things that happened was, we really believed in training. My father died because there was no fall arrest. Safety training was something we had to offer to contractors. We'll train you guys. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Donald Baker said, we'll front you the money to buy a training centre. They built a training centre in Las Vegas. It's beautiful (they've got it all embossed and stuff) to train their members how to do the different trades. We said right on. That was a whole new project for us, which Wayne Cox was the main guy here in making this happen.

**RM** [00:45:53] The Provincial Council also had access to this.

**SO** [00:45:55] No.

**RM** [00:45:55] Oh they didn't? How come they were frozen out?

**SO** [00:45:57] Because Provincial Council was not the Provincial Council anymore. They had become CMAW.

**RM** [00:46:02] Oh, that's right.

**SO** [00:46:04] They weren't part of it. We began to renovate an old warehouse in Delta, and made the United Brotherhood of Carpenters Training Centre. Along came the pile drivers and the millwrights and the floorlayers. They all came in. It was tough at first because the millwrights were on the Provincial Council side against us. There's always been this sort of them and us sort of thing, different trades.

**SO** [00:46:47] They began to see the writing on the walls as well. Some conversations, one on one conversations and they started to see where we were going and what we were trying to do. Another leap of faith for those guys. They came on and they said, we can have our own training centre and we can train guys, so the millwrights and pile drivers have their own offices there now. They train their guys there. The floorlayers train their guys there. We do carpentry training there still. It comes out of the funds the employers pay us. The employers are getting trained certified workers that know what they do, what they're doing. They're saying, here's what we need guys to learn. We do that so there's a benefit for the contractors.

**RM** [00:47:41] Does all that still exist?

**SO** [00:47:42] Yes.

**RM** [00:47:45] You guys didn't patch up your differences?

**SO** [00:47:48] No. What happened was a couple of years ago, since I retired, the provincial government got us together and there was an amalgamation, like an agreement to work together to not be working against each other. Now the members enjoy that. There's still CMAW and there's still the what is now the Regional Council of Carpenters, it's no longer the BC Regional—

**RM** [00:48:17] There's no real difference between the two of you anymore is there, because all those lefties have gone haven't they?

**SO** [00:48:24] The lefties are pretty much gone. I'm not even sure who is there anymore. It's becoming a distant past for me. The grey matter doesn't remember so well. Things seem to be going okay. It's better to have peace. That's all happened since I left. Things were going well. In 2007 and -8 things were tough. It was a little scary.

**RM** [00:48:58] You were a renegade.

**SO** [00:49:00] A bit of a renegade. You could sort of see where things are going and what you got to do. I'd pitched my tent and said let's do this right.

**RM** [00:49:15] This disagreement, this split didn't play into the hands of the employer.

**SO** [00:49:21] Yeah, quite a bit. Quite a bit, because there was different employers that wanted to stay with them in Vancouver, employers like Bosa Construction, big players, and who certainly was free to hand out perks to the Provincial Council. When I was with the

Provincial Council and on the benefit committees, I along with Len Embree were treated to box office seats at the Canucks games. It was great.

**RM** [00:50:02] Where's the downside?

**SO** [00:50:08] Robert Bosa's a good guy. It was nice, but they were lobbying and that wasn't so good. In this business, you've got your members and you've got your employers, and you have to get along with their employers if you want to do things, if you want to make things good. We recognize that but I still want, as much as I thought this is kind of cool, it stank to me.

**RM** [00:50:41] What's wrong with this picture?

**SO** [00:50:42] What's wrong with this? This is like taking a bribe and so those are some of the things that gave me pause for thought.

**RM** [00:50:51] Did you and Len Embree ever patch it up?

**SO** [00:50:54] Oh, not really. The last words to Len Embree and me were an exchange of 'F you,' 'F you' during meetings, which they were trying to oust Wayne and I. I'm a big guy, and I think I intimidated them a bit. There was a lot of characters that were doing creepy things.

**SO** [00:51:26] You had a lot of influence then on the union construction industry in B.C. starting this whole other organization.

**SO** [00:51:35] I hope it was a positive influence. When I was in school without a father, I was in a class with a teacher who was a drama teacher, Mr. Dalmage. He pulled me aside one time. He asked me a question about another student. He said, I want to tell you something. He said, you're a natural leader. That was news to me. He said, I want to tell you whatever you do in life, make sure that you're the leader, whether it's being the leader of the bank robbers or the president of the United States or whatever, you're the kind of guy to do it. That has stuck with me to this day that Mr. Dalmage was a great guy and that gave me the confidence I didn't have. He was like a father figure, whatnot. He was the best teacher, I think, because he taught me that. The reality is that guys will follow me if I'm going in the right direction, if we're going in the right direction. Wayne Cox too. Very much we were together in that sort of thing. I think he turned you down. I spoke to him and said this was how I was going to do this. He said I was worried I was going to get too carried away with the communist stuff. (laughter) I said, I probably will too Wayne, but it has to be said.

**RM** [00:53:03] You haven't gone much on it but we know that's the subtext. Are you an anti-communist?

**SO** [00:53:11] No, I'm not an anti-communist. It's just I don't think it's best for us.

**RM** [00:53:17] But they had no power. It's just a belief that they have. The Communist Party got about 200 votes any time they run.

**SO** [00:53:22] Yeah, that's right, but it was a dangerous thing because what it seemed like they wanted to do is they wanted to be able to have the strength of the union to further their dealings.

**RM** [00:53:35] You didn't regard that as a side issue because the point is whether you deliver the goods to your members. The Fishermen's Union was led by the Communist Party forever, and they always were supported.

**SO** [00:53:47] Yeah, and Wayne Cox's father was a fisherman and a Fishermen's Union and strong so we knew about what was going on. It wasn't such a bad thing. It was just we don't think that you need to take the Carpenters' Union in this other political direction for that political reason, when we should be looking after what the members do as a union and what happens with them. That was really sort of the difference. If we were living in a communist country, we'd be fine for it, but still trying to do the same thing.

**RM** [00:54:19] A lot of right wing guys, especially in the building trades, in the States, that supported Richard Nixon, and supported the war in Vietnam.

**SO** [00:54:27] That's right. Yeah. That stuff is kind of all that sort of flutter up there. What comes down to is what do we need to do on the ground. That was sort of our whole thing is what we need to do is we couldn't be bothered with all the political junk.

**RM** [00:54:47] But would you, when you organized, would you bring that up?

**SO** [00:54:51] No, because most of the time the guys on the tools didn't really know about it, didn't really understand it, didn't really care about it because they didn't know. The odd guy did and would understand. Most of the time they're thinking about, how do I get more wages, is my pension going to be there? What are my benefits? What about my wife and kids? Those are the things that happen. They're going with who is going to make it best for them.

**RM** [00:55:27] No. Sure. They were dissatisfied with the leadership they were getting from the BC Provincial of Council of Carpenters.

**SO** [00:55:35] They really didn't know what happened until we started to make the split and we started to educate them as to why we're leaving the Provincial Council of Carpenters and we're becoming the BC Regional Council of Carpenters.

**RM** [00:55:48] When was that, Shan?

**SO** [00:55:50] Let's see. I retired in 2014 and it was eight years before that. What's the math.

**RM** [00:55:58] 2006? As recent as that, the split happened.

**SO** [00:56:03] Yeah. Just when things were going wrong. We did something that was kind of fun is, under the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, there used to be a national apprenticeship contest, and, that sort of slowed for a while because the States was saying, we don't want to spend too much money on these things. But still we got it to happen in Canada. We brought the national apprenticeship contest to Victoria in 2007, and, at that point in time I had a son who was a journeyman, and had a son who was just completing an apprenticeship with Campbell Construction. We had it on Ships Point. We had the machinists, we had the floorlayers, we had the pile drivers and we had the carpenters and the drywallers all exhibiting on Ships Point for people to see. In the Empress we produced a magazine and sold space to different companies and organizations to sponsor us. It was



a great success. To top it all off my son, Ryan O'Hara won the national apprenticeship contest.

**RM** [00:57:27] Woo-hoo!

**SO** [00:57:28] Which was kind of tough because he had been trained in Camosun College here. One of the instructors, Al Van Akker, was one of the judges. But, Ryan was good. He won hands down. We knew it.

**RM** [00:57:47] The other organization, the CMAW?

**SO** [00:57:51] Construction Maintenance and Allied Workers, yeah.

**RM** [00:57:52] They still exist?

**SO** [00:57:53] They still exist.

**RM** [00:57:56] Do you both do apprenticeship training?

**SO** [00:57:57] No, they didn't, they didn't.

**RM** [00:57:59] They don't do apprenticeship training anymore?

**SO** [00:58:01] I think they do somewhat.

**RM** [00:58:02] You guys do it.

**SO** [00:58:05] We do it. They do it. They got into the ICBA a bit and did some training but I don't think they do much training. We send guys apprentices.

**RM** [00:58:16] Do you have more members than they do? I know you retired in 2014.

**SO** [00:58:22] I think we do, I don't know. They're still doing all right. They started to join up with Alberta and they started try to join up with Local 1 in Quebec, which is, sort of more to the way of thinking, but I think that failed.

**RM** [00:58:41] Do you think there might be a getting together and unity out of this, or do you think it's too far gone?

**SO** [00:58:48] I would like it to be and I think that we're close to that now, but that may happen.

**RM** [00:58:57] Because there's not the enmity that there used to be.

**SO** [00:58:59] There's not. It's gotten better.

**RM** [00:59:01] You're used to each other.

**SO** [00:59:04] When I retired, I had to retire a little earlier than I wanted to. I had kidney stone problems and, interesting little story. We were at a convention in New Brunswick or Nova Scotia, I can't remember which, just before 9/11. I was there with our delegates, and I had to fly back because the morning of September 11th, I had a kidney operation to be

to, so our delegation flew out early the night before. I got home and got booked to be in the hospital at 6:00 in the morning. I wake up at 5:00 in the morning, the radio's saying there's a plane sticking out of the trades building. I think, what? It was happening that day. It was a very memorable day. I survived that operation and continued on and then, in a couple of years before I retired, I had to have another operation. The doctor made an error and left a three inch piece of wire in me for 15 months. I lost all of the 'go get it' so I decided I can't do this. I retired a little earlier, but that's okay.

**RM** [01:00:41] The advantage is you get to retire early.

**SO** [01:00:46] Yeah, get to retire early. And have a good pension.

**RM** [01:00:47] One question I want to ask you. You're in the construction industry. One of the things that the NDP has always done when they've been in power, both in the 90s and now is these community benefit agreements, basically on public projects. Talk about the difference that that makes.

**SO** [01:01:03] That did make a difference. The first one was the HEL agreement. The highways constructors limited to do the Island Highway. That was the first time that came around. That was a good thing.

**RM** [01:01:15] They took a lot of flak for it, of course. The NDP took a lot of flak.

**SO** [01:01:20] It was good because what it said was in 50 miles or 50 kilometers, I can't remember for sure, maybe even 100 kilometers to get as many people as you could from that area to work on highways. That included a component of First Nations people, so that got them involved. It was a good thing.

**RM** [01:01:42] Plus the wage, there was a level playing field for the wage rates.

**SO** [01:01:46] It was a fair wage thing, so that was set. That was a good thing, but things died off and then the Liberal came in.

**RM** [01:01:59] They didn't like that deal.

**SO** [01:02:00] They didn't like that deal. One of the first things that the Liberals did was to, Shirley Bond, was to kill the apprenticeship training.

**RM** [01:02:11] Yes. Terrible decision.

**SO** [01:02:12] It was a terrible decision.

**RM** [01:02:15] What kind of an impact did that have?

**SO** [01:02:17] It had a big impact because all of a sudden the counsellors that the system we put in, all these apprentices for the school was all defunct, so we had to try and start to do it ourselves. The reality is what happened was the ICBA contractors, one of them, John Napier who owns Napier Construction, sat down with them and said, listen, this isn't good. We need a central place. He understood. John is a good guy. He wasn't with the provincial with us either. He was with another union called CISIW, Canadian Iron Steel Industrial Workers Union, One.

**RM** [01:02:56] Structural ornamental.

**SO** [01:02:58] Ran by a guy named Frank Nolan.

**RM** [01:03:02] Oh, Frank Nolan. I remember Frank Nolan. He's still around or he was?

**SO** [01:03:09] I don't know if he's still around or not.

**RM** [01:03:11] Frank Nolan.

**SO** [01:03:14] For sure, some workers. It was, but for Napier Construction to have an agreement with them which was so we couldn't just sign guys up. We had to if we would go in a raiding period, but John Napier's guys were pretty honourable guys. They wouldn't change. What happened was he went and said to the ICBA and to the provincial government, listen, we need to get this back in. We got it back in and it was never as good as it was.

**RM** [01:03:58] But now the NDP.

**SO** [01:03:59] But the NDP is going, it's still going well. I actually just sent off the paperwork for my third son who's working for Campbell Construction, who just left the food industry and started an apprenticeship as well. I have three sons in the game.

**RM** [01:04:22] A lifetime in the construction industry as a carpenter, and then you became a pork chopper.

**SO** [01:04:27] A floorlayer. I was never a carpenter.

**RM** [01:04:30] You were always a floorlayer. Oh, so you never really graduated to all the tough jobs?

**SO** [01:04:36] No, I had the soft, fuzzy stuff. Broadloom, wall-to-wall carpet.

**RM** [01:04:38] With the nice suit. Looking back on it, what did you like about being in the industry, in construction because you stuck with it?

**SO** [01:04:50] It was there and easy to go to work. It was a hard—being a young guy and strong. During the time I was with the Plasterers' Union, I did other subcontracting as a subcontractor, building scaffolding, much like what my father did on. Things were pretty unsafe then. You built scaffolding out of four by fours. It was kind of a macho thing and it could be much better money than I could working in a grocery store. That was the interesting thing to me to be in the construction industry.

**RM** [01:05:41] Were you a good floorlayer?

**SO** [01:05:43] I was really pretty good. I liked working for a company to being put in the position of a supervisor for a big company, like Home Lumber or Island Floors, which is owned by Home Lumber and the Johal family. They're a very reputable company. Putting that in place and then saying, we can't hire you anymore but we'll offer you a position. I felt that was an honourable thing. It's like anything you do, you want to try and do your best. That was a different world to me because I was dealing with individual people, families and

different things. That was really interesting work. I'd have a crew of guys that worked with me and I paid and learned a lot about how to cheat out of taxes on.

**RM** [01:06:34] We don't want to hear about that. We need taxes.

**SO** [01:06:39] It's interesting because of that knowledge, we realized that part of the problem with our industry was the subcontracting business, in that mostly in the drywall, wall and ceiling industry, everybody is a pieceworker, and they all worked as subcontractors. Those guys didn't pay taxes. They never paid the tax.

**RM** [01:07:03] That's actually bad, if I might.

**SO** [01:07:06] It's really bad. No benefits, no nothing, so to try and get that around, a guy clued me in to this one time. He said, if there was a law that said that the contractors that pay out tens of thousand dollars to subcontractors and the subcontractors don't have to register with Revenue Canada, that's a lot of tax money going somewhere. If they had to register with Revenue Canada, they'd have to be in the works. We could stop this subcontracting where everybody's trying to underbid the next guy.

**RM** [01:07:43] And under the table.

**SO** [01:07:44] Under the table thing. We jumped in the occasion. David Anderson was Minister of National Revenue. He had been on the hook from media for not meeting with media. He was in Victoria.

**RM** [01:08:04] David Anderson from Victoria.

**SO** [01:08:06] Phoned him and came to a meeting in their office and, and I hadn't really told Wayne Cox much about it. Steve Orcherton was the head of the Victoria Labour Council.

**RM** [01:08:16] I know that name.

**SO** [01:08:17] Steve and Wayne came in and we sat with Mr. Anderson and a few of his guys. I said, the employer, if he wants to write off that \$10,000 he gave to that subcontractor, that subcontractor should have to have a revenue taxation number so he has to pay taxes. You can check that. Otherwise that contractor can't write off that \$10,000 dollars. Well, we get all this sort of stuff. It was pretty interesting because about an hour later after they left got a call back saying Mr. Anderson would like to work further with you with Revenue Canada on this. We put it together and then, a year and a half later, at building trades, it became that it was voluntary to do it. We spent some time with our contractors, explaining what was happening and it became compulsory. The problem today is that it's not enforced. It was interesting. It was something that I was really proud of because, another member came to me with the idea and because of the position I was in I was able to make that happen. All those sort of things are the things that try and make the world better. Floor covering, flooring, my base industry, which I am a certified mechanic in, was suffering from the same thing. It still does today.

**RM** [01:09:48] It's not alone. Roofing.

**SO** [01:09:49] Yeah, roofing. Roofing is another one. These are good guys. I see guys that work for me that have teeth missing.

**RM** [01:09:59] Pay me in cash.

**SO** [01:10:00] That are still doing it.

**RM** [01:10:02] One last question. Unionized construction is the way to go.

**SO** [01:10:06] Definitely. Definitely. It's best for everybody. It's best for everybody. You have stability. Everybody knows what they've got. Negotiations, they can be tough. But unionized construction industry is the way it needs to go.

**RM** [01:10:23] Good note to end on.