

Interview: Vince Ready (VR)

Interviewer: Carmela Allevato (CA), Rod Mickelburgh (RM)

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Transcription: Jane Player

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CA [00:00:05] It is September 16th, 2024, and I'm here with Rod Mickleburgh, the co-question asker. We are absolutely thrilled to have Vince Ready, the legend in labour in British Columbia. I can say that.

RM [00:00:24] It's true.

CA [00:00:24] Yeah. I'm going to start with some personal questions about you, and then Rod will take over, and then I think I'll finish up. So, when and where were you born?

VR [00:00:38] I was born in Renfrew, Ontario, in the Ottawa Valley. Yeah.

CA [00:00:42] And were you raised there?

VR [00:00:44] Yeah, I was raised for the first 15 years of my life there. Yes. Then I left home, and I've been on my own since.

CA [00:00:51] At fifteen?

VR [00:00:51] Yeah. I went to work in the mines. Yeah.

CA [00:00:55] Tell us a little bit how you grew up, a little bit, before you left home.

VR [00:00:59] Well, I came from a family of six siblings, and my father was a—during the Depression was a construction worker, and he had a farm in the Ottawa Valley, and he farmed. My mother grew up there also. He was a very hardworking guy, but he unfortunately fell ill to Parkinson's when he was 42 years old. So, yeah.

CA [00:01:25] Were politics or labour issues part of your upbringing when you were—before you left home?

VR [00:01:31] My—politics for the Ottawa Valley were like religion, you know. My father and all his siblings were all Liberals. They were all Liberals, and they took elections very seriously. They donned all their work clothes, and they dressed up, and went and voted every election. They never missed an election. It was just like religion to them, you know. There was nobody ever got in the way of their thinking. They were Liberals and that's what it was. (laughter) Yeah.

CA [00:01:59] And so then you say you left at 15?

VR [00:02:03] Yes.

CA [00:02:04] Before we get to that, tell us presently, do you have a family now?

VR [00:02:09] Oh, yes, all my siblings but one. I had a brother was a logger. He died two or three years ago. The rest of my siblings are all living.

CA [00:02:16] Okay. And how about your own family?

VR [00:02:18] In my own family, I got two, a son and daughter, Michelle and Bradley. My daughter works for the government in Hope, and she's married to a schoolteacher there. My son's a chiropractor, and his wife is a social worker at the hospital in Richmond. Yeah.

CA [00:02:35] Okay. So, we're going to turn to your career in the labour movement, you—

RM [00:02:41] May I interject?

CA [00:02:42] Sure.

RM [00:02:42] Why did you leave at 15?

VR [00:02:45] To work. I had to go to work.

RM [00:02:46] Just dropped out of school?

VR [00:02:47] Yeah, I just dropped out of school. I went to work in construction. Then I went to work in the mining industry, and that's where I got involved in the union. I got involved in the union the second day I was underground, and we were—they were in bargaining. I went to work at the Bancroft mines in—uranium mines—in Bancroft. The second day I was underground, the union was conducting a strike vote.

RM [00:03:08] What union was that?

VR [00:03:09] That was the Steelworkers [United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union], actually. They represented the workers at Bancroft, and there was a strike vote. I sat down with the president of the union in the underground, and he explained the whole apparatus to me—what was going on. They were going to hit the bricks the following week. They ended up getting a settlement, but I joined the union that second day. Then they used to join you—you signed up in the union. There was no check-off. So, I joined the union the second day I was underground. Yeah.

RM [00:03:38] And that's in Ontario?

VR [00:03:39] Yeah. Bancroft, Ontario. Yeah. There was a big uranium belt up near the Bancroft area. So, yeah—you know where it is [motioning to CA].

CA [00:03:49] Yeah, I've been there. Yeah. So, your second day you sign up in the union. There's a strike—

VR [00:03:57] Yeah, Well there was going to be—they were taking the strike vote that day and the following day, so, yeah. So, that's where I joined the union. Yeah. Gordon Young. I'll never forget the guy's name, you know.

RM [00:04:07] How long did you work there? And then you came out to B.C.

VR [00:04:10] I worked there for about three or four months, and then I did a little more work in construction. Then I went to work at uranium mines in Elliot Lake—Elliot Lake,

Ontario—and then—they shut down when Diefenbaker shut down the [Avro] Arrow Project in North Bay. The uranium mines—Elliot Lake became a ghost town within seven days. It was just shut down, period. Yeah, it was amazing. All those families, you know. I was okay. I just went to—just got the train and went to Winnipeg, and went to Thompson, Manitoba. It was easy for people like me, but the families, the devastation was unbelievable. Like there was houses boarded up—boarded up within five days after the announcement. Yeah. That was just an overnight announcement. Yeah, I went to work in the morning and [motions closing a door].

CA [00:04:56] Wow.

VR [00:04:57] Yeah, the mine was shuttin' down. Yeah.

CA [00:04:59] Was that a union mine?

VR [00:05:00] Yeah. Elliot Lake was all unionized. Yeah. All those mines were unionized. Mostly Steelworkers. Sudbury, their big show was, of course, in Sudbury. Falconbridge. Inco and Falconbridge. Yeah.

CA [00:05:14] So then you end up at the Thompson Mine?

VR [00:05:17] Yeah, I went to Thompson, Manitoba. I worked there for a few months. I worked with a Dane underground, and he taught me how to play poker in between blasts. You had to wait for 45 or 50 minutes and showed me how to play poker. I had a bad drinking problem when I was—I was an alcoholic during my teenage years, and I could never get enough money to get out of there. It was an awful place to be when you're 17 years old. It was just an awful place to be, so I could never get out of there. One night into a poker game, and I won \$850, (laughter) and I went straight to the airport. I never quit Inco. I just went straight to the airport and got in the plane and flew to Vancouver. That's how I ended up Vancouver. That was 1961. Yeah.

RM [00:06:00] You were 17?

VR [00:06:02] No, I was—'61. I'd be what? Forty-three—I was born in '43.

RM [00:06:06] Eighteen.

VR [00:06:06] I was born the year they bought in P 1000, 1003 [Canada Federal Order-in-Council PC 1003]. Yeah.

CA [00:06:12] Oh, the Wagner Act in Canada. Wow.

VR [00:06:14] Yeah. Right. The right to bargain.

RM [00:06:17] Was there—sorry—go ahead.

CA [00:06:18] No, I was just getting on to—so, you come to Vancouver and?

VR [00:06:23] Yeah, I just hung around. I went to work in the Yukon in the mines. Yeah. I just tramped around the mines. I worked for the mining contractors, you know. That's where all the real action was, and that's where I got really involved in the union. Yeah. Me and Archie MacDonald, that guy you see in the picture there.

RM [00:06:38] Yeah, I was going to ask you about Archie MacDonald. You want to talk about him now?

VR [00:06:40] Yeah.

RM [00:06:41] He was one of your best friends, right?

VR [00:06:42] Yeah. We worked a lot together, and we got involved, quite involved, in the union with—we got really involved with Al King. He was kind of the guy we always went to in Mine Mill [International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers]. We got involved in a wildcat strike in Ashcroft. We were working for a little mine up on Ashcroft, and they cut our bonuses, so we struck the place. They brought in some scabs—or tried to bring on some scabs—and we put a stop to that. But we phoned Mine Mill and Al King came up, and we got things sorted out, yeah.

RM [00:07:14] Well, we're jumping around a bit here, but—so, you're up in the Yukon?

VR [00:07:17] Yeah.

RM [00:07:17] And?

VR [00:07:18] Then I went to the Northwest Territories. I just went wherever there was—I had a theory when I worked for, you know, the work—working isn't a whole lot of fun. You should always know where you can get two more jobs. That was my theory. I tell my grandchildren that. I tell everybody that. When you go to work for somebody else, make sure you know where you can get two more jobs so you can move whenever you have to, you know.

RM [00:07:38] And you could in those days.

VR [00:07:39] Yeah, well that was, yeah, but you had to go where the work was. That's why you moved around a lot, you know. There was a lot—there was work in the Yukon. There was work in the Northwest Territories, so I went where the work was. Then when we worked with the contractors, we followed those. I got quite involved with the contractors, and we had a—we used to, in those days, Rod, used to deal with the Mining Association. They did all the bargaining, and they were vicious, and they were powerful—they were really powerful. They just shot you down at the bargaining table. The first day I went to the bargaining table, I got kicked out of the room. I got kicked right out of the meeting, you know, by the—

CA [00:08:14] Why?

VR [00:08:15] I was mouthin' off, I guess, to the general, the secretary of the Mining Association so—

RM [00:08:20] So where was that?

VR [00:08:22] Downtown Vancouver. Charlie Mitchell was his name, yeah. He was—

CA [00:08:25] And which mine were you—

VR [00:08:28] Oh, we were working for the contractor, so they worked at different mines and yeah, and we—he—I remember he kicked us out of the office, and we shut the mines down. We ran the strike from the St Regis Hotel. We knew all the miners. I had a lot of energy; we had a lot of energy when we were at that age, you know. We knew all the miners, and we were able to keep the job shut down long enough—for they came to the bargaining table and made a deal with us, you know.

CA [00:08:57] Where was the mine that you were—

VR [00:08:58] There were, well—.

CA [00:08:59] Mines all over?

VR [00:09:00] Yeah. The contractors go in and develop the mines, you know. They were working—

RM [00:09:04] Oh, that's right. There was a word for that.

VR [00:09:06] Yeah—.

RM [00:09:06] I wrote it down. You were tramp miners.

VR [00:09:09] Tramp miners, yeah.

RM [00:09:11] What's a tramp miner?

VR [00:09:12] Well a guy that owns a pack sack with mining gear in it. (laughter) That's pretty well it. Yeah.

CA [00:09:17] And so the contractor—

RM [00:09:19] What were your jobs—

CA [00:09:20] Sorry. So the contractor is like a labour contractor, right?

VR [00:09:20] Yeah. They drive—they sink the shafts; they develop all the—they develop the mine.

CA [00:09:25] Okay.

VR [00:09:25] Mine consists usually of a shaft and an adit, and they drive—that's what we were doing in Granduc. We were driving that 11 mile tunnel when that avalanche come down. And so, that's what we did. We're the guys that went before they start mining. We go in and develop it.

CA [00:09:41] You develop the mine.

VR [00:09:42] Yeah.

VR [00:09:42] Here's what Al King says in his book. You were—they were a tramp—you were a tramp miner. 'One of these young guys who prepared mines for production. Hazardous work, but well paid.'

VR [00:09:53] Yeah.

RM [00:09:53] Was it hazardous?

VR [00:09:55] Oh, it was hazardous. Yeah, it was hazardous. Yeah.

RM [00:09:57] In what way?

VR [00:09:58] Well, there's no—there was really no safety standards in those days. That was back in the sixties, you know, so that was—there really wasn't much. There was no safety standards to speak of at all. You had to make your own. So, you were lucky enough. I was lucky enough to get to work with very experienced miners who actually took care of themselves and took care of those that worked with them. That's how I learned about safety. I never learned about that from any employer that I ever worked for. I learned that from people I worked with. Yeah, I always respected that, you know.

RM [00:10:29] And you got well paid?

VR [00:10:31] Yeah, we made good money.

RM [00:10:32] You got that bonus because the work was hazardous.

VR [00:10:34] Yeah.

CA [00:10:36] Then they tried to take it away, and that's when you organized a strike.

VR [00:10:38] Yeah, that's when we had the—yeah. The contractors they'd pay awhile for a month and start cuttin' your bonus. Once they see what you could do they'd start cutting, cutting, cutting it. So, So, we—that's create—create—and they wouldn't negotiate over bonus. That was the company's business, what they paid you. They wouldn't negotiate over that. That was always a big bone of contention. So, when we formed the Shaft Miners' Union, the Shaft and Development Workers Union, that was our number one issue, and so we finally got them, forced them to negotiate bonuses for us.

RM [00:11:12] Yeah, tell us about that—the shaft what?

VR [00:11:15] Well, the Shaft and Development Worker's Union. We set that up with Al King in the early sixties.

RM [00:11:22] Was that an offshoot of Mine Mill?

VR [00:11:23] It was a local of Mine Mill. It was a local of Mine Mill, and we used it as an organizing mechanism. Even in Steelworkers, we used it as a— because we always kept it under administration. We had lots of flexibility if we wanted it. Because what happens in the mining industry, Rod, when you organize or go in to organize—and we'd be involved in raids and all that kind of stuff—it was the first people that signed a card usually get fired. That's just kind of an unwritten rule. So, we were always very flexible. If a couple of our guys got fired, we could hire them. If they were an effective organizer, we'd just hire them, and we'd keep on organizing. So, with that kind of flexibility, we didn't have to—in fact, CAIMAW [Canadian Association of Mechanical and Allied Workers] took us to the labour

board over the way we ran [Local] 1037. [Paul] Weiler upheld us (laughter). Weiler upheld us.

RM [00:12:12] Yeah, there's a CAIMAW—well we're off topic. We'll talk about later. You also did mining, though. What was mining like in those days as a young fella?

VR [00:12:21] It was hard work. Mining is a tough business, you know, particularly working for contractors because it's all just drive, drive, drive, you know. So, it was hard work.

RM [00:12:31] Did you like it?

VR [00:12:32] Oh yeah. I liked mining. I did, because you were so independent and nobody ever bothered you, you know. Just never had—it had a certain independence about it that was—I found helpful. I worked in construction; I never liked it. There was a lot of bosses around and all that stuff. I never liked that stuff. I just never was—I was just never a good employee. (laughter)

RM [00:12:56] Were you ever fired?

VR [00:12:57] Many times.

RM [00:12:58] And why?

VR [00:12:59] Organizing. Yeah. Organizing wildcat strikes and that sort of stuff. Yeah.

RM [00:13:04] What attracted you to the union? Like what was in you? I mean, you didn't have that in your family background as Carmela was—

VR [00:13:10] Well, my uncles all worked in the mines in Northern Ontario, you know, so I was familiar. Like I was from—you know, I remember my uncles were involved in the 1958 strike in Sudbury that Mine Mill had, you know, that went on for some time. My uncles were all involved. I remember them coming to my house and talking about it.

RM [00:13:30] That rubbed off on you?

VR [00:13:32] Yeah, and so I, you know, I was very well aware of the class structure. I figured that out when I was quite young, you know. There was just—something wasn't right about a lot of things in society, and your ability to, I mean, your ability to survive as a worker is through the union, there's no other way. I mean, if you just think of any kind of a power structure, you know, the only way workers are going to survive is through the collective ability their unions negotiate for them. You know, that's—I believed that then, and I still believe that.

RM [00:14:06] How did you get involved with Mine Mill? Just that they were the union where you worked?

VR [00:14:11] Yeah. I mean, the working for contractors there was horrible working conditions. I mean, they're just horrible, you know, that was—and they just gets intolerable, you know, and that usually brings people together. That's essentially how we got involved in it. I was trying to improve the conditions which we worked under.

CA [00:14:28] So, you created a local of Mine Mill?

VR [00:14:31] Yeah. We created that local I told you about, the Shaft and Development Workers Union.

RM [00:14:34] How old were you then?

VR [00:14:35] Well, I was—that was—

RM [00:14:38] Twenty?

VR [00:14:39] Yeah, about 20. Nineteen, 20. Yeah.

RM [00:14:42] I mean, that's very young to be taking on work like that and organizing.

VR [00:14:47] Well, we—you just did it, you know.

CA [00:14:51] You just do what you've come to do.

VR [00:14:51] That was really—it was—there was no, there was no leadership, or nobody from the international coming in. We just did it. That's how we met King. We just—we were all out on strike. We phoned Mine Mill, and they sent Al King up, and that's how we met him. So, we developed a very good relationship with him. He was the—

RM [00:15:08] Talk about Al King.

RM [00:15:09] He was a very dedicated guy. He was a hardworking guy. I can't think of anybody that worked harder for injured work people than he did. He just—he was just really dedicated to injured work people, and I learned a lot from him. He was a streetfighter. You know, he was a real streetfighter. He grew up in the Depression in the thirties, and he ended up working in Trail, and he was quite involved, as you know, in Local 480. And so, yeah, so—but he was a very decent human being.

RM [00:15:42] And you knew he was a communist?

VR [00:15:44] Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was, and pretty well his whole family. I'm not sure about Bill, but he—

RM [00:15:52] No, not Bill.

VR [00:15:52] Bill wasn't. But Olive was, his sister. She worked for Mine Mill. Yeah.

RM [00:15:58] And you weren't—you were not attracted to—did he try to convert you or anything like that?

VR [00:16:03] No.

RM [00:16:04] And he didn't expect you to be a communist because you worked for Mine Mill?

VR [00:16:05] No, we were just involved in the union itself. We were quite involved. We just kept ourselves busy in the union itself. No, I've been a member of the NDP since 1967.

RM [00:16:23] What kind of a union was Mine Mill?

VR [00:16:26] Well, it got beaten up pretty badly, you know, at the end. I mean, they really had nowhere to go. Once they merged in the U.S., it was all over in Canada. The thing that did them in was the '58 strike in Sudbury. They never recovered from that. They were continuously raided until finally in 1965 Mine—Steel took over. Once they lost the local in Sudbury, that was pretty well it. They had a local in Port Hope, but— and the Falconbridge local—but they ran—

RM [00:16:54] But out in B.C., they did well.

VR [00:16:56] Yes, fairly well. Yeah. But, you know, remember back those years, Rod, there was a bad depression in the mining industry, and there was just a—a lot of the mines were shut down. It really wasn't the—the mining industry wasn't that active in those years. And so that that that period of two or three, four or five years really done them in in terms of, you know, they were being raided everywhere by the tri pact, by the Steelworkers. The Steelworkers, at that point, was a big union, much, much bigger, twice the size it is now.

RM [00:17:29] Could you explain what the tri pact was?

VR [00:17:31] The Teamsters and the Operating Engineers [International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE)] and the Tunnel and Rock Workers [Union].

VR [00:17:36] And they raided you, and they were trying to organize, and they made sweetheart deals with the employer?

VR [00:17:41] Yeah, well, there was—yeah, there was some of that went on. They gave away the eight hour day in Granduc in the mines, you know. That was an awful day, I think.

RM [00:17:50] Well, I was just going through Al King's book, and he said, you know, you and Archie McDonald were known as King's wrecking crew because you'd be troubleshooters going to all these mines wherever there was a raid.

VR [00:18:01] Yeah.

RM [00:18:02] What was that like? I mean, the experience of fighting off raids and organizing and so on?

VR [00:18:07] Yeah, well, I can tell you that, Rod, it took a lot of energy, believe me. We'd go work—we were just, you know, we—but we knew a lot of the people, you know, we were young and we—we had lots of energy. You get to know people. I did a lot of organizing for the first several years of my life. That's how I ended up being a troubleshooter for the Steelworkers. That's really what I did in the Steelworkers for ten years. Just wherever there was a mess I went. That's where I learned how to mediate.

RM [00:18:35] But here, 'Vince, Archie and Al King successfully raided the three-way pact certifications at Boss Mountain and Peachland.'

VR [00:18:47] In Zeballos too.

RM [00:18:47] 'And secured new certifications at Mount Nansen and another mine on the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border.'

VR [00:18:53] Yeah.

RM [00:18:53] I mean, it seems like you were everywhere.

RM [00:18:55] Yeah, I did a lot of running around. Yeah.

RM [00:18:58] And were successful.

VR [00:18:59] Yeah. Well, it worked out. Yeah. (laughter)

RM [00:19:02] Did you have a secret way of approaching things? I mean, how did you do it? Not everybody is successful like that.

VR [00:19:09] If there's one word for it, it's energy—just takes a lot of energy to organize. You got to talk to people tonight. You got to go back the next night. You got to make sure that they stay with you. It's keeping the group that you organized, you know, you got to keep them with you, so you got to spend a lot of time. You got to do a lot of repeating. It's not unlike an election campaign. You got to just keep in touch with people. You try and organize a group of fairly loyal supporters, and you try and expand on that. Al King used to call it a ginger group, and I—when I was a union rep, I practiced that all the time whenever I was negotiating. You always have your bargaining committee, and you always get yourself surrounded with a—we always called them a ginger group. They're just—these are just people that are good people in the local union that you go and talk to and have a beer with and talk to them. You get some sense of where the membership's at, you know, because your bargaining committee sometimes were quite self-centered, you know, and they're elected from every department in the mine or wherever it is. They're quite self-centered, and they really don't have—sometimes they have a lot of—they don't care that much about somebody else's problems. You've got to get beyond that. You've got to get beyond that. That's how I used to do it, and I learned that from, I certainly learned that from Al King. You organized that way, too. You got to organize out, you know. You've got to organize out from the centre. We were able to beat these guys off pretty good.

RM [00:20:40] What did you like about it? You kept going at it.

VR [00:20:42] The activity. I liked the action. I missed—still miss—the trade union. I was never like a desk trade unionist. I remember after the raid in Trail, you know, they told me they were going to give me a break. They sent me back to Kamloops with nothing to do, and I just about went crazy. That didn't last long because they sent me to Gibraltar. Then after that, Gibraltar.

CA [00:21:03] What happened in Gibraltar?

CA [00:21:04] Well, we had the raid with CAIMAW, and so we—

RM [00:21:07] I remember that.

VR [00:21:09] There was a big labour board hearing out of that still, eh? You must have read about it [pointing to CA].

CA [00:21:12] Yes.

VR [00:21:12] About hyperbole and all that stuff. (laughter)

RM [00:21:16] All right. So, this is great stuff. Okay. Granduc.

VR [00:21:20] Granduc, Yeah.

RM [00:21:21] Tell me about Granduc. First of all, why you went there, and then what happened?

VR [00:21:25] Well, again, that was a sort of a development project. We went in there and they drove an 11 mile tunnel to get into the ore body. They drove it—

RM [00:21:33] Under the glacier and mountains?

VR [00:21:34] That's right. They drove it from both—two ends. They drove it from Leduc where the slide was in 1965, and they drove it from the—oh, what the hell? I had it in my mind, a minute ago there. I guess it was the glacier side there. But they drove it—we went into the Leduc camp. That's where they started the tunnel, and so we were—

RM [00:21:57] That's way up north?

VR [00:21:58] Yeah. You went in from Stewart. It was quite a place. We used to fly in on—I remember flying in there on a plane. I was sitting on a box of spikes (laughter), I was just trapped by—and they landed in the snow and landed right on the right on the glacier, you know. We were in there about, oh, I guess, 10 or 12 days when they had the big slide in 1965.

RM [00:22:25] You were there with Archie McDonald?

VR [00:22:26] Yeah. He was working that day. I was sleeping when the thing happened. It came down like—took the half, the right half of the bunkhouse right off. Just—I was about three rooms back. It just cut it right off. It was huge, a huge slide. If it had have happened in another hour and a half, it would have probably got 300 people, you know, because it was the kitchen—it was right in line with the kitchen. Wiped the kitchen out, and that's where it got most of the—all the cooks and them were all killed.

RM [00:23:02] What was it like after it hit and all the rest? Were you involved in the rescue operation? Can you talk about that?

VR [00:23:06] Yeah, because we were fogged in. We were fogged in; we couldn't get—well, you know, in those days there was no Internet or anything in there. There was always a bunch of geeks around camp that set up transistor radios and run—and so they kept sending out the signal, and finally there was a ship in the Aleutian Islands, picked up the S.O.S. or the help signal, and then they sent the American Navy—Air Force rescues in. There was quite a few people who were hurt badly, with broken limbs and backs and all that, so we had them lined up. There was a first aid guy that was pretty good at organizing stuff. I think we were in there two days before they could get a helicopter in. Then they brought in the Sikorsky, the American Army come in and—

RM [00:23:53] They were pulling guys out of the snow?

VR [00:23:54] Yeah, they were digging for people in the snow. Remember, the Finn guy that lived for about five years. He lived in the East End after that. They did a story on him every year. He was buried—

RM [00:24:05] He survived—he was there for about five days under the snow.

VR [00:24:08] Five days. Yeah.

RM [00:24:10] Were you there when they found him?

VR [00:24:12] No, we were out. By that time, we were out of there. We got out after about three days. They took us out—I should tell you, there's a great story about how we got out of there. They got all the injured people out in the helicopters, and then they took us up, and they landed us on the—we were, I guess we were up in the Aleutian Islands, I think. They landed us, and then they took us over in a 12-foot boat over to the scow. We went into Ketchikan, Alaska, on a scow, open scow in middle of the night, two o'clock in the morning. Anyway, the boat we were in, we were overloaded. We were—but it was dark, so—I'll send you a—I've got a story on it. I'll send it to you. The god darned thing started taking on water, so we took off our muckers [motion scooping water] and that's how we were getting the water out of the boat. (laughter)

RM [00:25:01] You survived the avalanche, and then you almost drowned.

VR [00:25:04] Yeah. So, we—(laughter). Yeah. I'll send you the story.

RM [00:25:09] Were you involved in trying to rescue people right after?

VR [00:25:12] Well, we all were. We all were. It's a weird thing about when there's an avalanche that big, it triggers a whole bunch more, and you can hear them, you know. We were up all night, you know, we were—and it's hard to bring yourself to believe, but the safest place to be in an avalanche is right on top of it because the snow has already come down. So, we just kind of stayed up out there all night, and people were taking turns digging for people and that sort of stuff. We had to take loading sticks, you know, you use underground to load power. You had to poke around, and that's how they found a lot of people. Some people were quite—buried quite deeply; others weren't, you know, others were. Yeah.

RM [00:25:57] And so you were asleep when it hit?

VR [00:25:59] Yeah.

RM [00:26:00] Do you remember, like, waking up?

VR [00:26:02] Yes, it woke me up alright. (laughter)

RM [00:26:04] Talk about that.

VR [00:26:06] When I came out, it was just—yeah, it was just amazing. They just cut the front end of the bunkhouse off and just, like, took a chainsaw to just cut it off. The snow came down, and it went up and it rebounded. It did as much damage on the rebound as it did coming down. It's funny, it came up one side of the mountain and right back down. I

had a friend who was mining who was outside. There was two people outside. One—there was a 40-ton mucking machine; that's how much it weighed. It that took that thing just like a dinky toy and took it down into the valley on the rebound. Cap Palmer, [Cecil Alan Palmer] my friend, was in front of it, but he got killed. Another chap was behind him. He didn't even get touched. It was just the flow of the snow.

RM [00:26:52] Have you ever reflected on how lucky you were?

VR [00:26:55] I guess you do, you know.

RM [00:26:58] How much did it miss you by?

VR [00:26:59] Well, it was—I was two doors, two or three rooms down from where it hit the bunkhouse, and there was nobody in the front two or three rooms. I guess they were all on shift. Yeah. The only reason, you know, the only reason that it missed me was that night that—in those days used to write letters, you know. Now, you don't do that anymore. I had been only—I just got in there, and I had written a letter to my mother, and I'd written a letter to my sister, and I was sat up doing that, and doing whatever else. But anyway, I didn't go to bed till about—I was on afternoon shift, so I didn't go to bed until quite late after getting off afternoon shift. So, I'd slept past it. We used to always gather for coffee in the morning in the little coffee shop, it got wiped right out.

RM [00:27:43] And the cookhouse got taken out. So, what did you do for food?

VR [00:27:49] We knew where they stored the food. They stored the food in the warehouse, and so we managed to dig our way into there, and we got into the food supply. Then we lit a fire on top of the avalanche. We had this guy—we had no frying pan, so he just used a shovel. (laughter) Then we fried the steaks. So, you just did what you had to do, you know.

RM [00:28:14] That's one of the huge natural disasters in B.C. history.

VR [00:28:17] I'm the last surviving guy. You know, CBC did an interview with me about two or three, four years ago, and I'm the last survivor of the Granduc slide.

RM [00:28:26] Wow. What did you tell them?

VR [00:28:27] I don't know, I had an interview with them. They have a—they sent me a tape of it. I have never even listened to it.

RM [00:28:36] Do you ever reflect back on it?

VR [00:28:38] Yeah. You think about things. Yeah.

RM [00:28:40] I mean that's—

VR [00:28:41] I do, but I don't, you know. What can you do. (laughter)

RM [00:28:43] Of course, you were a young guy then so—

VR [00:28:44] Yeah, those things kind of came and went, eh.

RM [00:28:48] You knew some of those guys, as you mentioned that didn't make it.

VR [00:28:51] Yeah, we knew some, yeah, some of them. I was—yeah—that part's not easy.

RM [00:28:56] Did you talk to Archie about it? Did you get—

VR [00:28:59] Oh, yeah. He was working.

RM [00:29:01] He was underground.

VR [00:29:01] He was underground when it happened after—because he came right around that mucking machine I told you was right outside the adit. Because they had mucked around out, and moved it out, and then the drill crew goes in, and it was just there, and they were just getting it. Palmer, the guy that got killed, was the guy that operated it, so he was out there, out getting ready to go back in. Yeah, and so Archie was underground at the time.

RM [00:29:21] Did you ever go back?

VR [00:29:22] Yeah, I went back to work there nine months later.

RM [00:29:25] Really?

VR [00:29:25] Yeah. I went back and worked there in the spring, but I went into the other side, the glacier side. They never did open up the Leduc side. They—we were back—I went back in—that was February. I went back to work there in May or June when they opened it up.

RM [00:29:44] What was that like?

VR [00:29:46] Well, it was just another job, you know. (laughter)

RM [00:29:50] Were you organizing then?

RM [00:29:51] Yeah, we were organizing. We're organizing for Mine Mill, but Tunnel and Rock had a pretty good lock in the miners at the time. So, they got—they won the certification.

RM [00:30:03] Boy, it's an amazing story.

VR [00:30:04] Then gave away the nine hour, eight hour day.

CA [00:30:04] Oh, there?

VR [00:30:05] We never forgave them for that. (laughter)

RM [00:30:09] Tell us about that.

VR [00:30:10] Well, Milner, he negotiated an agreement, and he gave them—he allowed them two hours a day to travel the tunnel, you know, and when we were there, it was part of the day, you know. You went to went to work, and as you advance the tunnel you just—

Yeah, it took a little longer to drive, but that's part of the business, you know. But, anyway, they gave that away.

RM [00:30:31] Why would they give it away?

VR [00:30:33] I don't know why they gave it away. (laughter) They were dealing with this guy Mitchell that I told you about that kicked me out of the meeting. He was a pretty tough cookie, you know. I think they probably had a strike over it, too, but yeah they ended up giving it away.

RM [00:30:50] We haven't talked about someone that I've wanted to ask about. The leader of Mine Mill, Harvey Murphy. How well did you know him?

VR [00:30:58] Well, I knew him well enough that he was in the office, but he really didn't, in my view, never took much of a role, like he was in his waning years. He retired shortly after the merger. He'd come and go. He spent a lot of time in Toronto, and I think he was quite active in the party. I think he did a lot of party business—him and Longridge and those guys, you know. He'd show up. You wouldn't see the—you didn't see him that much. I remember driving to Trail with him one time. On the radio—and he drove everybody crazy. He insisted on sitting in the front seat. In those days when you got past Abbotsford, you couldn't get a radio station. He never stopped punching the buttons in the car to try and get the news, you know. He was an amazing guy in his own right. I mean, I don't know if you ever heard him speak. Did you ever hear him speak? Yeah, I have the recordings of that 1954—

RM [00:31:52] Paul Robeson?

VR [00:31:54] Robeson, at the—

RM [00:31:55] Oh, I've heard that.

VR [00:31:56] Peach Arch.

RM [00:31:57] Yeah, I've heard that speech.

VR [00:31:57] He spoke there, but the speech at the convention in '67 when the merge with the Steelworkers, you know—remember he was very vocal against the Steelworkers and he was quite— but he gave a speech, honest to Jesus, you'd wonder after the end of the speech why we didn't merge with the Steelworkers 20 years ago. He just stood up and made a speech. He never had a note in front of him. Nothing. There's a copy of the speech. If you look at the Mine Mill history, it's a full spread. He never repeated himself once, and he was a very, very good orator. That's the one thing he was good. I don't know if you ever heard him speak, but he's just a tremendous speaker, and he was funny. I could see why he listened to the news all the time because he had every local—you remember in about '67, '68, the nuns, remember, they organized in Montreal—

RM [00:32:52] The singing nuns?

VR [00:32:52] Yeah, the nuns remember. Well, he worked that into—he was talking about the importance of organization. He worked the nuns organizing into a speech. He just had every local and anything that was going on around the world, he could work it and he could meld it into his speeches. He was a tremendous speaker. Yeah, that's the one good thing

he was really good at, yeah—but as far as taking part in the day-to-day operations of Mine Mill, in terms of ever going to the bargaining table, he used to go to the bargaining table in Trail, but that stopped in the later years, you know.

RM [00:33:25] You knew he was a diehard communist?

VR [00:33:27] Yeah.

RM [00:33:27] That didn't bother you?

VR [00:33:29] No, that never bothered me. No. Mine Mill was a very—I found they were very close to the membership, like they were good that way, you know, they were good with the membership and all that. They had a great rapport with the membership. It always reminded me of the Carmela lead the HEU [Hospital Employees' Union]. I mean, when she took over the membership were very, very involved, and it's fair to say, isn't it Carmela? Yeah. Noticeably. Noticeably. That's kind of the way Mine Mill had brought that feeling to the—you know, you could go to the Mine Mill office, you could talk to somebody that was real about a problem, and then do something about it. You know, I predominately deferred to Al King about that stuff. You know, if you took a miner with a WCB [Workers' Compensation Board] complaint, he just sat down and did it. He just fixed it. I thought that was a pretty good form of unionism. I always notice that as I look at the trade union now. How do they interrelate with their membership? What kind of a program do they have to relate to their membership? A lot of the unions are lacking in that, you know.

RM [00:34:43] Was Harvey Murphy a good leader?

VR [00:34:46] I'm sure that in his day he was. I didn't think he was at the end. I didn't think he was—you know, I think he just lost his mojo. He was—but I'm sure that in his day he was. He made his moment. Made his mark, you know, but you wouldn't know that. Then again, as I said, we went to the merger, and it was it was pretty rocky, you know. There was quite a split in the union about whether to do that. Then Murphy spoke, and they put him on at the opportune time. As I say, when he was finished, you think they hadn't thought of it 20 years ago. He just mesmerized everybody. Yeah.

RM [00:35:23] What did you think of the merger?

VR [00:35:25] I think it was—I think to be realistic about it, where were we going to go? Mine Mill was right out of gas. I mean, it just was. You got to remember, the people you're dealing with on the other side are pretty powerful people. You needed some kind of backbone and power to deal with them. You know, because at its core, labour relations—you can never forget labor relations is about power. It's not about—collective bargaining is about power. It's not about, you know, nice guys and all that kind of stuff. It's about—and it's not about getting to yes, it's about power, that kind of stuff. Getting to yes is kind of a side show of collective bargaining.

RM [00:36:01] You voted for it?

VR [00:36:02] Yeah, oh yeah. I thought it was the only way to go. It was—where were we going to go? They were literally financially broke, you know.

CA [00:36:13] Yeah, and so what happened to you after that?

VR [00:36:17] Well, I was the youngest guy to ever get hired by the Steelworkers. They hired me. I was the last guy on the list. I don't know how that happened, but they had a selection process, you know.

RM [00:36:28] Because not everybody got hired?

VR [00:36:30] No, that's right. That's right. There was some people weren't hired. Yeah. I was the last guy hired. I was hired really to organize, and they used me to organize, and troubleshoot. That's what they used me for.

RM [00:36:47] Was it hard working for the union that had been raiding so bitterly against Mine Mill all those years?

VR [00:36:52] Not really. Not really because you have a lot of—there was a lot of bad blood between—but don't forget, I was a pretty young guy at that time. That was 1967. I wasn't that—I hadn't lived through all this stuff. The fist fights and all that stuff (laughter) that had gone on in the past, you know. The Steelworkers were—at that time the structure of the Steelworkers was such that District 6 was Toronto, West and North. They were the second biggest district in the union, and no international officer ever got elected without the District 6 support. District 6 had a lot of power in the organization, and that translated down onto the shop floor. One thing I've—I can always—I can say this without any fear or contradiction. They never interfered. If you said you were going to have a strike in a local they just made sure that all the, you know, that you had gotten through, all the—and if you had to call it, you called it, and that was up to you as a staff rep. You had a lot of freedom in the Steelworkers.

CA [00:37:57] What were some of the key or memorable things you were involved in early on with the Steelworkers before you moved on?

VR [00:38:05] Before what?

CA [00:38:05] Before you moved on to other things?

VR [00:38:08] We had we had a lot of new mines starting up before I left. You know, the Highland Valley Mine started, the Fording Coal Mine started and all that, and the mining industry had certain norms that they—they'd sit down and negotiate stuff in collective agreement. The collective agreements weren't very powerful or helpful (laughter) to the union. You know, they really weren't, and that's because of the power base. I mean, these guys are powerful guys, you know. I mean, I remember they took a strike in Endako for four months. I think we got ten cents after four months. I mean, these guys were tough. Anyway, one of the things—Carmela you'll like this—is the—they wouldn't—they'd never talk about housing, and that was beyond the pale. You just didn't talk about housing, so we organized the women. We always organized the women. We learned that very quickly—organize the housewives and let them go up to talk. They'd come back pleading with us. We want to talk to you about housing. No, no, you talk to them. We did it at Highland Valley and we did it at Fording Coal, and it worked, you know.

RM [00:39:11] I'm lost—what do you mean organize—

CA [00:39:12] The wives.

VR [00:39:13] Well, housing, things like housing, they would, they would—for instance, at Fording Coal, they'd go to places and have hiring—what do you call the hiring. They have a word for it.

CA [00:39:24] Hiring hall?

VR [00:39:25] Health care's used to do it. Hiring—

CA [00:39:27] Support worker and housekeeper?

VR [00:39:30] No, they have the hiring fairs.

CA [00:39:32] Yeah. The hiring fairs, of course.

VR [00:39:34] They'd bring in people, and they promised them housing, and they'd get over here—they'd get up to Fernie and there'd be no houses. They'd be staying in motel rooms with young families and all that stuff and no housing they were promised. The employer wouldn't talk to us about it. They said, 'That's none of your business. That's not a matter for collective bargaining.' We said, okay, we just got to find a way around this, so we organized the women.

RM [00:39:58] You'd organize them as activists? Not into the union?

CA [00:40:02] All the wives.

VR [00:40:02] Yeah.

CA [00:40:03] In the family, type thing.

VR [00:40:04] Yeah, and that, by Jesus, that got action for us. (laughter) Things like that, you know, you had to—that was one great thing about the union, there was never a dull day, you know. I mean, even it was just keeping the union together was kind of a fun day doing it. I always enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed bargaining, and I enjoyed all that stuff. I enjoyed—did a lot of arbitration work in the union. I just learned this stuff from— just did it. (laughter)

RM [00:40:30] I'm going to ask you one question about the old days. Last question about the old days. You mentioned that fistfights and stuff like that. Probably a lot of drinking, too. I mean—

VR [00:40:38] Yeah.

RM [00:40:39] What were you like in those days? You sound like a brat, you know, a hellion.

VR [00:40:45] Yeah, I'm an alcoholic. I drank throughout my—I haven't drank since 1964. That's when I quit drinking. Yeah. What happened there was I got into—I went to work in Zebellos. They were telling me about the food. So, I get into a fight with the cook and got fired. (laughter) The first night I got there. So, the guys all walked off the job, and so— (laughter)

VR [00:41:10] Because of the food or because you got fired?

VR [00:41:12] Because I get fired. Anyways, somebody brought it to a head. Nobody'd do a god darn thing about it, so I got into a fight with this cook. Anyway, that's what happened.

RM [00:41:23] A lot of fights?

VR [00:41:25] Yeah. So, then I quit. I quit drinking. I figured, what the hell these guys all walked out I've known. I should take control of myself. So, I did. I went to the hospital in Esperanza. There was a—that's a little spot between Zeballos and Gold River and Tahsis, you know. Tahsis, yeah. It's just around there. There was a little hospital, it was a religious group, and I was in bad shape. I'd been drunk for about two months. Anyway, remember I told you I just flew into Zeballos that day. Anyway, I woke up one morning, and this was a religious group, and they're kneeling at my—(laughter) they're kneeling at the foot of my bed. This is a true story. (laughter) They asked me if I'd seen Jesus, and I was in the snakes. I was in the DTs [delirium tremens], you know. (laughter) I said, 'Yeah, I seen him. He ran by here a while ago with a bunch of people chasing him.' (laughter). Anyway, that's when I quit drinking—and I haven't drank since. That was 1964.

RM [00:42:32] That was a good one. You carried on with Archie too?

VR [00:42:34] Yeah.

RM [00:42:35] He joined the Steel—he—was he also hired?

VR [00:42:38] Yeah, he was hired. We worked—he did a lot more servicing work than I did. I did a lot of—just a lot of organizing and troubleshooting. Yeah, that's what I did. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed that. That was lots of action, you know.

RM [00:42:54] You had a new rival—CAIMAW.

VR [00:42:57] Yeah. CAIMAW.

RM [00:42:58] What were some of those battles like?

VR [00:42:59] They were interesting. (laughter)

RM [00:43:02] Let's hear about it.

VR [00:43:03] Jess Succamore and—but you know, Jess is dead now, eh. He passed away.

RM [00:43:08] Yeah.

VR [00:43:09] You know, he came to me at our Art Kube's funeral, and he congratulated me for all the work we'd done for Royal Oak Mine, you know, and all that, because he got involved right at the end, eh. Remember at the Royal Oak Mine in Yellowknife, Buzz Hargrove sent Hemi Mitic in, and they took over the CASAW [Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers] local, and then we worked with them to bring that thing to an end. Succamore come up to me after all these years and congratulated me for all the work we had done—because he got involved right at the tail end, Succamore got involved. Because we had those 44 people that were fired and all that, and [Donald R.] Munroe did

all the—Munroe and I did all the arbitrations and that and brought that to an end. I had a few good, pleasant words with sad Jess, anyway, before he died. I didn't know he had died until several months ago.

RM [00:44:04] But during those days you weren't so cordial?

VR [00:44:07] Yeah, but I got to tell you a funny story. You know how unamerican he was, so I go to play golf over on the golf course he belonged to over at Avalon in Washington state. I didn't know he was—I didn't even know he'd go into the United States (laughter) the way he carried on. I go in and he's larger than life—he was a scratch golfer, you know. He was a very good golfer.

RM [00:44:30] Yeah he loved golf.

VR [00:44:30] So who's sitting there larger than life—it's Succamore. I see, I went over, I said, 'Jesus, how come you're playing golf in an American golf course?' (laughter) Remember, how anti—(laughter) Anyway, he had a bit of a laugh.

RM [00:44:42] What did he say?

VR [00:44:43] He was jovial about it. Yeah, he was jovial about it.

RM [00:44:46] You were very bitter rivals, right?

VR [00:44:48] Oh, yeah.

RM [00:44:49] You're laughing now, but it was tough stuff.

VR [00:44:52] I know it was. Yeah. My view of when he got sued was to counter sue. I never—and if they gave it, you gave it back. You know, I never believed in being nice about this stuff, you know, cause they weren't, and I wasn't. (laughter) So, I get to know a lot of—I guess—we had that labour board case there at Williams Lake, at Gibraltar Mine. We had that case and that was—arose out of some back and forth between Succamore and I.

RM [00:45:23] Was that the one where you put out a leaflet saying they were starving and—(laughter)

VR [00:45:27] Yeah, that's the one.

RM [00:45:28] Weiler put out (laughter)—said it should be made clear that the workers are not starving. (laughter) That was—he took that, you know, he took a shot at you guys.

VR [00:45:36] Yeah, that was the one.

RM [00:45:38] Any regrets about the way you carried on sometimes?

VR [00:45:40] No, none at all. When you're in a fight (laughter), you know. No, I don't. Why would you have any regrets? I don't know. No, I have no regrets over any of that stuff. No, none whatsoever. I still think it was—I think their program was screwed up. I think—I just still believe that you need power to go up against the mining industry. That's a tough god

darn industry, you know, and to be all split up like that, that was—I thought was wrong right from the beginning.

RM [00:46:15] Do you have a position on raiding? Is raiding good for unions?

VR [00:46:19] No.

RM [00:46:20] But you took part in so many raids yourself.

VR [00:46:23] Yeah, but we were the dominant union in the mining industry. We had the—we were the dominant union and it'd be just like saying it would be proper to go in and raid the HEU [Hospital Employees' Union], the dominant union in health. We were the union with the power in the mining industry. That's why I thought it was important.

RM [00:46:40] You didn't think you should be picked off by these smaller unions?

VR [00:46:42] No. No, because you got no power base if you're going to deal with these guys. I mean, how you gonna—we had a copper strike in the United States, went for nine months. It was 200,000 people involved in it. How do you—you know, some rump union can't handle that stuff. You got to have a power base if you're in a trade union. That was my approach to it is that—all that crap about where the money went and all that stuff was all nonsense. We spent more money—because I told you the structure of District 6—we spent a lot more money in Canada than we ever collected, Canada and the Steelworkers. That was a financial fact.

VR [00:47:19] So, what do you remember about your time with the Steelworkers? I mean, good stories or you enjoyed it?

VR [00:47:23] Yeah, I enjoyed it. Yeah. I still miss some of it. I enjoyed the troubleshooting and all the stuff, you know. The mining industry was, more or less as we know it today, was kind of in its infancy in the seventies, you know, when I was involved. All the new mines were starting up. We did all the organizing, negotiated all the first collective agreements and all that sort of stuff. Yeah, it was fun. We had a lot of wildcat strikes. I remember in 1971, we had 21 wildcat strikes I had settled between June and September of 19—and all over the province, Fording Coal, Williams Lake, everywhere. So, I was—that was my job. I went in and sorted all that shit out, you know.

RM [00:48:05] It's like the guy that arrived in the Westerns? (laughter) Vince Ready's in town. (laughter)

CA [00:48:09] The troubleshooter's in town.

RM [00:48:10] The troubleshooter.

VR [00:48:12] We had a playbook that we dealt with and yeah.

RM [00:48:19] What characters do you remember from those days?

RM [00:48:23] Oh, a lot of the—you remember a lot of the mine managers because they were—Jesus Christ, they were tough. They were tough guys, you know, to deal with. I remember going to arbitration at Craigmont Mines over 75 cents. No shit. Yeah, 75 cents.

RM [00:48:38] Bob Baird was the local president.

VR [00:48:40] Yeah, that's right. Baird was the local president. Yeah.

RM [00:48:42] Yeah. I dealt with him on the phone a lot. He became mayor later.

VR [00:48:45] Yeah, that's right. That's right. Yeah. Bob—yeah, he was pretty good guy, you know. He was an okay guy. Highland Valley [Highland Valley Copper Mine] was kind of the lead local union for the Steelworkers. It still is, you know. So, we'd a lot of—I remember going out the service area. You drove around this corner on the road, and if the belt, the conveyor belt was shut down, you knew it wasn't broke down. It was because there was a—the guys were all at the gate. (laughter) Well, collective agreements, Rod, you know, were not that helpful to the—you know, on real issues and the—like, seniority and that kind of stuff. There was kind of a roughshod approach to seniority and all that kind of stuff. There was just a lot of issues, and you couldn't get at them. They'd say, 'File a grievance.' You can't agree if you don't have the language, so they'd wildcat.

RM [00:49:35] You preferred working for the union than working underground or working at the mine I guess.

VR [00:49:40] Oh, yeah. I enjoyed working for the union very much. I enjoyed the action. I just liked the action. There was always something to do, you know. (laughter) And if you didn't, you created it.

RM [00:49:52] So, Vince, you mentioned something off camera. Talk about Highland Valley.

VR [00:49:58] Highland Valley started up in 1968. I was there when we negotiated the first agreement and got it ratified. I've negotiated, I've mediated every agreement there for the last probably 25 or 30 years. Yeah.

RM [00:50:14] Tough negotiations?

VR [00:50:15] Yeah, real tough.

RM [00:50:18] In what way?

VR [00:50:18] They have a very, very good collective agreement negotiated. The Steelworkers bargained hard at the—they had a long strike there. What was it—'89, '90. Yeah. It went on for six or seven—five or six months. They came out of it. The mining—the price of copper was way down at the time, and the mines had shut down—Afton Mines had shut down. Boss Mountain shut down. All the mines. So, the Steelworkers did a very clever thing. I got to give Steve Hunt credit for this. They—he negotiated, he attached the pension to the price of copper. That's why they've got such a good—they've got the best pension of any mine in the world, clearly, because the price of copper has gone from about 60 cents—4.25 or \$4.00. Yeah. For every so many cents in the price of copper, they get \$1 million in their pension plan.

RM [00:51:17] That was Steve Hunt, not you?

VR [00:51:19] Steve Hunt—well, I was mediating those disputes. I mediated all of those.

RM [00:51:22] Yeah, we haven't got into the mediating yet.

VR [00:51:24] Yeah. I've mediated pretty well every dispute in Highland Valley for, oh jeez, the last 30 years.

RM [00:51:30] Got a nice spot in your heart?

VR [00:51:33] Yeah. No, it's a good—they're a good group of people—they were really—wonderful. It was a great place to serve—I serviced the local when I was in the Steelworkers, the last five or seven or eight years, I was in the Steelworkers. They're just a great group of people.

RM [00:51:47] You negotiated their first collective agreement?

VR [00:51:49] Yeah, that and I negotiated in the seventies, the 1976 agreement when the AIB [Anti-Inflation Board] was in. Remember the wage controls, and we negotiated 44 percent over two years (laughter) [unclear] — so, we had to figure out a way—we had this guy in the Steelworkers who was fairly creative. We had this formula during the AIB. What a difference a day makes. You put the wage increase in for 364 days a year and then reduce it. That's how we got around the AIB.

RM [00:52:16] What?

VR [00:52:17] Yeah.

RM [00:52:18] How did that work?

VR [00:52:19] Well, you put the wage increase in because they measure it the last day of the collective agreement, so you made sure the last day of the collective agreement was back where the wage controls were supposed to be. Then you put—so, you reduced the agreement for one day, and then you put it back in the next day.

RM [00:52:37] The company went along with this?

VR [00:52:38] Yeah, but they needed men. They were—they needed people to work, and so we had a good bargaining position. Yeah.

CA [00:52:45] You had power.

VR [00:52:47] We had power. Yeah, that's exactly right.

RM [00:52:49] Did any other unions do this? I've never heard of this.

VR [00:52:51] We tried in a few other places. A lot of places wouldn't do it, but we'd— and then we also got the employer persuaded. We went to Toronto for a day AIB brief in Toronto. We got them persuaded that the—we got a shorter workday, and the employer developed a productivity argument over the shorter work day that excused about 20 percent of the agreement. (laughter) AIB guys are just bureaucrats. They didn't have a fucking clue what the (laughter), you know, about any of this stuff. They just follow the book, you know. Anyway, but there was a provision in there if you had a productivity increase, it was excused, that was the effect of it. They argued that the 7.5 hour a day

rather than the eight hour day was a productivity increase (laughter) for a whole pile of reasons that I didn't understand and didn't need to. But anyway, they accepted it.

VR [00:53:43] And they got a wage increase too?

VR [00:53:45] Yeah. Oh, yeah. They got that. They justified part of the wage increase, you see.

RM [00:53:50] So, are you a good negotiator?

VR [00:53:52] I don't know.

CA [00:53:53] How dare you ask that question! Of course.

VR [00:53:55] I don't know.

RM [00:53:57] What did you take into negotiation? More than just power, right?

VR [00:54:00] Yeah. Bargaining, you got to know from day one where you're going in bargaining and never forget it. All this other side stuff just run along with it but never, ever, ever take your eye off the ball—and it's the same in mediation. Just never take your eye off the ball let—you know, you get crazy days in mediation. You get crazy days in bargaining, but you know, this is another day. I always take one day—you're one day closer to a settlement—you just don't know when it's going to be. But never take your eye off the ball—ever. That's the key. And know where you're going. Know what's achievable and how you're going to go about getting it even if it doesn't appear to be achievable.

RM [00:54:40] And strikes—you led strikes.

VR [00:54:42] Yeah. I had the strike in Trail in '73. Four months. Yeah. Four months and 17 days.

RM [00:54:50] What was that like?

VR [00:54:51] It was tough. Yeah, it was a tough one. Yeah. We almost lost it after about eight weeks, and the membership gettin' raunchy because we had a lot of people against us. We had the Catholic Church against us. We had the Anglican Church against us. We had the Trail Times against us and Cominco against us. We had a lot of stuff against us, but we were organized. We were well organized, and we—it's funny the way we brought it to an end. The Trail Times and Cominco and every other force against us argued that we didn't vote the last agreement and that the last offer had it gone to a settlement, an offer, a final offer vote prior to the strike, it would have been accepted, you see. They were starting to get some traction on that, and so we said, 'Well, we better just figure this out. Figure out where we're going here.' We mustered up. We had a lot of meetings, and that got the crew worked up, and we said, we'll call a vote and have a vote, but what's more, we'll have the—I used to call them the God squad, all the Baptist, the ministers and the the priests and all that—we'll have them scrutinize it. We'll have them scrutinize it. We'll have scrutineers there too.

VR [00:56:03] When they count the vote—we were pretty sure by then that we'd carry it, and we carried it by about 85 percent. This was like seven or eight weeks into the strike. I said, 'No, we're not going to make the mistake. We'll let the—the Catholic priest in Trail

was the only person that supported this because his mother was living on a \$49 a month pension plan. So, we said he'll be the spokesman for—he'll announce what the vote is, and so he did. Then the next Sunday, he stood up in church, and he went on for about 25 minutes about just how awful the pensioners were treated, including his mother. (laughter) I had a call the next day from Mark Holland, and he was the general manager, of course, he was an upstanding member of the clergy. He phoned me. He said, 'Vince, we should get together. We've got to figure out what's it's gonna take to settle this.' And I said 'We will.' We had applied for—the bill came for an industrial inquiry commission because we were getting to the stage where we had to do something, you know, to get out of—you gotta get out of these fuckin' strikes. You know, it's one thing to get into them—but anyway, we had applied to Bill King for an industrial Inquiry commission, and so once the priest got up and made this speech, and I had the call from Mark Holland, who said, 'I think we're okay. We don't need the commissioner. I've got the blessings of the pope, now with us.' (laughter) So, we bargained. We got a deal after about seven or eight days. Yeah. That's the only time my entire career I've ever seen the employer negotiate surrender terms. The only time of all the agreements I've done. Yeah. Just sit down. Yeah. He said, 'What's it going to take?'

RM [00:57:41] You had all those Italians in Trail, and they of course were Roman Catholic.

VR [00:57:46] Oh yeah, they were all Catholics. We had everybody with us then. That's how we settled it.

RM [00:57:51] Did you spend a lot of time in Trail?

VR [00:57:52] Yeah. I lived there for three years. I lived there all through this period.

RM [00:57:56] It's one of my favorite towns. What do you think of Trail? And the smelter there? It's different.

VR [00:58:02] Yeah, it's very different. It's very inward, very inclusive. (laughter) I used to bug them. They go out in the morning and shout, and then their echo came back from the mountains. (laughter) They never thought beyond that, but it was a nice place to live. It was a good place to live. It was different because they'd had a, you know, they had a funny origin. They were a company union when [Selwyn] Blaylock ran Cominco. It was a company union—out-and-out company union. He had, yeah, works crews, and we had some funny fallouts in Trail because if you were in favor on the company union, or property on the—and all the supervisors, all the cottages that are built on Christina Lake is all stolen lumber from Cominco, you see. (laughter)

VR [00:58:51] We had this old painter up there, and he got fired one day and he was— for stealing nails, see. He came down to the union office. He was screaming and really wild. He insisted that we bypass the grievance procedure, and we go up and see the manager, and I forget his name now. Anyway, we insist—he insists we go up and talk to him. So, he gets on the phone, and he phones the guy. 'I want to see you on Monday morning.' And he still—he got caught at the—remember they brought out those big aluminum lunch pails about the seventies and he had both of them—he was building a cottage on the lake—and he had both of them full of them six-inch nails. They busted—one of them busted right in front of the guard, so he got fired. We go up and we see this guy, and he started telling them about all the—when he was on the company union. On the weekends they'd haul plywood down for all these guys to Christina Lake. He started comparing notes with them, see. (laughter) So, he said, 'George', he said, 'Look George, I'll put you back Monday

morning as a labourer.' 'No, no. Fuck you. Put me back as a painter.' (laughter) That's how we settled a grievance. (laughter) He just reminisced for about a half an hour about all the loads of lumber— 'How do you think that's going to sound?'

RM [01:00:08] And it worked?

VR [01:00:09] Yeah, it worked. Yeah, but that was funny.

CA [01:00:13] How long did you stay with the Steelworkers? Then what happened with your career?

VR [01:00:18] With what? What happened?

CA [01:00:19] What happened with your career?

VR [01:00:22] Yeah, '78, I left the Steelworkers. After the Trail strike, I come back to work in Kamloops, but that's when they changed the union, you see. They changed the structure of the union. They set up District 3, and it's Winnipeg—and it had no power at all in the international union, you know. Then the guy that they put it in as director, he and I didn't get along very well.

RM [01:00:45] Who was that?

VR [01:00:46] Len Stevens. Yeah, he was the director. He come out—you must remember that.

CA [01:00:50] Yeah.

RM [01:00:50] I remember.

VR [01:00:51] Well, anyway, you know, he and I didn't get along all that well, and I figured I'm just too young to go to work mad every day. I had a young family, and what the hell? So, I just decided I would leave. I phoned Bill Kelly [William Patrick Kelly], and I went to Ottawa, and I met him, and he hired me. That's when I left Steel. I left in June of '78, I left Steelworkers. I worked for the Steelworkers right up until midnight the date I left. I went to work for Labour Canada the next morning.

CA [01:01:19] What did you do at Labour Canada?

VR [01:01:21] I was a mediator. Yeah. Mediator. Labour Canada's broken down in the mountain regions, and they've got the central Canada region, and another region for Ontario. I was a mediator. Yeah. So, I mediated disputes, but it was boring as hell because there's not that many disputes that come in under federal legislation. Then I got hired for—hired by the B.C. board in 1980 or '81.

RM [01:01:49] The Labour Board?

VR [01:01:50] No. The mediation group. Mediation then, Rod, was separate. Was a separate—I forget what they call them.

CA [01:01:59] The Mediation Commission, I think.

VR [01:01:59] Yeah. I think it was called the Mediation Commission or something. Yeah, I hired from them. Yeah. I went to work there and then—and that was busy. It was good. It was fun. It was a lot of fun.

RM [01:02:11] Do you remember your first dispute, though, you know, as a mediator for the federal government and how different that was, wearing a different hat?

VR [01:02:17] Yeah. North American Construction [Group]—first dispute. Yeah, and the first and second one. Yeah, I remember them both well. The second one was the pilots for Conair—you know the guys who put out the fires. Yeah, I remember them.

RM [01:02:35] What was that like, though, being the guy in the middle?

VR [01:02:38] Well, it was funny. The first one was kind of just a normal mediation was just—we got it settled. With the second one, I had to take over the bargaining. I did take over the bargaining for the union. They had a business agent that was really inexperienced. I knew there was a settlement there, you know, but you couldn't—every time—and the other thing he did is every time he had to make a tough decision—he had a construction project—and he'd just leave the bargaining. He wasn't capable of sittin' and making a decision. So, I took over the bargaining. I said to his committee, 'Do you want me to just do this for you?' Because I was familiar, you know. I just left negotiations for ten years, and I was familiar with contract language and all that. I had no trouble figuring it out. I phoned the employer negotiator and said, 'Look, here's the deal. I'm going to sit across the table from you (laughter) when you come in tomorrow morning, and I explained it all to him. He was okay. They wanted to get a settlement too. I said, 'Well, I'll make a lot of noise,' but I said that we'd get a deal, and we did going on two in the afternoon. I went and told the director of mediation what I'd done. He went completely crazy. I mean, 'We just don't do that,' he said, 'We're neutrals.' (laughter) I phoned Bill Kelly and told him exactly what I'd done. (laughter) Kelly said, 'That's good. These fucking guys don't know what they're doing.' (laughter) That was good. (laughter) Anyway Kelly, that's when he appointed me to Thunder Bay. And so, to go to Thunder Bay.

CA [01:04:05] And then you came to B.C.?

VR [01:04:07] Yeah. Then I went to BC, I— it was boring, Carmela. Like there was nothing to do with this—this was an awful—it's an awful way to live, you know, when you're just sitting around doing nothing. So, I got hired by Allan Williams.

CA [01:04:23] Let's jump to your involvement in [Operation] Solidarity in B.C.

VR [01:04:29] Yeah.

RM [01:04:33] No, I was going to ask Vince, but I have to tell a Vince story on Solidarity. I was, you know, in—I was at the Province then.

VR [01:04:42] Yeah, that's right.

RM [01:04:44] So, you know, you can imagine the media interest. Vince would show up, you know. They all—the TV all need the shot of the mediator walking in, right? (laughter) Vince would come in, in the morning, he'd see me. 'Oh, hi, Rod. How's it going?' (laughter) And would ruin all their shots because they didn't want the mediator saying, 'Good

morning, Rod.' (laughter) But of course, as a print person, I loved that. Good old Vince. Grrr. Sorry.

CA [01:05:13] So, how did you get appointed to do that?

VR [01:05:16] I was in arbitration with CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees] and the schoolteacher and bus drivers—not schoolteacher—a bus driver over in Nanaimo. I turned on the six o'clock news, and Bill Bennett announced that I was appointed as the mediator. I didn't know a fucking thing about it. Nothing. They said they tried to get a hold of me in the early afternoon, but I didn't know anything about it. I found out about it at six o'clock on the news. So, I phoned the parties and said, 'I guess I'd better go back to Vancouver.' I didn't know what I was walking into—didn't have a clue what I was walking into because remember that they had revoked all the tenure. That was the issue. Remember, it was the tenure. They took away the tenure from the civil servants.

RM [01:05:56] Fire—you could fire without cause.

VR [01:05:58] There was [Bob] Plecas and [Norman] Spector. Yeah, they were the two guys. Yeah.

RM [01:06:04] Well, talk about it. I mean, it was an incredible situation.

VR [01:06:07] Yeah, it was. Yeah. I remember about an hour after the strike started, the general strike—see, I was appointed on the on the GEU [BCGEU, British Columbia General Employees' Union] dispute, eh.

RM [01:06:18] Right.

VR [01:06:19] Then the other thing all broke out and—but I remember Larry Kuehn and Art Kube coming to me about an hour after it started, and he was in a panic. I said, 'This isn't a good time to be panicking, Art. You know, this thing just has barely started. What's your next move?' I was kind of the view that they hadn't thought about this next move, you know. I just was. Anyway, we got into the bargaining, and then it became one of timing. We kind of kept working away at the settlement in the background, and all this noise was going on, but I knew that they wouldn't settle until they were forced to settle. I just knew that the Bennett government wouldn't settle the dispute until they were forced to. What it took was—you'll recall the day it settled, there was at— every pass in British Columbia was shut down by snow. Right? That's the morning it settled, and I knew that. I just instinctively knew that that's what was going to take to settle it. I also knew what the settlement was. I knew what the settlement was from talking to both sides. Yeah, so when they got the call—Spector got the call to settle it from Bennett at five o'clock in the morning. We put the deal together and announced it at 10 o'clock in the morning.

RM [01:07:40] Is that the BCGEU settlement?

VR [01:07:43] Yeah, that's the GEU settlement.

RM [01:07:43] Not the settlement of, of—

VR [01:07:44] And the other thing—but the other thing was part of it. The Munro part was—that was part of it. The general strike had to somehow come to an end, and there wasn't a whole lot of thought went into it, you know. Anyway, the deal was then there's

who would—we had two— there were two problems. We had to get the planes out from behind the picket lines and get pilots out to fly them and get somebody to Kelowna. Who is the somebody going to be? Well, Bennett wasn't gonna talk to a lot of people, but he would talk to Munro because we knew that from the railroad strike that we had had, the BCR [British Columbia Railway Company] strike. Remember Munro played a big role in that when they had the strike over the caboose, taking the one person off, the conductor off the backend, the second conductor. That was what the '80, I guess, the '81 strike with B.C. Rail was all about. Munro then was part of the commission that studied that and gave a report and that's how that got settled. We knew Bennett would talk to Munro. That's how Munro ended up being on the plane in Kelowna and he and Bennett met.

CA [01:08:54] When you say 'we knew' who was it who knew?

VR [01:08:58] Well, I knew that because I was involved in the B.C. rail strike. I knew that—it was a question of who would—who—first of all, who was capable of going and working out a settlement so that they could get the general strike settled, and it wasn't going to be Kube, and it wasn't going to be Larry Kuehn and it wasn't, you know, there was just certain people that would be able to do that. Anyways, it was decided that Munro would be the guy. I don't know what apparatus they went through in the Fed [BC Federation of Labour] to agree to that, but they worked on it all morning, and finally they come up with the conclusion—

CA [01:09:35] But was that one of your recommendations? Like did you have any sugg—

VR [01:09:37] Well, that was just part of the overall settlement. We knew that we couldn't get the settlement done unless we got everything else done, you know. So, that was just kind of a sideshow, if you will. Yeah, it was just—that was just there, and we kept talking about that along with the BCGEU settlement, you know.

CA [01:09:54] Okay, that's what I was trying to get at.

VR [01:09:55] Yeah.

RM [01:09:57] Were you involved in that sideshow?

VR [01:09:59] Oh, yeah. We were involved in everything. One thing about public sector bargaining, when you're in bargaining, you know this, you've got to have, if you're a mediator, you've got a very good peripheral vision. You've got to know who else is talking to who, you know. That's always a big part of public sector bargaining.

RM [01:10:14] Were you conscious of the stakes that were involved? That B.C. was staring a general strike in the, you know, the eye?

VR [01:10:21] Yeah.

RM [01:10:22] Did that put a lot of pressure—did you feel that pressure?

VR [01:10:24] No, I never feel that kind of pressure—ever—in any dispute. If that's the way it's going, that's the way it's going. You got to learn to live with that. That's part of bargaining. I don't feel pressure with that stuff. I just don't. I don't think you can let yourself do that because you can't—you start getting too—you get kind of—you're all screwed up if you start thinking that way, you know. I don't—if there's going to be a strike, there's going

to be a strike. It's part of our collective bargaining system. And I don't—no, I don't feel that kind of pressure. Never have. I didn't then neither. I can honestly say that.

RM [01:10:56] The government in the BCGEU settlement, in my view, basically capitulated on these key issues that they weren't prepared to move on before. Did you play a role in that or why do you think the government—

VR [01:11:07] Yeah, well, the big thing was the seniority, and they had to find a way to appease people. They had taken away their tenure.

RM [01:11:13] Protect seniority in the contract.

VR [01:11:14] Before that they had tenure, and so you couldn't get laid off. No matter what happened, you couldn't get laid off. That was the plum for working for the government. I don't know what kind of a plum that was, but it was seen as a plum. They had—you know, they were founded with an association. They had a kind of a collective begging approach over there before the GEU was set up. There was a lot—there was still a mixture of that whole thinking and that. You remember all the breakdowns they'd have over the press conferences and all that. You were around there then. Remember that? They'd break down for 24 hours and—

RM [01:11:52] I don't remember that.

VR [01:11:53] You don't? (laughter)

RM [01:11:53] You do.

VR [01:11:55] Well they'd—that's how I formed the view, and I think it was the correct view. There wasn't going to settle until there was some significant event. It wasn't going to settle by two guys being nice at the bargaining table when settlement time came. The time came when the passes all shut down. But the—they'd no ploughs, snow ploughs—because remember, Minister of Transport was under the—the roads were all under the government at that point. They weren't contractors. That was the pressure point that brought about the settlement, but the issue at the table was the new seniority provision about how you were going to place people when they got laid off. Now the government now had taken the right to lay people off. So, how do you place them? I don't know if you've ever—you've probably read the BCGEU agreement [pointing to CA]—but there's a whole box of options of what you can do with people, and that was the big issue. There's a lot of time spent on that. The rest of it was just money. The rest of it was just money and stuff, you know, because—you know, the NDP put in place a pretty solid collective agreement. They negotiated a pretty good agreement right off the bat. There was a lot of stuff that was in place that didn't really—so, the rest of it was about money. It was about seniority and how you're going to replace tenure. That was—

RM [01:13:17] I've got here another question, on the sideshow, you know, the Kelowna Accord—

VR [01:13:21] Yeah.

RM [01:13:22] My impression was that they agreed to something. They went to Kelowna and Bennett thought, 'I don't have to agree to anything. All the pressure's on them.'

VR [01:13:31] Yeah.

RM [01:13:32] You share that view?

VR [01:13:34] Yeah.

RM [01:13:35] I mean, basically he reneged on the agreement that was worked out, didn't he?

VR [01:13:39] Well, that's kinda—is kinda fuzzy. That is kind of fuzzy. I think they agreed on a parameter of issues that they would talk about. You'll recall at the time they were reviewing the code, and so they—that was kinda part of the settlement. It was a pretty (laughter), it was a pretty loose understanding before they went to Kelowna, and it was a question of what they're going to come away from.

RM [01:14:01] And they basically came away with nothing.

VR [01:14:03] Well, it was well (laughter), they had to—it was a question of who was going to win that, you know. See, I think the general strike, it was—it had its moment and it—I guess it made a point, but I don't think it was very well thought out. I think that's what I think happened.

RM [01:14:23] Well, they wanted out of it.

VR [01:14:24] The GEU were, I gotta say, were very well organized. They were. They knew where there were going. They were, they were ready for that one. Yeah.

RM [01:14:33] They were the big winners.

VR [01:14:34] Yeah.

RM [01:14:35] Well, they got a good deal with the help of the other unions.

VR [01:14:40] No. Right. The labour—they were well-organized, around the BCGEU issue because they'd—you know, the issue was tenure and that didn't—it didn't impact other unions, you know. The HEU and the nurses and the teachers have their own way of dealing with that stuff, you know. Yeah, so they were well organized. The GEU were well organized.

RM [01:15:04] Got any other questions on Solidarity?

CA [01:15:07] Just so I understand, you said the timing, and you believed it would happen because of the snow and the passes were closed so they wouldn't be able to get snow ploughs to open the passes if they didn't settle.

VR [01:15:24] That's right. Ministry of Transport. All the road, all the road crew—

CA [01:15:30] Phil Gaglardi right?

RM [01:15:30] No it wasn't him then.

VR [01:15:31] No, it wouldn't be him. It'd probably be Alex Fraser, right, I think. I think it was Alex Fraser. Yeah, that's right. The GEU owned everything. They owned the pilots, the planes, and the Minister of Transport. It was shortly after that that they went to the contractors. Right?

CA [01:15:48] Right.

VR [01:15:49] I don't know if it was that agreement. I think it was. Yeah.

CA [01:15:54] I think that was '87 that they went to the contractors.

VR [01:15:56] Yeah, they went to the contractors. Yeah. This was '83. So, it was shortly after that.

RM [01:16:02] I never heard that as the reason why the government blinked.

VR [01:16:06] Eh?

RM [01:16:06] I've never heard that is the reason that the government blinked.

VR [01:16:09] Well, that's what happened. I know the phone call came at five o'clock in the morning when the passes were all shut down. Every pass in the province was shut down, you know. It's time to—

CA [01:16:20] The phone call came to you?

VR [01:16:22] No, it came to Spector.

CA [01:16:23] Oh, to Spector and then Spector called you?

VR [01:16:25] Yeah.

RM [01:16:26] But it still took a while to—took time to negotiate it?

VR [01:16:29] Well about five hours to get it all together. Yeah. No, we had worked— we'd been working diligently and what—because I said to them, 'Look, at some point, you know, this is going to come to a deal. You better figure out what the Christ we're going—' I had the settlement worked out about five days before they settled it. Yeah, I had it on a business card [puts hand on shirt pocket].

CA [01:16:50] So, that was—that kind of catapulted you into the public eye?

VR [01:16:55] Probably. Yeah.

CA [01:16:57] What came next for you?

VR [01:17:00] Well, I can tell you that I've never had a week since that week that I haven't had business. (laughter) So, I don't know. But yeah, I guess. I guess it did. Yeah. I never think of myself in those terms, Carmela. I just approached mediation the way I approached collective bargaining when I was in the Steelworkers, and as I said, you go into a dispute and you try and figure out what it's about, and you keep your eye on the ball. It doesn't matter what's going on on the side. That stuff all happens, you know. So, you let it happen,

or sometimes you try and control it. Sometimes, you try and make it worse and you bring it back.

RM [01:17:41] You've been involved in some pretty significant disputes.

VR [01:17:43] Yeah.

RM [01:17:45] Any others that really stand out for you?

RM [01:17:47] Yeah, there's quite a few. The nurses strike in Saskatchewan was a huge dispute. It was a huge dispute for—not for me but for the parties. There was some interesting issues, you know: porting seniority throughout the province and all that. This was what, 1987? It was a lot of years ago. Some of that stuff now seems like—and the dispute you were involved in with pay equity and all that [motions to CA], that was an interesting dispute. It was fun. I don't know if Carmela ever told you the story, but the CSP [Compensation Stabilization Program] appointed me as the mediator, and HEABC [Health Employers Association of British Columbia] phoned me up, and they said they had an offer, and it was pretty thick, eh? There was nothing in it. We assembled all of Carmela's group, and usually, you know, they're set up kind of in a normal bargaining fashion. I went in and there was about 35 of them on the bargaining committee and they were sittin' (they had chairs set up) and they're staring at me. (laughter) I handed her this box—but there was somebody with me. Who was it? Larry Gregg? Somebody was with me.

CA [01:18:49] Grant McArthur.

VR [01:18:55] Yes, that's right. That's right. We had all those boxes of these proposals, and I knew they wouldn't get—they wouldn't read past the first page. (laughter) Anyway, so Carmela said to me after—and they're all staring at me. They're all trained to stare at me. I'd never seen so many blue eyes wide open. (laughter) Anyway, so Carmela says, you know, 'What are you going to do next?' I said, 'I'm going to hand these out, and I'm going to get the fuck out of here (laughter) and let you do your thing.'

CA [01:19:24] We voted on it.

VR [01:19:25] Yeah.

CA [01:19:27] It was roundly turned down.

VR [01:19:27] It was turned down by about 98 percent.

CA [01:19:28] Oh, pretty much.

VR [01:19:29] Yeah, 98. Anyway. Now there's a typical example. You know that dispute is going to go right to the wall, right? You're going to right to the mat before you—

CA [01:19:40] And you knew that?

VR [01:19:41] Oh, I knew that. Yeah, I knew that. Yeah. And it did, right? Yeah. That's where you made that famous statement that justice isn't negotiable. Right?

CA [01:19:51] Mm-hmm.

VR [01:19:51] Yeah, you just live through these things, you know.

RM [01:19:58] I'm sure you've been interviewed on this when—so, what was it like from your point of view, dealing with Carmela and her union?

VR [01:20:05] I dealt with her a lot. The first issue was the named business manager. She's the one that made the change in the HEU. The first issue is appointed—we had a bunch of—

CA [01:20:14] We went for lunch.

VR [01:20:16] —shit going on. No, but we went to Kamloops.

CA [01:20:18] Oh, we did. Yes.

VR [01:20:19] That's right. We flew to Kamloops together. Remember, we had all that stuff going on in Royal Inland [Hospital] [unclear]. Yeah, we went to Kamloops together. No, we did a lot of work together. It was always fun.

RM [01:20:33] Was that positive?

VR [01:20:34] Oh yeah, it was always fun. I always enjoyed working with—I told you— she took the union in a much different direction. You got a lot more of rank and file involvement. It was good—it became a—just changed the face of the HEU [Hospital Employees' Union]. It became a very activist union. Yeah.

RM [01:20:52] What did you expect from—when you're dealing with the dispute and you've talked about how much you respected and enjoyed working with Carmela—but is there a way, and what do you want from the union side? I mean, what works better? What kind of leadership works best for you?

VR [01:21:08] Well, you've got to find out whether or not they've got control of their membership, whether they got control of their issues, that they know what their issues are. There's a pretty standard template that you go through as a mediator. You've got to find out, to figure out, what's going on, what the issues are, what—how much pressure is on each—everybody, you know. You just kind of size it up. I don't know how else to explain it. I mean, you just size things up.

RM [01:21:37] But when you're mediating, I mean, pay equity, there's a good example—

VR [01:21:40] Yeah.

RM [01:21:41] I assume, and maybe shouldn't be asking the question, but I'll just ask it. Is that, like in your gut as you're mediating, do you think pay equity is a good thing, and let's see how I can help deliver it to these workers who deserve it?

VR [01:21:53] Pay equity is best described as an issue of the day, wasn't it? Remember, it had come through the federal government. They were working on it. They were working on it, but you brought it to a head. That's the difference. How are you going to bring the thing to a head, and get that some real juice around it? Everybody could talk about it and try and explain it and pretend how important it was and all that. But how do you bring it to a head? It was kind of what I call an issue of the day, and who's gonna break through on it. Who's

going to organize the troops around it in a way that they—their membership— understand it and will stand up for it, and it'll become an issue on the other side that has to be paid attention to. That's what those kinds of movements are about as I see them anyway.

CA [01:22:37] The other thing that you were involved in, which I think has had an impact very broadly, is the restructuring of health care.

VR [01:22:45] The [Health Labour] Accord. Yeah. That was—

CA [01:22:48] Do you want to talk a little bit about that.

VR [01:22:49] Yeah, that was really one of the most interesting disputes I think we were all involved in, and it was just—you know, they had to—they were changing all the—and I don't know—and I've often thought about it, and I've spoken about it. I don't know how else they could have done it. When you reflect on it, how could you have moved all these services around the province and not have a collective bargaining regime to work with it? I guess everybody but Gordon Campbell believed that because he wasn't very fucking long demolishing it, eh, once he took power. That was an interesting experience, you know. It was novel.

RM [01:23:27] Could you set the scene a bit like when did this happen?

VR [01:23:29] That was '93, wasn't it?

CA [01:23:30] Two thousand, 2000 and—oh, that was 1993.

VR [01:23:34] No, '93, yeah—

CA [01:23:36] '93, yup.

VR [01:23:36] Yeah, remember, because they tried to put it out in the '96 agreement. Remember, and I did the Industrial Inquiry Commission in '96.

CA [01:23:42] So, in 1993, the NDP government adopted the closer-to-home health care strategy, which would have meant eliminating about 10 percent of the workforce and moving the resources into the community.

VR [01:23:56] Yeah.

CA [01:23:58] You came up with a structure that would see workers move to where the new employment was.

VR [01:24:06] They moved heart and hips from, well, Shaughnessy, I guess, to St Paul's and all that sort of stuff. The workers followed the work. That was kinda the concept, and there was processes in the agreement.

RM [01:24:17] You were involved in all that?

VR [01:24:19] Jesus, yeah. Remember that? We had all those arbitrations at night. We'd meet—Jesus—every third night, and we'd all had worked during the day too. We had work to do during the day (laughter) and we'd meet at five. Remember, we'd have all those—I'll never forget, Reynolds, eh, those long submissions. (laughter)

CA [01:24:37] David Reynolds from the HSA. We had all of the unions, plus all the employers and the government, and Vince was going, (laughter) and all the rulings and keeping everybody on track.

VR [01:24:49] Then after we reached the agreement, then there was all these tag ends, and we had to meet and arbitrate those and finalize those. We did that at night.

RM [01:24:58] Peter Cameron was involved?

VR [01:24:59] Yeah. He was involved.

RM [01:25:00] Is this the one where I wrote the front page story for the Globe and Mail about it?

RM [01:25:04] Yeah.

RM [01:25:05] The social classic—

CA [01:25:07] It was the Health Accord.

VR [01:25:08] Yeah, the Health Accord. Yeah. Then, Campbell, the first—well, funny, the agreement expired. Remember, the accord expired one day before the agreement.

CA [01:25:20] Yes, in '96.

VR [01:25:20] Then the Liberals were betting that they'd get elected in '96. Then remember, I was the Industrial Inquiry Commission in '96, and I remember Clark called us over to Victoria.

CA [01:25:32] Glen Clark, yeah.

VR [01:25:33] Yeah, and he gave me the mandate. Who was that guy? MacArthur. That was with him? I used to call him General McArthur because he—

CA [01:25:41] Yeah. Doug McArthur.

VR [01:25:42] Yeah, Doug McArthur. He called everybody over to Victoria, and we had a chat and—and then he give me a mandate. He gave me personally, give me a mandate. I think—I don't know if I ever told you that, but, yeah, he gave me a mandate to work with. So, we went. We did okay. We got it all done. Yeah, we got it all renewed and got everything sorted out. And because I was doing the Health Accord in Prince Edward Island at the time, I remember writing the award down, and I was down bargaining in Prince Edward Island. We're up at night writing this god damn settlement for B.C. Yeah, interesting times, you know. It was interesting times because I did the Health Accord in Prince Edward Island, you know. It was all taking place at the same time.

RM [01:26:30] That raises a question. We've talked about how well you work with the union side, what was it like dealing with employers? Did you ever really have to put the boots to them and—

VR [01:26:37] Oh yeah.

RM [01:26:38] What were they like in some of these decisions?

VR [01:26:40] Well, on a dispute like that, you know, you're kind of the fool with the fountain pen at the end of the day. You can write, and with the NDP government, they were—they would, you know, if you made a recommendation, they would very likely accept it.

RM [01:26:56] I mean, generally with employers—I mean, you didn't always have the NDP to deal with as the employer.

VR [01:27:00] No, you don't. That's for sure. Yeah.

RM [01:27:04] So?

VR [01:27:04] Well, I just deal with them straight up. I don't beat around the bush too much with them. I take the same approach with them. I take a look at where I see the settlement, and sometimes they like what they hear and sometimes they don't. You just do what you have to do. I've never really had problems with employers that way because I deal with them pretty straight up. I don't—I mean, if I phoned them, they usually would respond to me, you know. I don't know whether that's good, bad or whatever. That's just the way it is. It's the way I operate.

RM [01:27:40] What do you like about all this stuff? I mean, obviously you've done it for a long time. You must like it.

VR [01:27:46] I find it—I still find it very rewarding, you know. I do. I think it's fun. I like the activity. I like the action. I don't think it's an ego thing with—I just always enjoyed—I've always enjoyed—I really firmly believe in collective bargaining. I've done quite a study about the labour movement around the world. I went to the ILO for six weeks and studied it in 1975. I can tell you that our labour movement at its worst, is better than anything I've seen anywhere else, and that includes Europe. Now, they've got some broad things that they do. You know, they sit on works councils with employers and all that kind of stuff, but there's nobody has got an active labour movement better than we have in Canada, and that includes United States. We have a very, very active labour movement here, by comparison. There's some bad ones, but there's—but overall, Rod, we've got a very, very—I think we've got a very good labour movement by comparison.

RM [01:28:42] Even now?

VR [01:28:43] Yeah, because don't forget, you may say ours is declining but go to the United States if you want to see a decline in the labour movement. Now, it's better now with the Biden government, and I noticed that Harris has put the unions and the right to organize out in front, which is a positive move. They've gone through an awful decline down there. I talk to people who are from the labour movement. Try and organize down there if you want to see an example of bad stuff.

CA [01:29:11] I'm just going to ask a few more questions because I—and then we'll try to wrap up.

RM [01:29:17] Sure.

CA [01:29:19] Can you—your observations on changes in the role of unions in labour management relations over the time?

VR [01:29:29] It kind of goes with the turf. It goes with how the—labour management usually worked the way the parties want it to work. After serious input from both sides, sometimes you can make it work, and often you can make it work. It really depends on the issue. If you're dealing with tough, tough issues, sometimes it's helpful to have a relationship that you can at least talk about them, you know. I think overall it's improved. I mean, there's been some provisions put in the code. Not as strong as they might be, but at least they generate a discussion between labour and management. I still believe that labour management work the way the parties want them to work. If you want them to work, they'll at least they'll function. They may not work, but they'll function, and there's a difference, you know. If they don't, if the parties work against each other, they don't work. Sometimes parties have to go through a difficult period before they get better. You'll see that often. You'll see that coming out of strikes, you know, where people go through tough periods, and they kind of figure out there's maybe a better way of doing things. That's kind of standard.

CA [01:30:47] You've already made a few comments about unions. From your experience over time, how do you think the labour movement in B.C. has changed?

VR [01:31:01] I've thought about that question since I got your email, Carmela. How has it changed? Again, it kind of depends on a number of things. It depends on—first of all, in the public sector, it depends on the government—a lot. It depends a lot on the government. We've seen that with the former NDP government. We've seen what the Liberals did and how they went right at it. I mean, they went headfirst after the collective agreements—what they did to your union, what they did to the nurses, what they did, particularly the teachers. You know, you think back about the price that the communities have paid. They ripped millions of dollars of wages and benefits out of these communities—smaller communities. Salmon Arm. Take it. Sorrento. Anywhere. You know, that's a huge economic impact on working people and their families and their lives and that. It lasted for a long time. Now, some of it's been restored, but it's a long time to wait 20 some years, you know. When you think about the impact that governments have on collective bargaining. The private sector—the private sector goes with the economy. You've heard me talk about the mining industry. I've seen mines' camps shut down. I was driving into Boss Mountain one night. It was a mine owned by Noranda. I turned on CBC and they announced at three o'clock—I was going to a union meeting—three o'clock in the afternoon they shut the mine down—going to be shut down in ten days. The private sector has a lot—forests—if you look at the forest industry, eh? If you recall, remember in 1983, the IWA went from 55,000 to 33,000 members over a six month period, and it's just gone—declined ever since. You know, unions have to deal with that. That's a difficult thing to deal with. It's a lot different in the private sector than it is in the public sector. They deal with them as best they can. You know, when you get a decline in private sector, you get a decline in the trade union movement too. There's a lot of anxiety. You get a decline in numbers. One of the big problems for private sector unions is they decline and the memberships and the resources.

RM [01:33:14] Those big bargaining units aren't there anymore.

VR [01:33:17] Yeah, they're not there anymore, so there's no resource base for the union. I remember when we were in Trail, the union, the Steelworkers Union, has always, always pressed us, 'Go out and organize everything. Organize the laundries.' Organize everything

because you've got a power base to support it. Now that power base is gone. The one area that I find very interesting is how are the—how is society and the trade union movement going to get around these small employers like the 7-Elevens of the world and Starbucks? I mean, you organize one Starbucks. It's good probably for the people that are there, but there's no—I don't know how you put together—I don't have an answer—how do you put together a cohesive program to organize? Just take that—take Burger King. Take any one of them. All those small like A&W and all, er not the A&W maybe, but Burger King and all. They all belong to that big company from Brazil—restaurant. How do you get at that stuff? Do you just put on an organizing campaign to say how badly they're treated and get enough—I don't know. How you get at that organizing. That's a tough job, and these are big employers. That's a huge employer. One of the biggest ones probably in the world in terms of the fast food service. How do you organize that stuff? Do you have any ideas on that? (laughter) I just don't know how you get at it.

CA [01:34:36] I was going to ask you, what advice do you have? (laughter)

VR [01:34:38] Well, you know, it came up in the 1992 labour review, and the labour movement didn't really have very many ideas about it. You know, we talked about sectoral bargaining. You take an area—take Kingsway, for example. Do you have a standard for certain areas? There's a model in Quebec that seems to work, but I don't know how. I think they just made that work because there were—the labour movement was pretty powerful and probably still is in Quebec. I think they just got it out of power. I don't think they got it out of any, you know, any other way. That's a tough issue because about 95 percent of the business now are 50 employees or less. That's going to really diminish society. I think the biggest societal concern is, you know, the lack of pensions for people that are retiring in the private sector. That's going to have a real impact on society. Real impact. Yeah. Not so in the public sector because they've got—they've been able to negotiate decent pensions. There's a lot of people in our society that don't have pensions. I see the people around me that I know well, you know, that are really hurting in retirement.

RM [01:36:04] Sort of miss the good old days of union organizing?

VR [01:36:07] Oh yeah. I do. I really miss working for the union. I really enjoyed the action. Anyway.

RM [01:36:16] I've got a question on one of the disputes you handled—was the illegal strike by the B.C. Teachers Federation, you know, led by Jinny Sims. You were involved in that?

VR [01:36:27] Yeah.

RM [01:36:28] I thought your solution—I'm praising you—was brilliant because there was no money there, and yet you found some money.

VR [01:36:36] Yeah.

RM [01:36:36] Through—I don't know. Was it worker's compensation?

VR [01:36:39] Yeah.

RM [01:36:39] Talk about how tough that was because that was an illegal strike. It was heavy duty.

VR [01:36:44] Yeah. Jinny was the—I liked her. I worked very well with her. I quite liked her. I think she did a pretty good job of holding it together in an impossible situation. It was—they weren't in a very strong bargaining position. I forget all the details, but we were able to cobble together something that looked like a 2.5 percent increase or something, you know.

RM [01:37:09] Even though you weren't allowed to have it.

VR [01:37:11] Yeah, and so we recommended it. I knew if the union went for it, the government, albeit Gordon Campbell, would have trouble saying no to it. I just knew that, and they did. No, yeah, that was interesting.

RM [01:37:30] Was it tough dealing with the B.C. Teachers Federation because they're sort of like an ultra-democratic union. They almost voted that down.

VR [01:37:37] Yeah. I knew that. They called me down to their caucus at two o'clock in the morning to persuade them to take it. (laughter) Yeah, but those are just things you have to do, you know.

RM [01:37:51] One of your was—I remember was you believed in negotiation through exhaustion.

VR [01:37:57] Yeah. Well—

RM [01:37:58] Talk about that.

VR [01:37:59] Well, not really.

RM [01:38:01] Well, you keep them going.

VR [01:38:02] When you see a deal coming together, you work at it. You know that. You see a deal coming, you just don't let it go, you know? You don't—I remember once doing a case with the Teamsters within the gas industry. They'd half a dozen bargaining units throughout the province. At six o'clock in the night, the deal was this far apart [holds his hands close together], and in one of my weaker moments, I let them go for dinner. They came back, we were six weeks getting back to that position. You keep it going. Once you get it going, you keep it going.

CA [01:38:32] On that Vince, how do you know when the deal is there? How do you know?

VR [01:38:36] It's hard to explain. It really is hard to explain it. With me, it's instinct. It's just instinct. Yeah, I have no—I can't answer that question logically because there is no logical answer. Think about it. There's no logical answer to it. It just starts to happen. I have an overlay over bargaining that I always put in. I see bargaining always in four stages. There's kind of the silly season at the beginning when everybody's got 150 proposals on the table and don't know what they want and think they know what they want. Then, it kind of morphs into an engaging—people start to engage. Then there were framework stage where you kind of get a little more serious and then the settlement stage. You just kind of—and you got to make sure that when you're mediating, that one guy isn't over here and the other guy is over here, you got to kind of keep them melded together. I spend a lot of time thinking about that and working at it. If I see somebody way out here (laughter) and

these guys over here (laughter) are still talking about 150 proposals—God— and I bring them together, you know. There's all sorts of—those are just techniques.

RM [01:39:42] It doesn't seem to bother you—like sometimes you, as we've talked about, these huge disputes and—

VR [01:39:48] Yeah.

RM [01:39:48] And incredible impact on the economy and stuff and yet you still seem— there you were settling the Whistler bus drivers' strike.

VR [01:39:55] Yeah.

RM [01:39:55] Which was a tough one, but they're, you know, small potatoes in some ways. But there you are.

VR [01:40:01] Yeah. Well, that was an interesting one. They both bargained themselves right out of—they just bargained themselves out, they had nothing. Nothing left. Including no gas left. So, you had to create something, so I came up with a cost of living clause. We wiggled some money around and come up with a cost of living clause and the employer was—

RM [01:40:26] Kicked in later in the agreement.

VR [01:40:27] Yeah. That was enough. They ratified it by about 76 percent, but it really wasn't a bullshit thing. I mean, it did produce money. It produced quite a bit of money.

RM [01:40:38] You don't say, 'Well that's small potatoes for me. Lookit, I'm Canada's top mediator. I'm not getting involved.'

VR [01:40:44] No, I never see that. I just never think about that stuff. I don't. It's just part of what you do. I don't think it's any different if there's 50 people involved or 50,000. I don't think makes any difference. It's all the same. You're dealing with issues that belong to the parties.

RM [01:41:02] And another last question. Sometimes you have to put the boots to the union, right? It's not always the bad employer.

CA [01:41:08] A lot of times, right?

VR [01:41:08] Yeah.

RM [01:41:11] Talk about what you do if sometimes unions are unrealistic.

VR [01:41:14] Well, don't forget I cut my teeth negotiating for unions, so I understand that very well. Yeah, you do. You got to sometimes help union negotiators. Sometimes, they'll say to you, 'Would you come in?' They're really saying, will you come in and take a round out of our folks or take some heat from (laughter) or something. So, you do that. That's part of bargaining. The union negotiators take more crap from their own committee ever. I mean, the employers are always predictable. You know what they're going to do. You've got a pretty good idea. It's your own group that you got to bring along with you, you know, because it's very important at the end of the day, when you're ratifying agreement, you got

your folks with you, you know. That's why you got to reach out. You got to have some activism in the union. You can get a sense of where they're all at, you know, if they— where your true membership's at, what they'll really stand up, for because it's important. Because we said earlier, it's easy to start a strike, it's getting it ended, and getting ended successfully with some pride and some ownership from your membership. Those are just all the things that are pretty fundamental to collective bargaining.

CA [01:42:25] Anything else you want us to know about you?

VR [01:42:29] (laughter) Jesus no.

RM [01:42:31] (laughter) There's a question.

VR [01:42:33] I'm just a guy who came along. I don't think about me in that way. I never think about myself, though, in those terms. This is just a lot of fun. You know, I've always treated this as a labour of love. I've never seen this as any kind of a—something that would—should cripple you in any way.

RM [01:42:53] You're so good at it.

VR [01:42:54] Well, I don't know about that, but anyway, I'm still going.

CA [01:42:58] I was going to say, what's next for you?

VR [01:43:00] I don't know what I'll do. I turned down three book offers. I've got no interest in doing anything like that. I've got no—I'm not good at building dog houses and all that, so I can't retire. I haven't got enough room in my backyard to grow a garden. I don't know. I don't know Carmela what I'm going to do.

CA [01:43:18] Keep doing what you're doing?

VR [01:43:19] Yeah. (laughter) What the hell, eh? Okay?

CA [01:43:22] Thank you.

VR [01:43:23] Oh, you're welcome.

RM [01:43:24] Wonderful.

CA [01:43:24] Wonderful.

VR [01:43:25] Yeah.

CA [01:43:25] So precious for us. Thank you.