

Interview: Gary Johnson (GJ)

Interviewer: Keith Reynolds (KR), Blair Redlin (BR)

Date: Sept 24, 2024

Location: Burnaby, B.C.

Transcription: Pete Smith

KR [00:00:06] Hi. We're here today with Gary Johnson, a longtime trade unionist, longtime employee with CUPE. And with us also today, I'm Keith Reynolds, who worked for years with Gary, at CUPE and also with Blair Redlin, who worked for years with Gary as well. And we're going to talk to Gary about his life and his trade union life. And I think hear some very interesting things. So I will begin by saying, Gary, could you tell us about your family and your childhood, about where you grew up and what the work your parents did? What kind of jobs you did when you were young and how you were introduced to trade unions? Long question.

GJ [00:00:45] It is a long question, but well, I was born in February of 1949, in a little town of Leroy, Saskatchewan, and it was very small. And we lived there for one year in the winter—I think it was January 1950, I came to the coast with my parents and we settled in Langley, first of all, then into Surrey. And my dad got cancer and was hospitalized. So we ended up moving to New Westminster to be close to the Royal Columbian Hospital. It was in Sapperton. Spent some time there.

GJ [00:01:39] After my dad passed, I guess I was five years old. We moved back to Surrey to be close to some family-friends that my mum had. I had a pretty normal childhood. We had three boys, each of us a year-and-a-half apart. And so I was the oldest. And as I grew up, I ended up babysitting them, for example, when I was 11 until I was about 14, and then they were 11 and 14. So, you know, things went pretty good that way.

GJ [00:02:26] Mum was a single parent for most of that time and she worked two jobs. She worked at Woodlands School in New Westminster and she worked picking potatoes or other odd jobs at the same time. So she year-round had two jobs. She had her afternoon shift at Woodlands School because it paid a slight bonus premium for evening work. And so she took those shifts and she would leave around three and we would see her again at 11:30 if we happened to be awake. Usually didn't see her until the next morning.

GJ [00:03:10] As I grew a little older we moved, as I said, we moved to Surrey and my mum and a long time friend of my dad's started seeing each other and they eventually married in 1963, about 8 or 9 years after my dad had passed. And so I had a stepfather until he passed about ten years ago. But we were treated well and we never went without, without anything. The one thing Mum insisted is we all had to eat and we had to eat lots because she actually was skinny as a rail because she would put all the food on the table for the kids, we would eat and then if there were stuff left over, she would eat. But if there wasn't (I didn't realize it until I was many years older that) she would go hungry. So it was interesting. And it was one of the life lessons I had.

GJ [00:04:23] I think you asked me about unions and what I first understood about unions. So I started out as a paper boy for 4 or 5 years with the Vancouver Sun. So did my two brothers. We all had to contribute to the family income. And then I got a job at a gas station, so I pumped gas. I worked on mechanical things. I loved doing that. And I eventually got a job with the municipality of Delta. But, in this time my grandparents had

moved in with us. They had retired. Both of them were unable to look after themselves individually or as a couple. So they moved into our family home. And I remember Grandpa talking to me about the 1930s and how what it was like then after the Depression. And he would explain to me how he was a member of the farmers' union. I never understood what the farmers' union was, but he was a member of it. And that many times he would talk about Tommy Douglas the CCF and how Tommy Douglas had spent several evenings resting on his travels in our farm outside of Regina. And so that was kind of my first introduction to the word union even.

GJ [00:06:06] Later on, I would hear some of my customers in the gas station talk about unions, but I really didn't pay very much attention. I was young. I was more interested in getting a car and fixing it up and being able to go hot rodding around, unsuccessfully. But it was good. One of the regular customers lived about a block away from the gas station, came in one day and said, Are you still looking for a different job? And I said, yes. He says, well, tomorrow morning you be here at 7:00. I've got a job for you if you want to take it with the municipality of Delta. So I got picked up the next morning as he was going to work. He introduced me to the superintendent, who was a gruff old guy. Old now is relevant (laughter), but he was older than me. I was like 18 or maybe 18 years old. And so he took me around, showed me who I was going to be working with, told me who my foreman was and that he would be around later. My crew chief said to me, well, grab these shovels, we're going to go down to downtown Ladner and we're going to shovel snow. It was the snowiest day of that particular winter, and it was late February, early March. And so we went out and shoveled snow for the rest of the day. The foreman showed up and talked to me and told me what to expect in the days coming. And so that was my introduction to working harder for a living than a gas station jockey.

KR [00:08:00] So you went to work at Delta. That was your first unionized job?

GJ [00:08:04] Yes.

KR [00:08:05] Did you remember when that was? And how did you like the work? What sort of work were you doing?

GJ [00:08:10] Tough. It was, I think 1968, in February, early March. I really don't remember that. And I loved the work. Don't get me wrong, I did everything that you can imagine within a group of outside workers: blacktop, drainage, sewers, water works, even repaired fire hydrants and pressure regulating valves for the water system. And I guess the first time I sort of got involved would be our crew chief was wanting to develop a CUPE Local 454, which is the Delta Municipal Workers Ball Team. Baseball. And this guy, he told me that he was going to ask the vice president, who was an outside worker as well, if he could get \$150. And the vice president said, I don't think so. You know, the inside workers have already got \$150 for their ball team. And so my guy, the crew chief, came back and he was kind of disappointed and said to me, you know, it doesn't look like we're going to get it. And I said, well, how did they get it? Well, they vote for it at a union meeting. And I said, well, let's take everybody there and we'll out vote them. And so that's what we did. We went to this meeting. We introduced ourselves as wanting this \$150. They made us go through the motions of how we made a motion and stuff like that. So I moved that we get \$150 for the CUPE Local 454 municipal employees, outside workers baseball team. And it passed. We took 28 people. The vote was 28 to 9. Everyone else in the room voted no. But it was a great lesson for me about the power of voting and democracy. So it was good.

KR [00:10:33] Well that's how you got involved with, like with the Local.

GJ [00:10:36] Yes.

KR [00:10:37] How did you make the next step to become an officer with the Local and from there how did it happen you ended up as president?

GJ [00:10:46] Well, the Local union was holding elections in April. So I've only been a member for, I think, three months max. Absolutely.

KR [00:11:02] '68 or '69.

GJ [00:11:03] No, it was actually '68. And the Vice President comes to me and says, I'm not running again why don't you vote or why don't you run? You're a big mouth. And that was how he actually said it. And I said, is it a lot of work? He said oh no, there's nothing to it. Well, that was a lie. And I said okay, because he told me there isn't a lot of work. And I was still, you know, pretty darn young. Didn't want to get tied up in anything too complicated. So I agreed to run. I got elected, was vice president. The president at that time became Bertha Budd, who worked within the assessment department of the municipality. And of course, that year, the B.C. Assessment Authority was created. And about six months later, in the late fall, Bertha was transferred out of our bargaining unit into the new bargaining unit. CUPE Local 1858, I think they were. And they needed a new president. And under the rules and the constitution bylaws of my local union, I automatically became for the balance of that two-year term, the president.

KR [00:12:29] How old? How old would you have been?

GJ [00:12:31] I don't think I was quite 20 yet.

KR [00:12:34] That's what I thought.

GJ [00:12:37] It was interesting. But Bertha had taken me under my wing for those six months. I was Vice President. She showed me what bargaining was about and how to deal with the grievance process, how to accept rejection by the bosses. But, you know, to carry on and you know. Well, her name doesn't live on in history, her son, Brian Budd, became the world's first superstar, if you remember that competition. He won that championship as the world's first superstar.

KR [00:13:14] Well, you weren't there for an awfully long time before 1972 came along. And in 1972, there was a Regional Municipal workers strike, which included 454. What were the issues involved and what do you recall about that strike?

GJ [00:13:29] Well, we really thought about, the issue was pay equity. The very beginning of the discussion of pay equity. It was not something that was well-defined for us. There was the issue of wages and benefits, naturally. But we also had the rights of temporary and part-time workers was on the agenda. For years they had either no rights, no seniority and no benefits. And so that was kind of the major issue. We went out on strike and it was difficult because we did not have a lot of support from others because this was our first time. And the leadership group wasn't the strongest. They almost went through the motions. So we went through the strike, weren't very happy with it. And then the discussion in my local union was, why should we be in joint bargaining or coordinated bargaining? So that's kind of my experience, Keith.

KR [00:14:49] But you were involved in this, your local was on strike.

GJ [00:14:56] Yeah. We were on strike. When we finished the strike, members were pretty unhappy that they didn't get everything they wanted. My Local already had benefits for part-time and temporary employees, but they didn't have seniority rights and we did gain some seniority rights. That was manipulated by the employers across the Vancouver Greater Vancouver Regional District area.

KR [00:15:26] We'll talk more about that kind of bargaining in a minute. But for now, let me ask you eventually being president of the Local and being involved in that kind of activity that led you to become more active at the CUPE Metro District Council and CUPE B.C., what can you recall about that at the time?

GJ [00:15:44] Well, that was an interesting because my very first meeting was—I was actually assigned to go to it, I had no idea who anybody in the room were except for some of the municipal workers. There, I met Colleen Jordan from Burnaby Schools and Bill Harper from Burnaby Schools. And Bill and I ended up becoming very good friends. And we've remained friends for the last 35 years. And I met some of the CUPE 1004, the Vancouver outside workers members, including Dave Worland, who was their elected business agent. And I'll talk about him a little bit later, I think. But there we talked about coordination. We talked about political issues. It was the first time that kind of politics started being discussed in my life other than what I had heard from my grandpa. My mum and my stepfather never talked about who they voted for in an election. And 40 years later I found out they'd always voted NDP. But it was a surprise to me because I would have thought they might have been kind of a liberal-leaning, but they weren't. So that was good news.

BR [00:17:11] So in the course of that interaction with people of CUPE B.C. In the Metro District Council, you became friends with a number of union activists who were on the left side of the spectrum, some of whom were associated with the Communist Party. What was that like in the 1970s?

GJ [00:17:29] It was a difficult time. If you knew somebody and you were friendly with somebody who was a commie, then you would be red baited or you would be attacked yourself as not a good person. And, you know, yes, I met many people within CUPE, Aubrey Burton, Jack Phillips. They were staff reps with CUPE. Dave Worland, who I mentioned was a business agent for CUPE 1004, Bill Ferguson from the Kamloops Area Schools and Municipal and several others. Harry Greene from North Vancouver, who became president of CUPE BC for quite a while. So all of them I met at my first convention, which was in Prince George, and we became friends. And I didn't feel any pressure to join or to become a communist per se. But we talked about lots of things. I disagreed with them. I always remember Jack Phillips would want would talk about his time in Moscow. And I was quite frankly, would say to him, I don't want to hear about that, you know, the communists were our enemy, around the world kind of thing. And so I just I just would ignore this stuff I didn't want to hear. But they talked about lots of the issues that I had an interest in, you know, and talked about fight backs, talked about solidarity with each other and with, you know, with CUPE being in solidarity with a private sector union such as the IWA. You know, we had many common goals and issues, and we just had to find a way to work together.

BR [00:19:38] And I guess in the course of that activism, you ran for the executive of CUPE B.C. Several times without getting elected. Why were you so persistent and what was the context about you running for—

GJ [00:19:50] Well, you're very kind to say only the words several times. It was many times. And quite frankly, I didn't particularly want to run. But there is a need for opposition. You can't win an election if you're acclaimed. And for me, it was all about forcing fellow CUPE members to declare themselves and to what they intended to do for the membership. And so that was my biggest goal. I never wanted to become a full-time union rep or officer. And I just wanted to carry on volunteering and being my little wee corner in Delta. And when the time came, we worked together, you know, for certain things.

BR [00:20:43] Well, despite that intention, you became involved with the B.C. Federation of Labour and you were eventually elected to an at-large position on the executive board, defeating Mike Kramer, who was a well-known person within CUPE. And so, you know, who were you active and allied with at the BCFed and what happened in that election?

GJ [00:21:04] Okay. Well, it was an interesting group of people. I had, first of all, gone to CUPE B.C. caucus and they said, well, CUPE has two positions. One for a political person like a member and one for the staff. And the staff position was going to be Mike Kramer. And the president of the division was going to be the political position appointed. And it was kind of a—you get up and, you don't even vote because it's by acclamation. Again, I don't like that. So I tried to get the endorsement of the CUPE members. I lost that vote, but not by a large amount. There was decent support. And then I talked to some of the people I'd known within the Fed. And so there were people like George Johnston, who was, I think, from the Meat Cutters Union, and he was the president of the Fed at the time. So he liked the idea of having this election system versus appointment system. There was Bob Donnelly from the Telecommunications Workers Union. There was Colin Gabelman, who I think worked for the Fed. But he later went on to become the Attorney General of British Columbia under the NDP government. So there was a lot and, you know, there were Ron Johnson, from NOW Communications (now he's with NOW), but in those days he was starting out as a young person working for one of the local unions. And it happened that I knew his father from CUPE 1004. And his father was also one of the business agents there, elected business agent.

BR [00:23:14] And that's Ole Johnson.

GJ [00:23:16] Ole Johnson. Yes. And so and all he had been one of the ones who helped me in my very early days to understand some of the politics. He had been because CUPE 1004 had a history of having communists at their head. He was determined by somebody to be a communist, even though he told me he'd been in the NDP for all his life or CCFer in those days, I guess it was. So it was really interesting for me to learn that stuff. So some of what happened to me in the days leading up to all of this really didn't matter. So, you know, there was a group of them and we all got together and I was nominated on the floor at the convention. I accepted. I won. In those days, the tables were all numbered and ballot boxes were put on the table with the same number. So when the elections were over, about three days later, somebody said, you got a really good vote from the CUPE members. Because they knew that like table three and box three, they counted them and I got the majority of votes out of there. First time I won election that CUPE didn't endorse me for. So it was it was an interesting time.

BR [00:24:40] Yes. And as part of an interesting time, there was all the solidarity activities of the '70s. And one of those was when members of the CUPE Broadcast Council struck the radio station CKLG in '75. What do you recall about that dispute?

GJ [00:25:00] It's really interesting how unions look after unions when it's needed. One of the sons of Homer Stevens from the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union—Homer was the past president and he'd gone to jail for his beliefs. And so I lived about six blocks from him. And so his son called me on a Saturday evening saying we need some people to come and do a demonstration. And I actually hadn't heard that there was a strike at CKLG. And I asked why and they told me so I said, okay, I'll try and get somebody out. Before I could even pick up the phone to start phoning members, I got another call from the president of CUPE Metro Council at the time and he asked me if I would get people out because it wasn't so much a demonstration. It was a picket line to show solidarity for those strikers because they were going to bring scabs in later that evening. So I phoned around, got 20 people to come, and we joined the picket line around 8:00 or 8:30 that night. And you know, the signs were all ready and we carried them proudly and we sang songs and demonstrated and several people tried to get in and we would put 20 bodies between us and the door and the door would be behind us and we were successful and driving them away.

GJ [00:26:44] Vancouver police showed up. They were really actually quite helpful in that they warned us of things to come and what to expect. So they told us that the CKLG was going to court to get an injunction to prevent us from picketing and from blocking the door in particular. And so we said okay. And then somebody said, don't touch the injunctions, if you don't read it, it doesn't apply to you. You can continue on. Now, that was pretty naive of me. So I should say that one of the things that happened is one of the workers there who was on strike had actually gone into the radio station or maybe it was before he actually left and he put the song Union Maid on a loop, closed loop, and they were broadcasting Union Maid over and over and over again. So I actually learned the words to it by listening to CKLG in those few days.

GJ [00:27:59] And so also somebody had taken and they put Krazy Glue or Super Glue in the locks of the building to prevent people from going in. Eventually when the police and the process servers came along, they tried to serve the injunction. We all just either put her hands in her pocket or refused to take them, refused to talk to them. They tried to explain to us what was going on. We just turned away and started singing Solidarity Forever, you know we just weren't going to pick up those papers. And so the next thing you know, the police officer that had warned us came over a little bit later and he said, listen, I don't know why you're doing this, but you're still going to go to jail if you don't follow the injunction. And it was really everybody their first experience with it. So and there wasn't somebody a lot older than than I was there. And so we read it. We read the injunction. It told us that could be damages against this. We could be arrested and charged, etc. So I think somebody else put more glue in the lock to make it really secure. And then we picketed for another hour or so, and then we left. As I understand it, CKLG couldn't get in until the following day some time and took Union Maid off the air.

BR [00:29:43] Great story. Also, another strike again now was back in Delta Local 454 in 1979. And so that strike for your Local, what were the issues there and what do you recall about it and why did it go on so long? It's an eight-week strike I think.

GJ [00:30:01] So there had been some sort of regional bargaining going on. My Local 454 decided not to take part in the regional bargaining, that it was poorly planned in our view,

that the strategies were no better than then they were going to lose something, we were going to lose. And we had a huge number of temporary and part-time workers. So that became the issue again. And we had a huge issue with our job evaluation system that had been introduced by the Greater Vancouver Regional District Labor Relations Bureau, which was run by Graham Leslie, who was a smart guy, but he was a tough guy to deal with. He had the ear of the municipal councils in those days.

BR [00:31:05] And for eight weeks and then how did it end up?

GJ [00:31:10] You know, you're asking me to go back 50 years or almost 50 years. So I think the biggest issues we were able to make a little bit of gains in that for the first time, temporary and part-time workers could get on to the what was called the secondary seniority board and they would be able to work themselves with time into a regular job. So that was a big success for us. And we were happy with that. Our benefits didn't change much. Our wages were what the others had already settled for. But we did agree that they would look at and review with us the job evaluation system at that time. And that was something that CUPE was just introducing as a system of their own.

KR [00:32:10] Gary, one of the things that happened during that strike is your Local ran into both the use of scabs and contractors. What sort of thing happened with that?

GJ [00:32:20] I wouldn't say we ran into a bunch of scabs. We only had two real incidents of, unfortunately, union members who wanted to go play men's league hockey on a Saturday evening and said that they would go across our picket lines no matter what. And even though our picket captains urged them not to, they went across. So we dealt with that because we're in a small community. Ladner in North Delta at that time. And we knew who they were. We knew which union they belonged to. We knew where they worked. And so we picketed their homes for an hour one day when we knew that they were at home. And we said that we were going to go to their employer and picket there. They were livid and said they'd never cross again. And I think they learned the lesson. But we never had another problem with anybody else until we come to Rempel Contracting.

GJ [00:33:29] Rempel in those years was the uber enemy of the B.C. Federation of Labor. Anti-union, supported right-to-work legislation, did everything in its power to undermine construction unions mostly, but they also took over the public garbage pickups. And Delta was one of their clients. In addition to taking it over as a contractor, they made sure that all of their drivers were independent contractors so they couldn't be unionized very easily. And so we faced these independent contractors wanting to dump garbage at the Vancouver landfill out in Delta and of course, CUPE 1004 members are there and they won't let them dump. And the city of Vancouver wouldn't let them come there any longer because they didn't want picket lines. They understood the danger they felt they faced if they allowed these people to dump the garbage.

GJ [00:34:37] So they eventually decided that they were going to dump garbage at the Watershed Park landfill. It had been an old landfill many, many years ago, maybe '40s and '50s, but had been cleaned out, all the old garbage removed. And so they decided they were going to take and put it in there on a temporary basis. And we decided that we weren't going to let them. So we chained the fences with our own padlocks and so forth, and we had picket lines every day. One day I was there and one of the Delta police, they were sitting nearby, told us that they had heard from Rempel that they were going to get in that day, kind of come hell or high water. And what they did plan to do was to come right up to the gate and drive through, just push their way through the chains and everything.

And then whatever damage was done to their trucks, they'd worry about that later. So we were prepared. There was about 35 of us. We all linked arms. We stood in front of it. They drove right up and pushed against us, against the gate. And the police officer, when he realized that they were actually going to do it, jumped out of his car and he came rushing over, jumped and onto the step of the truck and told them that he was going to be charged with assault causing, potentially causing bodily harm and other charges if he didn't back off. So he backed off about six inches. And they then brought out the great big bolt cutters and they tried to cut their way through. And we spent the next kind of 20 minutes holding our arms up, getting backed by the guy, trying to get to the locks and stuff like that. But it didn't get in. And they got an injunction, though, a little bit later and we were limited to four. And one of the things we didn't want to do was endanger four people, especially if they tried to get in, you know, in the evening where there's not a lot of people available to quickly react if we heard of a dangerous situation arising. So we eventually allowed them to go in. But the deal we cut I had forgotten to tell you this before, but the deal we cut was with the municipality was we got to haul the garbage out. So our crews got overtime work when we did settle.

KR [00:37:34] Well, you settled for then. But then back in 1984, you were on strike again and this time for 13 weeks. Well, this is sort of a two-part question, but let me start off by asking what, again were the issues back in 1984? Why did the strike last so long?

GJ [00:37:53] The issues were no different. You know, wages and benefits are always kind of number one. We started talking about pensions. We didn't really understand our pension plan. But it wasn't a serious demand. We wanted them to put more money in, didn't realize they couldn't put more money in because it was a defined benefit plan. And the pension, the pensions structure was such that we were told how much we could put in, we couldn't negotiate, how much we could put in. But the benefits for temporary part-time and improving some of the benefits, like Extended Health: we had a \$7,500 lifetime maximum benefit for extended health. At the end of the strike we had unlimited. So those are the kinds of things that the members could rally around and they could see it. And they felt good about the gains we made in '79. You know, they hadn't forgotten that when they went back to work, they were still kind of hyped up. And that hype and faith in bargaining and so forth propelled us into 84.

GJ [00:39:15] We were on our own. That was the biggest reason. We were not part of regional bargaining. Our employer wanted to try local bargaining and we agreed. They, though, brought in the Greater Vancouver Regional District Labor Relations Bureau again, and so they proved to be difficult. And even the friendly council members at that time on the City Council, by this time, I think we're a city in '84. They they wouldn't talk to us and they told us many years later that they had been advised not to talk to us because we were kind of ultra left-wing Local union and, you know, we'll just have to fight it out as long as it took. So it took a long time. And we got 63% vote when we started. Not exactly a ringing endorsement of either demands or the leadership. And then at the 9 or 10 week mark, we did another vote the same way, strike vote. Over 300 people out of 400, 450 people of member, local size. And we still got we got a 66% vote after 9 or 10 weeks. And so the important thing is that we we got a settlement several weeks later and it was a 64% ratification vote. So we were stuck in the '60s, I would say in the 1980s.

KR [00:41:09] The pay equity was part of that settlement, too.

GJ [00:41:11] Keith, it was pay equity was a big part of it. We had, if you remember, I talked about us doing job evaluation and CUPE introducing it. And by this time, unions,

especially CUPE and other public sector unions had grasped the idea of what we had to do to attain some fairness and pay for female dominated jobs within all of the public sector. So we, CUPE I think, led the way. We had a full job evaluation department. We had a job evaluation person in British Columbia. It was Carol Cameron, and we worked hard at getting an agreement that we would change our job evaluation system and we were able to do it, and we were able to get some money to make some adjustments to jobs that we just knew were underpaid because they had traditionally been jobs that women did.

KR [00:42:13] But in that strike, you weren't coordinating with the other CUPE Locals?

GJ [00:42:16] We didn't. It was one of the issues that they had eventually—they had made some headway by getting false promises from the GRVRD Labor Relations Bureau. But we wanted words. We wanted it in writing on paper so that we could hold it up and say, you promised to do this.

KR [00:42:39] Gary, tell us about the Save Local 454 Dance.

GJ [00:42:44] One of the best evenings of my life. We were in week 11 or 12 and things weren't going very good. I was starting to get pretty nervous that we were going to just run out of steam as a Local. The members would eventually give up and we had to do something. So we hired Dave Fairey from the Trade Union Research Bureau to do some research for us and also to help us organize with some of the other unions outside of the public sector. And so the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union and the Telecommunications Workers Union stepped up and they sponsored the Save CUPE 454 Dance.

GJ [00:43:41] So we did a press conference where we announced that there was going to be this dance. It was at the Sunbury Hall in North Delta and that we were going to have Jim Kinnaird and Grace Hartman. Now, Jim Kinnaird was president of the Federation of Labour at the time, Grace Hartman was president of CUPE. And I hadn't asked either of them. So I got a phone call from Ray Mercer, who was the assistant regional director of CUPE. Sorry, by this time he was the regional director of CUPE. And he said, What the hell are you doing? You never asked. Grace isn't available. Now what are you going to do? I said, Well, it's easy. I'll just tell them that she couldn't make it. No, no, no, no. That can't work. And so he says, I'll come. And I said, Well, you can come, but you've got to speak in favor of what we're doing. And so he said he would. So he showed up. Kinnaird said, his secretary phoned and said he would be at the dance. But he was pretty upset. And I said, fine.

GJ [00:44:58] And when he when he showed up, he kind of grabbed me by the lapel. We knew each other a little bit and he said, Can we talk? Off into the little kitchen, off the main dance hall area. And he said, Now, I want to understand what are you doing? I said, well, we're going to have you speak. And then Ray Mercer is going to speak and then I'm going to just capsule what our next strategy is. And so he said, well, what's your strategy? And I said, Well, we're going to start picketing Burnaby City Hall and the various facilities in Burnaby. Why are you doing that? That's an NDP council. The mayor's an NDPer. And he was well-known. And I said, Well, these guys have twice voted down potential agreements as part of the GVRDLRBEU or whatever it was. And so, you know, they've done it twice. So I said, fuck 'em and just we're going to picket. They're helping Delta and they're holding us back. So he said, You can't do that. You can't do that. They're our friends. And I said, okay, Jim, we'll see.

GJ [00:46:18] So he does this speech, really good speech, really supportive. Told us to be careful not to go out on the limb. And I knew what he was saying. He was still upset. Ray Mercer did a bang-up speech, you know, bringing greetings from Grace and telling us how much she missed being there with us and how there was solidarity across the country for our struggles. And so then I got up and I announced this picketing would start on Monday morning. The members were happy because they were, we were stalled and we had to do something and the members were prepared to do something, just needed a push in the right direction. So the dance started and carried on. And about 20 minutes later I saw Jim Kinnaird over in the corner in the telephone at the far end of the hall. Remember, no cell phones in those days. And Jim got off the telephone and he goes like this to me and off to the kitchen we go again. And so I grabbed my bargaining committee chair and we went in and he said, okay, so this is what's going to happen: tomorrow morning the Labor Relations Board is going to call you and they're going to start discussions to settle this thing. And I said, okay, and what do I have to do for it? What does the members have to do? And they said, no picketing at Burnaby. I said, Alright, but if we don't have a settlement by Wednesday we start the picketing. And he said, I don't know if you can do it that fast. And I said, But we can change your mind. And he said, okay, I can tell them. I said, yes. So I got up on the stage again, announced that there had been a breakthrough, that we were being called to the LRB at 11:00 on Sunday morning. And we were meeting with Stephen Kelleher, who was vice chair of the LRB at that time, and a well known arbitrator. We had a settlement by Wednesday. We got enough money to do a bunch of job evaluation work, one year's salary for a person to work on job evaluation full time. And we were able to make some further inroads on the benefits front as well. And so it was a real victory, although, as I said, 64% said yes. And we were stuck in that kind of number every time we voted.

KR [00:49:22] Gary, all of the strikes and all of the bargaining between 1972 and 1974, that involved conflict between CUPE locals and the Municipal Labor Relations Bureau. Can you give us your thoughts about what role the Municipal Labor Relations Bureau played in all of those disputes?

GJ [00:49:43] If there was ever an anti-worker organization determined to hold back wages, benefits, seniority rights, anything that had to do with union rights, it was the MLRB. And as I've said many times, it's been the GVRD Labor Relations Bureau, and it became the Municipal Labor Relations Bureau after Graham Leslie had left. I would say from the late 1960s, right through until probably 2015, they did more damage by holding back, coordinating their negotiations, saying no on every issue of importance to workers across the region. And they cost us hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars and they cost all those temporary and part-time workers many, many opportunities to get a job because they had no rights. I guess that's it.

BR [00:50:50] That sums it up. Also in the '80s, what was your involvement in Operation Solidarity?

GJ [00:50:57] I played a small role. George Hewison from the Fishermen's Union called me up one evening. I think it was Saturday and said we're doing a meeting to talk about the bills the Social Credit government have brought in. There had already been a lot of stuff in the papers, and senior union officials had talked about the need to come together with community groups. And so he asked if I wanted to take part. I said yes. So I went down to the Fishermen's Hall on East Cordova, 33 East Cordova. It's funny. I can remember that. And we listened to Art Kube and a United Church minister whose name totally escapes me. But he and Art did great speeches, talked about the need to come

together with communities. Art was with the Federation of Labor at that time, and we needed to create our own Operation Solidarity. After all the good that seemed to have come out of Poland in their Operation Solidarity. So that was the start of it.

GJ [00:52:16] I didn't have a lot to do with day-to-day stuff or decision making at all. When it came time for my local union to show up, we did. We had the rally at—"We" meaning Operation Solidarity Rally, was at Empire Stadium and we hired 12 busses. We brought, I think, close to 350 of our members to the rally. And we went out and we purchased a great big, huge twenty-five-by-four foot heavy canvas sign with printing on it "CUPE Local 454 Delta Municipal Employees Union" as our show of support for everybody there. But what we didn't realize was just how heavy it was going to be. And it took four of us with great big, heavy sticks to be able to carry it out like this, especially when we were marching. It was easy when we could put it on the ground and just hold it up. But it was an interesting time.

GJ [00:53:28] And when we were called upon to picket various schools in Delta. If you remember, teachers and schools were going to be the first part of a general strike. We answered the call and we picketed the various schools. And I always remember my kids, two of their teachers came out and said, absolutely happy that you got here. Thank you very much. And so they came out and picketed with us. I think it only lasted for half the day because people would get their kids and go home, you know, and not come back. So we did that and anything else that was necessary, we would, you know, sometimes send people to the various location when community groups were doing a demonstration, we'd add to that demonstration. It was good.

BR [00:54:26] Great. So after all this activism, you started to move towards becoming staff, you were first a business agent with City of Vancouver Local 1004 and then you came onto national staff as a servicing rep. Who hired you and what were your early assignments on national staff?

GJ [00:54:45] Well, Ray Arsenault, who is by this time regional director, was the person who hired me. He brought me he invited me to come over and talk about things. He said I had no idea what that was about. So he cooked up a meal for me in his apartment in Coquitlam and Govind Sundram was there as well. And Govind was a longtime CUPE employee, and I had known Govind quite I had actually known him longer than Ray. So we had the meal and then they sat me down and asked me if I want the job with CUPE and ask me a ton of questions. It became the interview. CUPE used to hire without an interview, but I was one of the first to actually be interviewed and I think they just tried it out on me. And so they said— Ray phoned me the very next day and offered me the job. Started out as a temporary. CUPE did have temporary seniority rights. I didn't like them at the time, but it was as temporary. Replaced Connie Credico, who was on maternity leave and did some municipal work early. Then after some period of time, still as a temporary, I got assigned to work in the schools area in the Lower Mainland. I became—I was successful at a posting that came up. I was the senior temp in the province who wanted it. And so I got this job, had 14 local unions from Surrey and all the way through to Black Creek, Black Creek up near Pemberton, all of the schools were mine to service. And it was interesting.

KR [00:56:47] Yes.

GJ [00:56:51] Then I started doing more and more as schools work and got involved in pensions.

BR [00:56:58] And you eventually became the provincial schools coordinator in CUPE. And so what was your role in building up coordinated bargaining in the school sector?

GJ [00:57:09] So we were fractured at the beginning of my appointment, as the pseudo-coordinator. Because I was so junior, people didn't give me the title of coordinator and nor did they have any respect for the coordination because it was brand new stuff. But the municipal workers were starting to see coordination in the Lower Mainland. They were doing a better job in the Okanagan. They had started to come together and saying, We're going to put the major set of demands in each area would be the same, and they wouldn't back down and they would negotiate it at a single table. None of this going and doing it local-by-local. So they were having some success and schools were not. They faced the BC Public School Employers Association, which was created by, unfortunately the NDP Government and Public Sector Employers Council, which set the wage and benefit mandates from years gone by. In other words, wage controls that we had fought way back in 1975, but we were back in them under the NDP, unfortunately.

GJ [00:58:31] So the coordination came together because the locals themselves started to say, okay, we just can't have this individual bargaining, when you've got one employer group (the BCPC), showing up at the table with the employer and the employer sits there with their arms crossed. And we have to listen to BCPC and listen to it 43, 45 times around the province. So do something. So we started campaigning within the school boards to have them support provincial bargaining. And we started—I traveled across the province, about four times talking to local unions, bringing them together as groups and talking about coordination, what it could mean for us and why it was necessary and so forth. And we got buy in. And, you know, and it wasn't just me. There were other reps out there who were just as passionate about this coordinated bargaining. I just happened to be the coordinator by this time.

GJ [00:59:47] So we got a coordinated bargaining group together and it was 48 people. Now with the staff assigned, it was 53 people trying to do bargaining at a single table. It was horrible. And we would have the B.C. Teachers Federation would send 4 or 5 people from their bargaining committee to watch us because things that we said yes or no to could affect their bargaining. So we had huge cooperation and coordination with them as well. So it was an awful undertaking. But we were there and we started out trying to get our list of demands together and it was the one failure I think on my part is to cut that from 165 to some more reasonable level. But because we'd face such opposition from that BC Public School Employers Association, our members and our Locals wanted their issues up there. So what we did is we grouped them together, I think into 14 kind of subcategories. And if it was something that was a little bit different, we started to say, you know, except for CUPE Local X, who wanted something even more. Now, I understood as a negotiator and as somebody with a lot of experience by this time that that was a tough row to hoe, especially for those who wanted more. If they wanted less, we just crossed that off and didn't put it on the table. We had a bottom line that everybody would be seeking. And the other demands, a big number of them were from somebody who thought they could have this breakthrough in the region at the provincial bargaining table.

BR [01:01:56] Okay, so that's intriguing. And it led up to one of the most significant rounds of school bargaining, which was in 1999 or 1999/2000. Can you tell us the story of that dispute from your point of view? And it led to something called the accord process. So could you explain about that and the creation of the public education benefits trust?

GJ [01:02:21] I can. The Clark government had just kind of disintegrated when Glenn resigned and Ujjal Dosanjh took over as premier and they were in transition. So Dosanjh was the premier, but the people we used to talk to that might have been able to make some decisions and help us get through a strike were gone and new people were appointed. Typical when you bring in new leadership, a lot of the support staff are changed.

GJ [01:03:11] So we had heard, I had heard that somebody had this idea that they could have trusteeship of all of the public sector pension plans in British Columbia (six of them) it could be arrived at by the form of an accord, and that there was legislation (Bill 18, I believe it was), that was set to go once the first accord was signed. And the college plan signed an accord off. So I didn't know really what an accord was. Was it a collective agreement? What was it? And what it was, was a way for workers to get something out of the bargaining process that was not obvious as part of their zero, zero, and two mandate that was going on in that particular set of bargaining. And so people could get more, but it had to be a found way and accords were going to be the way. Tony Penikett was appointed as the chief negotiator or chief accord person, and John Calvert worked with him. And John and I knew each other. John, I phoned him and said, What is this? And he explained to me slightly, but he was a little uncomfortable because Tony should be the one talking to me. And so I said, Well, listen, I don't want this so-called accord that covers the municipal pension plan to go through because nobody in CUPE has heard anything about it. And we want a say. It's our pension plan and we make up the biggest group of members, you know, between health care, social services, municipal workers and our school boards. We were, by far the largest union within that pension plan and had no say in what was going on.

GJ [01:05:40] So we ended up with a meeting with Joy MacPhail, who was the minister of finance, I think. And she explained to us what the accord process was and that we could have an accord, but we had to have provincial bargaining in schools. Couldn't do it municipally. Health care was already well into it. Too late to put that on the table there. But the schools are still involved enough that we could put the pension plan accord on as part of ours. And there were some ideas about other things we could use the accord for. So I'd heard about it. We got down to work and we very quickly agreed that there would be an accord on public sector—or on the Municipal Pension Plan Trusteeship, called the Joint Trust Agreement—Joint Management Trust Agreement that had to be approved by all the parties in the province who would be part of it. So some 700 employers and I think about 65 unions in all.

GJ [01:06:59] So it couldn't happen until school boards ratified their agreement. And we were in the process of going on strike. We started our strike on Thursday. That afternoon had come out Carmela Allevato, who was the legislative coordinator for CUPE at the time, called me and told me that a government spokesperson had told them that they were going to call the legislature back to session on Sunday and pass back-to-work legislation with penalties if we didn't go back to work. So we went to the Labor Relations Board, called there by the government. We agreed to sit down and try and hash through a bunch of things. And it just didn't work out. We couldn't get a settlement. So the strike went on. And at twelve o'clock, I left the bargaining table with the government representatives at the Labour Relations Board, walked across to the hotel that our 53 people and BCTF visitors were all sitting in. And I had to announce that the legislation was set to be passed at two o'clock and that we would wait to see what the legislation looked like before we made the decision, but we may have to go back to work without a settlement.

GJ [01:08:39] So two o'clock came, three o'clock came and finally at 3:15, got the call that the legislature had passed legislation and that a copy of the legislation would be at the LRB. So we sent somebody over to pick up a copy. I took about 30 minutes to read it. And then, even now it gives me shivers, I had to ask them to go back to work. So the toughest decision I'd ever made, but it was a good decision. The accord process provided a method for us to get ahead. In schools alone, we ended up getting \$252 million in two years for job evaluation slash pay equity. Job evaluation, a new system was going to be introduced across the province in schools, and the major beneficiaries would be female workers. So your special-ed assistants were, I think, \$12 an hour at that time. They got boosted to \$22 an hour. Things like that. Some of the jobs that were male-dominated also got big increases because for some reason over the years, things got out of whack amongst their jobs as well. And so it was a big deal. And, you know, the employers are still paying that money, but in a much larger amount, you know, 30 years later. 30 years later. And so I'm pretty proud of that.

GJ [01:10:31] We got the Joint Benefits Trust. Now, this was important because we had crappy benefits in most school board locals. And we wanted to bring it all to a common table and start to increase those benefits as money came available. Government gave us \$19.3 million. It allowed us to set up a Trust that would be jointly sponsored by BCPC and the school districts and by CUPE. And we included the non-CUPE unions in schools as part of that discussion and so forth. So we brought every school district into the benefits trust. They fought it at first and then when they saw the 19.3 million meant they no longer had to pay benefit costs, you know, as employers, the bosses were getting improvements and the bosses had some representation on the Trust. And the workers—all four of us were CUPE employees or elected people on that Trust. And it's running today, and as far as I know, is still doing a good job and has slowly but surely been able to bring benefits up. And maybe the most important benefit is every single person is entitled to Long Term Disability in the event that they can't work again. And it is one of the fairest LTD plans, not the most rich. But it provides an opportunity for you to have LTD payments up to your 65th birthday and then move on because you don't have to pay pension contributions when you're on LTD. It also meant that it would be like you were getting inflation protection on your pension as well. So it was a good in both senses. Great for members to see. Great for members to be able to see that they had, you know, they had faith in the union and we won.

BR [01:13:01] We won in the end

GJ [01:13:04] We won in the end.

BR [01:13:04] Pensions were so important part of that. And so following that, next decade or so, you worked as the Pension Coordinator for CUPE and were widely respected for your knowledge about pensions. So what kind of pension gains were made and why is pension security so important?

GJ [01:13:23] So I started with pensions because I was the big mouth who ended up saying we had to negotiate a pension agreement with the employers, you know. So we created a pension bargaining committee. There was, I think, 13 of us on it from many locals, from many unions and mostly staff but some rank-and-file members who were active and or wanted to know more about pensions. CUPE had Darcy Beggs from Ottawa, a researcher who was my mentor in all of this. She would say, Oh you can't do that, Gary. You can't do this. And I said, Well, then what can I do? And we negotiated. It took us a little over a year to to agree. Then we signed it off and it was effective January 1st, 2005.

And so I spent, you know, a couple of years negotiating all this. Then I moved into being a Trustee. And what we found right away was that we needed to have somebody essentially full time in their early days of Trusteeship. And I was appointed by Robin Jones to be that person. And Robin was the regional director at the time.

BR [01:14:57] And so the importance of joint trusteeship for pensions is?

GJ [01:15:01] Well, really important. You know, your own pension is jointly trusted for both you and Keith and I. And, you know, it means the members through their union have a say in what that pension plan looks like, how it's administered, when the payments are made, when we have inflation protection or cost of living built into it and so forth. It's so important that members have a say. And it's not just the employer or some company the employer hires to run everything and they want to stop. For them, it's just the job. For us, it's a passion.

KR [01:15:47] Yeah. And as it turns out, workers in unions and pensions were not your only passion. So for many years, you've been an active racehorse owner. Vice president of the Horsemen's Protective and Benevolent Association and you were also chair of the board of Teletheater, which conducts all live and off track betting in B.C. How did you become so involved with horse racing and why do you enjoy it so much?

GJ [01:16:13] Well, years ago, Joe D'Onofrio was my staff rep and they called him Senator Joe because he knew everything. And one day he was working with me in our union office in Ladner, and he said, Listen, on Saturday, I've got a horse racing do you want to come to the races? I said, Well, which track? He said, Hastings, I wouldn't have one of those standard breds. And I had no idea the difference. But I do know that years earlier I had loved going to horse racing. My mom would take us there because there was no cost to get in. And I like grey horses mostly. And so he took me and his horse didn't win. But by about five o'clock that night, I had written him a cheque and I owned 10% of that horse. Now, the horse never won again. But I was fascinated and loved the whole idea of having a racehorse. The following year (this horse is still racing), Mark Hancock, who is now the CUPE national president and was a racehorse owner at the time, phoned me up and said, Are you interested in buying Point Five? And I said, Point Five, he's a great horse. He says, No, Terry, our trainer, wants to get rid of him. You know, he ended up 14 lengths back in a stakes race last weekend, and Terry doesn't think he's going to be any good. So I phoned up my trainer, asked them to go see Point Five. He phoned me and said, How much are they asking? I said, \$1,500. He said, Gary, if you don't buy him, I will. So I gave him \$1,500. Mark and I and Robin Jones became partners in this horse, \$500 apiece. He went on to win a little over \$390,000 Canadian, and we were hooked. So we remained partners for a period of time. And then Mark leaving the province eventually dropped out. Robin was doing other things and so I was still there. And I've taken on other partners and I've had racehorses ever since. I don't have a clue what year that first one was, but I know I've had 47 horses over all these years.

KR [01:19:01] So you also ended up in a management role and I was curious was whether your experience with CUPE gave you anything with respect to the Horseman's Association and that sort of thing?

GJ [01:19:13] Well, I didn't do much for the first 5 or 6 years that I was a horse owner. You know, only the single horse you go every second week, well you go every week to track but you're watching your horse every second week or so. And when you win, it's the most amazing feat to go get your picture taken. Blair's got a couple of pictures from me that I've

given him. And you've got a picture, a win picture. So, you know, it's one of those great things in life right, that you're just there and it's yours, and even though you only own 10%, you own the horse. So I didn't do much. And somebody said to me, you have experience with unions, why don't you run for the executive of the of the HBPA? And I said, you know, I should do this, I've done stuff like this all my life, so, yeah, I'll take it on. And so I got elected, learned the ropes, learned how things were done, didn't like kind of the way that motions were made or minutes were kept or even the policies were kind of wishy washy, never written down. Everything was a verbal or a handshake and that was it. And so it was very hard to find out what was going on. So the skills I learned, you know, Municipal Pension Board Trustee, Public Education Benefits Trust Trustee, they were all dealing with how to manage something. And the industry you have to manage it. Owners, trainers, jockeys, you know, breeders of the horses, they're all members. So they all deserve representation. They all deserve good governance. And that's you know why I got more involved. I eventually became—I was elected as the vice president representing owners. That board then appointed me to be a director at the Teletheater B.C.. And I've added one more task to my plate, and that is I'm chair of a new organization called Thoroughbred Racing B.C., which brings all of the disparate racing groups into a single organization and we're starting to talk about negotiating the Trust there.

KR [01:21:51] So this is what retirement looks like for a trade unionist.

GJ [01:21:55] Yes, And it's a good life.

KR [01:21:57] And I guess just to conclude with an interesting discussion, looking back on your life in the trade union movement, is there anything else you'd like to share? And as a final question, what do you have to say to a young person who for the first time is joining a union?

GJ [01:22:15] Not a lot to say about going back, we've got to always look forward Keith. And I think what I would say is something— well it is looking back, an old trade unionist, Saul Jackson from Coquitlam Municipality took me aside one day and he said, Gary, he said, you've got good instincts. But here's the question: Is it good for the members? If it's good for the members, you do it. If it's not good for the members, don't do it. And I would say to everybody joining the union, first of all, go to meetings, learn what's going on. Talk to those in leadership role and understand what they're saying and how it applies to you. But most important, if you get involved, remember: is it good for the member?

KR [01:23:10] Great way to conclude.