

Bena Pattni & Karen Kennedy

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Interviewers: Jo-Ann Kolmes, Winston Gereluk, Don Bouzek

Q: Tell me when you started at Canada Post and a bit of your history.

KK: I started at Canada Post in 1974. It was a few years later that I got involved in the women's committee; it wasn't right away. The work I was doing was inside the plant. I was working on midnight shift for the first seven years sorting mail between 11 at night and 8 in the morning.

Q: What union were you a member of?

KK: Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

BP: I started at Canada Post in 1986. I started as a term temporary letter carrier and then I became permanent after a year. I was a member of the Letter Carriers Union of Canada until 1991 or whenever there was a merger, and that's when I became a member of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. I was a letter carrier for 28 ½ years and after that I decided to go into registration on the advice of my colleague here. So I am working inside now and I look after cash.

Q: Karen, could you talk about the early days of the women's committee?

KK: We often talk about this in our women's committee. We talk about the history of the committee and how it began. Bena in particular likes to talk about the beginning days for the women's committee. So the merger between CUPW and LCUC was in 1989 by the way. There was a vote across the country as to which union was going to be the name of the union, who was going to be the union – was it going to be LCUC or CUPW? All the

members voted and it was 1989 that that took place. But the year that we started up the women's committee in the local, which is still continuing, was the year after I got elected as fulltime secretary.

BP: April of 1999 is when we first started the women's committee. It was actually inspired by a very prominent woman who worked as a CUPW member. She was our regional national director, Cindy McCallum Miller. Actually she asked me to go for a course which was at Port Elgin, and it was Strength and Power. The course was aimed at an educational to empower women and give you all the tools you need to start women's committees and get involved in the union labour movement.

Q: Who sponsored that course?

BP: The conference was Canadian Union of Postal Workers sponsored, and 150 women participated in it. It took place about 150 miles south of Toronto, which is called Port Elgin. It is a really nice resort, holiday resort, and that's where the Canadian Auto Workers Union is actually housed there, and we rented the space from them.

Q: At that time was there already a national women's committee? How did the national committee encourage the locals to start their own committees?

BP: The national women's committee actually was behind starting this program and the course, Strength and Power. Cindy McCallum was in that committee because she was a regional director. Any woman who is on the executive board is considered a member of the national women's committee; it's just a recognized thing. She was there, so she was actually behind it mostly. It was all organized by the national women's committee, which comprises of eight women from all the regions which are eight regions that we have in Canada for CUPW. It also comprises of all the executives at the national level and at the regional level.

Q: What happened at the local level after you went through that experience? What steps led to the forming of the committee here?

BP: At the local level we, actually Karen Kennedy was my inspiration at the local level. Even though I took Strength and Power as a course I still didn't have that urge to start something on my own. I was afraid. So Karen was a powerful woman even then and she and I got together. There was another woman with us; she's unfortunately not able to carry on with the women's committee anymore because of her health issues. But she was also part of the women's committee. So the three of us sat down together and decided what should we do to start a women's committee. Karen came up with brilliant ideas of hers, as usual, and she has never stopped. She's still part of that women's committee even as a retired member, and she has inspired so many of us. I think that was the main driving force is having Karen Kennedy there. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't even be speaking like this today, because I was a shy person, sat in the corner and didn't even talk or be heard. Now I can tell you a whole life story or anything you want me to tell you.

Q: Karen, can you describe the steps your group took to do the outreach and build the membership of the women's committee?

KK: Well just to elaborate on what Bena was saying, nobody can do anything by themselves. What really was the kernel of the beginning of the committee was the connections between Bena and Brenda Swift. The three of us, knowing that we wanted women to have more of a voice in the local and to have a more secure role to feel empowered, to feel like they could be involved in the union, that there was somebody there that heard what they were saying and that could see a future that involved more women in the local. At the time there weren't that many women involved and it was male dominated. We'd gone through that our entire lives of involvement with the union – it's male dominated. So if it wasn't for the three of us being there together, the strength of us

for us to make something happen, to reach out to other people, to validate the ideas. We've got them together, we've talked together, we brainstormed – what's the best approach? So we went with what we thought would work. It's a group thing, it's always a group thing. It's always a community.

BP: Every time we met, the main aim of our meeting was how to get more women involved, how to reach out to them, how to network with them. When we first started talking about having this conference actually, that again was Karen's idea. This conference brought us about 65 women members who wanted to be on the mailing list. They weren't really part of the conference but they wanted to be part of the mailing list. We mailed them anything that we did and we just gathered up and I guess the ideas just started flowing. At that time the issues that affected us mainly were fighting for equality. In 1999 we were also going through, like we had just gone through a strike in '98 which was a ten day strike. In '97 we had another issues as well, so those were some of the issues. So we needed women to learn what we wanted for our bargaining rights in the union and we also wanted women to play a more active role in the union. So it just kind of took off that way and we just brainstormed, like Karen said. Brenda had some wonderful ideas as well, so the three of us together. I think we started off with about eight in the first year. Those eight are all not here with us today on the same committee. We've had a lot of new women coming and going, coming and going. We've seen them grow and we've seen them really, really flourish. One of the examples is Kathleen Mpulubusi, who is very active in our union now. She just sat back and didn't even say anything; even if she came to a meeting she wouldn't say anything. Now today actually she's in the caravan that's going across Canada that stopped here yesterday. They picked her up, so she went with them, with the three gentlemen who came with the caravan, the three brothers.

Q: What outreach methods did you use in the early days to attract women to the committee?

KK: Well what did we do first? I think what we decided to do was hold an event, which we called the Equinox. We did it around that time of year. So we had an event and we invited guest speakers, we picked topics that we thought people would be interested in. We wanted to talk about equality, I think we had somebody from the sexual assault centre there.

BP: We had Ritu Khullar.

KK: Ya Ritu from the labour lawyers that we were affiliated with and we used. We had someone come and speak about human rights, a labour lawyer speak, and it think it was Ritu.

BP: We also talked about violence against women. I think Lynn Bue came from Ottawa, didn't she?

KK: We had Lynn, yes that's right.

BP: She came from Ottawa. She's one of our sisters who really takes women's issues seriously as well, and she fights for women's rights and women's equality. She's taken very good leadership roles in the union as well. She was part of the negotiating committee as well.

Q: What year was that first Equinox?

BP: 2000.

KK: Was it 2000? Yes it was, cuz it was Y2K paranoia. But we ordered mugs and we still have a few of them left, and they have the year 2000 in the bottom of the mug. So ya it

was 2000. But we tried to appeal to people to talk about, to get together as women. It was restricted just to women – no men, only women. The other really important factor that was in play in all of this was our local president at the time. Our local president was Greg McMaster. So Greg McMaster is a feminist and really supports women's rights, so it made a huge difference to have someone in the leadership position who wasn't trying to hang onto power and nothing can happen without me being there, which you so often see happening in the labour movement. He was all for this – you're the women of the local, you guys make your own decisions; you at your meetings make the decisions and you tell us what you want.

BP: He also supported us in such a way that he never really said anything when we asked for money for any programs that we wanted to do. When you want to have some programs it's obviously going to need money. Karen actually started a good budget for us, so that was really helpful as well to bring more women in by advertising and also calling on women. Also Karen Kennedy was, I don't remember if you were doing the Inside Out newsletters at that time or not, but our Inside Out newsletter was a monthly newsletter that went out to every member of CUPW, and that that was also another factor that inspired women. Karen drew all kinds of cartoons and pictures, and as usual she has a really artistic creative hand there. So she did that and people just got attracted to the page and started looking and started phoning the union office, contacting the union – we want to know more about this, how do we get hold of Karen, how do we get hold of the women's' committee? That's another inspiring factor.

Q: Was there any question about the need for a women's committee?

BP: There always is; there still is. There's still always a backlash and a bashing – why do you guys need a women's committee? What do you do? Do you just have parties? We have an agenda usually when we have women's committee meeting, and we have a board. Karen is very environmentally friendly so we only use the board, so we just erase it

afterwards. So there's always an agenda of women's committee as to what transpired in our meetings. We do have breaks, so we eat, cuz that's what gets you going. Somebody actually commented, oh I like this meeting, they're only eating here. But you have to have food to attract people to come to your meetings. Even today when we meet, nobody even makes any plans but all the women just bring something. We share this, we share our stories. It's not very what do you say, it's not very formal. It's just you just go there and you have fun, you talk with friends. You do have an agenda and you have to get through the agenda, so you make sure by the end of the night, it's a two hour meeting and we meet ten times a year. So it's just something that we all look forward to. It's never a chore to go to a women's committee. Sometimes you go to so many meetings that you don't want to go to any more meetings, but women's committee meeting is one of the meetings that we all love and we're looking forward to it all the time. We phone women, we inform them of the meetings even though it has already been advertised. Karen used to do bulletins and send out the bulletins and she used to write down what's the basic agenda going to be, and she put these flowers and patterns to attract some women. A lot of women did get attracted. We also had speakers at our meetings, we often had speakers. We used to try and get a speaker in some area of something that the workplace was going through at the time. Let's say there's people going through a lot of depression or mental illness, so we would have somebody who would come and talk about mental illness. We would have somebody come out and talk about stress. Sometimes we also had people to come and do a drumming session. Drumming is very therapeutic, so we had drumming sessions. We also had women from the sexual assault centre come to our meetings and do a presentation. It just kind of, like the meetings were very productive even though they were not very formal, they were just an informal meeting. It brought the women out.

KK: We took turns too. Basically we liked being together; it was fun. So we wanted to try and laugh when we were there and do something enjoyable together. The food always showed up. We had a formal agenda and we took turns chairing, so it gave people the skill of running a meeting. Some were better at it than others, and you got better over

time obviously. So we'd sit down together and say, okay what do we have to talk about today? We'd have maybe a couple of things we knew we had to deal with, but is there anything else we need to put up here? Sometimes we'd start by just going around in a circle and saying, particularly if there was new people there, but we'd go around in a circle and say who we were, where we worked, and something that we wanted to share. So it really did become like a group of friends who were meeting, and you felt accepted. I think that was the thing – we wanted to try and be accepting of all the different people that were there and their different issues and where they were coming from. It was a respectful environment but also a friendly one. So that's what kept us coming back. We liked to see each other again, we enjoyed being together. It's the core group of women, it continues today.

Q: In the early days, what were some of the issues you were identifying? Did those translate into bargaining demands?

KK: I can't think of anything that would've.

BP: I do remember some of the resolutions that you came up with at one of the meetings, and we took them to Alberta Federation of Labour. We were also part of the Alberta Federation of Labour; one of our women was a member of their committee when they had a committee. Now they don't have women's committees anymore, but at the time they did. Also one of our women also was a part of the national women's committee, so any resolutions that we came up with. Basically we were actually working towards trying to get good language put into our collective agreement where there is no violence against women period in the workplace or anywhere. That was a big thing, and you came up with a really good resolution on that.

KK: We did, we did together.



BP: Then we worked together on it. Also there was a childcare issue. Women always needed childcare problems, so in our union whenever there was a function I remember when I used to go for meetings in the early days of CUPW they always used to announce that there is childcare available if anybody wants at the location where the meeting is. That encouraged women to come out and participate as well, because the childcare was right there in the building so they knew that their children were safe.

Q: Were there other issues in the workplace that women brought forward at the committee?

BP: The main one was part time work. Canada Post has gone and not making temporary employees permanent and also having the two different, like now we have two different waves and that causes a lot of issues with women in childcare problems because some of the daycare spaces are only available at certain times of the day and we work around the clock in the post office. So it's very difficult for some of the women. They do bring those issues. They also bring, there were some issues that were brought were related mainly to favoritism and some of the stuff that goes on in the workplace with they're feeling vulnerable. Racism was brought out by one of the members. She said when she worked at her other job she never felt this much racism that she's feeling in Canada Post.

KK: And harassment.

BP: And harassment.

KK: And bullying. So the difficult, ya there's been lots of issues. Maternity, women going on maternity leave or taking elder care, and the processes and how they work. Working on packages that would instruct them on how to apply for and how the process works for maternity leave.

Q: What would you do with bullying or harassment issues to take them forward?

KK: Well we would talk about it in the group. If someone came, I can remember specific times when that happened, they would come to the women's, they'd seen the notice that we're having a meeting and they'd come to the meeting and bring the issue there with them and talk about what was going on. So then we'd try and figure out with them what was the solution. Sometimes what would be the obvious solution wasn't what they really wanted to happen. Once you start a process then this is where this might lead, and so on. So once they understood the processes, you had to make the choices that worked for the person who was involved.

BP: Just being there as a support network to kind of help them, they knew that if they feel really vulnerable they know where to go for more information or who to reach out to. Also there were people in the union office who were able to help out with that too, so we were able to direct them to the right person. A lot of women don't know who in the local looks after some of the issues, and they may not want to talk to another man and they may want to just share it with women. So that was also another very good point where they were able to come and talk to us and share this information.

KK: But in terms of process, I think that's what you might be talking about, is how is the women's committee connected within the local. So every committee in the local had someone who was an official liaison to the committee, and they were the ones who reported to the local executive. So there had to be one executive person who was on each committee who was the liaison to the executive. So someone who was a woman who was on the executive would be part of the women's committee. Now they've changed the bylaws now so if you're on the local executive you are automatically part of a local women's committee if you hold an executive position and you're a woman. So that works and it doesn't work, cuz not everyone who's in a fulltime position or on the executive wants to be part of the women's committee. So you're still gonna find that there's people

that do though, so the person who would be at the meeting when an issue arose, the committee might decide they wanna deal with it in a certain way. They could go back then to the next executive meeting, make a presentation, make a motion at that executive meeting that a certain thing would happen in the local and this action would take place. They would be able to deal with it that way. So that's how it was connected. Failing that, failing the support that you might want on the executive, suppose you didn't get that, you could still go, the women's committee could all go to the general membership meeting and put a motion forward at the general membership meeting and wrote on it there that this action would take place. So that's how you were able to connect and make things happen. So was a big role of the women's committee actually, was to make women aware of what the processes were so they understood how the bylaws worked, they understood how to make a motion, they understood what the budget meant. If we put these things in the budget, this meant that we had the money for this, we don't have to go back and ask for it again, it's been approved. So we know that we have this much money to work with for these various planned events that we were gonna do, and it's still that way. We still have a set budget. They're still able to say, okay we know we can give money to International Women's Day event, we know we have \$400 designated we can use for that event. So it's part of the process how it works, it really plugs people into being activists. They know what their rights are and they know how to work around the system, work with the system.

BP: And at the same time learn how to run a meeting, how to conduct a meeting, how to do agendas, and all the process that is required to get ahead and push your agenda ahead. You do need that as well, so it really helps.

Q: Was the training formal or informally on the job?

KK: Well let's say for example that you're a woman on a work floor, you see a notice for a women's committee meeting and you decide you're gonna go there cuz you're interested

in what might be on the agenda or you just want to see what it's all about. The place that you can talk about what's going on with the union and who your reps are and how things work, even in the workplace with the collective agreement, there's very few of those places. So if you go to a women's committee meeting you're talking to the union. You have women here who are involved and understand the collective agreement to varying degrees, but they understand the workplace too. So a great deal of time you would see taken with someone saying, oh I bid for this thing and the results came out, now I'm not there and I don't understand why, because this person looks like they have less seniority than me. We spend a lot of time, for example, talking about workplace issues but it's an accessibility thing. It's a way to access the union, to access the collective agreement rights in an environment where you can ask questions comfortably and not feel like I don't know who to turn to, I don't know where to go. You may have shop stewards on the work floor but the nature of the workplace is such that everybody's rushing, especially in a letter carrier depot. Everybody's on a timer. I'm supposed to start at this, I'm on wave one so I start early, I'm on wave two I start later, wave 3 I start later. But I've still got the same set route laid out how many minutes I've got for everything, and I still have to get everything out. Whether you're a steward or not, you're still in this really tight time race all the time. So to be able to go someplace outside of work and talk about the workplace, very important. So those sorts of educational pieces are informal. If you don't know the answer to the question you can say, well we know who can find that out for you, or we can find it out for you, here's who you call, here's the phone numbers, that kind of stuff, and this is where you can find that answer.

Q: How do you think the women's committee influence participation of women in the local generally?

BP: Actually Corey Longo is one of the good example of that. She came and she was a younger member, she was only 22 when she joined the women's committee. She started coming to the women's committee and she started planning and started getting involved.

She was very inspired by the women's committee. She went to nursing and she took nursing course in her evening time. She took a part time position. She started off as a letter carrier and then she went and worked in the plant and became a nurse. After she became a nurse she thought that maybe that wasn't what she wanted to do, so she applied for a job with Canadian Labour Congress and she's their regional representative right now. She's only 30 years old. So she made that gain in eight years, so we saw that happen right in front of our eyes. She still thanks the women's committee for inspiring her. She said, I wouldn't be here without the women's committee.

Q: What about numbers of women getting more involved in general?

KK: I don't know statistically how many women would be involved. There would be small numbers of us that would come to the monthly meetings. There was changes in that, like who was going to be there. The event that most people would come to would be the Equinox, our annual women's conference. We would kind of target that. But I think the fact that we had a women's committee that was functioning, that was meeting, that we had a group of women who were writing articles, putting out information about what was going on, and were just visible in the local and visibly active in the local, made women feel comfortable that their voice was being heard, that this was a place that was welcoming to women as well, that the local was welcoming to women.

Q: Did your activities sensitize members generally to gender and other equality related issues?

KK: There were still people within the local that didn't agree with the women's committee being there. It wasn't 100 percent endorsement by any means. We went through the 42 day strike in 1981 where we got maternity leave, and the entire 40 years that I worked at Canada Post I kept hearing about it. It never went away. There were still men who were angry that women got maternity leave. There's some things you just can't

change. There was I think more of a reluctance, more of a respectful approach to some things because the women's committee was there and the local knew there were outspoken women who were going to challenge them if they didn't respect that women in the local were to be valued, that there was equality involved here. So I guess in that way our existence was an educational force. I don't know.

BP: We do have actually, at the national convention you actually see how many women actually go to the national convention now. I think one of the reasons behind that is locals having women's committees and getting women inspired to start coming to meetings. Once they start coming to the meeting, any time we see a new face on the floor, the meeting floor, we start nominating them for different things and try and get them hooked up. Once they start coming then it's just kind of the ball just starts rolling. It was 40 percent women at the national convention when I went there in May. That was really good to see. Alberta and Calgary, Calgary and Edmonton are the top leaders in that. We had, I can't remember how many we had here, but between Calgary and Edmonton we had very good participation of women. I think Calgary beat us a little bit more this time because we weren't able to elect that many women here in Edmonton.

Q: What role has the women's committee had in strikes?

KK: I'm not sure what to say. In 1981 at that time I'm not sure if we had, we didn't have the same type of functioning women's committee in the local. We had almost an entire women on the executive was almost entirely women. There was a small executive, CUPW, the CUPW strike. So that was before the merger. Ya we didn't really have a functioning women's committee then as I recall. I think LCUC did, and we would sometimes go over and meet with them, some of us would go and meet with them, their women's committee. There was a connection between the two unions. In Edmonton we were close, that's why we didn't have the problems other locals did after the merger, because they had met prior to the merger and decided that whoever won, this was the

structure we were going to use and it was all very friendly. Not that, we fought desperately for the union that we were in favour of, but we knew that at the end we were gonna work together no matter how it worked. So the '81 strike, I don't remember there being any kind of role for women's committee. The most recent strike was the 2011 strike. I wasn't in the local at that time; I had been moved to the national union just before that, maybe a month or two just before the strike, and I worked the strike in the national office. So locally

BP: We did have a very good participation of women on the picket lines. I know that the depot where I used to work out of, there were majority women out on the picket lines. There were a few brothers but more women. Women, as we are care and nurture person, we always intend to bring food along, so that was again another attractive thing for women to just kind of make it like a party on the picket lines. We had coffee in the morning and somebody would go and buy donuts or somebody would bake cookies and bring those along. So strike was almost like we were going there to have a party too at the same time as trying to fight that issue of Canada Post locking us out. It started out as a rotating strike and then before it even went to the third day of rotating strike they locked us out. A lot of people still don't know, they still think we were on strike for those two weeks. But they actually locked us out. I think that women did actually quite well during the strike. They have louder voices sometimes than men, they can really yell loud. Sometimes men kind of feel like they shouldn't be yelling like that on the street when people are listening, but we don't hold anything back. We just take everything out and show it, show our power. That power only seems to make you feel like maybe soon you're going to win this fight. That's really the aim, to try and get the message across to the employer that we are out here trying to get our jobs and we wanna just work, we don't just wanna be locked out walking the street.

KK: But no, I don't think there was an official role. The women's committee didn't meet during the strike and make decisions about how we were gonna approach it or anything

like that. Everybody was actively engaged in being picket captains or participating in picket duty, that sort of stuff.

BP: The majority of the picket captains were women, and that was a good thing to see as well. Even in the union office we prepared strike cheques after people picketed, because we had to do all that. At that time we were not really that computerized yet so we had to do everything by hand and do all the adding and everybody's shift that they put in, they put in three hours every day or whatever. So we were all working extra time in the union office, and the majority were women. Some brothers came along, but they all came out. You'd think it would be the other way around, because women do have a lot of duties they do at home as well. I know if I have to go somewhere I have to plan ahead and I have to make sure that I have the food ready for my family so they can eat, otherwise where's mommy, where's mommy? They're not really adequate to do it themselves even though my children are mostly adults now. They still look out for mommy when they wanna eat.

Q: Could you describe the connections between the local women's committee and the national women's committee, and the provincial one if there is one.

KK: There's a structure within CUPW. The women's committee is a committee that's supposed to be in every single local – that's what the constitution says, where it can be formed. So if you have a local that's made up of 15 people you're not gonna have 10 committees, right? So in those locals where a women's committee can't be formed, it's the role of the executive to fulfill the mandate of the women's committee, so take care of the issues that are in the constitution as it provides for women's committees. Locally if you're a larger local they expect that you're gonna have a women's committee. There's no provincial structure for one. The region is the next level within CUPW and the region varies in size. The region that we're in, the western region or the prairie, used to be western, okay that's a flashback. But it's the prairie region, and the prairie is Manitoba



Saskatchewan Alberta,(NWT too!) so those three provinces are part of the prairie region. The pacific region, for example, would be all of BC and Yukon. So the person who would represent women from the region is elected at the national convention when the national convention is held, and that person only recently, but that person now at I think it was the convention before this last one, which I didn't attend cuz I'd retired, but the convention before they put in place budget money for the person who was the regional rep so that they could connect with the other locals and women's committees within those locals or connect with other women within locals. Some locals don't have a women's committee but a means to connect with those women in some fashion. How you did it was sort of up to the creativity of the individual, but it could also be something that was developed by the national women's committee. When they had their national women's committee meetings, which is also mandated under the national constitution, those representatives from the prairies or from the pacific or from any of the regions in the eight regions of the union would be at the table for those meetings along with every other woman who held a fulltime union position at the national office level or at the eight regional offices, any of those that were fulltime women in any of those positions, including union representative positions, not just the three exec but also the union representatives who were assigned in those offices. The number of union representatives depends on the number of how much work there is in that region. It's not by how many members there are in the region, some of it's by what they got through at convention in terms of their needs as far as union reps go. It might be the size of the region.

BP: That one is actually one of the resolutions that was put in our constitution that women's committees get the regional reps get the 10 days a year. It was 10 days, wasn't it?

KK: I think it was 10 days, ya.

BP: To go and connect with all the women that they are representing. What was happening was before there wasn't very much connection between the two women's committees. National women's committee would meet twice a year. That's not very much meetings, and they meet for the whole weekend. So they have meetings right through the weekend when they meet, and there's 30 women that are part of that. The women that are not represented, especially aboriginal women, are appointed because if there is no aboriginal woman elected as a member of that committee they always have somebody that the national executive board or the women's committee appoints. Worker of colour, they try and always have somebody worker of colour on that committee as well. When I was elected for the first time for the national women's committee, that was the main reason why they thought let's have a woman of colour in the committee as well, because at that time there wasn't any.

KK: And you didn't have any funding when you were there.

BP: No.

KK: There was no budget money at that time. There is now.

BP: Ya. So I actually sat on the national women's committee for the first three years I was as a first alternate and then the person that I was alternating for somehow had some family issues so she wasn't able to attend, so I attended for the three years then I was elected for the next three years. So six years I was able to be part of the national women's committee. Some of the programs that the national women's committee present are oriented towards workplace issues. One of the projects that our union has done is the Moving Mountains for children with disabilities and now they're extending it to adults with disabilities. That program is actually funded by Canada Post and the union operates it. The fund is operated by the union but it's funded by Canada Post.

KK: It's negotiated in the collective agreement.

BP: Negotiated in the collective agreement.

Q: What does the program do?

KK: Well I haven't looked at that for a long time. For example, they would pay for someone for respite if you have a child with a disability. They would send your child to a camp, perhaps pay for camps. You can get subsidized money each month that they'll send you that you need because of various things. We have a coordinator who looks at all of that and helps with all of that. It's very structured.

BP: Actually a brother just asked me about, not quite a year ago, about eight months ago, a brother who works with me in the depot. He asked me, because he has a child with a disability and he said, can you connect me to this program? I just gave him a brochure and then I just saw him about three weeks ago when I was back at that same depot. I asked him, did you get any results from it? He said, oh ya he says, thank you so much. He was really appreciative that he was able to connect with that program. So they must be giving him some help. He didn't go into detail as to what he got.

KK: Ya it's a 1-800 number that you call.

Q: What other programs does the national women's committee have, like training or ...?

KK: I don't know if it was when you were there Bena they developed that paper that was talking about harassment in the union.

BP: Yes, I was, from Caroline Lee.

KK: Yes. So harassment in the union, union brothers harassing union sisters, the kind of intimidation and bullying that was going on within the union towards women.

BP: There was also a study done by a prominent women's activist and she did a study on how women even when they are in the union movement how they have to fight to be in leadership roles, because there's always backlash and there's always times when brothers seem to not want to listen to the sisters and they want to try and play the dominant role. So that happens too, and that study was conducted by an outside source and it was presented to the national women's committee. They also had a paper that was written by another activist and this was on, what was it? If they women aren't there in the union, something like that.

KK: I don't remember the title of it but it stressed the importance of...

BP: If the women aren't there then something is missing, something like that. If there are no women in the union then something is missing. That was the main title of it. I was actually looking at it last night but I can't remember the title.

KK: The other thing was childcare, the childcare campaign. So they connected some of these activities to existing union functions. There was a regional, was it a regional conference we were at where we did the roundtables around childcare?

BP: Yes.

KK: Promoting the childcare campaign and trying to get people to work on that campaign.

BP: Get onboard with the CLC when they started that campaign. So we kind of connected with CLC on that one, so connection with labour movement always is there.

Q: Could you talk about the connection of the women's committee with other labour groups?

BP: With the CLC we attended a conference that was organized by CLC. That was in 2002 I think or somewhere around there.

KK: That was a good, that was a strong building block for the local.

BP: It was very good for us. Remember we didn't have money for the five women to go, and we wanted five women to go to this conference? We didn't have enough money in the budget because our budget was quite small at the time. But Karen came up with a really brilliant idea. We made soaps and we did all those little things, and we sold them and we raised money for the fifth person. We shared rooms and all five of us were able to go. It was a very good experience, it was a good conference.

KK: The workshops that we went there and participated in were excellent. The CLC had an excellent education program at the time. The people that were brilliantly doing all that stuff had focused in on women's issues and developed these amazing workshops. So we took the materials, we split ourselves up so we were covering different ones. We took the materials back and we used those in our Equinox, our women's conferences that we were doing. We modified them and presented similar sorts of things, like used some of the ideas to do our own workshops in our conference.

BP: The connection is really good and it's really good to know that women from all different unions getting together there and sharing their stories. It's amazing, even with the international women's day planning committee it's AUPE who does that. I have another retired member, and they're the planning committee and I am also a member of that committee and we meet with them. Our international women's day has really grown

in the last few years. We had one woman there who is a trade worker, and she was just thrilled to be part of the women's committee. She said that she has her brothers in her workplace even exciting her to go to this meeting. They all participated in international women's day march, the brothers from the trade workers. So that was really a good thing that happened at the last international women's day march that we did.

KK: I think the attendance at the CLC convention, the women's conference that we went to, was an important barrier for us. It was a breaking point for us in some ways, because we saw then the vast number of women out there that are involved in other organizations and have similar issues and that we should be connecting with. So we started to realize that we really need to be better connected with those groups here. So we had a potluck supper with women from another union; that was UFCW. We found out they had a women's committee so we had a potluck supper with them; we stayed connected with them. We were involved with LEAF and the person's day breakfast. So we built a person's day breakfast in as an annual budget item so that we would always have a table that would go there. Women who came to our committee meetings would say, what's the person's day breakfast? Then you'd get to explain to them what all that is about. They attend, and if they couldn't go someone else would go. It might be the first time they'd ever gone to something that was talking about feminists and talking about women's rights and equality and the charter and explaining all of that. We had Take Back the Night, we were involved with that. We were approached by someone or someone came to one of our meetings who was involved with the Take Back the Night. So for a while we were on their planning committee helping organize when they were going to do the event, and participating in it. Then the next year maybe we weren't there because it didn't take place or was at a different time or whatever.

BP: Those were women from the University of Alberta actually that were planning Take Back. They were organizing. I attended a couple of their meetings and it was very interesting to see their perspective coming from the university women. At the end of the

day we're all sort of fighting for the same thing. They're fighting to keep their sanity and there's always an issue of sexual assaults and stuff like that going on. Rape culture is there in the university. Actually Lize Gotell started that, what was that she started?

KK: From the university. But we invited her to our Equinox. So a lot of these connections were Equinox based, like our annual conference. We started doing the collections for the women's shelter every December, so that was sort of an offshoot as well. We got a list of items that were needed, most needed critically by the women's shelter, particularly around Christmas, because women would be leaving during Christmas with their kids and were on their own. So these were the items they were short of. So we had, with the cooperation of Canada Post, set up a large monotainer in the plant and people would come in and drop off. It was like a month there I think, and we advertised when it was gonna be. They would bring in things like soaps and toothpaste and towels.

BP: Canada Post actually allowed their trucks to

KK: They let us load them onto a Canada Post truck and drop them off at the shelter location, pickup location. So we did that for quite a few years. We had one woman in particular, Virginia was leading that at the plant and would make sure the signs were up and the monos were in place. She was a mail handler so she was driving the equipment, and would make sure everything was there. If it got full she'd put another one up, and so on. There were a lot of groups that we connected with that way through education, through the women's conference. They would sign up people to volunteer with things as well when they were there.

BP: We also did one with Alberta Federation of Labour when they had their women's committee. We did that in 2010 actually and we went to Jasper.

KK: Jasper Park Lodge.

BP: Jasper Park Lodge. We had our Equinox there and that was a real successful event as well.

KK: People from all over Alberta. But because we were doing it with, we'd been doing it for awhile, we started inviting people from the region, from our prairie region. We were inviting them to come. They could come to our Equinox if they wished as well, so we sort of broadened the perspective.

BP: It was our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary when we invited them.

KK: Is that when we did it?

BP: Ya.

KK: That was at the Strathcona Wilderness Centre.

BP: No, the

KK: The one in Jasper was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

BP: Yes, because we started in 1999, so 2009. We had 65 women who came to our Equinox, and we had that Equinox at Strathcona Wilderness Park.

KK: Strathcona Wilderness Centre ya, but the region was at that one before they were at the one in Jasper I think. Rhonda was at that one.



BP: The Jasper one was 2010, ya, and the region participated in 2009. We also when we have Equinox we also create something like a T-shirt. My T-shirt here is from the Equinox 2015 that I'm wearing. The year that we went to Jasper we had hoodies, and those hoodies were painted by one of our local members, Linda Nyznyk, who is artistic. She did a really nice design on the back; it was like a winter solstice kind of design, because the Equinox was in December or January, January.

KK: It was in January, ya. Every year we'd say, okay so what are we gonna have? We had bags one year, we had mugs that first year that had 2000 on them. We've had more than one hoodies that we did, T-shirts. So we'd have fun sort of brainstorming what the focus of the conference would be and what kind of message we wanted to convey.

Q: Could you talk about the connection with Alberta Federation of Labour and what happened there?

KK: We had someone from the local who sat on the women's committee for the AFL, because you could put your name forward. That's the way the system was structured. They had standing committees and the local unions would, if they were willing to pay for the wages for that person to participate, their expenses, could put a name forward and then they were appointed to the committee by the executive of AFL. But they were basically just endorsing the names that were put forward by the local union. So we always had someone on every committee and we had an alternate for every committee. So that was just the way our local functioned – we wanted to be actively involved in the AFL. The Calgary local, for example, didn't do that. I think they might've had two or three people that were on committees but they didn't have someone on every committee. So we always had a woman and an alternate to the women's committee for the AFL. The sister that attended would talk about what we were doing as a local and as a women's committee and she would bring back the information on what was going on that was

being reported there and come up with ideas about what they could do as well as the women's committee with the AFL. Did you sit on that too, Bena?

BP: Yes I did. I was also on the workers of colour committee, and they eliminated all those committees.

KK: I was on the education committee and I'd been on that for more than 20 years and then I moved to the environment committee and was on the environment committee. So again...

BP: Alberta Federation of Labour also they commemorate the December 6<sup>th</sup> event and they always have breakfast for that. Because they eliminated the women's committee, we boycotted their December 6<sup>th</sup> event in that year. We participated again last year but we boycotted it. I think Gil McGowan got a message also when Karen said that if it's a women's event it should be a woman speaker not a brother speaking. So Gil doesn't speak at women's functions now, he always makes sure that we have a woman speaker.

KK: That's nothing to do with me, I'm certain of that.

BP: Well I attended a few after and I've always seen Siobhan [Vipond] or any other woman making a speech, and they're wonderful, they're very powerful. I love listening to Siobhan, she's good.

KK: That is one way we connect though, we go to the December 6<sup>th</sup> event and it's part of our budgeted money from the women's committee that we would attend that. So the presence is always there for CUPW women's committee.

BP: With the EDLC we also connect with them. The majority of it is through the courses that they give in March. A lot of our women attend their courses at EDLC. That's another

union labour movement that we are connected with. We also participate in their barbeque that they do, the yearly Labour Day barbeque. Brenda actually, Brenda Lekochinsky, she also was a part of our women's committee. She's retired now and she hasn't been able to come and attend our meetings, but she was a very active member of the women's committee and she always goes and helps out at the Labour Day barbeque with all her family.

Q: How do the current economic conditions, both generally and at Canada Post, affect the women's committee and women?

BP: First of all I can say one thing, that they cut down our budget from \$14,000 to \$10,000 a year. So that's one cut we've already seen because they are going to have less employees. They've done restructuring at four depots and we lost 63 positions just in the four depots. Two of them are very small and the other two are medium size depots, and the cut is 63 positions. It's affecting mostly the younger workers. They are the ones that are vulnerable because they don't have enough seniority and they also put a freeze on making them permanent, so they're all working as casuals. The union has fought for them benefits and everything so they do have the majority of the benefits that we also enjoy, but they still are not considered permanent employees.

KK: Which means they're precarious. They violate the collective agreement. You're asked to do things which you shouldn't be asked to do, but you know that you're a term employee. So a lot of the assignments are based on good will. It's not a good situation.

BP: Another impact I can also see is having, like since Canada Post did postal transformation they created waves in the depots and they took away all the day shifts from the plant, so the majority of the workers are working odd shifts so they're unable to participate in women's committees or any other committees. So there is an impact there as well because the participation cannot happen as readily as it would have if they were

working good daytime shifts or even not having to worry about picking up their children before the daycare closes. Some of the women are running through their routes to try and make it in time so they can pick up their children. So it has impacted the women's committee in that way as well.

KK: At the time that I started in 1974 the oil boom was going on in Alberta and men did not want to work at Canada Post cuz they could make a lot more money in the oilfield. So there were a lot more women being hired at that time. So at this time with the downturn in the oil, I know Canada Post is constantly advertising that they're hiring. I don't know how that's gonna play out in terms of who's working at Canada Post. What is it gonna mean for women?

BP: Exactly. And we do have 40 percent in Canada Post are letter carriers in the depots now, 40 percent. So it's going to impact them if they start eliminating positions right front and centre. Actually Sherwood Park is going live community mailboxes next week and they're scrambling. They're scrambling cuz some of the CMB sites are not even ready yet; they haven't even poured the concrete blocks. So it's gonna be quite a thing. Today they were announcing that they can work on the weekend and delivery mail on Sunday to some of their routes, because they don't know what to expect on Monday. So it's a really iffy situation and people don't know what to expect.

Q: Are the current conditions putting some of the gains you have made at risk?

KK: I think that Bena's point about the local union reducing the size of the budget for the women's committee, cutting \$4,000 from the budget, is an indication that that means they expect that the women's committee is going to reduce their activities, it's going to change what they're doing. There won't be as much money for the local to do the things that it's been doing, so it'll have an impact. I don't think the women's committee has figured out

yet where that \$4,000 is going to be removed. If they just cut it off the top of the budget and said, you figure it out, then I guess the committee will have to do that.

BP: Also the worry of the job and the worry of all the economic conditions and everything, people don't really want to participate in other activities as readily as they would when times are better. So that could have an impact too in trying to get some of the members to start looking at coming to women's committees. So they do definitely have ?? So a lot of us who are actively running the women's committee are going to be retiring so that may have an impact. The committee may not even exist if the younger generation doesn't pick up, so that is another issue that we may face. I know that if I'm not pushing or Karen is not pushing, the women's committee almost dies. So you need somebody that keeps it going and you need somebody to pick up the phone and call people and do something – let's get together, let's organize some of this. It's definitely an impact.

Q: How many women are on the women's committee?

KK: The way the local bylaws are structured, and we wrote them, is that we have standing committees in the local and in a specific month of the year we elect that committee at a general membership meeting. We elect a specified number of core members, but the size of the committee is not limited in any way, but we can have that way an identifiable group who are the core members. I think the women's committee has six or eight core members.

BP: Eight.

KK: Eight core members. So the committee would have, for sure if you said who's the women's committee, well it's these people. But it's so much more, because we have others that are, you're not limited to just the core members. You can have as many as you want to be part.

BP: Members of the executive now are part of the women's committee, so they can show up at any meeting as well.

KK: And they don't count as core members. They're add-ons to that.

Q: How do the numbers compare to when you started?

BP: Well when you started the first woman was hired in 1973 as a letter carrier, I know that. I know that people in the plant probably were there prior to that, because Gail started in 1963 at the post office. She's still around, she's still working. She's 52 years of service.

KK: There's a lot of women, there were a lot of women working in the plant inside. The outside, it was sort of a revolutionary thing that there were women in letter carrier positions. It wasn't viewed as a woman's job, it was considered a man's job. My uncle was a letter carrier in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. He went right into the position when he came back from the war. So in Nova Scotia there were no women working as letter carriers; not just in Nova Scotia, in Quebec and the east you just didn't see it. So the parts of the country that were first seeing women delivering mail were here in the west, and it was because of the oilfield. Men were not gonna work for that wage in Canada Post when they could get so much more working in the oilfield. So they were sort of trying to find somebody who was willing to work at Canada Post and do that work, so women were getting the work. You hear stories from certainly before Bena's time but before at the time around that I started, women in those positions going to convention and what it was like there when the women came in from the western areas who were women that were coming to these LCUC conventions. You should do some interviews with those folks because it shouldn't be lost what they went through going to conventions as definitely unpopular members.

Q: Who were those women?

KK: Well Lynn Bue was one of them, she was one of the first and she experienced all of that, what it was like working on the work floor, definitely predominantly men, and the attitudes toward women. She's got some great stories about other brothers standing up for her and how things went down. But I know who you're thinking of and I can't think of her name.

BP: Shirley Cameron. She was the first letter carrier in Edmonton in 1973.

KK: We did a write-up about her in the Inside Out, our newsletter, at the time that she left, that she retired. She's here in Edmonton, she's still here I think.

BP: And the percentage on the executive is about I would say about 30 percent women.

KK: At the moment, ya.

BP: More women are starting to get attracted to come to the meetings. You see them on the floor. Michelle Rim I forgot, she's an executive as well. So there is seven. Kathleen Mpulubusi is also the route measurement officer. She's a verification officer. She does the planning and building of the letter carrier routes, so she's quite involved. She started off from the women's committee. She was introduced by me to the women's committee and then she just started coming and she loved it. We kept pushing her. We said, you know there's a position. Karen was actually telling her. Kathleen, let's put your name down for that. She agreed, and it just went that way. She hasn't stopped now and she's really doing good too. She was a little pushed and stressed in the beginning but she handled it really well. She also does fundraising for a school in Zambia, so she's very involved in her community where she was born and raised.

KK: The participation of women on the executive goes up and down. But what would happen on the women's committee as we would be talking about the local elections that are coming up, who's running for what positions, and we want to think about making sure that women are represented in these positions so that we have women who are on the executive in executive positions. I think Kathleen is the official liaison to the women's committee at this time.

BP: Yes she is.

KK: Cuz we name them in the executive when we go through who's going to be the liaison and so on.

BP: She's also a national representative. She got elected at the national convention.

KK: So she's on the national women's committee as well.

BP: Anita Sharma actually, she came to the national convention. She was one of the elected delegates. We pushed her to run for the position of alternate, and she did and she won. So she's an alternate and she's also going to start coming to the women's committee. So we kind of encouraged her that way just to get into the position of the alternate here now since you're at the national convention and then start coming to the women's committee. So she was quite excited about that. Total numbers of members in Edmonton are 2,300 members approximately. Maybe Monday we might have a little less. I don't know what they're going to do with the surplus employees. Canada Post has not said anything yet. They've promised these workers that they're not going to be laid off, so we're hoping that they will find them some work and they'll find some positions for them. But 63 positions are going to be cut by the middle of October in the four depots that are being restructured.



KK: Restructured so that there's delivery in the community mailbox, cuz that's taking place right away, ongoing.

Q: Don will have some questions in a minute, but is there anything else?

KK: About the numbers? Statistically I'm not sure what the makeup of women is across the country with the union, with postal workers. But it used to be between 25 and 30 percent, but I think it's a bit higher as well now. It may be closer to 40 percent, which is what you say was the percentage at the national convention. But I think statistically it's coming up pretty close to 40 percent now, perhaps more.

Q: But in general, are there any aspects of the women's committee or activism or work life that you'd like to mention?

KK: I think that for anyone that went through those conferences, the Equinox, who helped plan it, I think it was a big thing. It was a big accomplishment as a group. After we'd completed the first one and we saw that we could actually do this, we could come up with an idea, we could figure out how to carry it out, and then people would come to it and it would be a success. We knew how good that felt. It was fun to do. That really fed the next one. It made us look forward to doing it again and again and again cuz we just kept thinking, oh we can make it better, we can do this, have new ideas. It was just fun. It took on an energy of its own.

BP: When you are actually planning it though you really have to keep going. If you just lose the focus a little bit it doesn't happen. You keep saying, oh this must be the last one now, we're not going to do this anymore. We just did our 15<sup>th</sup> one, was it 15<sup>th</sup> or the 14<sup>th</sup>?

KK: Fourteenth I think, cuz there's one year we missed one.

BP: So we just did our 14<sup>th</sup> Equinox since we started the women's committee, so we've only missed one year. I think we've come a long ways building those blocks with the women of Edmonton CUPW local and other women who participate in our Equinox as well. We had some other women that participated as well in the Equinox that we had. One year, not last year but the year, not the one this year but the one that we did in 2014 or '13, '14 ya, that's the one we had at the Alfred Savage Centre. We made it a free event. We normally charge a nominal fee so that we have women's participation and we just give them a token, like a T-shirt or gift, for that money. It's not for taking their money anyway. But this time we actually refunded their money because we decided that some of the women had financial issues and they couldn't pay to come. The local had money in the budget, so we were able to refund their fees that they paid.

Q: Did the Equinox include the ??Choir?

KK: Yes. We invited Notre Dame des Banane to come out to the Strathcona Wilderness Centre and sing. That was one of the best events. You look back at some of the highlights, that was a huge highlight. If you've ever been out to the Strathcona Wilderness Centre, they have that huge ceiling that goes up and it's beautiful windows and it's open beamed.

BP: They came in 2009 I think. That was the year when we had 65 women there. Then they came, and they came with a big group as well. So the whole room was full of people. It was so nice. We were all eating the cake for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

KK: But the music soaring off those beams, it was just magnificent. It was so good. People were going, who are they, who are they? We haven't heard of them before. Then we all sat down and ate together, because we'd ordered enough food so that they would be part of the supper event. So then we sat down and talked with them and ate with them. It was really good.

BP: We had an Edmonton catering company that brought us our food. That was when we had the catering company brought us our food. We didn't have to cook it, they actually brought everything. That was the year we even paid for the plates. We didn't have to do the dishes, nothing.

KK: We talked about the environment too. It was so multifaceted. We got a company that didn't have disposables; we didn't want to use Styrofoam. We were introducing all this kind of stuff all the time too. It was a catering firm that just used linens and they used real cutlery and the dishes. We had a dishwasher there, but everything that they brought in they took it away and they just cleaned it.

BP: Normally when we do the Equinoxes we take turns as to who does kitchen duties, like cleanup after. There are so many women so we do have to clean up. One year we even cooked there. We had two of our CUPW members who came out and they came and cooked the meals three times. It was really nice. It was really sad to see though that the woman who did that passed away in her sleep.

KK: Not there, but afterwards, a couple months later.

Q: Don, do you have questions? . . . You both mentioned educational aspects. I'd like you each to comment on the role of education programs in the union and why they're important.

KK: In general, not as it relates to women? I think it's important that women are facilitating, first of all. Women have to be facilitating so that women feel comfortable that this is for them too. Women need to have that role; it's very important that women are in roles as facilitators. I think it's really important that the educational programs that are presented, it's an opportunity in some ways for our members for the first time to see things done in a way that embraces equality, embraces human rights, that uses consensus

where we're not forcing a vote because we know we have the majority, and that that damages the people that don't win the vote, and how we build a community that works together and moves together in a healthy way. We may not agree on everything but we figure out how to do it, we try and figure out how to do that. It doesn't always work. But this is the place where you can in a classroom do that, like open eyes to things that they haven't looked at from that point of view before, maybe not exposed to those thoughts, those ideas. It develops activists when you can get them into a classroom and get them thinking and doing exercises and realizing there's another way to do it, there's another way, that labour has a different way that they can do it.

BP: The programs that I would like to say something about is mainly focused on women, how to empower them, how to give them strength by presenting them self defense courses, which have been done, and those are all done by the union. The majority of them are organized by the women of the union and brothers also help and they support, that's why they happen. Also they have brother and sister usually co-facilitating every course that you go to. Even in our local whenever there's a course it's always a brother and a sister, so you see that there is equality right in the facilitation there. So they promote equality right from that angle and it just shows that the union is all about equality and good participation from both genders. Gender parity actually is one of the things that Karen always used to push and she used to always bring it up at even the meetings, and try and put resolutions through. Education wise, I think our union is really good at education programs. We have really good programs that are offered. They offer union education program, which I have taken. It's a four and a half week course. You go at a different time five times in those course, so you have to be committed to go to those times that are allocated for the course. They have 40 participants from all over Canada and they always have gender parity, they have language parity because of the French language. In Quebec we have members from the French nation as well, so we have both type, then they try and combine the two as much as they can whenever we are participating. So that program is actually more geared towards trying to learn as to how

the union functions. It's like a mini union program where they teach the participants, first they start with the labour history in the first week. First is the introductory week and then the second week is where they start labour history and go through the whole labour programs. Then the second week is where the human rights and women's issues and all that is touched, and the rights of the gays and lesbians and everything is also there. Then the third week they specifically focus on the post office and its society as to how it's connected with all the communities. In the fourth week we actually participate in debates and we have a mini convention, like a mock convention, and we prepare resolutions and we do news articles and we do speeches, start with a one minute speech then three minute speech, five minute speech. So you're all nervous and then you have talk in front of a whole crowd, but you know that you see all these friendly faces that you have been with for the whole four and a half weeks, so it's no fear there. So you're able to speak whatever you wanna speak, and it really builds your confidence that way. So I thought that was a really good program I attended, and that program actually is also funded from the money that we get from Canada Post. This was another program that was negotiated and it's union education fund they call it. They contribute 3 cents per employee, I think it's 3 cents.

KK: I'm not certain.

BP: Three cents an hour per employee is contributed. We also have another international solidarity fund which is also funded by the employer. We get international solidarity fund and we keep solidarity with the women and the men of other countries. The majority are postal workers, so we wanna connect and see what issues they're facing. A lot of women in Colombia have actually visited here and they are really, really strong union leaders there, the women. They share their stories and they tell us how difficult it is for them. They're afraid of their life because they're union activists. This is all done from the money that is actually provided by Canada Post as funding for education. I think the union is really using that fund really well.

KK: That's all organized by the national union, cuz they get the funds. I think that the events organized by LEAF are really important. Locally we have an active group with LEAF and they do the person's day breakfast. The person's day breakfast, that's sort of what appealed to us right from the beginning was the educational piece at the LEAF person's day breakfast every year where they talked about the different types of cases that were in front of the courts and how LEAF may have intervened and why, and women's rights under the charter. It just brings a whole new perspective for women who've never heard about these issues and don't understand that this is going on every day, that there's a challenge going on every day, a fight going on every day, to try and maintain our rights to I can say expand but to maintain our rights even. So they're under attack. That was clearly conveyed to us when Ritu last spoke to us at the Equinox. She gave an incredible report about the attacks on human rights that are going on within the courts and how the pendulum is swinging. It was very disturbing. But yes, the education that we get when we come together and learn about what's going on. Where do you see this reported in the newspaper? You just don't. What other sources do we have of what's going on? Where's the information coming from? There's such a filtering process going on at this point. The cover of the same event in the Journal, the Mike Duffy trial and what's going on right now with the senate, and you read the report. I get the Globe and I get the Journal, and read the two reports and it's like night and day about what's going on. The truth is not neither one of them, I'm sure it's somewhere out there. So it's very important to have good education. But I think it's very important to have feminists that are teaching in the classroom, that are facilitating the classroom. What I experienced, and I was facilitating, I mean after all those years on the education committee and I'd been trained by the CLC and with the union. You would be faced with many situations within a classroom, same as in a workplace, where there's harassment going on. There's comments being made that shouldn't be made, that need to be challenged, and they need to be challenged in the right way so that someone doesn't feel like they've been humiliated. But on the other hand, this is an educational moment where we have to figure out how to deal with, okay you might

be thinking this way but this is why we don't do that. You have to be able to stop what you're doing and deal with that issue as well. It's a background layer. You can't do education unless you're dealing with these sorts of issues, all these human rights issues within a classroom. It has to be that way. So I think women's committees can really be a good tool to bring women into the role of understanding facilitation and challenging those issues within a classroom and within their workplace. You can build those skills. You can be out there making a difference.

BP: Women's committee, when we do our Equinox program it's not just all about fun and eating. We do a lot of courses there. Those are really good courses and people learn, everybody learns from those courses. They loved your presentation. Women were commenting on that presentation. They learned how we were able to get our position in the House of Commons, in the charter.

KK: So Joanne, you spoke at our Equinox in 2014, no 2015 at the Bennet Centre, we were back at the Bennet Centre again. That was from a long time ago, but we were back at Bennet Centre and you came and did a presentation for LEAF on the role of LEAF and the work that you're doing.

BP: Jennifer was with you, Jennifer Tomaszewski. It was a very good presentation and we still get people commenting on it. So it's good to be connected with you. We are connected with so many different groups through being part of the women's committee, that it's unreal. Even yesterday actually I went to the Steven Harper rally at that business where he was attending, his selected people that were by invites only and they were checking their IDs before they go in. They all were coming in suits and we were all there. This fellow that I know, he's a letter carrier at our downtown depot and he said, Bena you know so many people. Because all these people come and he says, how do you know all these people? You connect with all these people because you're going everywhere, you're seeing. Merryn Edwards actually, she's from AUPE, she spoke. She spoke and she spoke

about women's issues, how Harper has attacked women's issues. People were really happy to hear that. Then Peggy Morton, she spoke as well and she spoke mainly on security as a risk and it's not Bill C51 that's needed, it's Steven Harper who's a security risk. So it was kind of nice.

Q: You mentioned that the national CUPW constitution provides for women's committees. Do you know when that came in?

KK: Well I wish I could remember that clearly. I don't really remember when it came in. I remember the debate at convention.

BP: Marion probably would, because she was part of that, wasn't she? Marion from Vancouver. They had a women's committee.

KK: Oh ya, Marion was part of it.

BP: They had a women's committee. I know that they talked about a national women's committee, that Vancouver local was the only local that had a women's committee, and they pushed the issue. I don't remember the year it came about, but I know Marion was behind it and she pushed it so hard that they ended up putting it in the constitution and it became part of the union that they wanted to have a women's committee. They just celebrated their 25 years, so it's 25 years ago. We had our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's committee at the national convention.

KK: There you go.

BP: So 25 years ago. See, I answered my own question. When you start talking it comes out.



KK: But I remember the debate, and it was nasty, it was really nasty. She talks about Marion Pollock because Marion is an incredibly gifted speaker.

BP: She's a very strong feminist as well.

KK: She is, but she wasn't alone in what she was doing. But she's the person that you remember from, she was so passionate about the work and the work they were doing in Vancouver with the women's committee. She wasn't the only one there.

BP: She was one of them, so there must have been other strong women like that who played a part in bringing the clause in the constitution that addresses national women's committee, local women's committees, regional women's committees as well. When Cindy McCallum Miller was in our region they even had a regional women's committee. She's also a very strong activist. Maybe she had played a part in it too.

KK: But I do remember the conventions, well some of the conventions we went around the clock. A lot of things could happen at 2 o'clock in the morning and 3 o'clock in the morning when you've been going since early.

BP: But this year's convention didn't take as long a time. It was pretty fast. It was our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary both together – 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the union and 25<sup>th</sup> for the women's committee. So it took 25 years before they came up with that clause in the constitution. That's a long time, but it's there, it's there now to stay.

Q: Is the women's committee still needed?

BP: Definitely, oh ya. We have to keep fighting to keep what we have. We just talked that everything we've gained is slowly getting eroded. So if we're not there, it's gonna be gone. Once it's gone, it's gone. You never get it back. We had to fight to get where we are,

so if we do not focus on having women's committee, all that work that we did is just going to be disappearing within a few years and we will never know what even existed before.

KK: I guess some of what you're asking goes to what's the role of a women's committee. Is it a role that we've achieved our goal now? I don't really see it that way. There were many goals in place at the time it came in. If you go back to the debate in convention 25 years ago I think you'll find some of them embedded in there. But I know that part of it had to do with harassment and the way that women were viewed by other people by the brothers in the union and other women in the union. Not all women felt there should be a women's committee. It took some pretty extreme examples of things that were taking place for people to realize that there was a need. The need was there because we needed to shift attitude in the way people think about women. Sometimes it's with women themselves that you need to shift the way that they think about themselves. But I know that for myself when we started the women's committee in '99, I was elected to the position in '98. When you're elected off the floor into a fulltime position it's a completely different world. You don't have the support. As a steward on the floor every day I'd see folks and I'd be doing things with them. You have a support group; it's like your community. When you're in a fulltime position it's totally different. You're working fulltime for the union, you don't see those people anymore. You're looking for some other way to sort of share your stories and figure out how to move forward and work as a group and the rest of it. It's sometimes not available to you as a woman and it's more difficult, it's much more difficult. Going into the work that I was doing, there were a lot more men in those fulltime positions certainly in all the unions in Edmonton area and Edmonton District Labour Council, in the AFL, everything. It was predominantly men that you were dealing with. So the women's committee for me was, we had an exhausting day of doing phone calls and endless things that you're trying to deal with with the employer and with members, and then the women's committee would take place that evening. I would stay, even if it was a 12 hour day, because I needed to be with the women in the women's

committee cuz we support each other. So it was like a battery recharge when you were with that group. It was a very positive thing.

BP: Just two weeks ago we all gathered up and we toured around the gardens of Edmonton, because Karen was so happy with us that she gave us all a pass to go and visit these gardens. We toured, eight of us, eight women from the women's committee, and we all went touring the beautiful yards. It was a real good activity to do. We spent the whole day Saturday doing that. That was from the Edmonton Horticulture Society where Karen works now, and she bought these passes for all of us and she gifted us with that for her gratitude for being part of the women's committee.

KK: Well their gifts to me have been innumerable over the years. But it would be the same for others, it wasn't just me. People would come from the workplace where they had been harassed by a supervisor, go here go there do that, the union is terrible, you're lucky you have a job, all that kind of nonsense. Then they'd come to the women's committee meeting and then we'd sit there and they'd tell us the story, and we would empathize with them and support them and say, oh that's terrible. We had a community that supported each other and that's why it carried on, is because there was a need for what we were doing. I can't see where that need has gone, I really can't. I can't see it disappearing. Every community has to have a way of sharing together, and that's how you grow.

BP: We share all that with a bottle of wine and some food.

KK: Sometimes.

BP: To make it better.

[ END ]