

Kevin Rebeck

Interviewer, Alvin Finkel; Camera Don Bouzek

KR: I'm the president for the Manitoba Federation of Labour.

Q: Why should the labour movement spend time and money on studying and promoting its history?

KR: There's that popular saying that if you don't learn from history, you're doomed to repeat it. We don't want to have to repeat what happened in 1919, but it feels like the world today is leading us in that sort of direction. More and more there's inequality and there's a growing wage gap between the wealthiest and the rest of us. Workers are looking for finding their voice. In 1919 workers drew a line in the sand and they invited others to stand with them to say that we want to stand up for fairness, for union recognition, for living wages. That call was answered, not just by unionized workers. The majority of nonunionized workers stood up and said, that's a rallying cry we can get behind. It was an amazing demonstration of solidarity. For six weeks people went without a paycheque to rely on each other, to work together, and to stand up against powers and authorities that were working against them. That's something we need to be proud of and remember - a chance to learn about our history, to talk about what happened back then, why did people come together, and how did that fight play out is something worth doing. We've taken the steps to find every way we can to share that story, whether it's through a graphic novel or a movie or a play or a conference or several books that are being published, a gala dinner, free community concerts. We're making it as accessible as possible for people to get a taste of what life was like back in 1919 and what that strike was all about, and hopefully that will spark their interest to learn more.

Q: It is a period that sparks a lot of interest across Manitoba and across the country.

KR: And the strike was across the country. People call it the Winnipeg General Strike, and that's certainly where it started. Actually, some might argue that it started the year before with some other strikes that went on at a conference about One Big Union and a move in that direction. But certainly once the Winnipeg General Strike started, there were sympathy strikes all across the country. Just like them, today there are other groups across the country and other labour organizations and supportive networks that are commemorating this anniversary with us, and we're working in partnership with them. A lot of what we're doing we're trying to put online to make it very accessible to people across Canada. A lot of the publications and the movie will be something that everyone can get. Thanks to a contribution from Canada's labour movement, every Grade 11 student in Canada will get a copy of the film, *Stand*, which we're quite excited about.

Q: Is that being done through the schools?

KR: Yes, through the schools. It'll be a digital download that they'll all get a copy of.

Q: Things have obviously changed in terms of the knowledge that people will be able to have about that strike.

KR: Sharon and Nolan Reilly put together an educational kit quite some time ago that has curriculum about the strike, and some artifacts. Those are out in schools now. They're not mandatory learning. So it's up to teachers whether they want to pull those kits out and make use of them. They include videos; they include all sorts of curriculum that they can use. I think this year in particular, it'll spark more discussion. I know there's a number of presentations to some of that teacher training days that they have, to talk about the strike. I'm very hopeful and excited that it will become something that's talked about in classrooms. I think it's necessary to speak about this in classrooms, and it's timely. Young people today don't know about that struggle. They take many of the employment standards and labour relations and health and safety rights they have today for granted. Those were hard fought rights

for us to get through strikes, through worker action. They weren't the bosses or government saying, oh we think this is a good thing to do; so we're going to do it for you. It was workers standing up and paying with their blood, sweat, and tears to get those rights for all of us.

Q: And people struggled to get the social programs, but now we're losing a lot of them.

KR: Conservative governments across the world are really launching attacks on social programs, really turning to a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, that we should just fend for ourselves, and that there is no benefit to collective and community strength. They're absolutely wrong, and that's against people's values as a whole. But their message box is pretty good. It sounds like a reasonable thing when they put it in little bite-size components, saying, well is it fair that I don't have kids and I pay school taxes? Well I don't want to live in a world where people aren't educated, and I'm happy to pay my fair share. That's what community living is about. That's why we come together, that's why we want governments, and we want rules and laws. It's about the collective and us working together.

Q: What can we learn from the Winnipeg General Strike about how to fight back now?

KR: The Winnipeg General Strike was an amazing demonstration of solidarity. Virtually, the city came to a complete halt. People understood that they had more in common with their fellow workers than with the boss or government who was saying that it was okay that wages had been frozen but the cost of living had gone up 67 percent. That's not right and that's not fair. Today, more and more young people are calling out for fairness. They're saying, we're worried about the environment; they're saying, we're worried about the economy; they're saying, we're worried about what the future means for us. There are lessons to be learned from that strike about how we stand together, how we can rise up and make a difference. Although the strike was a battle that we lost, we won a war on ideas. We brought forward and created the

formation of eventually the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which eventually morphed into the NDP today. We created another political option. We need to be involved in politics, whether that's voting at the ballot box, volunteering for a candidate whose values you share, or standing up yourself as a candidate. The importance of having those debates, putting forward different ideas and having a vibrant democracy is about playing an active role. Far too often, we're told we shouldn't talk about politics. The only people who benefit when we don't talk about politics are those who do.

Q: Union gains after World War Two had a lot to do with the general strike.

KR: Absolutely. Even in 1919 before that strike came to a complete end, they negotiated a royal commission to look into living and working conditions. That was a part of the deal of them calling the strike off. Certainly they called it off for people's safety, because the state had pulled in the army and the police and were using brute force and shooting citizens. So there was a safety measure, but even with that threat we didn't go without some ability to look at what's really being done here; what's the root cause of this? It's about unfairness and it's about us putting some equity back into our society.

Q: How do we fight against the tendency of the working class to lose focus on what has been won and to vote for those who want to take those gains away, and yet claim to be against elites?

KR: I think politics is a bit of a pendulum, and we hit different extremes at different times. People generally like it to be in that middle zone. I think the extreme right have done a good job of convincing people to sit out of politics. The amount of people who don't exercise their right to vote can determine every election that we have in this country. That's frightening. What really needs to happen is we need to change that. We need people to wake up and be aware that they have tremendous power and that they've been convinced not to exercise that power, that they've been convinced

that there is no difference between political parties. There are huge differences between political parties. Of course I belong to a political party and some people say, oh well you're just biased towards that. I encourage people to be involved, find out more. If no party completely aligns with your values, find the one which aligns most, and get involved. The amazing thing about our democracy is you can change it by playing a role and getting involved, and getting others who share those values involved as well. Far too many people sit on the sidelines when it comes to elections. Far too many people don't get involved and don't belong to a political party. I think that needs to change. I'm hopeful that the new generation of Canadians coming up, whether they're born here or coming from elsewhere. . . We need people to come from elsewhere, we need to grow our immigration policies, we need to engage our Indigenous citizens and get them involved in our workforce, in our communities, and politics. We need to create a society where we listen to each other and we're hearing all the diverse views, because I think far too many are silenced and they don't know how to find their voice. We need to help them find their voice and we need to help them play an active role in shaping what our future is. That's the only thing that's going to change our future is people getting involved and caring about it. We need to do everything we can to educate, engage, to be prepared to have differing views. If we motivate people who are against the values we stand for, that's okay. Let's motivate everyone. I'm convinced Canadian values are about us having some shared collective values. Healthcare, our healthcare system, is a shared Canadian value. While people may try to privatize it and take it away from us, there's nothing more Canadian than our healthcare system, and people care about that. There's a call for a Pharmacare plan. We're the only industrialized nation with a public healthcare system that doesn't include a public Pharmacare plan. That needs to happen and we have a chance this election to force governments to make sure that they're listening and doing what we're asking of them. We can cause change to happen, but it means waking up and being engaged and mobilized. That's our job.

Q: What can the labour movement do now to create that sense of a solidaristic society?

KR: The labour movement is involved in the fight for Pharmacare. The labour movement was the lead to create an expansion of our Canadian pension plan. The labour movement is involved in the fight for 15 when the reality is many of our members make more than minimum wage. Even as we make incremental steps, why is the labour movement having its voice there? Because labour needs to speak out for workers. Yes, we're going to fight to have good collective agreements and contracts, because that ratchets the bar up for others. We fight for legislative change. That means this is a law that applies to everyone. When we fight for healthcare reform and improvements, we don't say just for unionized workers, we say for all workers. That is why the Right fears unions, because they're not afraid to exercise their voice to say: we want to do better for everyone. That is why there's forces that try to make it harder to unionize, just like they did in 1919. The Pallister government in Manitoba has passed a law that says now even if there's a two thirds majority that want a union, we're going to take time to have a vote and to let the employer know that, oh employer, if you interfere, that's illegal. But the penalties are kind of worst case maybe you'll get the union is the penalty. Okay, so if I don't participate and people want one, I'll get a union. If I screw around with it or try to threaten people and they don't catch me, I don't get one. There's no disincentive for them not to game the system. That's wrong. People need to have the right to make those decisions themselves. When a clear majority want to have a voice in the workplace, when a clear majority want to have some equity and fairness, when a clear majority say that things are unfair in this workplace, then they need to be able to have that voice and that presence.

Q: How does the labour movement get it across to people who want to be in unions that there are things they can do?

KR: We organize as best we can and we try to tell stories and let people know what's going on. There's a Tim Horton's on Portage Avenue here in Winnipeg, largely new immigrant workforce. They called a staff meeting that unfortunately someone thought

to hit 'record' in their phone. The staff meeting had two items on the agenda. The first item was about how quickly we can keep customers moving through the line, and there's a timeclock and here's our expectations of you, and if we can beat last week's time there'll be a bonus. But then it sets a new bar and we've got to try and do it faster the week after. The second part of the meeting they said they heard there was a union organizing drive going on here. Then they listed the things that would happen if people wanted to have a union here, including taking away rights that they currently had, including eliminating the 5 percent benefit coverage they provided, including eliminating their breaks, including closing the store. They basically said, I have three other stores, I'll be fine, and if we have to board this one up, we will. Then they kept the person behind that they thought was doing the organizing, and fire them. All of this recorded. We took it to the Labour Board and we ended up winning and getting a union put in place there that we try to support and send as many unionized members as we can to frequent that business and thank them for organizing and having the fortitude to do so. But we need to tell those kinds of stories. When people say employers don't want unions in place, the vast public don't believe us. They say, oh that's not true; employers won't interfere. But they do every day. They play games to interfere with people's rights and to scare them and to tell them lies and to take illegal action to prevent unions being in place. That's not fair and that's not right. You're right, many people, whether they're in a union or not, if they're in a sector that has unions, they benefit from that. If we're in the aerospace sector and this company down the road is unionized and it gives them three weeks vacation when they start and has given them a wage increase, well, the one down the road that's not unionized says, oh well I can either keep pace with what those benefits are, or a union is going to come knocking on my door and I don't want to have to deal with them. So when unions are involved in society, it raises the bar for everyone. Whether you're in one or not, you reap those benefits.

Q: How does the labour movement get that message across to people?

KR: One of the most amazing things to me that the elites have managed to do is to convince people that if they can drag others down, that's fairness. It's much easier for people to expect, that if I can get others to get paid less and they're more in line with me, then that's equality. And it's not - the opposite is true. When the one percent keeps growing exponential wealth in our world and keeps doing better with their profits, there's something wrong with the system. Somehow they've convinced people the problem with the system is that we've got these workers who are doing better than us; so they should do worse. The first of that argument is right - there's workers that are doing better than others. The second part is, so we deserve better. We need to change that dialogue to say: why aren't we getting those kinds of benefits? why aren't we getting those kinds of wages? I'm not saying everyone should make the same wages; that's not what I'm advocating for. Certainly people who play out a much more critical job and are saving lives probably deserve a higher salary than people who are playing some other role that's not an essential service. But everyone who works fulltime should be able to make ends meet, and that's not true. We have poverty wages at the minimum wage level. Everyone deserves to have a pension plan; everyone deserves to have benefits. Our society can afford to do it if we change how wealth is distributed into a more fair system that still allows business to succeed. I want businesses to succeed. Then they create jobs. But this notion that if they succeed they will create jobs without government interference is bullshit. Government has to play a role putting criteria on that. If a corporation is going to get a tax break, then they better damn well show what they're doing to create wealth for others, not just for themselves. Our governments don't do that. The federal and Conservative governments at the federal level just give our public money away and say, well they're going to create jobs for us. And they don't. There's no criteria or no measure in place to ensure that that happens, and that needs to change. We deserve more and we deserve better. I think climate is an issue and the environment is an issue that opens the door for that. When we talk about a blue-green deal, when we talk about putting some criteria or some requirements on what we're doing to our planet, we can also talk about putting some criteria on employment, putting some

criteria on good, paying jobs that are covering things and making sure that there's careers that make people make ends meet.

Q: What did the union movement do in 1919 to mobilize even the nonunionized?

KR: I think one of the interesting and ironic things about 1919 and now is even though we have the technology and means to be in touch with each other on a constant basis today, we were more in touch with one another in 1919. We got our news by having large gatherings. Tens of thousands of people would gather at Victoria Park to hear what was going on or what's happening now. We would talk with each other and debate the value of that. The 1919 strike wasn't a perfectly cohesive group. There were many different views and many different political parties. They were having very live discussions on what to do about things. It wasn't a revolution, but there were revolutionaries within the 1919 strike. There was a very vibrant discussion about politics, about fairness, about what our wants and needs and dreams were. I think we've lost a lot of that; I don't think that happens as much. Even in social media, people kind of create a bubble of people who share their values. If you check your own social network, I would hazard a guess 80 percent of the people in your network share the same kind of values you do. It limits our access to what else is being said and why people think that way. Even worse, if you're on the extreme right, the chance of you having anyone from the Left in your network is very low. That creates a dangerous dynamic, and we're seeing the result of that. We're seeing the result of that with right-wing politicians being elected. We're seeing Donald Trump being the president of the United States and taking very racist and sexist and anti-immigrant stances on things. There's a shift happening. As frustrating as this time is right now, sometimes those shift happenings create this dialogue now. Why is this happening and what do we need to do to change it? I'm hopeful that it will help create the impetus on how do we make a system that's better. How do we create that vibrant dialogue again? How do we create a space where we can listen to diverse views and realize, oh that can work as well? We need to get there but there are some growing pains on the way.

Q: How can we recreate that kind of mass movement today?

KR: I think we're trying to do more. I think creating the space to hear from the different groups that are raising different key issues, and finding some common ground on what are the solutions to those issues, and where does that overlap. I think we're struggling. I think social movements and the labour movement is struggling, and far too often I think we're talking over each other. While one's advocating for this, the other is saying, well, this is my priority. We're not realizing that to achieve either of those things, this needs to happen. We need candidates with values and we need to be politically involved and we need to get the electorate engaged and we need to talk about issues. I think we're getting better at finding some of those common touch points and saying, okay, how do we achieve this goal here? And that can play to both our broader goals. But again, it's tough to get there. People get enthused about one particular topic or one particular issue and need to realize there's a bigger issue at stake here, and it's who has power. That's the real question. Who has power and gets to make the laws, gets to make the rules, gets to decide how wealth is distributed? If we can't mobilize in a way that's going to change that, if we can't mobilize in a way that's going to let people know that that is the path to something different than what we have now, then we're going to lose. Creating the space to have those discussions - the academic conference, the Building a Better World Conference we're at right now, talking about our history, talking about how they did it back then, and what that means in current terms now. It means listening, it means educating, and it means engaging. We need to do more.

Q: Building on our history is important. The rights we do have didn't fall from the sky.

KR: Absolutely. Young people today in particular don't realize where everything came from. Educating them about our history, whether it's the 1919 strike or other struggles that workers have fought for, that people just like them have said, I don't think the

world's right the way it is right now and we deserve better and can find a path to make that change real. I think we can work together to make that happen.

Q: Could you talk about the six-week period of the strike when the strike committee was actually running the city?

KR: When the 1919 strike took place, no one predicted the response that would be received. I have to imagine that a strike leader on May 15<sup>th</sup> or May 16<sup>th</sup> in 1919 thought, oh crap, what now? We put a call out for people to come and support us, and they did. Everyone is out. Well, we need to have central services operating. They recognized right away that even though the outcry of support reached all sectors and all workers, that they asked certain workers to stay on the job. The police - we know you're in support of us, but really we need a police force in place. Hospitals, we need you to operate. They declared milk and bread delivery was an essential service back then, which I know we smile at now, but they felt it was important to continue. They thought, how do we make this work and happen? People who were on strike were saying, hey, we're out. If they saw people performing their job or taking their place, they were angered and they were protesting. So they created a sign that said, permitted or authorized by the strike committee, and they put that on different essential services. They insured that things people required would still be there for them, but that the majority, 90 plus percent of the workforce, they asked to stay home, to do nothing, to check in. This isn't a violent protest, this is about us withdrawing our labour because we feel we're being treated unfairly. People did. They offered free bike learning lessons and they came together as a community in an amazing way. The Women's Labour League created the Labour Café, where they provided food for unemployed women and others who couldn't pay. Basically, the rule was if you could afford to pay, great, and if you can't, come in and we'll take care of you anyway. Neighbours relied on each other and neighbours cared for one another. People came together in mutual benefit societies. A lot of our cultural organizations looked after one another in a way we don't see today as much. Workers can and do know what's best for workers. We exercise and give our power to governments to do

the job that we're asking them to do. When they're failing to do that job, workers can still make sure that they look after one another and meet those values until we have a government that listens or until election time comes and we can elect a government that's going to listen to us. That's what they did as well. There were strike leaders who were in jail when the next election time rolled around. They did everything they could to get them out of jail - mount legal defences and raise funds for them, when they had very little funds themselves already. When they locked three of those leaders up anyway, they elected three of them into public office while they were behind bars. It was an amazing show of solidarity and showing that workers know what's in workers' interests. But we need to be able to talk about it and we need to be able to exercise our power. There was a speaker last night who said that the most powerful tool that we have is withdrawing our labour, and she's right. The will, the fortitude, the belief that by withdrawing our labour we can make a difference, is what's lacking right now. We need to engage people and educate them and know that those people who are making the billions of dollars, the one percent, don't get to do that unless we go in and do our job every day. They're reliant on us. I think they've done a good job of convincing us that we're reliant on them, and that's not reality.

Q: What legal barriers are in place now?

KR: In 1919, even though laws on how to join a union weren't what they are today, how you joined a union was basically you asked to be recognized, and if the employer said no, you went on strike until they listened to you and would meet with you and deal with you. One of the results of the 1919 General Strike over time was the industrialization or the codification of how you belong to a union. We created laws and structures around that. There are also laws and rules around how a strike is managed, and what's a legal strike versus an illegal strike. In 1919 there was a strike - people went out and they were against the law, because they saw the law as unjust. There have been changes now, and some of that has been good. When it works and when it helps get a resolve and it helps get employers and workers together to solve

something, it's helpful. There's times it doesn't. When an employer, especially if government is backing them or completely on the employer's side and adds their power there, there's a gross imbalance. There are laws now in place that say, well another group can't go out on strike in support of you. This can't happen; solidarity is illegal. That's a problem that we need to grapple with. We need to either find a way to change that balance of power or we need as a society to say, are there some laws that are completely unjust and unfair? Do we change them, or do we not follow them as a collective because they're unfair? Laws that limit things like that when all the power is on one side are unjust and unfair. But I think we're a ways from getting there. I think people need to understand that they hold tremendous power by going to work every day. They need to understand that their power can be pooled collectively. They need to understand that they can support one another and make things work. We've got a lot of work ahead of us before we can make a challenge of that magnitude.

Q: There have been strikes where others don't go out, but their workers show up to support the strikers on the picket line.

KR: There are strikes where other unions go on strike too, but often for a day or two. The irony with that is, even though it's illegal and we know it's illegal, the state is kind of paralyzed when it happens. They expect us to follow the law, and the reality is if they tried to lock everyone up who did that or if they tried to enforce the law, they don't have the capacity to do that and they also know the public wouldn't be in favour of that consequence. We've tested that, as a labour movement, at times. We flex and shrug it a bit, but we haven't outright challenged it en masse in a big way like we did back in 1919. But there have been testers, and it is a risk. It does mean the risk of getting arrested. Helen Armstrong was one of the most arrested people during the 1919 strike. She flouted the law regularly, and regularly they charged her and locked her up and then set her free, going, well we're not really going to fine you or lock you up on any long-term basis on this, but please stop doing that. Off she would go, and do the exact same thing and take a stand and do it again. So it can be

done but we need to understand that there are risks with that as well. It does mean that there may be some arrests that happen. It does mean that there may be an attempt to limit our ability to do that. There are consequences to those actions, and we need to know that is that something that we as a collective believe strongly enough and are going to support one another enough to take that risk and do that. There are times and places we do that. It's not the go-to and it shouldn't be; 1919 wasn't the first thought that let's do a general strike. There are a lot of things that led up to that strike saying, we're going to try to work within a system; we're going to try and make these rules work for us. But when we found out the rules were completely stacked against workers, and we could talk to the public and clearly articulate that and say why and what a better way was, workers said, you're right, this is unjust and wrong, and we deserve better, and we realize that we can take an action like the 1919 General Strike to make real change happen.

Q: Structural tests can determine the potential success of a strike.

KR: And those tests can really work both ways. Conservative governments continually get their turn in power and they freeze wages but don't roll them back. Or they roll them back one percent to see how the public and unions react. Or they privatize this service but not that one yet. They test, at what point do the public turn on us? At what point do enough workers get worked up that they're going to exercise their strengths? So those tests work both ways. We need to continually test our membership and educate and point out what's at risk. There's a price to being silent; there's a price to not acting in solidarity. The other side knows it too. There is constant testing going on and power being coalesced around people who have the extreme view of survival-of-the-fittest mentality, and people who have an extreme view of everyone's equal no matter what they do. People generally want somewhere in the middle. They want people who try really hard to do really well, but they want everyone to do well enough that they get by and have everything they need, and if they work extra hard they can have a bunch of the stuff they want as well. I think that's where society

would like to see us land, but the extremes keep pulling folks and winning their hearts and minds at different points in time on where on that pendulum do we stand today.

Q: Anything else you'd like to talk about?

KR: Maybe one other thing. In 1919 those in power made it pretty clear right away that the way to break the power of workers was to sow division between them. Some ways they did that was to call anyone not Britain born the enemy alien, that they weren't true Canadians. The irony that they ignored the Indigenous workforce and people entirely isn't lost on me today, but certainly seemed to be lost on them then. But they tried very hard to sow divisions between cultural lines to economic lines to wherever they could find some divide to say, well this group, you're okay, but it's those ones that are after what you've got, was something that was tried in 1919. Because people were having lots of conversations with one another and because they were relying on working together, by and large we didn't buy into it. But we see those exact same tactics today by governments, saying new immigrants are a problem. They're not. In fact, our economy and our society depend on new immigrants coming and being a vibrant part of our culture and heritage together.

Q: Without immigrants, we'd disappear.

KR: Exactly. But I think they're gaining some traction and I'm worried about that. I'm worried about the way that they try and point and create divisions. I'm worried about the homophobia and the racism and the sexism and the divides that government try to use or that those in power, whether they be government or other forces, try to use to show that we don't have things in common. What we have in common as a worker is that we live paycheque to paycheque and month to month to make ends meet, that we try to provide for our families and make sure that they have food and shelter and clothing and hopefully they have some extra that they can do some fun things and recreational things as well and play sports and do things in our society. What we have in common is so much greater than what we have in differences. Our differences are

often things that we can celebrate and learn from one another. I think in 1919 they did more of that, and we need to do more of that today. We need to not let the politics of division create divides on those bases. We need to learn from one another and create a more reflective and a more inclusive society that hears the voices of our Indigenous people who are grossly screwed over by governments in the past and by business. New immigrants, we need to find ways to welcome them and make sure that they're part of our workforce and part of our community and part of everything. Women need to be better represented at boardrooms and in senior levels and decent-paying jobs. Pay equity should be something people study and go, really? There's this gender gap that occurred merely because someone was a man and someone was a woman? That's ludicrous. But we're not there yet. We have many more fights to be had to make that difference, and largely that means by listening, by building understanding, and helping others find their voice to speak up.

[ END ]