

Jim Sinclair Transcript

Interviewer: Okay, so tell us who you are and how you first heard about free trade and how you became involved, working on issues fighting against free trade.

Sinclair: My name is Jim Sinclair. So, I think we had a very interesting insight. Before there was free trade, there was something called GATT, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. That was sort of an international treaty on what the rules were for the flow of goods between nations. So, in the fishing industry, from the turn of the century, the government and the corporations that were involved, as well as the people, realized that the source of capital investment was a supply of fish. If you didn't have a supply of fish, then you couldn't make the capital investment to build a cannery.

Even as early as a turn of the century, the 1900s, 1905 or whenever it was, the companies realized that one of their vulnerabilities was that the fish could go south of the border. So, it wasn't very far to go south of the border and when 30% of your fish run every year, in the salmon industry, it comes right down and goes into the states and comes back out some years, depending on the water temperatures. They realized and recognized early on that there was a vulnerability for the flow of fish out of the country to cheaper places.

So, they really focused on sort of the bread and butter of the canning industry and the big companies and that was fishing pink and sockeye salmon. That was the backbone of the salmon industry, volume wise, and it was also the canning fish. Without canning, we never could have sold our fish. This was long before we had the kind of quick freezes we had and all that stuff we have now. Anyway, they had passed a series of laws over a long period of time, which basically said you couldn't export that, or you couldn't export here either. Herring was not in the food fishery for the longest time but then the Japanese developed a taste for herring row. So, in that industry the price went way up for that. Herring was also restricted from export unprocessed.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: We precipitated this crisis with GATT—

Interviewer: — “we” meaning the fishermen’s union”?

Sinclair: No, sorry. By “we” I mean Canadians.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: So, during a herring season, when the price of herring was through the roof, there was a small herring fishery in Alaska. The Prince Rupert Fishermen’s Coop went up and they bought herring and brought it back to Canada. Of course, this opened the door for the Americans to say, wait a minute, if you're going to come and buy our fish then you can't protect your fish. We immediately understood what that meant, which was that we were now vulnerable for the export of this fish. All the companies, most of the companies, and then Union, spent a good two years leading up to the free trade agreement. As this ruling had come down from GATT and it was ultimately against us. I don't know what year that was. I think that was probably at 1987.

Anyway, we saw free trade as just starting in the middle of that process. What we thought was that they were going to do to the country what was about to happen to us. So, we planned and launched a major campaign against the Free Trade Agreement in the fishing industry. We spoke about it. We held public meetings, wrote articles, lobbied Ottawa politicians and built opposition. We developed a whole campaign, called “our fish, our jobs, our country.”

Interviewer: So now the “we” is the union?

Sinclair: Yes, the “we” is the union. So, we developed a fairly major campaign, the labour movement came out against free trade.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: There was also support initially from some of the fishing companies themselves who sounded the alarm that free trade was bad for our industry. Company presidents wrote articles about, why would we support free trade? Yeah, because it destabilizes our economy and destabilizes what we do and forces us to compete with uncompetitive situations. So, that campaign went on for about a year and a half. During that time, the fishing industry became one of the examples that they used for how this could destroy your industry.

Of course, I understood that this was really about the country. I think a lot of us at that point, particularly on the left, people began to understand that free trade was really nothing to do with trade, and everything to do with democracy, and the ability of you to shape your country for your needs. That was the hidden language and all that was really about taking away the democratic rights of governments to make decisions. You couldn't hold them through the Free Trade Agreement. There was clearly clause after clause that restricted nation states from acting to protect your industries and to control the export of your natural resources. That was the key to the whole thing. But it had to go both ways; it wasn't good enough to get unfettered access to our resources. If you took the raw resources to another country and processed them with cheap labour and low environmental standards there was still a problem. Countries could protect their markets by applying tariffs on the finished products. Prior to free trade tariffs were still possible.

So, basically, they had to have the access both ways across the border – unfettered export of raw resources and unrestricted access to markets, and the trade agreement was really the starting point for ensuring that would happen. So, for a lot of us, it really was about an already complicated relationship with the economy.

The United States already in a branch plant economy in many respects. The left spent years hating branch plant economies, including me, but then we realized that they didn't even want a branch plant economy anymore. The only reason that we had an auto industry in Canada, for instance— this is an excellent point—we negotiated a deal, that if you sold a million dollars of cars, Canada had to manufacture a million dollars worth of cars in Canada. So, it wasn't even car for car. For every car you sold here that wasn't made in Canada, you had to build one here, it was just dollars. That's why much of our industry was making big cars, because they add more value so they could bring in more U.S. cars. This is part of the Auto Pact.

Democratic concerns in Trade Agreements

Many of us knew that the Auto Pact was an example of how flawed it could be because it basically made it impossible to develop a national auto industry, which most developed countries had. It stopped us from doing that. We had concerns with it. But still, it actually required certain behaviour, certain capital investment. So, what we saw was that free trade was the opposite. Free trade was about ripping the guts out of your democracy taking away people's power to protect themselves and institutionalizing a declining labor force. There were three or four different levels for the trade agreement, starting with a democratic question. Moving right down to how you maintain labour standards in a situation where you're now in open competition, where people live in other situations, right, with no way to protect yourself. That campaign went on.

I remember one of the great stories of that campaign during the free trade election the UFAWU [United Fisherman & Allied Worker's Union] was building a fishing boat for a co-op Nicaragua. Ironically, one of the U.S. free trade negotiators was also one of the people supporting and organizing the contras to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. It kind of came full circle for me to realize the ideology of the United States, their idea of dominating things. It really went much deeper than simply a trade deal. They were opposed to anybody who wanted to build a different kind of world. When I was in Nicaragua, it really came home to me that the threat isn't from Nicaragua to the United States. They aren't a bunch of people who were going to jump in cars with submachine guns and drive to Florida and kill people. The threat was that they were creating another, better world. They were creating a world based on principles and about common ownership, about taking care of each other. All the good things that democracy might deliver.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: I mean, here there was a guerrilla warfare and that was successful, but then they proceeded to make a democratic system. That was the real threat. The United States has always been

Sinclair views free trade as a threat to democratic governance, limiting the ability of nations to protect resources, industries, and labour standards. *"All that was really about taking away the democratic rights of governments to make decisions. You couldn't hold them through the Free Trade Agreement. There was clearly clause after clause that restricted nation states from acting to protect your industries and to control the export of your natural resources."*

"Free trade was about ripping the guts out of your democracy, taking away people's power to protect themselves, and institutionalizing a declining labour force."

The agreement allowed companies to take raw materials to places with cheap labour and lower standards, then sell the finished products back. *"Prior to free trade, tariffs were still possible. So, countries could protect their markets by applying tariffs on the finished products" "...they had to have the access both ways across the border – unfettered export of raw resources and unrestricted access to markets, and the trade agreement was really the starting point for ensuring that would happen".*

threatened by democracy. Democracy means people make the wrong decision, in their mind. The more democracy you have, the more problems you have controlling government, the country and protecting your investments.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, at the time, do you have a name for the ideology that you were starting to identify? Neoliberal, neoliberalism—

Sinclair: I always get confused with the neoliberal agenda. Okay. Like, what was a neoliberal? I mean, South Americans call it neoliberalism. That's where I first read it. So yeah, they call it neoliberalism. They of course defined US as neoliberal, but I never did. Liberals in United States are actually considered a left winger in the popular culture, so I never called it neoliberal.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay.

Sinclair: That was just not a word I would ever use because it just didn't make sense in this context to call it neoliberal.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay.

Sinclair: Because liberalism in this country which meant a struggle between the center and the left.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's it.

Sinclair: So, I never called it that. I mean, I wasn't dogmatic. It wasn't imperialism. I didn't call it imperialism. I didn't have that kind of framework—colonialism—Was I using all of those words? No. At that point, for me, it was a nationalist issue about democracy and the right to control your own country. The United States was always imperialist. No question about it.

I first started thinking about these years before because I saw what happened in Chile. I was really affected by that. When [Salvadore] Allende was overthrown, because for people like me, I was young, 19 years old. I still love Che Guevara. But here was this incredible situation where this Marxist government got elected. No bloodshed. Then they proceeded to nationalize the copper mines, redistribute wealth, create popular power, etc. Also, to create a new social infrastructure. It was destabilized by the Americans completely with the military and with the elite in Chile. And they overthrew Allende and killed him. And kill about 20,000 other people.

So, I always understood that about the United States. They were murderers, right. On the day after the Chilean coup, I went down with a sign by myself and walked over from the embassy, saying that Nixon killed another democracy.

That's kind of an example of how I always believed that democracy, with all of its flaws, still is one of the best ways for workers to exert ourselves. It's one of the few tools we actually have. We don't have money in the same way that the rich have money. We don't have militaries or police forces. So, how do we express ourselves? How do we get enough power to influence the history? One clear way is influencing and controlling the state through elections and popular actions. I think ultimately Salvador Allende was vindicated by democratic movements that won elections across Latin America. What free trade was about was a non-violent coup that stripped power from people and governments.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: So yeah, I saw that personally in my own the industry. Right. There were some wonderful stories with it. I saw it as a big picture. I've been in the fishing industry, been involved in the Action Canada Network for a while. Some people I knew from before the fight around Chile and other popular struggles.

Interviewer: So, it was the Pro-Canada Network back in the 80s?

Sinclair: It was the Action Canada Network back in the 80s.

Interviewer: Did you do that through your union or just kind of as an individual?

Sinclair: You know, I'm sure it was the union rep, but there was also a chapter here.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: I was one of the leaders of that chapter. So, the Action Canada Network was created to bring that a coalition of people together to fight free trade at a national level. It was an organization that coordinated a lot of the work. We also had a group here. So, our job was that we went around, and we produced leaflets. We held demonstrations. We did all kinds of stuff. We really tried to popularize the issue and to have a strategy across the country for how we could do it.

So, that group was relatively effective. There was also Maude Barlow's group, Council of Canadians, and Mel Hurtig. You know, there were also Marjorie Cohen. That's when I met Marjorie, who's still one of my close friends. So, we reunited kind of that left group to really try to lead this fight with the labour movement when we could. I mean, the Aislin cartoon book [What's the Big Deal?] was through the creation of Action Canada Network and the labour movement.

In terms of the labour movement being the bankroll for it in the end but having the vision to see the importance of that kind of mass work. It became a much bigger issue during the election period. There was a huge amount of effort that went into the fight during the election. People from all walks of life. I mean, again, there were industries, like the dairy industry, as well as other industries that understood this wasn't good for them. Al Brown when we were building the boat to send in Nicaragua, right. That was one of the things we decided we would do.

Interviewer: As the Action, Pro-Canada?

Sinclair: It was, again, it was all part of— oh wait that wasn't part of the Action Canada Network, that was part of Tools for Peace...

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: ...which was a group we created early on after the insurrection in Nicaragua, to organize and send quality materials to support them. So, we went down there a couple times, a couple of fishermen went down there and looked around and said, "These people need boats." We came

The Coalition against Free Trade: mobilizing a national movement

The Action Canada Network united diverse groups, supported by the labour movement, to oppose free trade through education, demonstrations, and election-focused efforts. "The Action Canada Network was created to bring a coalition of people together to fight free trade at a national level."

back and started building a boat for Nicaragua, which took forever but that's a whole other story. I remember— this is classy, about how people are affected. So, Al Brown was the guy building the boat. He was an amazing human being. So, he went down there and looked around and said, “Well, we need to build these people boat.” Then he came back, I was at the Union and I said, “Okay, we will build a boat. That makes sense. I don't know bugger all about it, but we will build a boat.” I do know that free trade to him was terrible. These are guys that use their hands to work. So, one of the ways they express themselves during this whole election campaign, was that they built a coffin about 15 feet long and about six feet wide. Anyways, it was a huge black coffin with the death of Canada on one side and a Canadian flag. They strapped it on their old pickup truck, and they drove it around the city for two weeks. Vancouver, right, just to say, “This is what it is.” This was how they expressed themselves. There was a lot of that across the country, just ordinary people trying to have their say and infuse themselves into the debate about the election. So that period was very intense because it was the election issue. It became the vote-determining issue. Now the complication for the left was, or for the anti- free traders, for many of us our natural party was the NDP.

Creative protests to express opposition to Free Trade

Labour unions and grassroots groups used creative and symbolic acts to voice their opposition during the election campaign, such as constructing a coffin labeled “The Death of Canada” to highlight the perceived dangers of free trade and driving it around Vancouver. *“They built a coffin about 15 feet long and about six feet wide...it was a huge black coffin with the death of Canada on one side and a Canadian flag. They strapped it on their old pickup truck, and they drove it around the city for two weeks”*

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: So, I remember being in a meeting before the election with one of our local NDP organizers for BC. I was saying, I remember a meeting with the NDP, and I asked, “What’s our position going to be on free trade?” He said, “well, we've decided that we want people who are against free trade and people who are for free trade to vote for us.” This would become more controversial as the election developed.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: Oh, my God. Yeah, this is nuts. I mean, you're not going to have a position on the most critical issue of the election. If you're going to have a position, it's not going to be your central position or your central campaign. So unfortunately, the issue was whether you voted for or against free trade which divided down between Turner and Mulroney. It was very clear during that election and at the end of election, the majority of people voted against free trade, but there is always this dichotomy in Canada.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: So, people voted against free trade. During that election, I ended up going back East. At that point, the story came out about the Fleck manufacturing plant. I had it somewhere...

Interviewer: Fleck as in—

Sinclair: Fleck as in F-L-E-C-K.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: His plant was a small auto parts plant in Eastern Ontario, and near London. They had organized the plant about eight years earlier and had a brutal strike to get recognition. So, about two weeks before the election I had gone back east for a week. That story came up and I got obsessed by it. I do get obsessed with things. I got obsessed and the company brought in trucks in the middle of the night, loaded equipment and trucked it to Mexico where they set up a new plant with wages of \$3 per day. Back home they fired all the employees. Fleck would later say the workers moved the jobs to Mexico not him. For me it was a real-life story, not speculation. So I went, “this is it”. We all had been talking about this as a big threat but here it was happening in real life and real time.

Interviewer: Yes.

Sinclair: So, my first instinct was, “here's the picture. Here's the agreement. Here's the picture that goes with the paper.” This is the real story. We're not making it up; it's not an idle threat. Then when I started to investigate the guy, he had a long history and very close ties to the Americans. Harvard, Roundtable on Business, very much involved in the whole business right in the United States. Also, he was an advisor to Davis in the Conservative government, on their economic panel. Was very influential in the government as well. Federally tied to the Conservatives.

Interviewer: Can you specify which Davis?

Sinclair: Oh sorry, Bill Davis the Premier of Ontario.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: Davis was a progressive conservative Premier. In journalistic terms Fleck answered all the basic questions. Who, why, and how. There it was. Who, why and how presented in black and white. So of course, I don't have real access to get this story out. So, we sent it out through the network to try to raise

The NDP's ambivalence on Free Trade and the Fleck Plant's role in the debate

The NDP adopted an ambiguous stance on free trade, aiming to attract voters both for and against the agreement. This approach hindered their ability to fully engage in the debate on the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. *“We want people who are in favour of free trade and people who are opposed to it both to vote for us.”*

The closure of the Fleck plant in Ontario served as a powerful symbol of the potential harm from free trade policies, as jobs were outsourced to Mexico under exploitative conditions. *“the company brought in trucks in the middle of the night, loaded equipment and trucked it to Mexico where they set up a new plant with wages of \$3 per day.”*

However, the party failed to capitalize on this event, reflecting broader indecision that limited its impact during the election. *“When I found this out [Fleck plant situation] ... I phoned up a person I knew in Ed Broadbent's office and said: ‘Here it is, here's the story, and here's why.’ He told me, ‘This is a great story, Jim.’ We talked a bit about it and I kind of said, ‘Well, will you do it, will you do it?’ He said, ‘Well, you might want to phone John Turner's office.’”*

the issue. The union knew about it because we gave them the information. It was about four days before the debate. So, I phoned up a person I knew in Ed Broadbent's office and said, "Here it is. Put it to Mulroney. This happened, this happened, and this happened." Brian Mulroney on free trade. Why was that guy just a little ahead of the game for free trade? Why aren't there going to be thousands of other plants that are going to do exactly the same thing? If the labour rates in Mexico are \$3 an hour.

So, when I found this out, I phoned his office up and I said, "here it is, here's the story, and here's why. This is a good one and this is real." He told me, "This is a great story, Jim." We talked a bit about it and I kind of said, "Well, will you do it, will you do it?" He said, "Well, you might want to phone John Turner's office." I thought, "Oh, my God."

Interviewer: Did you ask why?

Sinclair: I didn't have to ask why. I knew exactly why. Because Ed Broadbent wasn't going to go out there and make a big stink about this. At that point, I mean, Bob White and others were very critical of the party after the debate. I think if you wanted to research it—I think he probably got dragged down to that plant to say something because you just couldn't avoid it. It just expressed that basically, the NDP wasn't really part of the debate in a big way and didn't want to use that argument.

Interviewer: Why do you think it was that case?

Sinclair: Because it was just a political—well, they lost sight of the soul of the country where working people were at. They lost sight of what was the driving issues. They thought strategically, it's always the third party looking for the strategy to distinguish themselves from the other two. So, their thinking was that they could get both votes from both sides if they didn't have a strong position. It goes right back to that guy saying to me, "We want people who are in favor of free trade and people are opposed to it both to vote for us." Yeah. Right. Yeah. No, I still think lots of people were in favor of free trade would have voted for the NDP, anyways, because it was the only party that represented them. If they had been opposed to it, however, they missed that. So ultimately, despite all our best efforts, and the majority of Canadians saying, "No," we ended up with the 1988 Free Trade Agreement.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, during your involvement in this election, I guess earlier in the 80s, who do you see as the kind of common enemy? Was it Mulroney? Was it the Americans? Who were you kind of focusing on in your work?

Sinclair: Well, I've always thought it was a class issue. The elite spend their lives looking for the cheapest labour possible. They can produce more and make more profits in cheap labour areas. Things stick in your mind at this point, right? My dad used to say to me that there was a Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company plant where he started working at an early age and then realized he didn't [want] to be a factory worker. So, he went off to be an office worker. But he would say the tire plant in Etobicoke existed because there was a tariff. Basically, they built it here to get around the tariffs. He told me in Akron, Ohio there was a big plant. He said, if they kept the line turned on for another hour a day, and they wouldn't have to have this plant. So, the thing that most people got was the logic of this thing made no sense. But if you're not producing anything, what good is the access to the United States for?

They didn't want access for our finished cars or our finished washing machines, or canned fish. They wanted access for the raw products. So, that's really why people understood there was nothing in it for us. Clearly nothing in it. So, who was driving that? Well, a lot of people ideologically believed in this. People fundamentally believed that the free market should rule the world. So again, in order to do that, you have to eliminate borders. You have to eliminate the things that can control capital and control the flow of goods. People can use that to protect themselves. There's always a contradiction. I mean, borders also had their negatives.

Nationalism wasn't always a great thing. It was used for all the wrong reasons. So, I always felt uncomfortable. I started thinking about the rest of the world when I was a teenager. I knew as much about Chile, as I knew about Vancouver. We were living in Toronto. Because that was important to me. Borders in those cases didn't make any sense to me since we have so much more in common. Working people are so much more common. You can see that was the basis of the book I did later. It's basically me saying, "Wait a minute, this isn't about us having a nationalistic fight. It's about people in all three countries, having the ability to control their destinies."

That there wasn't a deal for anybody. If we thought that Mexicans would partake in the deal again because our production was going to Mexico. They wouldn't because they make \$3 a day. That's not a deal. The economic model they were building in the political context, they're in had no chance. They were not going to turn into the consumers of the products they built. So, I realized that was the underpinning of this whole thing. Government in this case, Mulroney government, absolutely I could just see him selling us up to the Americans. I think American working-class people thought they might benefit from this. It wasn't an issue for them, didn't become an issue to them until Mexico got into the play. Suddenly, they could see their jobs going down south because historically we've been higher paid than the Americans in most of our industries.

Free Trade as a threat to workers and democratic sovereignty

Sinclair's perspective is that free trade policies primarily benefit economic elites at the expense of workers' rights and undermine the democratic control of nations over their economies. *"Well, I've always thought it was a class issue. The elite spend their lives looking for the cheapest labour possible. They can produce more and make more profits in cheap labour areas."*

Sinclair underscores the imbalance of free trade, which benefits corporations at the expense of domestic manufacturing and economic sovereignty. *"If you're not producing anything, what good is the access to the United States for? They didn't want access for our finished cars or our finished washing machines, or canned fish. They wanted access for the raw products."*

Sinclair emphasizes how free trade agreements perpetuate global inequality by exploiting low-wage workers in poorer countries. *"There wasn't a deal for anybody. If we thought that Mexicans would partake in the deal again because our production was going to Mexico. They wouldn't because they make \$3 a day. That's not a deal."*

Interviewer: So, for you, it was more of a question of democratic sovereignty for Canada rather than a nationalistic issue?

Sinclair: Yeah. I mean, it was nationalistic. I was the kid at 19 years old with a flag on his backpack and hitchhiked across the country to discover what my country was. It was a nationalistic fight in a sense, but it wasn't nationalism as its bad connotation, because it's been used so poorly. You can be a nationalist and end up with a fascist government. The point is that you have to—my nationalism was based on people having power. The institutions I believed in, the ones I was married to like the trade union movement, those things don't function— even in nationalistic countries—they don't function if the states are run by fascists, if it's run by anti-democratic people.

Interviewer: Yes.

Sinclair: Because the last thing they want is democracy for the working class. So, I didn't see it as that, I really saw it as a struggle for working people. I remember one of the great demonstrations we had when Mulroney was in town. We got all these fishing boats together and put these big signs on them, got all these horns and went down to Canada Place to parade all our boats around. I mean, that's the kind of stuff we did to get publicity. So, lots of fishermen came out with their boats and sailed around the trade and convention centre. It was a great demonstration. Also, a very public one in the course of national media falling along.

Oh, I had forgotten about this. So, in the middle of the election, Broadbent wants to go to a fish plant. It's all coming back to me; I haven't thought about this in awhile. He was going to be in Victoria, so we arranged to take him into the BC Packer plant. Right, the fish plant. And so, we say, "this is good chance for you to talk about free trade," Right? Here's your chance. Anyways, he shows up and we get all the workers ready; they all have signs and it's all good. We've got organized a company to let us bring him in. He's got the whole tour of the plant, right? He goes through the whole tour of the plant and then he goes to hold his press conference. He doesn't talk about tariffs, but about stumpage rates and forestry in the Northwest Territories. It was like I was in a [Federico] Fellini movie on surrealism, right? I just said, "You're standing with a bunch of fish plant workers in a fish plant. You're supposed to say you're going to protect their jobs." This is their issue.

Interviewer: Yes.

Sinclair: This is what they've been told by all of us, including the union. That their jobs are going to be threatened by this. He shows up and I don't know if that was about free trade or just the way they played the national media for the new cycles. That's what it was blamed on later. I think somebody finally yelled out, "what about our jobs?" He said, "Well yeah, your jobs are important too. Know that I'm here to tell you that I believe in your jobs, and I do this— blah blah." So, the ending of this story is that I walked into the lunchroom afterwards and there was a whole bunch of women sitting around. They're all laughing, Okay? Just having a great laugh. I go, "what's the joke?" and this woman sitting there, all others allocate to that one woman. She says, "Okay, I'll tell you." So, I'm standing there, we were off the job. So, I decided to have a cigarette. Then this guy walks by me and he brushes up against me and the red end of the cigarette falls into his pocket. I look over and I realized I dropped my red ember in Broadbent's pocket. They were all laughing, he deserved it. Oh, that was funny, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yeah. So, the fishermen didn't have much faith in Ed Broadbent?

Sinclair: I [wasn't] with the fishermen but the shore workers. I mean, they really got it because, basically, the fish in the water, if it's worth a buck, if it goes into a fish plant and comes out the other end, it's worth another buck or two. You double the value of that production. This is all about how you build countries, you take what your natural resources are, at least in those days, and you add the value to them. The more value you can add to them and sell it to a market, the better off you are.

So, it's always the struggle about adding value with your labour. There might have been 5000 fishermen, but there are 5000 shore workers. They were the last forgotten folks in any industry. I mean, there were fishermen that weren't opposed to free trade if it could give them a higher price, which was always the promise of an open border. Why do you think the Wheat Board got taken apart by the Conservatives? Because a small group of farmers along the border could sell their barley across the border at a higher price rather than selling it to everybody to and collectivising it. So, it always came down to this.

There were always some individuals that are individualistic and might benefits from free trade. It just wasn't an economic model you could build a country on. I think that's what we have proven out already. Yeah. That was it. So then, the election came, and we lost. Right after that election, we went back to bargaining with the companies. This is what you really saw loud and clear. We call this the first free trade strike. It was the one of the most difficult strikes in the history of the union and it almost cost us the union. And it was a direct result of free trade. That was really tough. This one was brutal for the union. The reason was, basically, the combination of free trade and GATT.

So, we went to the first round of bargaining, and they walked in and put their proposals on the table. So, we went to the bargaining table, and they put their demands on the table. We just looked at them and our jaws dropped. Basically, what they were proposing was to gut the collective agreement. But in a sophisticated way— because they understand the union was militant and we would

The first Free Trade strike: How new economic conditions tested Union solidarity and shaped Canadian labour

The employers used the economic justification of free trade and competition from the United States to demand drastic cuts to wages and benefits. *"They basically said that the starting wage is going to drop from \$13.75 an hour to \$8 an hour for every new employee". "They were making the economic case that they were in financial disarray... this was the free trade choice, I called it, for workers. You can import the conditions of the place where they want to export the product."*

The strike highlighted the strain free trade placed on union solidarity and agreements, with companies demanding significant wage and benefit reductions for future employees: *"They wanted to gut the overtime provisions, the shifting provisions, all that stuff... it basically made a two-tiered wage system."* *"We can see that whole tradition that we grew up with in that union, 'all for one, one for all,' was now breaking apart. We all knew why too, we understood, it was the whole free trade deal."*

fight for our members—they used to sit across the table from us and say, “You’re the highest paid fish plant workers in the world.” We would say, “You’re some of the richest companies in the world.” We always had this thing about being the highest paid fish workers in the world. These were not rich workers. The starting wage was \$13.75 an hour. I'm not sure we were higher paid than the Icelandic people, or somewhere in Nordic Europe or anywhere else, but anyway, long story short, they came in. They basically said that the starting wage is going to drop from \$13.75 an hour to \$8 an hour for every new employee. We had a 400-hour probationary period before we could bump up to the higher rate, which was between \$15 and \$16 an hour. For newbies in the fishing industry reaching 400 hours took two seasons, generally speaking.

The industry bulks up from July till September and then it has a smaller core that run the plants. You know, the ground fish. Herring bolts up again but not as much. Salmon was the big time to get a lot of people into plants. So, they wanted to take the 400 hour and make it 5000 hours, which in effect, meant that you had a two-tiered wage system. I mean, you'd have to be there 20 years to get your 5000 hours. Okay, maybe not that long, but anyway, it basically made a two-tiered wage system. They wanted to gut the overtime provisions, the shifting provisions, all that stuff.

Interviewer: So, did the employer come to the negotiating table with this proposal because free trade had been assigned?

Sinclair: Absolutely. Very clear. They didn't hide that at all. They used it to justify their demands.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: They were making the economic case that they were in financial disarray. The industry was going to collapse. They made the thing for the new world means that those people in Washington State and in south of the border or anywhere in the world are now our competition. And basically, they said, "you have a choice." This was the free trade choice, I called it, for workers. You can import the conditions of the place where they want to export the product. So, you have a choice. Export the product or lose your job. Import the conditions to compete, gut your job, with no guarantee that it can't leave anyway when the real estate land the fish plants are on is worth more as condos.

So, in a way, there was an inevitability built into it. So, we stood up, but they gave all the existing shore plant workers a two and three percent wage increases. They said, “Don’t worry, it's nothing to do with you. Nothing to do with you. This is all about the future. As long as you work here in this plant, you will have all the benefits you have today. You have all the wages you have today.” In fact, we are offering you a wage increase. Then, in the tradition of the industry, of the union, fishermen, shore workers, and tender men— all go on strike together. It was a 50-year commitment to each other; everyone goes out and no one goes back until all three groups settle. That was the solidarity that kept the Union. So that's the context for this, right? During strikes, the union exercised all its power because we stuck together. There was probably a third of the fishermen that weren't Union. There was a good chunk of seine boats either in the native brotherhood or were fishing for non-union companies.

Historically, as I said earlier, if there was a strike you didn't take your seine boat out and catch 3000 sockeye and throw them on the dock and give away for free because all the major plants were union. It wasn't worth it to be known as a scab in the industry for that. So, in other strikes, there was a handful of what we called scabs. We always had a scab list. In the best of times, even after that strike, I would go down to the dock; if a boat came into the dock and it was a scab, I would say, "we don't unload scabs." It was problematic to go scabbing.

But the companies knew this and this time they offered fishermen a good price for the fish. The prices on the ground were even higher at that point. We went into bargaining, and we didn't bargain at all for the first-time. Media got involved for the first time. We didn't bargain a thing. What happened was that we realized at the end of the first week that the companies now had an alternative. They had gone to the [United] States and they either purchased plants, or they rented plants, or we contract with U.S. plants to take the fish south of the border. So, they were saying to the fishermen, "you can go fishing now and we'll take your fish. We'll take it across the border." So, for two weeks, we watched a steady stream of trucks loading and unloading fish and going across the border. I think one day we had 29 injunctions against picketing. On one day, I think we set the record.

Interviewer: Really?

Sinclair: Yeah. All over the place. They were loading fish and taking into the [United] States. I remember at the end of this dispute driving to the hotel room and we were behind a fish truck. There was a blood water running out of the truck from the fish. I looked at the guy beside me who was the chief shop steward from the plant. I said, "You see that? Blood water coming out? That's our power running out of that truck." So, it was very interesting. The first thing we had to do as a union was to make sure that everybody understood that this wasn't about the new hires. This was about all of us. This is about their future. Once they got massive cuts for new employees they will come for you. We had to make the line and get them to know that. Right? That was the first job within the shore workers.

Then we had to inform the fishermen, and we needed the fishermen to understand that its going to be a tough time and we have to have solidarity with shore workers. The vast majority of union members did but all those other guys that used to tie up, they went fishing in the first week. That's when reality started hitting home. We were a little early on the strike deadline. We should have waited another week or two till the fish were more in there. So, we watched the most scabbing we'd seen in history take place in that first week. And the border was open. At the end of the first week, we all started to look at each other and go, "wow, this could be a long one." Don't forget for fishermen, the fish doesn't swim by you and then you come back to work, and the fish come back to get caught. There is also the fine art of being close enough to that deadline when you had enough power but not enough that they can let you sit there for two weeks before they hurt.

The northern fishermen and southern fishermen always argued, they always said "settle on the north and save yourself on the south." I mean, it was a very complicated process. I think historically, we might have been early here, but that's not really the point of story. The point of the story is that suddenly that terrain around us had changed. It was really about that open

border that's what gave them the leg up to have fishermen scab and to come to us and say, "You got to import these conditions."

They were really there because there was only one unionized plant in the entire Washington state. Its wages were similar to what they were offering us, it was just miles below what we had. We had a mature collective agreement and a strong union. So, our collective agreement was probably one of the best in the entire world. Seriously, it was. We were proud of it. But that's what we—because it had been built up through sweat and struggle over 50 years. Those first contracts were first signed during the war. When you could organize during the war which was easier. There was a board that set all your contracts—you couldn't strike even though people did.

So, many of those contracts had their roots back in the 40s. So of course, they were well paid people. So, by the end of the second week, it was really looking grim. We went down to the border, and we had a huge demonstration on the border trying to stop the trucks from going across the border and broadcasted on national news. I mean, it really was a wake-up call for Canadians in a way that this is the end result of what you just voted on. This is the end result. You could argue the GATT already set the thing in motion. Yeah, it did, but it certainly set it in motion what was going to be there thanks to free trade.

So, across the border it went, truck after truck after truck. I remember by the third week; we got to the hotel on a Thursday night. The fishing was opening again, and we were losing. The union was losing the battle. We hadn't moved them an inch on their concessions. The fishermen were going fishing more and more, because after what they saw from the first crowd out, let me tell you that no fisherman can sit on the shore for very long and watch another fisherman go and take double their take—catch their fish plus yours. It's just not built into them. Not built into their psychology.

That's why scabbing during those other strikes wasn't so bad because there was so little of it. Everybody was tied up. It was okay, we're all suffering. So, by the time we get to that night, there was this important moment, it really has nothing to do with free trade but maybe it has to do with the whole soul of the country, how people take care of each other because workers also got that this was about our obligation to the next generation as the workers who came before us have done that to us. Then we would be in the same place that these people are. So, we've gone back to the bargaining table on Thursday night. Fish opened up on Saturday and the company haven't changed their position.

So, it's about two o'clock in the morning. We're all exhausted. I'm standing out there with the bargaining committee and we're going, "What the fuck?" Like, what are we going to do? We can see the union falling apart, we can see the fishing section splitting away from the union. We can see that whole tradition that we grew up with in that union, "all for one, one for all," was now breaking apart. We all knew why too, we understood, it was the whole free trade deal. It was the deal. It was the breaking down of the barriers that we protected ourselves with. So, we're sitting there, I don't remember who actually said it, but somebody said, "it's not about the money, it's about whether we're going to be union anymore."

Like there was just a mental shift in our heads. We've been saying that all along, but I think it really hit home, as a lot of things in bargaining do. You can say something on day one, but after

a strike of 15 days or 20 days in the fishing industry, it's a different perspective. The world has changed dramatically for you.

Interviewer: Yes.

Sinclair: So, somebody said, "We'll give them back the money. Give them back the money they offered to us." Right? Like, it's not about money anymore, what the fuck do we care about 2% or 3%? That's not what it's about anymore for us. For us it's about who we are. Who we are as a union, who we are as fish plant workers. And whether or not those people that are going to walk in the plant next week and start working there are us or aren't. Because if we do what we're going to do, they're not going to be us anymore. So, we decided in the parking lot that we would go back and tell them that they could take their fucking money and stuff it up their ass. Now, probably the good news is we didn't do that.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: We did something just as dramatic though. We went back and we had the meeting, and it went nowhere. We all went back to the union, we all said, "okay, what we had in the past is gone." It was a tough realization, because our hardcore fishermen were still "one for all," still, okay. The guys, through their blood, guts, and glory, we had the union, they were still there. Even though we were fracturing, and the fleet and our power was draining away, with no end in sight. So, we decided, "fuck tradition it is not working today" and sent all the fishermen back to work. Send them all. Just break tradition. The companies went nuts. They didn't see that coming. Back to work. We said go fishing, just go fishing. You got a deal. We're going to vote on your deal. I remember having go to the big meeting of fishermen and sell them the idea that they could go back to work when shore workers weren't. The old timers were, a lot of them, were like, "no!" And I said, "Look I understand, this is not our first choice, but if we stay out here it's not going to end. It's just going to drag on and more people are going to go fishing." So, we have to do something to shake this thing up. So, we got a close vote, and they went back to fishing on the weekend. On Sunday night— is this too much detail?

Interviewer: No, please continue!

Sinclair: So, we got there on a Sunday night. We backed out there that Sunday night and went into bargaining. So, we thought, "okay." I don't know what we did. I think we gave them 10 cents off the starting rate or something, whatever it was right. Vince Randy was there who is like one of the best arbitrators in the country. That's the first time I had experience with him. I had many times after that. When I get to the end of the story, you'll appreciate why. He took our offer back to the companies, we never met face to face with the companies. He comes back five minutes later and says, "You're not even on the same page. You're nowhere. Yeah, we're going nowhere, guys. I want you to think about that."

Part of bargaining is you get to sit there for three hours. So, we had to sit there for three hours while he went away and probably played cards or had another deal happening. Anyways, so at the end of the day, we're thinking--I mean, it's really hard conversations." The world had changed, free trade had come.

Suddenly, the conversations at the bargaining tables changed. We weren't the only ones. This started to be the conversation on many bargaining tables across the whole country. How do you deal with the fact that they can pack up your resources and take them somewhere else? They have cheap labour and then they bring the resources back as finished products. That's a whole different conversation. So, we sit there for three hours, and frankly, to be honest, we don't really have an answer. The only thing we do know is there's going to be a whole lot of fish showing up on the docks on Monday and Tuesday that they're not going to be able to deal with.

So, we do have a bit of leverage, right? It's not the leverage we would have preferred, but it was leverage. Anyway, Randy walks in at around 11:30 or midnight and he says, "Basically, you're fucked. There's no way there's a deal on this table. Not in a million years. There hasn't been a deal since May when you started bargaining." I start thinking, "Okay, so what's your plan Vince?" So, he says, "have you ever heard of an industrial inquiry commission." I said, "No," none of us had, right? I was young, I didn't know anything about this. He said, "well, it works this way." So, you take everything they have on the table. They take everything they have on the table. They set up a commission, you'll have one person, the companies have one and the chair is an independent person. You go to them, you put your case forward. You make your case. And they decide, whatever they decide, it becomes the contract. Right. So, you don't vote on it. You're giving up your right to vote. I just went, "fuck, this sounds like a really good answer at this point." A really good answer.

Interviewer: A binding mediation?

Sinclair: Yeah, that's right, a binding mediation. And I thought, "Well, if it gets us out of this place, we'll deal with the consequences of that down the road. We might get screwed there, too. But we got a chance." Anyway, we settled. The story of settling is boring, so I won't bother you with it, but then the process started. We got Marjorie Cohen, who I met in the

A binding mediation that led to a pension plan and preserved Union Solidarity

The strike was resolved through a binding mediation process known as an *Industrial inquiry commission*. This alternative dispute resolution allowed the union to avoid a direct vote on the deal and placed the final decision in the hands of a neutral panel. The union embraced this approach, even though it meant giving up their right to vote. "Well, if it gets us out of this place, we'll deal with the consequences of that down the road. We might get screwed there, too. But we got a chance." "We got Marjorie Cohen, who I met in the anti-free trade fight to be our winger on the panel. She didn't know a thing about fishing, but she knew about the economy."

"We ended up at the end of that arbitration, getting a pension plan that we've been fighting for years. A very small one, but it was a pension plan... they lost everything they wanted and a two-tiered wage system. It was a victory because that was the issue. He said the union's argument that it would fundamentally weaken the union and create a second-class citizen, was a valid argument and he accepted it. So, it was a great victory. But it was unnecessary if there was no free trade agreement."

anti-free trade fight to be our winger on the panel. She didn't know a thing about fishing, but she knew about the economy.

So, she was our winger on the panel, and we went through the whole panel process. We tracked fish prices, fish exports, everything else for that following season. We made the case that despite the open border, if it wasn't for the strike, then most of the fish wouldn't have gone across the border. Yes, that point was true.

So, we ended up at the end of that arbitration, getting a pension plan that we've been fighting for years. A very small one, but it was a pension plan. We kept all our wage increases and they got the [...] of the shift by one hour in the morning. So, they lost everything they wanted and a two-tiered wage system. It was a victory because that was the issue. He said the union's argument that it would fundamentally weaken the union and create a second-class citizen, was a valid argument and he accepted it. So, it was a great victory. But it was unnecessary if there was no free trade agreement. No open border because for years, we could guarantee that if there were no plants then there was no fish going across the border.

That was the beginning of the unraveling of the industry. You can see that even today that those open borders take fish. There'll be people in the industry that say that we benefited when the Alaskans said no production. Right? Eventually, Jimmy Pattison owned the plant in Prince Rupert, which was built specifically to take fish from Alaska. Specifically, it's the biggest cannery in the world, but the Skeena Run would never have supported that cannery. It came from Alaska. But he built his own cannery on the other side of the border. He said, "Screw you, we are not going to use that cannery." I mean, that's how capital moves. Anyway—

Interviewer: Okay, so let's come back to free trade, would you—

Sinclair: Here let me just say that during that inquiry that we were meeting with Don McLean, who was the head of Weston.

Interviewer: Sorry, which inquiry?

Sinclair: The arbitration.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: We meet with Don McLean, the head of BC Packers, the Western Foods. Big, macho guy, way up there. We're sitting at the table. There's me and a delegation of shore workers, right? We're talking about the world. How the world works. I think he captured the whole concept of free trade. He did it in about a two-minute statement. He looked across the table at us and said, "You know, the trouble with you people is that you want to make a living." He said, "In Washington State we run a fish plant. The Mexicans come on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday when we need them, and they work hard. Then we don't need them on Thursday and Friday, so they go back to the fields, and they pick in the fields. They don't expect to make a living. The problem with you is you expect to make a living."

Interviewer: Okay, there you go. That's poignant.

Sinclair: It is poignant, wasn't it? That's why I remember, very few things I remember. I remember that day sitting in that room, having him say that.

Interviewer: I think I'm going to put that quote on the homepage of our website.

Sinclair: I think he was the head of the BC Packers, maybe. Anyway, it just said it all to me, because we've spent years, decades, making it so people can make a living and feed their kids.

Interviewer: That's right.

Sinclair: Send their kids to college so wouldn't have to work in fish plants. Their worldview was a problem because we wanted that living.

Interviewer: I mean, that kind of puts it all into focus.

Sinclair: It does. Little moments like that. You go, "okay."

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, so working for the Union aside after the 1988 election, how did it shift your way of looking at free trade? Because you worked on a book, *Crossing the Line*, published in 1992, I believe.

Sinclair: Yeah. Could be.

Interviewer: Yeah, early 90s. This is leading up to the North American Free Trade Agreement. So, in terms of how you strategize against free trade, or how you understood it, can you speak to that at all? I mean, you have a little—

Sinclair: Yeah, no that's right—well, it changed in a very practical way. It wasn't just open border it was also the declining fish stocks. We had to decide whether it was—okay, so here's a good example. Ground fish was never covered by a GATT ruling. Ground fish: sole, cod, sablefish, rough eye, all that was never covered. So, we lost a lot of our fish to the [United] States even though we had plants here. Okay, we'll go across the border. So, when the NDP got elected in 1991, they said they were going to protect the industry. They would take steps to keep the industry in Canada.

Interviewer: Under Mike Harcourt?

Sinclair: Exactly, under Mike Harcourt. So, we took that to the bank, we told our members vote to save your job. Then—and this what you understand about how governments work—so the fishery minister writes a letter to somebody, one of our members or somebody that says, "due to the GATT, free trade blah, blah, free trade, we can't do anything to protect those jobs," basically. So, we went nuts. I was pissed. We were all pissed. Because, again, if you just agree—anyway, we made a lot of noise. So, they set up a commission to look at what we do about getting this

Making a living vs. corporate profit: the fundamental ideological divide behind Free Trade

The exchange between Sinclair and McLean reflects the core difference in their views on labour and its purpose. McLean's comment encapsulates the free-market philosophy that sees workers as disposable resources to be used when needed, rather than as individuals striving for a stable livelihood. *"You know, the trouble with you people is that you want to make a living."* – McLean

"In Washington State we run a fish plant. The Mexicans come on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday when we need them, and they work hard. Then we don't need them on Thursday and Friday, so they go back to the fields, and they pick in the fields. They don't expect to make a living. The problem with you is you expect to make a living." – McLean

fish in Canada, right? The same time they were trying to make a quota system. They put the president of the Union on the commission and the President of the fish companies, a good guy, actually, and they looked at this and had to go through and figure out what's was the difference? What's the real difference between us filleting fish up here and the fish processor in Washington State? Well, the biggest difference was wages. Okay, to be honest they were all doing piece work down there. So, they can make a lot of money.

Some of the workers in Canada are piece work too, but the unionized ones weren't. They got paid a flat rate. They didn't even have standards for the most part. They cut as fast as they could cut, a tough job. Anyway, there was that whole piece of it. Then the other piece of it was that we were going to make a quota system. Quotas can be bought. You had to be at least a Canadian fisherman to go catch the fish. Once the quotas can be bought anybody can buy it. Take it anywhere they want.

So, again, free trade enters into it. It affected our ability to say, "No, you can't take that fish across the border." We had set up a whole elaborate system when the quota system came in. We took 15% of the quota and said that was a bonus. We said, "If you could arrange to deliver a plant that did the following ten things then you got the rest of your quota." But in order to do that, we had to basically allow American fish companies to bid on our own quota to get the quota too.

So, fishermen going down to the states could also get the company to get this 15%. Okay. We had to be quite sophisticated to protect it, in the end. That kept that fish coming to our plants for a long time, because 15% doesn't seem like a lot. It's a lot of fish and it's a lot of money. 15% is your profit margin, it's a lot. So, that was the first thing. You realize that there was a new world.

We went and sat down with the companies and said, "Okay, we can keep doing this to each other but with that border open, I don't see how you win, and we win. There's no winners here." In a number of cases, we actually rearrange how we did our collective agreements. But we did it in a sophisticated way. We said, "if you're bringing fish to the plant, new fish—salmon and herring, we're not talking about. Margins are there so forget it. But if you want to bring rock cod, salt it, and add value to it in order to make a new product, we'll work with you to do that." We'll cut our wages for that product. Providing we don't cut the incomes."

We would get higher incomes and if they didn't, then they had to pay us back. It's actually a concession, I actually got in shit for making that concession. I said, "It's not a concession in one sense, because (a) we probably wouldn't have got the work." But if he got the work and got the

After the 1988 election, the fish union adapted to globalization by negotiating innovative agreements

The fish union agreed to reduce wages for specific new products while ensuring that overall incomes were maintained, helping plants remain competitive. *"We said, 'If you're bringing fish to the plant...we'll work with you to do that. We'll cut our wages for that product, providing we don't cut the incomes.'"*

"We had to get very creative. We saved some plants and frankly, the industry eventually dissolved. Free trade was part of it, but it wasn't the only issue. It was the fact that big fish plants in Vancouver sat on valuable land."

extra hours in, and your paycheck was higher than the year before, then that was good. If it wasn't used, you didn't get the money. We had to get very creative. We saved some plants and frankly, the industry eventually dissolved. Free trade was part of it, but it wasn't the only issue. It was the fact that big fish plants in Vancouver sat on valuable land.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, okay.

Sinclair: Where is capital going to go? These companies, I mean, Jim Pattison owns a good yield and is probably the largest owner of the fishing industry in Alaska. Then they set up non-union plants, some of them, and they just went after us. But that was all part of the context.

Interviewer: Then, I'm guess diminishing fish supply, too?

Sinclair: Oh, absolutely. Diminishing fish supply. Yep, that was it. Lots of issues. Okay. Eventually just got to—it just stopped attracting capital. It just wasn't a place of attracting capital anymore. If you don't modernize, you don't survive. There's still fish plants here. There's still only one cannery left in the whole province. When I came there was 17 canneries in '82. Now the fish, by the way, goes to China. Its gutted here and then frozen. Put on all those empty containers going back. So that's the advantage that the Chinese have, those containers are going back anyway. Fill them up with raw unprocessed fish and send them back to China. They take the fish out. They thaw it. They chop it up into pieces and fillet it. They package it, freeze it, put it back into the containers and bring it back here.

Interviewer: Wait.

Sinclair: Yes. At one point they were taking frozen fish from Alaska to China, okay? They were processing the fish into fillets and then shipping them to Newfoundland, then processing the fish into meals, freezer meals. Then putting them on a boat again and taking them to sell in Europe. That is the insanity of globalization. Can you imagine the carbon footprint alone.

Interviewer: Okay.

The "insanity of globalization": the fishing industry became an example of how local industries decline in favour of global supply chains

Sinclair points out that failing to modernize the industry led to its decline. *"There's still only one cannery left in the whole province [BC]. When I came there was 17 canneries in '82."* *"It just wasn't a place of attracting capital anymore. If you don't modernize, you don't survive."*

Sinclair highlights how globalization creates unnecessarily complex supply chains that prioritize cost savings over environmental concerns, with fish traveling thousands of miles across continents multiple times and significantly increasing greenhouse gas emissions: *"Now the fish goes to China. Its gutted here and then frozen. Put on all those empty containers going back... They chop it up into pieces and fillet it. They package it, freeze it, put it back into the containers and bring it back here."*

"At one point they were taking frozen fish from Alaska to China, okay? They were processing the fish into fillets and then shipping them to Newfoundland, then processing the fish into meals, freezer meals. Then putting them on a boat again and taking them to sell in Europe"

Sinclair: Bizarre.

Interviewer: Globalization!

Sinclair: That's what it is. Nothing stopped either product from either entering Canada or leaving.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, how does Canada benefit from this? Listening to you just describe your experiences, how does Canada benefit from free trade?

Sinclair: Well, there's no doubt there might have been some beneficiaries. That's possible. People might have access to a market they might not have had before. I don't know, hard to say. But anybody who wanted sanity in their industries, like the Wheat Board, the Milk Board, the agriculture board, all those things were under attack by free trade. It's still under attack, right?

Interviewer: Yeah, that's right.

Sinclair: So, basically, we create an industry where people can make a living. This goes back to what that guy said. I remember Eugene Whelan, who is the Minister of Agriculture. He was being interviewed and he was arguing with a guy about the wheat boards, and he said, "What are you talking about? Wheat boards created the ability for people to have a decent life." The right to collectively sell their stuff. The right to collectivize the risk and the benefit. And the quota system gave them the right to be able to know that they weren't over producing. They weren't flooding the market, weren't wasting food and they could have a steady income and capitalize their business. What is wrong with that? Well, what's wrong with that is it's not the market. That capital wants to take advantage of the market. It's got to be "free".

Interviewer: It's going to be free; it got to be huge. As big as possible.

Sinclair: Yes, as big as possible. Then you can of course, you consolidate production. One plant instead of five plants.

Interviewer: Yeah. More efficient—

Sinclair: That's right.

Interviewer: More profitable. The profits are being—

Sinclair: So, what we saw happening was that it came down to industries across Canada. What we saw happening was that it didn't suddenly all these doors got locked up one day. That's not how it worked. You had to look over a decade or two and you had to see what happened to the manufacturing sector in Canada. What happened to that was it dropped and dropped and dropped. Whole industries left, or parts of industries left. It usually came about when companies have to make a capital decision to modernize a plant. They look around and say, "What's going on? What's our future here? What's our future there? What's our risk here? What's our risk there?" It was much easier knowing that the state had their hands tied so you are guaranteed the market in Canada.

Even if you didn't have a factory here. You could make those washing machines in Mexico or China or wherever you make them. Then you can bring them back. You can take the metal from Canada. You can export all of that, the coal for the steel mills, all that stuff. You can take all that

out and you could bring back the product. So, that leveled the playing field, but it wasn't a level playing field. It all ran downhill.

That's what I discovered when I went to Mexico, years later. They weren't creating a whole new working-class in Mexico that could purchase the products that we're making, they were creating another serf class. They were serfs, they couldn't buy the products they were making, and they couldn't afford to live except in shanty towns. We saw that clearly in Tijuana when a group of us went to look at free trade. We went to several plants. One I remember Maude Barlow got us into a computer plant.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: So, we went to Mexico. Three of us said we're doing a press tour. She gave her the card from the Toronto Star reporter and said, "Can we get a tour of your plant?" They gave us a tour of the plant, okay? Now, here is what we need to understand, we started off that morning at another plant. The plant was above a garage and there was about 50 women in that one small room They were sitting at wooden benches, at tables, I remember vividly, lined with paper. They were putting together, by hand, computer parts.

Interviewer: Wow.

Sinclair: So, they were the feeder plant for the plant we went to later, which was the plant that was making the computers. So, you walk in the front door, all the BMWs are lined up outside the plant. They all had American license plates on them in Tijuana. This plant could have been in Burnaby or Mississauga, anywhere in Canada. Looks just like it. Walk in the front door and it's a normal plant. Nice reception area, a woman is there. We get invited in, so we get to meet with the manager and bullshit the hell out of him. He talks about what a great job they do. Why they come everyday to do is run the plant and do the quality. That's the people that come from the [United] States. Quality and running the plant, overseeing the whole operation.

Globalization led to the erosion of local industries in Canada

In Canada, free trade agreements led to the decline of domestic manufacturing sectors. *"You had to look over a decade or two and you had to see what happened to the manufacturing sector in Canada. What happened to that was it dropped and dropped and dropped. Whole industries left, or parts of industries left."*

While resources are exported, the higher-value manufacturing processes and profits occur elsewhere, leading to a loss of economic benefits within Canada. *"You can take the metal from Canada. You can export all of that, the coal for the steel mills, all that stuff. You can take all that out and you could bring back the product."*

Companies chose to relocate production to countries with cheaper labour and fewer regulations, such as Mexico or China. *"It usually came about when companies have to make a capital decision to modernize a plant. They look around and say, 'What's going on? What's our future here? What's our future there? What's our risk here? What's our risk there?' It was much easier knowing that the state had their hands tied so you are guaranteed the market in Canada."*

Then the human resource director took us around because he was Mexican. We walk into the plant and the plant is very basic. It's got some automation but there's chemicals everywhere. They're making computers. Of course, the pollution for that plant runs out the back door. Out the back door is the real story of this plant, not the front door. The front door is a façade, it's a fake. The back door is the truth. Yeah. Out the back door the workers go out one door and the pollution goes out the other straight into the river. And the workers go home to the third world. They go back out to houses that are thrown together with scrap lumber. I went and visited them; they have no electricity and no running water. They're not buying that computer, even if they could afford it. The pay in that plant was \$3 to \$4 a day, depending on what you did.

So, to change that two things would have to happen. One way you change that is you tax the company so you can put into the community. You say, "You're creating all this wealth, here, we will tax you. Then we'll create streets and provide electricity." Those companies just look across the border, and what happened there was a paper from the company saying if they want to raise taxes, they will go somewhere else. We just chase capital now. The only thing we have to sell, or the third world sells, is their environment and their cheap labour. Their lives, really, because the safety conditions are terrible too.

So, that's when it became very vivid to me because this wasn't an economic model for Mexico either. This wasn't a great savior of the Mexican working class. It was just an entrenchment of the working class that have been exploited for a long time, but in their own terms they had gained some power. But these new factories weren't part of that tradition. They call them "Maquiladoras", because they have been set up before. That's the point about Fleck manufacturing, because they went to the Maquiladoras zone. It was set up to basically be a no-regulation zone by the Mexicans many years before. So, by allowing us access to that they had—it was just like there were no border with the United States except for people. That's what it was. They were in the Maquiladoras zones, and they were just terrible places.

Behind the façade: globalization and exploitation in Mexico's maquiladoras

While plants project a professional appearance with American management and modern facilities, the truth lies in the back, where pollution and worker exploitation thrive. *"The front door is a façade, it's a fake. The back door is the truth... the pollution for that plant runs out the back door."*

"The pay in that plant was \$3 to \$4 a day... They go back out to houses that are thrown together with scrap lumber. They have no electricity and no running water."

Factories discharge pollution directly into rivers. The lack of regulations in Maquiladora zones enables such practices. "Out the back door the pollution goes straight into the river... The fishermen don't even eat fish there because they are worried about the pollution... Because don't forget, the whole furniture industry from California went to the Maquiladoras. Not just for cheap labour...because, as we were told by the people there, there's no standards for all that shit they use on furniture. All those resins, stains, and varnish, all that stuff. No rules at all."

Interviewer: Yeah. I read your chapter in your book about that.

Sinclair: Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: It's illuminating even years later.

Sinclair: For me coming from BC, being taken down to—this, tells you a bit about politics—being taken down the coast by these guys who worked in the fishing industry. They were government inspectors, but they had agreed to take me around to the Human Rights director who I was a guest of. So, they took me down the coast and they went to a tuna plant. It's just another tuna plant. Four bucks a day. All this tuna coming in there and you go, “okay, that's what they do here.”

The shocking one was the sawmill—I wrote about in the book—because it was so out of context. There's not a tree for 1000 miles anywhere around there. The trees are all coming from the west coast. The United States or Canada. That's where it's coming from. It goes down there.

The fishermen don't even eat fish there because they are worried about the pollution from this place, right? Because don't forget, the whole furniture industry from California went to the Maquiladoras. Not just for cheap labour. Because, as we were told by the people there, there's no standards for all that shit they use on furniture. All those resins, stains, and varnish, all that stuff. No rules at all.

But one thing that was interesting is that I wanted to go take a picture of the sawmill and these guys didn't want to go with me. They were afraid because if they got caught there, they would be punished. Quite an environment to building your sawmill.

But if you had any illusions, you just have to look at China and realize that capitalism doesn't care if it's fascism. As long as it's good for them they don't really care. We all grew up hearing about China. China was the communist state which had no democracy, no freedom. These people were oppressed. We're going to fight for democracy for the world. Turns out that wasn't the fight at all. The fight was the right to invest and then find the labour and find the market. Once they got all those

The Globalization Cycle with profits built on human and environmental exploitation

The Cycle of Globalization is marked by a flow of resources from resource-rich countries to manufacturing hubs in developing nations, where goods are produced under exploitative conditions and sold globally. *"The only thing we have to sell, or the third world sells, is their environment and their cheap labour. Their lives, really, because the safety conditions are terrible too."*

The maquiladora system fails to improve the living standards of workers. *"This wasn't an economic model for Mexico either... It was just an entrenchment of the working class that have been exploited for a long time."*

Resources like trees and metals are exported from Canada and the U.S. to Mexico, where they are processed into goods under exploitative labour conditions. These goods are then exported back to wealthier markets, benefiting corporations while leaving local workers and communities impoverished. *"The trees are all coming from the west coast, the United States or Canada... It goes down there. Then you can bring them back."*

things they didn't have a problem with communism. How many times have you seen a big company stand up and complain about China? Democracy in China. How many times? How many of them are operating there, almost every single manufacturing company is there in some form now.

It's worse than we thought, and frankly for me when they added Mexico to the free trade agreement I thought, "You bastards." That's when I wrote the book [Crossing the Line] because I went down, and we did a lot of work around that fight. We organized a really sophisticated labour campaign. We must have dropped thousands and thousands of leaflets door to door.

Interviewer: Here?

Sinclair: Yes here. I mean, we did this incredible leaflet that I thought was brilliant, thank you. A bunch of us worked on it. It was just basically why free trade is bad for you. The story of free trade so far then what it means going down the road, right?

Interviewer: Do you happen to have a copy of that?

Sinclair: I do, I have one. I'll get it for you.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sinclair: I may have to photocopy it but it's excellent, I'll give it to you. Anyway, I think North America Free Trade really brought it home for people, but we still lost the election. Then the Liberals said they would get rid of it, and they never did. They promised to get rid of it, Jean Chretien said, "we're going to get rid of this." Then he got elected and did nothing about it. It's a classic liberal.

Interviewer: So, since the 90s, now I'm interested also in how the politics around free trade has shifted a little bit. I guess my hypothesis is that it has and that it's been adopted, kind in this opportunistic way at certain times, by the conservative right. I think of Donald Trump who said, "I'm going to tear up NAFTA." So then in Canada you maybe have gotten a little bit of that. Erin O'Toole for a while was—

Sinclair: Erin O'Toole was doing a Trump. I thought for a second that Karl Marx had been recreated. There was a Conservative talking about how the working class has been exploited, they've been taken advantage of. It's time to stop that and we're going to stand up for it. He came out and said he was going to bring in union legislation to make it easier organize a union. I mean, okay. What they're really acknowledging is what Trump got into, which was that the traditional political parties didn't have an answer for their economic woes. The Democrats had been in

Attempts to tax corporations or improve conditions are met with threats to relocate

Efforts to impose taxes or regulations on these companies are met with threats of relocation, reflecting how globalization enables corporations to escape accountability by moving to regions with fewer restrictions. "One way you change that is you tax the company so you can put into the community. You say, 'You're creating all this wealth, here, we will tax you. Then we'll create streets and provide electricity.' Those companies just look across the border, and what happened there was a paper from the company saying if they want to raise taxes, they will go somewhere else. We just chase capital now."

power for eight years before Trump won. He ran on a campaign that united that Midwestern working class in the Rust Belt and places like that.

They said, “We’ve had enough. It didn’t work for us.” All those promises were abandoned

and Democrats had eight years to fix it, and they couldn’t fix it. His answers were easy. We would stop you from taking the plants away. He made a big deal about doing that and went to one of those plants to show that he was doing something right. He got the Mexicans to leave half of it behind. There was symbolism, but fundamentally, the manufacturing industry in the United States hasn’t recovered and ours has dropped. I mean, why is the union membership in the country so down? Because here’s the other thing to remember: manufacturing was a mature industry. A lot had been non union but the base of the private sector—unionism was in the manufacturing sector. So, that drop has been dramatic in union members.

Interviewer: Huge.

Sinclair: Huge. I mean, you can get all those numbers, and you can see them all. What’s left is the dilemma of the service sector. How do you create value at an industry with your resources if you can’t control your resources? And many logs have we exported in the last 20 years out of this port [pointing to the Fraser Surrey Docks in Surrey, British Columbia]? I see a boatload go out all the time. That’s a whole week’s worth of work for a sawmill somewhere here.

So, you have this dilemma of how do you create wealth in the country? That’s the question. How do you create wealth in the country? Traditionally, it was based on our resources that created that wealth. All those homes in West Vancouver weren’t built from logging the trees in Cypress Park. They were built on logging the trees everywhere else in the province.

The other shift was that the resource sector supported the cities. The wealthy and the cities gave taxes and give all those things to support everybody. That deal is over too. That was the deal. Now we’re faced with—okay, if we’re not going to have a big manufacturing sector, and I don’t know the future, we might get it back, who knows. If it costs \$40,000 to bring the product from China, maybe you think twice about it?

Capitalism's indifference to democracy in global trade

Sinclair explains how global corporations embraced undemocratic states like China for their cheap labour and vast markets, disregarding political oppression. *“But if you had any illusions, you just have to look at China and realize that capitalism doesn’t care if it’s fascism. As long as it’s good for them they don’t really care. We all grew up hearing about China. China was the communist state which had no democracy, no freedom. These people were oppressed. We’re going to fight for democracy for the world. Turns out that wasn’t the fight at all. The fight was the right to invest and then find the labour and find the market. Once they got all those things they didn’t have a problem with communism.”*

There are variables in all of that. That economist from the CIBC who was against free trade for climate change, Jeff Rubin I think his name was, he said, “the price of oil goes to this, and the price of fuel goes to that. Suddenly, those economic shifts again because you need that cheap transportation to keep that system working back and forth.” So, it could all shift again, I don't know.

But the other question is how do we—and this is the failure of us, its got nothing to do with free trade, its got to do with the ideology that went with it, which is that we have a labour code that was made for two reasons: One is the principles that are established in the [United] States in [19]36 and [19]44 in Canada, that's your right to join a union, the company has to negotiate, a free vote, blah, blah, you know, the whole thing right. Legitimized up until that point, almost all the strikes were about recognition. I had to go and fight for the right to have a union. So, everything at the bargaining table got bogged down by the concept that we don't accept you. We're not going to recognize you and we're not going to take the dues off when you wanted us to. So many of those strikes were about recognition.

Then in the late 60s, thanks to minority governments, they brought in the legislation federally to—sorry, backing up in the 40s, Tommy Douglas brought in legislation that officially made the public sector a union movement. So, they joined unions, and they became unionized. The next one was in Ontario and then it passed the federal law. So, in [19]68 to 72, or 72, 73 was here in BC. The labour movement in the public sector became a legitimate union. They did it because of legislation. I'm not saying they weren't legitimate, but they had got the power. I mean if you were a teacher in BC you have to join the union. That's not even a question mark.

So, what's happened now since the 70s? It particularly accelerated since 88 when free trade came in and the private sector that we knew has disappeared. Ostensibly, there's still some. There's still mines out there, there's still manufacturing in some places, but it's just dramatic decline. The other

Reinventing labour protections in the era of Free Trade and service economies

Sinclair claims that the decline of manufacturing jobs in North America, due to free trade and globalization, has negatively impacted workers. Politicians like Donald Trump and Erin O'Toole used pro-worker rhetoric to address economic frustrations. *"Erin O'Toole was doing a Trump. I thought for a second that Karl Marx had been recreated. There was a Conservative talking about how the working class has been exploited."*

But the real challenge lies in transforming low-paying service-sector jobs into sustainable, family-supporting careers. *"The hospitality industry, the service sector, the high-tech industry, all of that stuff is growing... The challenge for us, is that you need to create the service sector jobs."*

"Working at McDonald's should be a family-supporting wage. You should get a pension when you work at McDonald's. You have to rearrange how you think about the economy and how you make those jobs pay."

Countries like Sweden demonstrate how raising minimum standards can benefit workers and the economy, but adapting such strategies globally remains complex.

part is growing. The hospitality industry, the service sector, the high-tech industry, all of that stuff is growing.

But the rules for organizing that are the rules left over from 1944. So, what has to happen is we have to—if you want to make those jobs good which is the challenge of us, is that you need to create the service sector jobs. Yes. So, working at McDonald's should be a family supporting wage. You should get a pension when you work at McDonald's. You have to rearrange how you think about the economy and how you make those jobs pay.

Other countries have done some of this, northern Scandinavian countries and other ones have done this because they've set the standard very high at the bottom. It repressed the top for years because they would set the standards for the whole country. If you were in industry making a ton of money, you didn't get any more than the 2% of the bottom got. So, for the companies they saw an advantage. But for the average Swede there is a clear advantage and standard of living went way up. So, how do we do that in a global economy? How do we deal with that? To use that as our advantage. To raise those wages up.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's interesting when I think about all the activism around the 1980s and how that seems to have—my understanding now is challenging. Free trade is more about it being a kind of rear-guard attack, where we now accept the concept of a trade agreement, because it exists now. But how do we change aspects of it to make it better?

Sinclair: Right. There was a period with Trump that did change some of those aspects. But it's not closing the gap enough to be competitive. You can't expect the Mexicans to pay \$30 Canadian an hour to their workers. It's just not available in that context, that whole country has to rise up. If there is one thing free trade taught me is that these people aren't just a threat, which is how they're first perceived, to my job. The real truth is their only hope is for our jobs. That's what we have to figure out and that's why I felt that I spent much of my life building solidarity with people in the third world, particularly in Mexico or in Central America. But I just felt that their fight was our fight. Just like that free trade guy who was screwing us up here and screwing them down there. That's the same set of ideas that they wanted. They wanted powerless workers who would work for nothing and be cheap labour for them and had no right to organize.

Interviewer: So, it's kind of looking beyond the kind of national lens to a more global perspective.

Sinclair: Yeah, absolutely. Just having that worldview, that somehow was tiny. You have to live in this world and that is tiny. Unfortunately, all of this technology we have hasn't made is that much smaller. Is that much more in touch with those other people? The other issue here is climate change and that has changed the world too. The consciousness around climate change. I don't know, again, I don't eat and breathe this stuff. Ask me about health care and I'll tell you what I know. But at the end of the day, climate change has made everybody realize that we can do everything we want in Canada. Everything. We can all park our cars, turn our heat down, stop mining oil, stop processing oil, and exporting oil.

It would have made a fraction of impact on the world. In a very strange way, the only hope for this planet is that people recognize instead of making rules that allow them to exploit us we have to make rules that allow each of us to realize our own potential to actually create a standard of living that's acceptable to everybody. Do it in a way that doesn't pollute the

environment and destroy the planet. Then we have to win. We have to do that together, which means we're all going to have to change. It's not about them changing, greed doesn't really change. But the underlying lack of values hasn't changed. Greed is greed. That's how it operates, it's rewarded. War is war. Divide and conquer. Free trade was really about those people getting way more power and taking it away from the institutions that workers need.

We have some say over what happened to our lives and create the kind of society we wanted. You couldn't create healthcare under a free trade agreement. It'd be against the rules. It's all against the rules. You can't favor the local factory in your community if you want to buy uniforms because it's against the rules. That was all that stuff that was embedded. I'd have to go back and read more and remember, but that was the whole other part of it. Which was, as a government, you couldn't "favor" the people in your own country, right.

So, that fits the big right-wing image that goes way beyond free trade which is "government is bad," inefficient and it takes away your rights. I mean, it's the truck convoy all over but their message was not a new that they had in Ottawa. They just had a rather dramatic way of expressing it. The fact that many, many, many people believe the government is bad. Yeah. They've been feeding this stuff to them for years, you know?

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. Again, stronger.

Sinclair: Well, there's a lot of it. Although we waffle. We want a strong government to help us through crisis.

Interviewer: That's right.

Sinclair: We do.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sinclair: I think most people think—anyways, a lot of people reject the idea that freedom comes from my individual right to do whatever I want because there's no freedom for working class people that is based on individualism. For working people

The tension between the profit-driven motivations behind free trade and the need for a humane, equitable world that prioritizes people over profit

Sinclair highlights the urgent need for a paradigm shift in global trade and governance to address the challenges posed by free trade.

"Free trade was really about those people getting way more power and taking it away from the institutions that workers need."

"They wanted powerless workers who would work for nothing and be cheap labour for them and had no right to organize."

The need for global solidarity, the environment and the collective responsibility: *"Opening the borders to solidarity, to understanding and respect, and actually acting together to save the planet and each other".*

"The only hope for this planet is that people recognize instead of making rules that allow them to exploit us, we have to make rules that allow each of us to realize our own potential"

"We're not going to solve the environmental crisis because I personally decide not to drive a car. The freedom to experience a clean environment is only going to happen as a collective freedom from working people acting together"

"We have to reject the daily menu of division and hatred they offer us. We have to celebrate our differences and our humanity."

freedoms that matter come from our collective freedom and our ability to fight together. For example, your child gets cancer, and you can go to the same clinic that Jimmy Pattison's kid goes to. You don't have to pay anything, and your kid can get the best care. Isn't that the ultimate freedom? Real life freedom for your family? That's freedom to me. That your kid can go to university despite the fact that you worked in low paying jobs and struggled to make ends meet. The right to education is kind of a basic freedom that I can't get myself. The basic right to develop yourself, to grow and learn the things you need to live your dreams and have a decent life.

We can all have private schools, but you know what that would be like. There would be the private schools for the rest of us and other private schools for the rich, which we have enough of now under the present system. We're not going to solve the environmental crisis because I personally decide not to drive a car. The freedom to experience a clean environment is only going to happen as a collective freedom from working people acting together.

What can be more basic than the freedom to love who you want and yet we all know that for years people were murdered for loving who they shouldn't have wanted. People continue to die because of who they love. This freedom comes from collective rights. All of these collective rights are the opposite of free trade, but they don't mean closing the borders. In a way, it means opening the borders in different way. More like opening the borders to solidarity, to understanding and respect. Actually, acting together to save the planet and each other. That's kind of, for me, where it is at. We have a long way to go.

Interviewer: Yes.

Sinclair: We don't even think like that. I know that I don't. I know that I have so much more to learn than I'll never get to in my lifetime to get to the point where I really understand how to make all these changes. It's because it's going to take the collective wisdom of a lot of people across the world. Developing ourselves and our ideas, our collective ideas that have to advance and keep advancing to keep ahead of them. We have to reject the daily menu of division and hatred they offer us. We have to celebrate our differences and our humanity. The world has never been smaller. Those that love free trade love a world where power comes from money and the exploitation of humankind and the planet. It is the opposite of human solidarity.

Interviewer: You mean like corporations?

Sinclair: Yeah! Anyway—

Interviewer: Alright, maybe we will stop it there. You've offered a very big picture perspective of free trade, and it was really good. You've made a lot of connections. So that's great.