

History Worth Remembering

On January 29th, 1990 the United Steelworker (USW) members of Kootenay Savings Credit Union (KSCU), Local 9090, took a stand and to this day, it is a piece of history worth remembering.

It all started in July of 1988, when six branches: Trail, Castlegar, Waneta, Salmo, Kaslo and Fruitvale decided and were approved for certification to unionize. South Slocan branch followed suit in February 1991. Warfield Credit Union merged with KSCU, whom were already USW members of local 9090, in 1997.

There were four employees that were instrumental to signing our first contract in November 1990. They were: Faye Peters, Cheryl Gallamore, Lisa Shepherd and Brenda Bortolussi. Together, along with the Staff Reps from the USW, they built an agreement that provided clear distinction between which jobs were to be excluded from the bargaining unit. So I bring up this exclusion of bargaining unit jobs for one good reason: it will be the start of events to come regarding the *Cheryl Gallamore Grievance* that occurred on January 17th, 1990.

Leading up to the day which the grievance was issued, a lot of turmoil had surfaced between KSCU and the newly unionized employees. In November 1989, KSCU management applied to the BC Industrial Relations Council (IRC) with concern as to whether or not two jobs within KSCU should be included in, or excluded from the bargaining unit. The reason for concern in the eyes of the Board of Directors and management, was that these employees were privy to and had access to information regarding management salaries. They told the IRC that no other bargaining unit employee had access to this information when in fact ALL employees could access this information. So in turn, the IRC requested that the Union provide evidence that all other bargaining unit employees did in fact have access to management wages. The Union contacted Cheryl, along with the IRC investigator and asked her if she could access manager's payroll information. As requested, Cheryl provided a payroll deposit from a senior manager's account to the investigator. Basically, this proved our case that anyone could access this information if you worked within any bargaining unit job and therefore those two jobs would remain in the bargaining unit.

Now this information was not given to anyone else other than the IRC investigator and the Staff Rep. After the "verdict" was handed down about these two jobs being definitely considered bargaining unit jobs, somewhere between November 1989 and January 1990, the KSCU management staff had declared that an employee had seriously breached confidentiality. A letter was sent out from the CEO of KSCU on January 11th to all the employees of KSCU. They didn't know who had done this breach so they brought in many employees, one at a time, to ask each: "did you provide this confidential information?" as well as "do you know who did?" No one knew anything. It was a stressful time for all employees and when word got back to Cheryl that this was happening, she did not hesitate to let the management staff know it was her. That is when this situation became very serious and would be the start of all the events to come.

January 15th, Cheryl and the Union Rep wrote a letter to all the USW members of KSCU. In it, Cheryl explained she had provided this information to the IRC officer for the purpose of the IRC investigation. It was the Union's position that the information was not a breach of confidentiality to provide that information to the Union or the Industrial Relations Council, especially when it was the Employer who called in the IRC and then did not supply them with accurate information.

January 17th, the Fruitvale manager and friend of Cheryl was required to issue her a letter of discipline stating that she had divulged personal information about member's accounts and therefore breached confidentiality. This discipline would be a 30 day unpaid suspension. That same day, the Union issued the *Cheryl Gallamore* grievance.

January 18th, USW issued a statement from Local 9090 office to the Shop Stewards defending Cheryl. In that statement, it read: "the information Cheryl supplied was required to respond to an application made by the Employer to the Industrial Relations Council. Cheryl was acting in her capacity as a Shop Steward and a member of USW and furthermore, she was acting on behalf of all of us as members of the USW. We believe that KSCU has not accepted the fact we wanted a Union in our workplace and the Union is here to stay."

January 25th, an investigator with the Financial Institutions Commission, that is regulated by the Province of BC, acted on a reported violation of the Credit Union Act (Regulation 9), concerning confidentiality. What this meant was that the Employer had requested an investigation in order to decide if laying criminal charges against Cheryl was deserving. Now while KSCU said they had not laid such charges, the investigator from the Financial Institutions Commission had contacted Cheryl to inform her that indeed only the Credit Union or the bank account holder could initiate these charges. No one ever knew who the bank account holder was – only Cheryl, the Staff Rep and the IRC investigator. No one within the Union cared who made what money. All they cared about was proving that any employee could access this information. So, KSCU must have initiated this, contrary to what the Board of Director President stated in a February 1990 memo to all the Kootenay Savings Credit Union members.

January 29th, the Union membership made a decision. The Union decided to hold a "study session" or some would call it a "wildcat strike", others would say the employees "walked out". It was an information picket to protest the 30 day suspension issued to Cheryl. Four branches participated – Trail, Fruitvale, Castlegar and Waneta. The Union used this time to educate the KSCU membership about the attack on Cheryl. Petitions were signed asking management to re-instate her, KSCU members as well as USW members stood the line in unity and management was brought in to work the teller lines. Senior management staff were preparing legal action to force the workers back.

January 30th, the employees returned to work therefore not requiring legal action. As one can imagine, managers were not easy to deal with. A resident of Fruitvale wrote in the Trail Times stating, "It was nice to see management respond in a very positive and mature manner. Take, for instance, in the Fruitvale branch. The following day, all the teller chairs were taken away. When the tellers weren't too busy waiting on members they used to be able to sit and rest their legs while doing their other duties. I imagine this earned them a lot of respect from the employees, especially the one who will be giving birth soon."

February 16th, Cheryl requested in writing a 60 day leave of absence to the KSCU Manager of Human Resources and that this absence would be for Union business.

February 26th, Cheryl resigned from her position of Loans Officer at the Fruitvale branch as Human Resources of KSCU declined such a leave. Cheryl's feelings on the matter were that it would be very difficult to work for a company that were proceeding with criminal charges against her. In turn, she worked at the USW Local 480 Union Hall and would do so for the next 20 years. To this day, Cheryl regrets not going back to work at KSCU as a way of thanking the employees for all their support during this stressful time. She was so fortunate to have a better opportunity waiting for her that led her to be

the first point of contact at the Union Hall. She ended up serving the USW membership in a different capacity and interestingly enough, her daughter took over her position when it came time to retire. But this issue became something bigger that the Employer could never imagine and that was the undying support of the communities of which she lived and worked in. She was a LOVED employee to put it mildly. KSCU members (not to be confused with USW members) wanted justice. Other Unions joined in to support Cheryl and the United Steelworkers. Many articles were published in the newspapers from irate KSCU members. One of which stated the following:

“We have had numerous dealings with Gallamore on a customer or business basis and find Cheryl to be of the utmost calibre of professional and confidential loans officer found anywhere in the business. We find the use of Cheryl Gallamore as a “pawn” in your current struggle with the Union totally unacceptable.” These were words from Fruitvale members that published their thoughts in the Trail Times on February 7th, 1990.

Also stated by letter mailed directly to KSCU Management and Board of Directors by two 44 year residents of Beaver Valley on January 31st, 1990, “As long time members of KSCU, we are greatly disturbed regarding the action taken against Fruitvale employee, Cheryl Gallamore. We feel the action to be unjust since the information can be requested by any KSCU member at any Annual General Meeting and management is obligated to answer.”

March 8th, in response to the letter that the President of the Board of Directors issued to every KSCU member, Cheryl explained, through publishing in Letters to the Editor of the Trail Times that this information was never given to anyone other than the IRC and the Union Staff Rep and continued on to say that “for KSCU to state that we cannot provide evidence to support our case is similar to stating that only a prosecutor in a criminal case can present evidence. What kind of democracy is this?” And she also reminded all KSCU members that Kootenay Savings Credit Union is a MEMBER owned Credit Union and ALL management’s salaries should be made available to the membership.

So at the next Annual General Meeting for KSCU that was held in April of 1990, the members of the communities of which KSCU served, as well as other Unions within the region asked the following questions:

“How much does the Credit Union pay each of their Management people?

“How much money has KSCU paid out in legal fees to fight this Cheryl Gallamore grievance?”

These members wanted answers because:

- 1.) They had the right to ask
- 2.) KSCU shares its profits back to the communities it serves, so the members wanted to know this financial impact to their communities and
- 3.) They were supporting the injustice that companies inflict on newly unionized workers.

The angst continued when the Employer’s lawyer would only respond to the questions with, “we will take it under advisement” for every single question by the people on the floor. From what I hear, it was truly shameful. Respect was lost that day.

The next 6 -7 months would be used to develop the first collective agreement. It would also be about accepting change in the workplace. All Unionized employees would now have a platform for building a

great workplace. The first contract was signed on November 16, 1990, three days after the *Cheryl Gallamore* grievance was resolved. USW and KSCU believed it was in the best interest of the parties to resolve this matter without proceeding to arbitration.

Maybe at the end of the day there was no clear “winner” or “loser” because this grievance never went to arbitration but how we got to this resolution may have been better than any clear black and white verdict. The Union got a lot stronger, a lot louder and a lot more united. It was a tough time and definitely a time worth remembering. Fighting for what was right doesn’t come easy – it didn’t then, it doesn’t now. These are days that we, as current activists and employees, should look back on and appreciate. It was very admirable how a Union sister held up in this particular fight. She was truly humbled by the support and dedication by her friends, co-workers, family, members and USW family. I am truly humbled by her honesty and courage and class and of course for standing up for what was right. Thank you Cheryl. 😊