

Percolator-Profile-with-Cathy-Callahan

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SPEAKERS

Loyd Willaford, Cathy Callahan

L Loyd Willaford 00:02

In this episode of the PERColator podcast, Loyd Willaford continues our series of PERColator Profiles. With a conversation with former executive director of PERC, Cathy Callahan. We hope you enjoy the episode. Welcome to the PERColator Podcast. I'm Loyd Willaford, one of the hosts of the PERColator and today we are continuing our occasional series on profiles of leaders in labor relations. And so with me today is Cathy Callahan, who is a former executive director at PERC, who is the sponsor the podcast. So Cathy, welcome. Thanks for coming.

C Cathy Callahan 00:40

Thank you for inviting me. I think this podcast is a terrific idea. I'm glad you're doing it.

L Loyd Willaford 00:45

Thank you. Yeah. So maybe for those of you who don't know you, can you tell us when you were the executive director at PERC and what brought you to the job?

C Cathy Callahan 00:56

I was the executive director from November of 2006. Until I believe it was January 1, 2012. So just a little over five years, I was headhunted by a headhunter that the Commission hired to find an executive director. At the time I was the officer in charge for the National Labor Relations Board here in the Portland sub region office. And I had no thoughts of looking for a job or taking a job. But I saw this letter from the headhunter and I was curious, actually, I put it in my trash. And then I took it out my recycling. And I thought, well, I'd make call and check it out, just out of curiosity, so drummed up a resume, because I didn't have one and I went to Olympia for the interview. And Olympia is beautiful when the sun shines, and indeed it did. Olympia is my hometown. So there was all the snow capped the Olympics, the sun shines out and the tugboats were racing, and it was a terrific time. I had an interview with staff, a group. And then

I went in and had an interview with the Commission. And the staff was extremely impressive. And their interview was well thought out. I very much enjoyed the commission. Of course, it's a lot easier when you're being interviewed when you're not really interested in, in, in or needing a job. And so but I have to say by the time I left the room with a commission, I thought, I want this job. It was a delightful day, I came back to Portland. Interestingly, the offer from PERC came in at about the same time, the National Labor Relations Board offered early outs to those who wanted to retire early. So it was the stars aligned and I accepted the job and retired from the NLRB on November 3 and began work at PERC on November 6.

L Loyd Willaford 03:09

Oh, wow. So it didn't take much time in between then?

C Cathy Callahan 03:12

No, not at all.

L Loyd Willaford 03:15

But who was on the commission then in 2006.

C Cathy Callahan 03:18

Marilyn was the chair. Pamela Bradburn, and Doug, I'm trying to think of his last name. I'm sorry, he was terrific guy.

L Loyd Willaford 03:28

I should know this too. And I don't.

C Cathy Callahan 03:29

I really enjoyed working with him. And it's funny, I just I don't I just don't have it.

L Loyd Willaford 03:35

So you said you were at the NLRB and retired. How long did you work with the NLRB?

C Cathy Callahan 03:40

I worked at the NLRB for about 23 years, 23-24. I started in 1983. Do you want to know how I got into labor relations? I think that was one of the questions.

L Loyd Willaford 03:54

Yes, that I would that was going to be.. you stole my thunder. That was going to be my next question.

C Cathy Callahan 03:59

Okay, it didn't mean to steal your thunder!

L Loyd Willaford 04:01

That's okay.

C Cathy Callahan 04:03

In my early 20s, I worked for the Anaheim Public Library in Anaheim, California. I became the union representative for oh 50 to 75 library employees. And that was my very first taste of contract negotiations, grievance processing and so on. I very much enjoyed it, and learned an awful lot. When I learned that my young family was going to move to Eugene. I started looking at college catalogs while I was on the reference desk, and I found the program at the University of Oregon in industrial and labor relations. So I enrolled as soon as I could after we moved to Eugene, it was a great program. I had an internship with the personnel department at the University of Oregon, one of the things, one of my tasks was to write a strike plan for the University in the event the Classified Employee struck, but my heart really belong to collective bargaining. So I was in labor law class when I learned the NLRB was coming to campus. And I got on that list, and I actually volunteered to go to work for him. That's how much I wanted to do it. I ended up with a six month Co-op program in Seattle, where I investigated cases like a field examiner, and then I, I went away and hoped I would get a job. And my first day back when they offered me a job, I handed two nurses, back paychecks, significant back paychecks. The deal was sealed because I had investigated that case, and I knew that because of the work I had done on that case, these two nurses had their jobs back and back pay, and that I'd made a difference. And I knew this was the work I always wanted to do.

L Loyd Willaford 06:02

Was it a summer deal at the NLRB?

C Cathy Callahan 06:05

No, it was actually a paid, I ended up in a paid Co-op program. It was six months. Yeah, it was six months where they give you actual real live work. That's like here, this is your case. Go do it.

L Loyd Willaford 06:16

Yeah, I had a similar experience when I was in law school in 2009, so I just missed you. But, was Richard Ahearn the regional director when you retired?

L Loyd Willaford 06:26

Yeah. So I, I worked with him and Brian Sweeney, and in 2008, I missed you by a couple of years. But similar thing, and they just hand you a case and said, Here you go, work the case. Yeah, so. So great experience. You said, so you started out as a at the NLRB as a like a board agent or field examiner or whatever they were calling them back then.

C Cathy Callahan 06:26

Yeah.

C Cathy Callahan 06:52

Field examiner. Yeah, my territory was for the most part, it was Montana. And so I did a range of things from investigating unfair labor practice cases, holding representation cases, hearings, and I conducted an awful lot of elections. So basically, if I was going to Montana, I was loaded with whatever needed to be done.

L Loyd Willaford 07:14

Oh, lots of travel, then

C Cathy Callahan 07:16

Love to travel.

L Loyd Willaford 07:18

You did some collective bargaining work with unions, then right before you went to the NLRB? Is that what I heard?

C Cathy Callahan 07:23

Yes. And when I worked at the Anaheim Public Library.



L

Loyd Willaford 07:28

So one of the questions that we kind of asked folks in our kind of profile series here is, is do you have any kind of memorable experiences from collective bargaining that either went really well, went sideways, that you'd like to share? And what you might have learned from those?

C

Cathy Callahan 07:51

Well, I can tell war stories about cases till the cows come home. There are cases that went really well, and there are cases that went sideways, there were difficult parties, difficult situations, there were huge cases. And that were, you know, a challenge, but the, but the thing that I loved I think the most about my job, was it it was never boring. When the phone rang, I never knew what it was going to be. So you know, I was in Portland, the phone would ring or I'd wake up in the morning then hear NPR, that the longshoreman had struck the Port of Clallam or, you know, and then I knew what was going to hit that day, or I would pick up the phone on Friday afternoon. And Kathy, they, they've struck the Intel site, you know, in Hillsborough, and so it was, it was always challenging, and never boring. Then if there was a case that was troublesome, or the parties were difficult, we always knew it was gonna be it was gonna be done.

L

Loyd Willaford 09:04

So did you have any, early in your career, any mentors, that you learn something significant from?

C

Cathy Callahan 09:12

Ah, mentors? There were a lot of good people at the NLRB office in in Seattle, and Paul Eggert was the regional director, when I was promoted to come to Portland to take over the Portland office. And did you ever know Paul?

L

Loyd Willaford 09:33

I did not. Yeah.

C

Cathy Callahan 09:36

He had an interesting way of doing things. He was very smart, but he was very gruff, but he knew the law. And he made us work harder. If you didn't know something, the worst thing you can do is try to bluff because he would always say, Don't BS me. If you don't know then say I don't know. It's the best answer you could possibly give. And I, I taught that to the people who work for me, it's like, if you don't know, if you didn't get it, you can always go back and get the information you need. But I don't know, what's the best answer. I don't know, but I'll find out.

L Loyd Willaford 10:16

Yep, I 100% concur with that. And also, if you've made a mistake, just fess up and say, I screwed this up.

L Loyd Willaford 10:23

Exactly. And we can fix it. There's nothing we can't we can fix. But if you lie, or you try to cover stuff up, then we have more problems.

C Cathy Callahan 10:33

Exactly. I always made it my personal rule, that if there were something that could hit the newspaper that my boss would read about, be it, you know, the NLRB, or the commission, I always let them know ahead of time, hey, this is what's going on. I don't want you read about it in the newspaper. So, but you're right, if you mess something up, the best thing is just, you know, fess up.

L Loyd Willaford 11:04

maybe switch to your time at PERC, what was your favorite part of working at PERC?

C Cathy Callahan 11:08

Wow. PERC was, my favorite part had to be the people. PERC had a great staff, from top to bottom. And it was always interesting, watching them grow and develop. And we had during my five year period, we focused an awful lot on training, all kinds of training. So it was interesting to listen to people and to listen to them, discuss and share their cases. That was good. Let's see. The other thing that was for me, PERC was a challenge. I had the National Labor Relations Act, which covered all private sector employees in the United States, except those specifically excluded. And I knew that statute in and out, and I got to PERC, and all of a sudden there's a book of statutes that I had to carry around. And one of my, one of my very first meetings, I think I'd been there for a couple of weeks, was with a union and the University of Washington and there was a unique group of employees, I don't remember what they did. But a, a new statute was suggested, that there needed to be a new statute to cover this particular group. And I just being new, I just said, don't you people think you have enough statutes? And the whole room erupted! So So anyway, for me, that was that was a challenge all these statutes. So it was nice to to have that challenge. I think at the end of the career, my my last five years of my career, and always, you know, we did good work and always watching cases be resolved and disputes settled in the workplace, because of what we did. That was certainly gratifying.

L Loyd Willaford 13:11

So you mentioned kind of coming to the end of your career. What have you been doing since you left PERC?

C Cathy Callahan 13:17

Personally, the thing I have really enjoyed the most I think is travel. My husband and I moved three times since I retired. And we traveled extensively. And we're kind of travelers who wander, we're not tour people, we just kind of like one wander, we went from London to Krakow, and we wandered and we took a couple months. And each had a carry on and got comfortable where we were, we spent a couple of months in Argentina one year, and then the pandemic hit and so that that certainly slowed everything down. So that we kind of broke our stride with that. So I've done some volunteer things with the North Thurston Education Foundation, where I was in charge of on the board and in charge of the scholarships. We we handed out I think, over \$100,000 of scholarships every year.

L Loyd Willaford 14:14

Which Foundation did you say?

C Cathy Callahan 14:16

The North Thurston Education Foundation.

L Loyd Willaford 14:19

North Thurston, like North Thurston County,

C Cathy Callahan 14:22

Like, yeah.

L Loyd Willaford 14:23

Do they do stuff other than scholarship?

C Cathy Callahan 14:26

Yep, they have a lot of programs to help, help eliminate barriers of students in need.

L Loyd Willaford 14:32

You mentioned traveling, Do you have any other other trips planned now that hopefully the pandemic is gone?

C Cathy Callahan 14:38
Yeah, I'm gonna go to Portugal with a friend in the fall.

L Loyd Willaford 14:42
Oh, nice.

C Cathy Callahan 14:43
Yeah, haven't been Portugal. So why not?

L Loyd Willaford 14:47
Before we wrap up here, do you have a piece of advice that you would give to folks who are just starting out in labor relations?

C Cathy Callahan 14:55
I do. I would say like, I was always is comfortable being a neutral, that was a sweet spot for me. I think for people who are going to come into PERC or the NLRB or neutral agency, remember that you are the neutral. Your job is to enforce the statute. And while if you're not comfortable in that neutral position, there are jobs with, you know, employers and unions, and you can actively participate in collective bargaining and make a difference, regardless of which side you're on or whether you're in the neutral, neutral position. But collective bargaining was a fabulous career for me, I can't think of anything I would have rather done in my life. It was, it was always rewarding, interesting, and like I said, never boring.

L Loyd Willaford 15:59
So you mentioned one challenge being the sort of difference between the NLRA and the PERC statutory schemes, plural. What any other challenge that you faced at PERC.

C Cathy Callahan 16:13
There were a lot of challenges. And I would say my five year period was, included a lot of change. So I walked in the door, and literally, within the first week or two, I was there, a client survey that had been commissioned, landed on my desk. According to the clients, we were in big trouble. Our cases were slow, they weren't moving. The clientele, both sides were extremely upset. So that was one of the first things I had to address. So here I am learning about this new agency and having to address problems. So what I did was, which was a good learning tool for me, I looked at the pipeline from the time the cases came in the door. And then what happened and we had, we had slowdowns in assignments. We had slow downs at the

preliminary ruling stage. And, and there was not a lot of concern about timeliness in terms of issuing decisions. So all that had to be changed. It's you know, change isn't always easy for an organization. But we did it. And that, do you still have the red list?

L

Loyd Willaford 17:31

We don't have a red list. But we do have a pretty good guidelines on timeliness that we follow. Actually, we get regular reports. And so but you know, if you read the the most current annual report, there is actually a timeliness issue that the agency is committed to address, on that is time to hearing. So we're getting decisions most of the time, I think, if you go back and look, I think our decisions, we are hitting our timelines. Most of the time, you know, there's always exceptions. But so we do pay attention to that. I appreciate that, that's a legacy from you. I think we're have follow through on that, at least.

C

Cathy Callahan 18:17

It is, because when I got there, we didn't have any timelines. And boy, did that show up in that clientele survey! And I think, you know, it was hard for some of the parties too. I had a, there was a case and I said, we need to get this to hearing. It's, it's getting old. And the examiner told me, "Well, the the parties don't want to." And I said, "What do you mean, the parties don't want to?" And so I think I pushed her and the party, one of the parties called me and said, you know, we don't really want to go to hearing on this. We were waiting until the new I think it was county commissioners are elected. And I said seriously, I said, it seems to me that if you have a dispute that serious enough to file, then it needs to be heard. So that was that was my mantra. If it's important enough to file we need to address it. So, so that's how that happened. And and I'm glad they're still timelines because the NLRB timelines, I don't know if you remember, but they were pretty brutal.

L

Loyd Willaford 19:17

Yeah, well, I'm with you. I think the same, same mantra, like, you know, this is your case. And if you filed it, we have an obligation I think, to get get all the parties involved, we get it resolved. Or if you don't want to do this anymore, that's fine. You can you know, you can withdraw it if you really don't want it to go to hearing, you can withdrawal it.

C

Cathy Callahan 19:39

But it was, you know, making that change, I think was tough on the staff and it was tough on the parties, but I did and then one of the other challenges we had too is that, I don't know maybe two or three years into my tenure, we had a horrendous budget cuts and so, um, things needed to change. I had a terrific business manager at the time, John Sheppard and John Sheppard came into my office and sat down. He says Kathy, and I said, Yes. And he said, You can't afford me. And I said, What? He said, You can't afford me with these budget cuts. I'm, I'm going to leave because you can't afford me. So everybody stepped up at that time. And that's when Diane Tucker took on more and more, bless her heart. Everybody dug in, I took our resources who were sitting in management positions, I put them in the field, because our job

was to effectuate all those statutes. And we weren't going to do it with with managers. So there were people who went back into the field after a number of years and being out of it. So that's how we handled that. We just, I just cut back and put all our resources in the field.

L Loyd Willaford 20:58

Well, I can say, I mean, I've only been at PERC for five years, we haven't had any significant budgetary impacts. Thankfully, we survived COVID pretty good.

C Cathy Callahan 21:08

Oh! I'm sorry, I just thought of something, after all those timelines, and getting and getting the agency up to speed, we were doing so well, that the legislature came on, and they started looking at the Marine Employees Relations Commission and PERC, and they wondered whether the Marine Employees Relations Commission or PERC would be better handling the ferry cases. So they hired some consultant to come in and, and went through all our books, and our records in our files and looked at how we did things. And then they went over to the other Commission, the Marine Employees Commission, and they looked at theirs, and they decided that that PERC had a better track record of getting things done, and moving cases. So probably the last thing I did was to effectuate that inclusion into PERC, which was the remaining public sector or group that wasn't covered by PERC. Of course, that also was was tremendous change for those people. But we did it and I from what I understand it's, it's been very successful.

L Loyd Willaford 22:31

Yeah, I certainly appreciate that I think our clientele probably appreciates it because I can go back read those old Ferry Commission decisions sometimes, and think that was a different way of doing things. Yes.

C Cathy Callahan 22:44

It was a different way of doing things. Some people were really happy with them. So I had to do a lot of outreach to make to bring them in successfully. And, and so I think it's, it's been a good, good thing.

L Loyd Willaford 22:59

Well, this has been a great conversation, wrap it up, maybe on a light note. Any suggestions for listeners in terms of music, podcasts, video viewing anything like that, that you you think people catch?


C Cathy Callahan 23:17

Well, for people in the northwest, we did something on Sunday. There's a there's a nonprofit

called In a Landscape. And it's an artist, a pianist who puts his Steinway on a flatbed truck and takes it into the wilderness where he does an incredible concert. And he does perform all over the Northwest and down into California. And so having just been there on Sunday, this was our this was our third concert. And it was out at Mary Hill art museum out overlooking the gorge. It was stunning. And so, Inalandscape.org.

 Loyd Willaford 24:04


We will put that in the show notes for folks, and so thank you very much. I appreciate the conversation.

 Cathy Callahan 24:11

And I appreciate you having me and best regards to the PERC staff and the clientele.

 Loyd Willaford 24:17

Great. Thank you much.

 Cathy Callahan 24:18

Hope you are all well, thank you.