

Apple Box Talks – Interview with IATSE 891 Organizing Team

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[Theme Song]

CB: IATSE 891 presents Apple Box Talks

HB: The podcast where we get to talk to the very best in entertainment, the artists and technicians of IATSE 891.

CB: From prep to post and everything in between, we create worlds on screens of all sizes. Welcome to part three of our educational series for IATSE 891's podcast, "Apple Box Talks." I'm your business representative, Crystal Braunwarth.

HB: And I'm Hillary Bergshoeff. Today we're joined by IATSE 891's organizing team, Sano, Brooke and Connor. Thanks for joining us.

(CM) (BT) (S): Hello. Hello. - Hey, thanks for having us.

CB: Thanks for coming in. So let's start at the very beginning, Sano. Can you give us the evolution of the organizing department within the last four to five years, where we were and where we are now?

S: Sure. IATSE 891 had not had an organizing program or department for quite a few years before we started our program here. A couple years ago we started trying to figure out what an organizing program would look like and we really needed to understand where the membership was at and so we did a lot of interviews with the chairs, with the executive, with the president, with everyone we could; to figure out what people were thinking in terms of engagement in the union which I would call internal organizing, and then MOWs and how to flip non-union shows into union shows. And we found out that there was a severe lack of that education amongst 891. So we created a pathway to try and go along to build that up for the first couple of years. And I think we've done pretty well.

HB: So Sano, for someone who is newer to this world, how would you define organizing?

S: I think I would define organizing as people getting together with a common goal and to address those common goals from a political lens.

HB: So the common thread I'm hearing in your answer, Sano, is solidarity, which we know to be a really key tenant to labor unions. Can you help us understand why continually developing organizing is critically important

S: In my opinion if a labor union is not Organizing and expanding its membership, they are actually shrinking. Because the industry itself is growing so if a union is to keep up with leverage against the employers with gains then my opinion is that any union has to be organizing

CB: So traditional organizing is brick -and -mortar type going in we've all heard about you know Amazon workers organizing and Uber workers organizing and so can you explain the difference between traditional sort of organizing drives that we see that are quite popular in the news right now and how that's different from film organizing? Because you guys have a monumental task with film timelines and just the structure of our industry being what it is.

CM: So at the same time, it is simpler and more complex than traditional organizing. Traditional organizing in a factory when workers came to the same job every day with the same co-workers and worked side by side. It was a static workplace, the same workforce. They knew each other and it was traditionally easier to make those connections and have them connect with one another. Obviously on a film set, we have a much shorter compressed timeline. Some MOWs are as short as 11 shooting days, which is a really short timeline. However,

the benefit that we have in film organizing is that these workers are not just on one work site. They work on a film and then they go on to the next film and the next film and the next film. And if we've done our job properly and trained them as organizers, then they can go on to keep organizing every show that they work on.

CB: So essentially if we were to break down organizing for someone who has thought that it was just pulling out a drawer and organizing the utensils in it or something, right? You go into a film that you talk to the crew, you help them understand the benefits of what, quote unquote, as we heard Sano say, flipping a show is. You educate them about the benefits, about how their working conditions could improve. They essentially agree. They sign a union card, and then what happens?

S: We then fill out what's called a Section 18 for the Labor Relations Board to review, which is an official application to certify whatever production has met the threshold of signing cards.

CB: And what is that threshold?

S: Currently in BC, it is 55 % of the workforce needs to sign those cards.

CB: Okay, and so if you're a member already, because we should be very clear, a lot of our members, especially during the time of the slowdown and the strike, had to turn to non-union work because that is what was available to them. So, when you're going into organize a show, oftentimes there is a large percentage of them that are already our members.

S: That's correct. But on a general basis, it's somewhere between 70 and 80 % are usually members already.

HB: So given that you already have 70 to 80 % 891 crew there, How have they responded then to organizing efforts to bring others into the fold under 891 representation?

S: So I'm gonna draw a small distinction between Kelowna and other places; where Kelowna had the least percentage of members - and I'll let others speak on that, and how members seem to experience the organizing program there. The organizing that has gone on on the Island so far is very high percentage members. And I believe that I'm not overstating the fact that our membership on the island has really appreciated all of the organizing program and the attention and the ability to contact and have conversations with the union. And I believe that they feel very proud of the program that's gone on in Victoria.

CB: And so just to give the audience here a little further context. So we have essentially three organizing programs, one in Kelowna, one on the Island, and one in the Lower Mainland. And these strategies take quite a while to develop, don't they?

S: Correct, yes. We've really thought about this stuff with a deep analysis on the industry and how it's shaped in BC, we did start specifically in Kelowna where it was purely non-union movie shooting without the presence of ACFC, which is a competing unit that also covers productions.

HB: So, Brooke, you're the newest member of the team here, and you come from the industry in Kelowna as a member of the props department. How did you get involved with this organizing drive?

BT: Absolutely. So I was working in Kelowna for approximately two and a half years before I first met Sano, the lead organizer at 891, and he started out by coming to Kelowna and reaching out to the active members in the region, and my understanding is those members then brought in some non-union crew members. So, I was invited to one of the early meetings in January of 2023 and saw the incredible potential of this program for the region to bring the union work there and to develop 891's presence there. So the crew members had access to health benefits and union resources which were very much needed in an area with not a lot of film options. So producers would often take advantage of the crew because there wasn't a lot of competition in that sense. So, I started attending every meeting I could to get involved and help support this cause.

HB: And how would you say the shifts and the successes that have happened in Kelowna have impacted the workers there?

BT: It's been pretty incredible because we've had two term agreements in place now. My community out there, they're gaining 891 days. They're coming into membership, and this has made all the difference for a lot of the crew out there who didn't have access to health benefits and the protection of the union when producers would

try and take advantage of them. Now they have access to the stewards' office and they have the union advocating for them. So it's been an incredible game changer in the area.

CB: I'll give a little bit of context to the phrase term agreement for those who may not know. So a term agreement is something that you sign with a company for multiple years. So now that all of this amazing, incredible organizing has happened, it opens the door for the business representative to go in and negotiate an agreement that will last one year, five years, however long you negotiate the term for. So with one company, we've got a two -year term agreement and another, we've got a three -year term agreement. And that provides stability for the workers in that area, knowing that they're year over year, but without the organizing, those conversations, those critical negotiations cannot happen the same way. We can reach out and offer a one -off voluntary recognition agreement to non-union producers, but they're not that motivated to sign them because then they're held accountable. And so it's just organizing is such a critical piece of work to any labor organization and I for one am deeply grateful for our organizing department.

HB: Sano, you have a long resume working for unions all over BC and in Canada. Why did you choose to come and work here at 891?

S: I think that's a bit of a sappy story. I had, you're right, been a labor organizer for a very long time. It is a very stressful job and you do take on a lot of other people's problems and that's part of your job. I felt a bit worn down after maybe 13 or 14 years of doing this and oddly, fell into film where I got a role doing stunts and background on the production of Shogun that shot here. And it is difficult to describe how wonderful that production was, because as a Japanese Canadian I had always wanted more Japanese community around me and that production provided that. To the point that I still have all of those friends and community around me, one of the wardrobe aunties during the production was the person who outfitted my kimono for my wedding, photographer from the Japanese community who was like the videographer for my wedding, and it was really, really wonderful and soul -feeding. And I started to think maybe this industry is somewhere I belong. And I wasn't sure how that would take shape because the only thing I really knew how to do was organize. And I was trying acting, which I'm not good at, by the way. And I ended up getting a call from the business rep at the time, Phil Klapwyk, who offered a role organizing and said that it would be really beneficial for a lead organizer at 891 to have industry experience and that I was perhaps one of the only people who had that.

CB: Not to make your cheeks go red or anything, but you are one of the most sought-after organizers in this province. And I would love for you to talk about some of the education that you've developed for our union and for the BC Federation of Labour, and how important that is to you.

S: Thank you for those words. I would not describe myself as such, but I have asked or been asked rather to help the BC Fed develop training and so this past year I've done that and it's gone really successfully actually. I think that the trainings were very well attended, and people left and filled out the feedback surveys with a lot of energy and good positive feedback. So I feel pretty good about BC Fed trainings that we've helped develop. The CLC also puts on a winter school and we help there in terms of trainings and other unions also, such as CUPE, ask sometimes, which is always an honor. In general, I think that training is a key to a lot of different problems that we have in solving those problems. For example, organizer burnout is a constant problem that all organizers face. And I think that training is one of the keys to not feel burnout. For 891 specifically, we've developed training for members to and both internal and external organizing, and we are about to launch that soon.

HB: So Conor, you have the longest working relationship with IATSE. You're the recording secretary for Local 118 and president of Local B778. Can you share for people maybe who aren't quite aware of how all of those different locals work together in what it means to be part of the bigger picture of labor here in BC?

CM: Sure. On a very surface level, there are either 9 or 10, depending on when the newest one comes into being, IATSE locals that have jurisdiction in BC across the live performance, entertainment, animation, VFX and general arts workers. That is to say, there are a lot of different IATSE locals in British Columbia representing different workers. We try our best to work together and all pull in the same direction and to be coordinated with one another while we can but it is a definitely a different situation, in some of the smaller provinces who might just have one or two IATSE locals who represent all the workers in that province. So I think we're very lucky here in BC to have such a wealth of locals interested in representing different types of workers. We try to come together in IATSE district conventions and our national Canadian convention and

through our participation in district labor councils, the BC Federation of Labor, and all the way up to the Canadian Labor Council.

HB: To shift here a little bit, I want to go back to something Sano said about the commonality of organizer burnout. That's not something that's uncommon in motion picture workers, burnout, overwork, the stress that comes in both industries. You've actually done research on in terms of the labor that comes alongside precarious work and gig work. Can you speak a little bit about how that impacts your organizing with 891 workers?

CM: Certainly. So a few years ago, I studied at Simon Fraser University in the sociology department doing a thesis on labor studies specifically focused on Canadian theater and live performance designers, which is where my background was initially. And I went across the country and interviewed a bunch of theater designers and basically asked them what working conditions do you find challenging and what would you like to do to improve your working conditions. And I mean first and foremost it forced me to learn how to talk to people about what they do- does not come naturally to me but is an essential part of organizing - but getting to talk to so many different workers from different backgrounds who did different things was wonderful practice and training for organizing workers on film sets of which there are, I mean, in 891, 19 different departments, but outside of 891, a bunch of other different jobs as well and being able to talk to people from different backgrounds who do different things to find those commonalities and find what unites them together is essential to organizing.

CB: So, Sano, I wanna know who is an organizer? And speaking of backgrounds, what is your background?

S: To the first part of the question, I think anyone can be an organizer. I think it's just about showing leadership. And so I think people generally choose to show their leadership in whatever situations they feel comfortable, or possibly even uncomfortable, in. My background is, I was recruited into labor from Unite Here Local 75, which is the hotel workers local in Toronto. And they recruited me to become the first salt in the Canadian Unite Here Salt Program. A SALT is someone who specifically goes into a non-union environment with the express purpose of unionizing said environment. So I became a mole in a hotel to specifically unionize it from the inside and the underground.

CB: So tell me, why do you do what you do? What drives you?

S: I think that there has always been something inside me that understood injustice in many different ways. I think being poor and a person of color forces you to learn that very quickly at a young age. Even when you don't have words to apply to it, you have the feelings that you're othered, that you're different for so many, so many reasons. I think that also as a male of color that the only real emotion that I was allowed to develop without being judged was anger. Tapping into that anger and using it took me a long time to figure out how to do and eventually I did figure out that using it for an actual political purpose is probably the most efficient way to use my energy.

HB: So we talked about this a little bit, but I'd love to hear your answer to it. How would you describe the wins that you've had so far? What are you proudest of in the time that you've been with us?

CM: I think first and foremost, the wins belong to the workers who did the actual incredibly hard and brave work of standing together, talking to their coworkers, signing cards, facing down producers, breaking the law with unfair labor practices, and ultimately coming together to successfully organize. And no one knows that better than Brooke. So she is the one who will provide you with like the best answer on that question. But what I am proudest of is that we were able to help these workers do what any workers can inherently do - come together and build worker power. The legal structures to make that happen are purposefully confusing and difficult and intended to make it harder for workers to build their power. So the most important thing for us to do and what I'm proudest about is when we can provide the little bit of extra help to navigate those processes to make it as easy as possible for workers to organize.

CB: So, if I'm an 891 member and I'm on a non-union set and I think, gosh, this needs organizing, what am I going to do?

BT: Well, as an 891 member, it depends if they are familiar with the organizing program or not. If they've heard about the organizing program or if they've had contact with the organizing department, hopefully they feel comfortable establishing that connection with the department to help facilitate an organizing campaign. The

other option is perhaps the member has not heard of the organizing that's been happening. And so that introduces the concept of internal organizing where Sano, myself, and Connor are actively focusing on developing the organizing program so that the membership is aware of what external organizing is, what it looks like, and how to organize that campaign.

CB: And often times workers fear the process of organizing and as Connor stated, this is all about their sort of tenacity and courage and solidarity to stand up to unfair working conditions. So maybe Sano, what would you say to someone who is concerned about employer retribution or any sort of backlash?

S: First I'd say that that's a valid feeling. Our industry is pretty famous for that fear, without the organizing process. You make enough mistakes, and you're blacklisted forever and ever and ever. It's everyone's worst fear. I've heard it a thousand times. The flip side is if that fear is already there then it doesn't change if you organize or not because it's there. So are people taking a risk? Yes. There is no real situation that I know of, where human rights are won without a big fight. And that is a choice that people have to make to win rights. So I think the most important thing is that everyone realizes all of those angles.

CB: And just to carry on that for Brooke. So you were part of that kind of a drive in Kelowna. You were part of that workers getting together, that solidarity. Can you explain what that felt like, what that was like for you?

BT: Yeah, so as I mentioned, I was really invested in this organizing program that was happening, so it was exciting to be a part of it, but I think the most rewarding element was seeing people come together, because a lot of the crew in the region who were doing these MOWs felt disempowered. They were trying to negotiate for better rates, better standards for their crews, and we're not getting very far in most cases. So, when we started talking about organizing on these productions, the crew felt empowered because first they felt heard. Seeing the crew come together and wanting to work as a collective unit, I think has left a really lasting impression on the crews in the region and has been what has led to the successes in the Okanagan, but also on the Island as well, we've seen it there. –

HB: So as one of the newer organized members into 891 coming from Kelowna, what would you ask of the administration, of the leadership within make 891 more equitable to members outside of the lower mainland?

BT: A big part of it is how the organizing program is framed. I think there's some fear, people are fearing that they're losing opportunities, so I think perhaps if the leadership had a consensus on what the program is about and then that messaging could be delivered through the membership as well, that the organizing isn't about taking away opportunities from the members. It's about having these non-union shows that are already gonna be filming, putting them onto 891 contract, which provides opportunities both for the members and for non-members to have access to the union and their hours for the health banks and all of that stuff.

CB: It's kinda like what the union's for, right?

HB: And we hear in lots of different places, people saying the union is the members and I can't help but wonder if you've seen a difference in the level of engagement then after organizing with those newer members wanting to participate more in the local.

BT: Definitely it's always about the individual relationships too that you're building up with the members but the new members that came into membership in the Okanagan we've been trying to establish that connection with them to make sure that they feel like they're a part of this union because Kelowna is, it's a few hours away from the lower mainland, right? So, there is a geographical distance there that some people feel. That's where the internal organizing also comes into place about engaging those memories and trying to bridge that gap between the two regions. So they feel like they're voice -herds and they are actually a part of this union.

HB: Do you have an answer to that too in terms of what could we say to the people listening about how to learn from these fresh lessons that the workers in Kelowna are bringing to us?

S: I think it's really important to actually just simply listen to the workers from Kelowna and from Victoria who have taken part in the program. I really believe that the large majority have had a very good experience.

CB: Can you tell us why Kelowna, why Victoria. And I know you're a strategist and a very keen one as well. So explain how the lower mainland will fit into this strategy and how you're building, cause it's very tactical.

S: Yeah, definitely. So as we've acknowledged, the program like this that could be so, so massive actually does need building blocks and foundations in the beginning. And so it is a slow build. Kelowna was specifically picked as a region because there was a pretty robust MOW hallmark production scene there that was majority non-union. And so we knew that there was talented crews that worked in the region that were producing films of a caliber that were sellable. That, plus the lack of ACFC in the region, allowed 891 to be the first in the region to speak to the crews about galvanizing and about organizing. And that was really exciting. People had already, of course, thought about their membership in 891, and at the time, probably were at a place where they could not figure out how to work at home in Kelowna and yet get into membership in 891. That was the reason why we focused on Kelowna first. After that, it was decided that we would expand the program to the Island as well. With a similar analysis, are there crews making movies, and what is the level of presence of ACFC? In Victoria, the level of production is about the same as Kelowna. There's consistent MOW and Hallmark work. There's a few differences, one being that ACFC is very present on the island. What that means is that ACFC could also sign a non-union movie to make it unionized and then that's final. There's nothing else that we as a 891 can do about that. So that is a layer of challenge that we know of in Victoria. There was a lack of that in Kelowna and hence we picked Kelowna first. Now this year, we are in Victoria. The program is going very well, and it doesn't seem to slow us down that ACFC is present in the region. After that is where both the small community of non-union potential members in Kelowna, with the members in Kelowna, and the majority of community in the Island being members, now learned what organizing is. Moving that now to the lower mainland is the plan, as we've had success after success with our campaigns and proven to people in slightly lower stakes areas that it works, we can now tackle the lower mainland and larger production companies that like to do non-union.

CB: Thank you for explaining that. And I just really want to reinforce the messaging there that these are shows our members are working on already. And so organizing has a huge benefit to the membership. Can you explain the importance to our membership of card check, what card check is, and how it helps to expedite the process, particularly with film organizing?

CM: So previous to the inaction of card check legislation in British Columbia, if at least 50 % of workers signed representation cards, then a secondary vote would be held as to whether the union would be formed or not. The signing of representation cards was just to trigger a secondary vote, which caused two issues. One, workers are essentially asked to vote twice for the same thing in a largely redundant process. But even worse, the time between the initial application being filed and the vote gave the employer time to run a pretty vicious anti-union campaign to try to convince workers to vote no in that second vote. So thankfully, Card Check has really democratized the process for workers, wherein if at least 55 % of the workers have signed representation cards, the union is automatically formed, and they don't have to face any kind of vicious anti-union campaign. A secondary vote can still be held if 45 to 55 % of cards are signed, but if workers are above 55%, the union is automatically formed. And the protection that that gives to workers is immeasurable in terms of ensuring that their employer is not putting direct pressure on them to not unionize.

CB: And so this is really important because the United /conservative party has said they will immediately eliminate card check and the NDP have reinforced their message of importance of card check. And I think just on an 891 level to bring it back to our membership, it is also very important for the membership to understand where candidates running for executive board, president, senior steward or business rep, stand on the issue of organizing and card check. Thank you, Sano, Conor, and Brooke for coming in today. It's been a really enlightening conversation.

HB: I learned a lot. Thank you so much.

S: Thank you.

BT: Thank you for having us.

CM: Thank you.

HB: And that's a wrap for another episode of Apple Box Talks.

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