

The Crises of Leadership in B.C., 1983

Anatomy of a Sellout

Review of Bryan D. Palmer's *Solidarity: The Rise & Fall Of An Opposition In British Columbia*

by Chris Knox

In class-divided society history based on allegedly "non-class" objectivity obscures rather than clarifies reality. Marxist social science—which seeks to change the world, not just study it—finds the truth by placing itself squarely on the side of the working class in the struggle for socialism. It is rare to find good studies of contemporary history which are really based on this Marxist understanding. For this reason, socialists, labor militants, and all those seeking Marxist clarity, should welcome Bryan Palmer's first-hand study of the class upsurge in British Columbia in the summer and fall of 1983, known as the Solidarity movement.

Influenced by right-wing ideologues and a notorious local "think tank" for social retrenchment, the ruling Social Credit party under William Bennett in that year launched a vicious, across-the-board attack on social services, education, minority rights and the trade unions. Under the quaint rubric of "downsizing" government, Bennett's July budget and package of 26 bills eliminated whole categories of social services, abolished the Human Rights Commission and rent controls, drastically increased class sizes in public schools, and virtually ended all the rights and functions of public-sector trade unions, among other things. The government wanted 1600 public service layoffs and the right to fire public workers without cause. As Palmer puts it, "In one devastating blow Bennett and the Socreds sought to liberate capital from the fetters of the post-war settlement," in which containment of the class struggle was achieved in exchange for legalized collective bargaining, unemployment insurance and other social services.

The response to this fusillade of "takeaways" proved once again that the British Columbia working class is the most militant in English-speaking North America. As hundreds of public workers were fired before the ink was dry, many more walked off their jobs to attend mass rallies demanding withdrawal of the entire legislative package. In Kamloops workers occupied a hospital for the mentally handicapped in order to keep Bennett from closing it and turning the patients out into the streets. Leftists of all stripes and rank-and-file unionists formed coalitions, such as the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition, to fight the government's attack and to pressure the B.C. Federation of Labour (the "Fed") into action.

The mass mobilization was marked from the beginning by a strong sense of unity between organized workers and the other sectors—drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of the oppressed—affected by the attacks: the elderly, women, students, the handicapped and the sick. BC's Chinese and Indian-derived minorities were also very much involved, as the Socred measures threatened to unleash barely-restrained racist forces in a province

with a long history of racist attacks. That this movement had revolutionary potential was evidenced by one speaker at a Solidarity mass meeting, who said that the government was "calling it revolution." While the situation was not yet pre-revolutionary, the mass mobilization could have, and should have, smashed the Socred offensive with a province-wide general strike by organized labor.

The assumption that there would be a general strike was everywhere, from calls by numerous union bodies, to placards seen frequently at demonstrations and rallies, etc. Yet the timid, legalist Fed leadership of Art Kube & Co. sought from the beginning to channel the movement in a "safe" direction. When the Fed brass presided over a rally of 50,000 in Vancouver (many of whom were striking illegally), many leftists and militants were duped by the bureaucrats' apparent commitment to the struggle. Drawing on numerous interviews conducted with principal figures after the main events, however, Palmer shows that this "commitment" was a fraud from the beginning. In one instance, George Hewison, a well-known supporter of the Communist Party, who was a prominent organizer of the early rallies, told Palmer that Kube "virtually ordered me to call it [one of the rallies] off."

Art Kube's real problem with Solidarity—which eventually led him to break down and cry on national television—was how to balance the bureaucracy's commitment to capitalist legality and parliamentarism, with its need to be in control of the mass movement in order to contain it. When the Fed did reluctantly "hop on the bandwagon," it formed *two* organizations—Operation Solidarity for the unions, and the Solidarity Coalition for non-unionists—both tightly controlled through their purse strings and hand-picked leaders.

Throughout the 100-day struggle, Fed leaders constantly coordinated their actions with the leaders of the New Democratic Party (NDP), Canada's parliamentary-cretinist labor party, despite the social democrats' inability to resist Bennett and their arrogant condescension toward the mass movement. Illegal walkouts and rallies were curtailed, and replaced with petitions and "education." Kube next announced his intention to *abandon* all issues except immediate union demands! In the end, the Fed leadership called off an escalating series of public employees' strikes in return for a vague verbal deal with Bennett which was never even announced publicly, let alone ratified by Solidarity or any union organization! Naturally, Bennett began renegeing on his "handshake" almost immediately. The sellout came only hours before ferry, bus and other municipal workers were set to bring Vancouver, B.C.'s only big city, to a virtual standstill. The pickets were called off, and by the morning of 14 November, as Palmer puts it, Solidarity "was a dirty word."

The deal allowed public-sector unions to negotiate exemptions from a provision of Bill 3 allowing indiscriminate firings. This followed the precedent set by the striking Government Employees Union (BCGEU), which “won” such an exemption for itself. But the BCGEU’s “no-concessions” contract did not restore any of the 1600 jobs the government wanted to be rid of! And the other unions facing contract deadlines were left to fend for themselves, as the BCGEU returned to work. The other sections of the population were left to swing in the breeze with a promise of “advisory bodies” to hear submissions on some provisions of the bills!

While some militant actions—including an occupation of Bennett’s office, and a mass “visit” to a minister’s home (dubbed “Luncheon with Gracie”)—took place outside of the Fed’s control, in the end, the reformist leadership’s grip was lock-tight. The Fed bureaucrats’ divide-and-conquer, two-organization policy worked, as the tops of both Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition separately bought the deal. While there was plenty of recrimination after the sellout, throughout the struggle there was no organized opposition warning of the impending betrayal, or advocating a course toward victory through class-struggle action and a general strike to reverse all the Socred legislation. Such an opposition would have had to have been rooted within the unions and other mass organizations, but *independent* of the bureaucratic structure. Palmer’s account spells out how this could have come about through democratically-elected strike committees in every work place, “which could have then co-ordinated activity with non-union participants in the Coalition and formed labour-centred municipal, regional and province-wide strike committees.” At that point it would have been possible to take “direction of the strike and Solidarity as a whole out of the closed hands of the labour bureaucrats.”

Only the Communist Party has the organizational strength to have implemented such a policy on a large scale; but the Stalinists’ subservient marriage of convenience to the Fed bureaucracy was more important. CP militants took the initiative to prod the Fed into motion, but the party’s position from the beginning was that unity must prevail within the labor movement *regardless of the cost*. CPers played good-soldier roles throughout the upsurge while the CP paper, the *Pacific Tribune*, covered up for the bureaucratic sellout, calling it a “limited victory” and burying any criticisms (16 November 1983).

The CP thought Palmer’s book sufficiently important to warrant a lengthy attack in the 4 March *Pacific Tribune*. The “review,” by Fred Wilson, is really a diatribe complete with personal denigration and absurd charges that the book is an attack on trade unions and working people, etc. Wilson denies the “limited victory” line—though the 1983 statement appeared under his byline!--as well as the comments of George Hewison to Palmer in an interview. (Hewison might well wish to erase

comments such as, “You don’t worry about the price” that the movement will pay for uncritical loyalty to the bureaucracy but the editors of his paper—perhaps in the spirit of *glasnost!*—printed a reply from Palmer on 22 April which pointed out that the interview was taped with Hewison’s permission and is still in the author’s possession!) Wilson really outdoes himself when, after his page-long discussion of Palmer’s book, he concludes that, “This is not a book to be purchased, read or debated by the left”! What cynical arrogance! The militant workers of B.C. will not be taken in by such a crass, self-serving attempt to squash a devastating critique of Stalinist betrayal at work.

Unlike social science from a bourgeois or New Left perspective, in which assumptions are made up as you go along to “explain” a present in its own terms, Palmer’s short but succinct work grounds its analysis in the historic lessons of the class struggle internationally, as expressed in the writings of leaders such as Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky. In Trotsky’s comments on general-strike action in France in the 1930’s, or in Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike*, the problems faced by the B.C. workers in Solidarity are illuminated for all to see: the trade-union officials, conservatized by their role and seeking only to contain and defuse the mass struggle; and the social democrats, who are so fixated on the next election that they turn their backs on the struggle in the streets. That is why the NDP charlatans, trade-union sellouts, and their hangers-on in the CP don’t want workers to read books like this.

Palmer’s conclusion, that the defeat of movements like Solidarity at the hands of their own leaderships can only serve to undermine future struggles, is being confirmed in B.C. today as a new Fed leadership, after calling a *one-day* general strike to blow off steam, prepares to capitulate before the latest Socred anti-labor attack. All the more important, then, is Palmer’s additional conclusion, that the need for revolutionary leadership of the working class must be addressed in the manner indicated by Lenin and Trotsky. The book’s only real weakness (aside from its being too short) is that, while it discusses retrospectively a program for a Solidarity victory, it fails to discuss in a sufficiently *concrete* fashion the need to rebuild working-class leadership in the form of a Leninist vanguard party.

Perhaps the most important part of the book is the afterword, which is in part an auto-critique (written in 1986). Palmer points out that he, along with many other militants who were suspicious of the reformist trade-union leadership, was nevertheless “guilty of slighting the critical importance of leadership and program, trusting implicitly if uneasily in the momentum of the movement to carry the struggle forward.” In drawing the lessons of B.C. Solidarity, Palmer aptly quotes Trotsky’s observation that, “All now depends on the proletariat, i.e. *chiefly* on its revolutionary vanguard. The historical crisis of humanity is *reduced* to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.” ■