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## Where the river flows: The birth of solidarity in B.C.

Diamond, Sara

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# WHERE THE FRASER RIVER FLOWS

## THE BIRTH OF SOLIDARITY IN B.C.

FOR THE CITIZENS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, THE sun set on one world on July 6th, 1983 and rose on something completely different the next day. With an astounding arrogance, the reigning Social Credit party introduced a legislative package designed to obliterate many of the services and rights won through decades of political struggle. Their plans directly contradicted their May 7th electoral platform of restraint, job creation, guarantees against public sector job loss, medicare extra-billing, etc. Despite a rhetoric of restraint, the new budget boosted provincial government spending by 12%, with a half a billion dollars going to such successful mega-projects as B.C.'s moribund coal industry.

### SARA DIAMOND

THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS assault on the province's standard of living comes directly from B.C.'s Fraser Institute, an economic policy group which is the Canadian equivalent of Milton Friedman. The Institute's funding is strictly multinational and their vision of economic and political well-being runs somewhere

between the streets of Santiago in September of 1983 and Reagan's America. In their brave new world all social services, from health care, to education and counselling, would be run by private industries on a "pay as you go" basis. As one Fraser seer stated, it's the existence of services for single mothers that create single

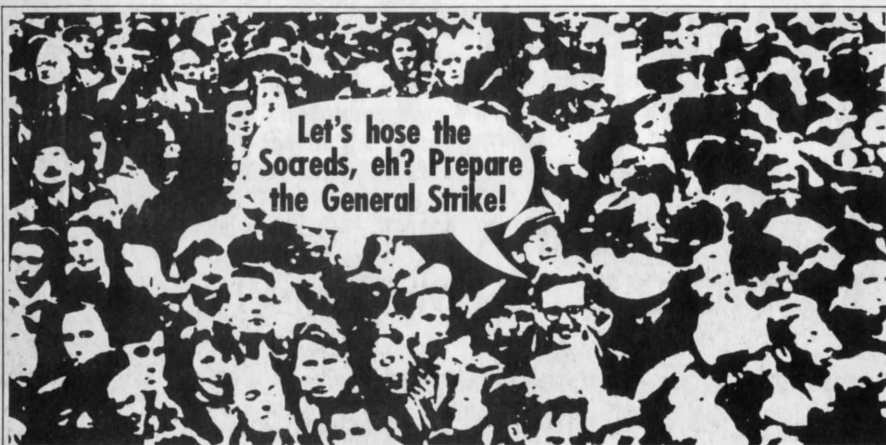


Courtesy Socialist Challenge

mothers; unemployment insurance and welfare that create unemployment, and so on. No surprise then, that as the B.C. government cut millions from the public education budget, it sank additional millions into private schools. Grace McCarthy, the Minister responsible for "human resources" in B.C. assured us that the church and family would pick up the slack, just like in the "good old days". A perfect rationale for eliminating support for incest and child abuse victims, and sending them back to daddy.

The government's goal is a complete restructuring of social relations including a decline in the real wages of workers, the gutting of union protection (the major block to all-out exploitation) and the elimination of all governmental barriers to a free marketplace — such as Human Rights legislation, the Rentalsman, rent controls, consumer protection laws and agencies, medicare, and employment standards legislation. Linked to this is the centralization of government, increased surveillance and use of the courts, and the introduction of microtechnology on every level in both the public and private sectors.

With this in mind, the Social Credit government introduced 28 pieces of legislation and a new budget. Public funding for education, health care, social services, environmental protection and forestry maintenance was drastically reduced: twenty-five percent of public sector jobs would be cut in 1983. Health legislation increased user fees; it allowed the Medical Services Commission to restrict the



Courtesy Socialist Challenge

# THREE THOUSAND TEACHERS WILL LOSE THEIR JOBS, IN ADDITION TO SEVEN THOUSAND TEACHING JOBS ALREADY AXED

number of doctors on the medical plan in a given area, to restrict services that a patient may receive and to have access to confidential medical records. It enabled the creation of a three-tiered medical system with extra-billing and opting out from medicare permitted.

The powers of local school boards, college boards and municipal governments were removed and placed in the hands of the provincial cabinet. B.C.'s effective thirty person Human Rights Commission was dismantled, to be replaced by a five person appointed council with no enforcement powers. Proposed revisions of the Human Rights Code would allow discrimination on the basis of language, weight, height, pregnancy and sexual orientation. The burden of proof would now be on the complainant who would have to pay the costs of the complaint as well as prove that there was "intent to discriminate". Legal aid was drastically cut.

Employment standards legislation was revised: workers with union contracts would no longer be covered. This excluded thousands of women from maternity leave protection and equal pay, and many workers from overtime and job security rights. Employers could now apply for union decertification when a contract expired.

Public sector legislation extended wage controls (minus five to plus five percent), and allowed firing without cause with no regard to seniority, opening the door to wholesale union-busting and sexual harassment. Provincial employees could no longer negotiate working conditions, such as contracting out, lay-off procedure, shift schedules, etc.

There has been a 41% cut to post-secondary student assistance and cuts in post-secondary funding. Tuition fees have sky-rocketed. The Greater Vancouver school board lost \$27 million dollars from its budget. Three thousand teachers will lose their jobs, in addition to seven thousand teaching

jobs already axed. (Student:teacher ratios are already 1:40 in some schools.) Daycare subsidies for parents were cut. English as a Second Language and special needs programmes are going or gone.

Despite increased budget allowances for welfare, rates are frozen. Work incentive programmes for recipients, such as the C.I.P. grant of \$50/month to disabled community volunteers disappeared. The government "de-institutionalized" mentally disabled people, throwing them into the community with no support apparatus. Service cuts include: The Women's Health Collective; all birth control

counselling (Planned Parenthood, Serena, Woomb); post-partum counselling; family support centres; seniors drop-ins; the Linda Williams Community Correctional Centre for women; The Senator Hotel (residential drop-in for young prostitutes and street kids); child abuse teams; legal aid to battered and separated women; parent-support projects; family places (drop-ins); Vancouver Status of Women; consumer protection centres etc.

A new residential tenancy act will abolish the Rentalsman (ombudsman for renters), phase out rent controls, and give landlords the right to evict



Courtesy Solidarity Times

# ON OCTOBER 15, THERE WERE 60-80,000 PEOPLE CIRCLING THE HOTEL VANCOUVER, SHOUTING 'GENERAL STRIKE, GENERAL STRIKE'

without cause. Within weeks of its presentation there were reports of 80-100% rent increases and landlords refusing housing to minorities.

The legislative package declared open season on women, seniors, immigrants, children, minorities, lesbians, gays, trade unionists, small businessmen.... Its intent was to demoralize and isolate individuals, and to throw groups into conflict in their attempt to protect themselves against cuts. Instead, it gave birth to the broadest social movement in the province's history; a movement which had the potential to defeat the Socreds and win the hearts and minds of the B.C. population.

Soon after the budget came down unionists, feminists, community groups, churches, human rights advocates and minority groups came together to form the *Lower Mainland Coalition Against the Budget*. Organizing meetings for a new women's coalition, *Women Against the Budget*, drew over 300 women

from widely varied walks of life, creating an unprecedented unity around women's issues. Coalitions sprang up amongst tenants, minority groups, gays and lesbians; CLC affiliated unions and CCU unions dropped their historic differences and vowed to work together to defeat the legislation.

On July 23 the first anti-budget street demonstration brought out between 25,000 to 35,000 to Vancouver's B.C. Place. IWA leader Jack Munro stated the potential of the movement in a speech that day. "This government has offended every decent and right-thinking person in this province." Hannah Jensen, former director of the Human Rights Commission, captured the spirit of the demonstrators and the television cameras when she cried from the podium, "Human rights are not for sale!" Unfortunately, the Solidarity coalition would be.

By August, there was constant media coverage of the growing movement. News commentators followed

moves by each side, competing for predictions and urging a spirit of cooperation. Columnists bounced from empathy with Solidarity to criticisms of its growing militancy.

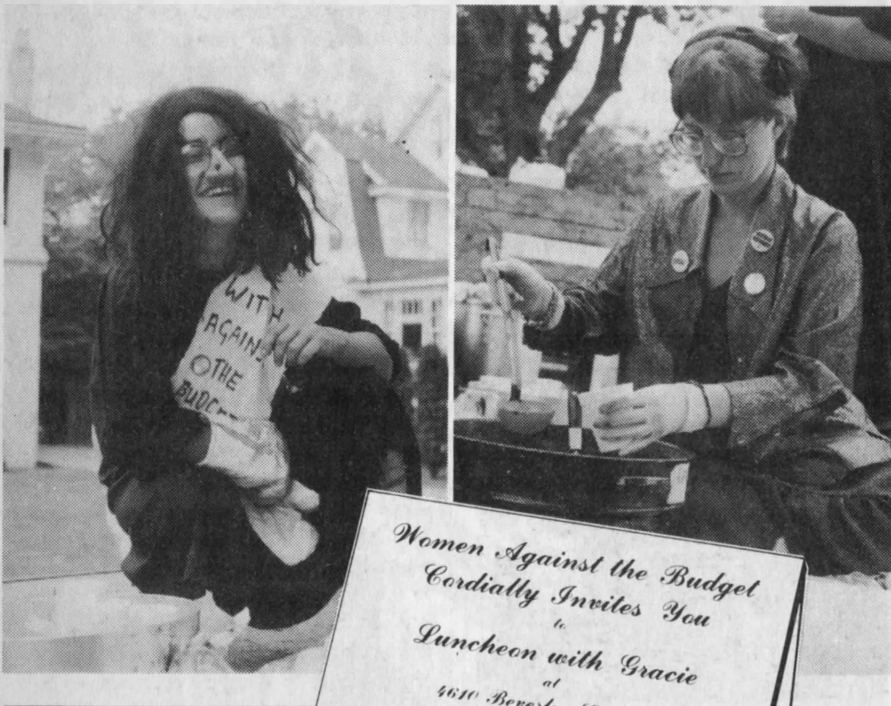
By August, the anti-budget movement was reorganized, at times forcibly into the Solidarity movement, comprised of the Provincial Solidarity Coalition, Operation Solidarity (the union component in the coalition and major funding source for action) and tens of local coalitions. On July 27, 20,000 demonstrators filled the lawn in front of the legislature; on August 10, 45,000 overflowed the Empire Stadium in Vancouver. There were demonstrations in smaller communities. On October 15, there were 60-80,000 people circling the Hotel Vancouver, shouting "General strike! General strike!" to the Socred convention meeting within the hotel.

Despite massive differences between the top union leadership, progressive union leaders, rank and filers and community groups, these were heady days, as thousands of newly politicized people 'spoke out', as feminist slogans became popular ideas and the province moved to the brink of a general strike — a strategy openly debated within the Solidarity movement. At it turned out, it was not the Socred budget that was to lead to isolation, depression and a sense of defeat, but rather betrayal by the leadership of the B.C. labour movement.

On November 1, the B.C. Government Employees' union struck to achieve a contract. All major sectors of the B.C. union movement geared up to walk out in a planned series of strike waves, leading to a full general strike. On November 15, teachers, education support staff, community college instructors and many faculty and students at university campuses joined the picket lines. Later that week, workers at several crown corporations struck, with escalating strike action planned for the following week. It was at this point that the Operation Solidarity leadership and the B.C. government "settled". —Sara Diamond

**SPRING 1984**

## WOMEN AGAINST THE BUDGET (WAB) ORGANIZED A SUCCESSFUL AND EFFECTIVE 'PICNIC' AT 'HUMAN RESOURCES' MINISTER, McCARTHY'S HOUSE



Marck Goertz