



Faculty of Art

1985

B.C. Solidarity: Western Expo sure as the breadlines grow

Diamond, Sara

Suggested citation:

Diamond, Sara (1985) B.C. Solidarity: Western Expo sure as the breadlines grow. Fuse Magazine, 8 (4). pp. 9-14. ISSN 0838-603X Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1508/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.

WESTERN EXPO SURE

As The Breadlines Grow

SARA DIAMOND

IT MAY SOUND LIKE A BAD JOKE, BUT THE SOCIAL Credit government really did declare September 30 to October 8 to be "private property week". For students, the unemployed, trade unionists, women, seniors and minorities, a special week is unnecessary. For us, this province is all about private property, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

AS THE WINTER FOG ROLLS IN, the breadlines are growing. The Food Bank, a private agency, originally intended to feed those not eligible for social assistance food vouchers and the unemployed, has increasingly become a mainstay of Vancouver's welfare recipients. But it has reluctantly begun to turn away those in need; there is simply not enough food to meet the demand. In March of 1983 the bank fed 2,700; this October 12,000 are expected to need the weekly bag of onions, canned soup, potatoes and other starches. Of these, 2,000 will leave empty-handed. Cuts in welfare that designate some as ineligible for assistance along with the low, frozen monthly rate mean that many simply do not have enough money to pay their rent and also afford food for themselves and their families. (A single person receives about \$360/month; the average rent for a one bedroom apartment in the East End is about \$350.)

Mill closures and public sector cuts continue. B.C. Hydro recently announced that thirteen hundred workers (fifteen percent of the crown corporation's labour force) will lose their jobs. B.C. Ferries is eliminating one hundred and thirty from its payrolls, drastically

cutting ferry service to the northern coast and islands by as much as seventy percent. The SocCredits are bent on decimating the trade union movement, using EXPO '86 to place construction unionism in peril, while threatening to remove the right to strike from the battered public sector. The government is restructuring and cutting both public and post-secondary education.

The Trade Unions

Throughout the summer, the EXPO board played cat and mouse with the building trades' unions. In May, the membership resisted the employment of non-union construction workers on the site through walkouts and mass rallies. After a round of hard bargaining in late June, the trades' leadership accepted a tentative pact that would require unionized tradesmen to work with non-union workers, but required non-union contractors to pay union scale, with the exception of the \$5.00 an hour benefit package. Union rates would apply retroactively to the non-union Kerkhoff contract, and to all future contracts and suppliers. In return, the unions would agree to forego invoking their non-affiliation

clause, which allows them to walk off jobsites where non-union workers are employed. The pact represented a major compromise on the part of the unions.

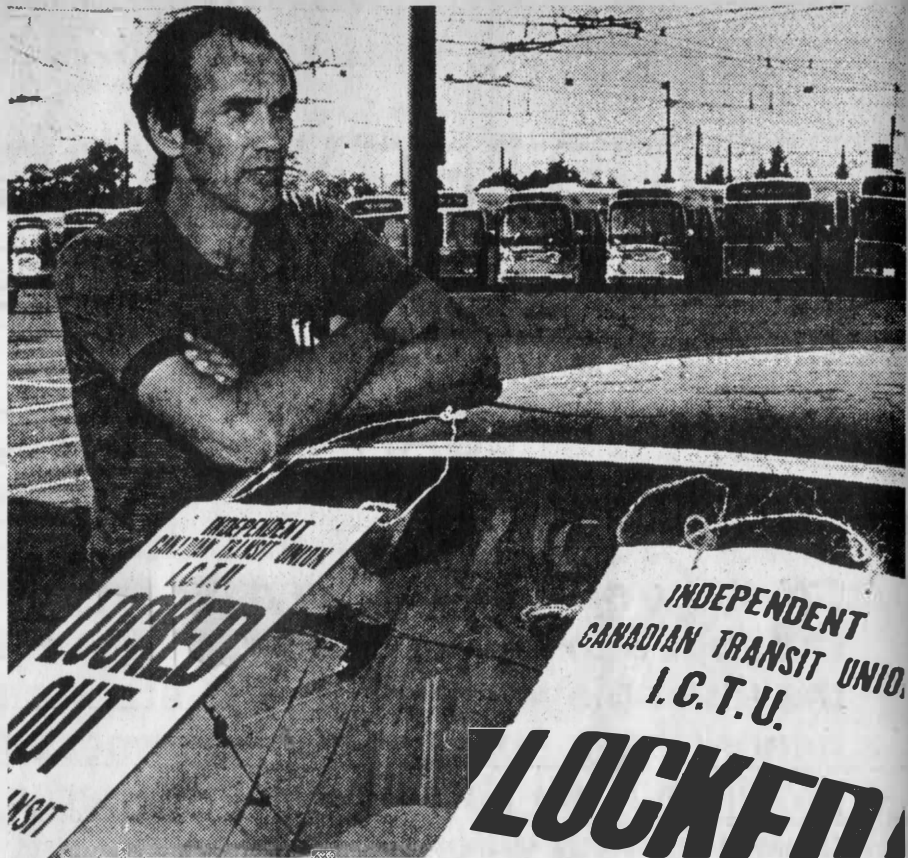
While the Carpenters' Union met the agreement with a powerful 95% rejection vote and called on the other trades to resist the infringement of non-union companies into largescale construction in B.C., other trades accepted the pact. To the embarrassment of their own negotiator, Jim Pattison, the EXPO Board overturned the agreement. They were not interested in paying union scale, especially retroactively, and felt that non-union companies were capable of building the entire project. In the following months, the board and the government took every possible initiative to move non-union contractors into the key place as builders of B.C.'s major housing projects, road construction and development projects.

In June, Chief Justice McEachern found a chastened building trades leadership to be guilty of a "criminal contempt for the purpose of advancing all unions", for their militant resistance against Kerkhoff's first major contract at the False Creek housing project in Vancouver. (See FUSE, Summer 1984.)

He imposed a \$30,000 fine on the unions. In response to the cancellation of the tentative agreement at EXPO the trades threatened to organize a national union boycott of the project. Meanwhile, the government ordered a two meter fence built between union and non-union sites at EXPO, to protect non-union firms from "property damage". Kerkhoff won the contract for the main gate, service tunnels and first aide building. On August 22, construction unionists walked off the site because of the premature arrival of Marbella Pacific, another non-union firm on the EXPO grounds. The walk-off was in defiance of threats by the president of EXPO to cancel all union contracts.

The unions' right to invoke non-affiliation clauses against non-union jobs at EXPO went to the Labour Relations Board for a ruling. In the past, the Board had decided that each of B.C.'s economic development projects constituted one large job site, because they were managed by a single agency. This had given the trades the right to refuse to work alongside non-union workers on that site. Given past precedents, it was likely that the LRB would reach the same decision for the EXPO site. Fearing such a decision, the Cabinet acted. On Labour Day weekend it passed a series of orders-in-council that designated each project within EXPO as a separate "economic development project"; EXPO now was made up of fourteen separate job sites, each a unique project! This tied the hands of the Labor Relations Board, invalidated the legal use of the trades' non-affiliation clause and de facto removed the right to strike from workers on the site. A victorious Kerkhoff, recently awarded yet another \$4.6 million dollar plum, declared, "The war is over...My feeling is that we'll see more and more of EXPO go non-union."

While the construction union bashing continued, the Cabinet and their friends, the Fraser Institute, took the ideological offensive. Industry Ministry Don Phillips pontificated that B.C. needed "free trade zones", where union rights would be prohibited. Such zones



"bus drivers want to be part of a transit system that works well"

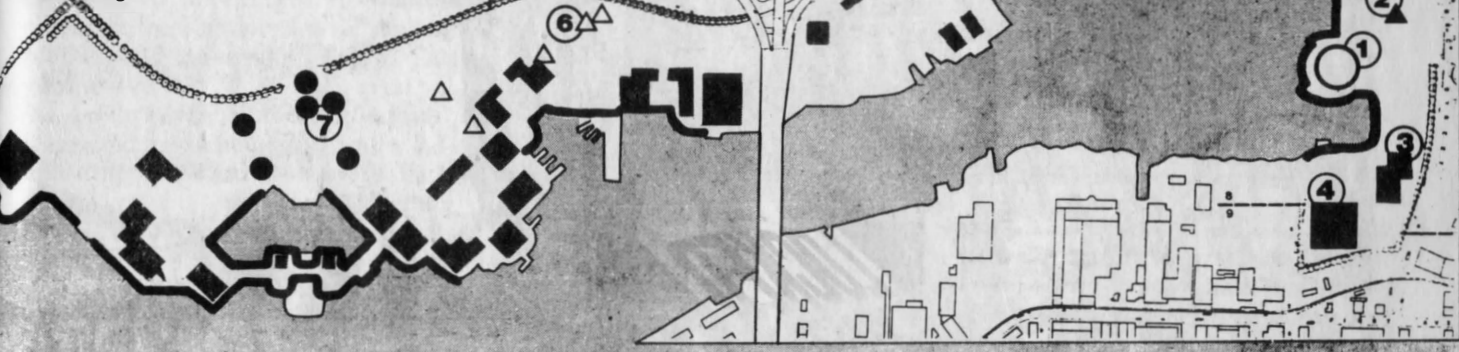
currently flourish in Malaysia, Mexico, the Phillipines and Ireland. Herb Greubel, a professor of Economics at Simon Fraser University and member of the Fraser Institute, elaborated on the concept in the *Vancouver Sun*. The zones would be "designed to change the legal environment in which unions operate." For starters, non-affiliation clauses would be outlawed, unions would be automatically decertified when a company went bankrupt, thus freeing the successor company from unionization; decertification would be easier and organization very difficult. The goal, of course, would be to attract foreign capital to British Columbia. The article cited supposed "intransigence" on the part of unions as basis for legislation. The membership of the Ironworkers' Union had recently turned down a sweetheart deal signed by their local leaders that would have allowed AMCA International (a US firm) to pay them at twenty-five percent less than the union rate, in "exchange" for the creation of seven hundred and fifty jobs.

This summer brought the first major public sector confrontation since last year's massive strike wave. For months, the Independent Canadian Transit Union has followed a cautious and

public-minded course in fighting for a collective agreement. Through their "unstrike", they wore civilian clothes, refused to collect fares and held rotating strikes, in the hopes of winning a contract and guarantees of a decent level of service for the bus system. The union insisted that drivers, "very much want to be part of a transit system that works well. They take pride in their jobs. There is nothing a bus driver hates more than missing connections or not picking up passengers because of overcrowded buses." The stakes in the dispute were high; the Metro Transit Operating Commission, with the support of the government, were trying to introduce three hundred and fifty part-time drivers, as well as cuts in service levels. Bus routes and driver schedules, traditionally divided by seniority, would now be arbitrarily assigned by the company. As public sympathy for the union grew, the MTOC put the brakes to the transit system in Vancouver and Victoria by locking out the workers. They hoped that a long shutdown would result in public outrage against the workers and create the conditions in which the drivers could be ruled back to work with an imposed settlement. The goals of MTOC were not

Where contracts have gone on the Expo site

- Dominion Steel
- J.C. Kerkhoff and Sons - awarded contracts
- J.C. Kerkhoff and Sons - low bid; contract not awarded
- Cans Construction
- Onyx
- Farmer Construction
- Seawall piling and decking
- Marbella Pacific Enterprises



only to crush the union but also to cut transit subsidies from Victoria by cutting the level of service. This would create the basis for a privatization of transit.

The lockout wore on through the summer, becoming increasingly known, with the help of the media and government, as the transit "strike". Surprisingly, the public did not abandon the union. Small merchants pressed for an independent industrial inquiry commission, echoing the union's demand, as did Seniors Without Any Transit (SWAT). This latter, highly active group, donated hundreds to the drivers' strike fund, picketed at bus stops to underline the lack of transit for seniors and developed a petition calling for the independent inquiry. The drivers bore the burden of the "marathon". The union had no strike fund and many lost mortgages, rental accommodation and cars as bills went unpaid.

At last, the government called in a one man independent inquiry commission. Despite the union's strong protest, they appointed Joe Morris, one time IWA honcho. Morris had absented himself from the labour movement for a number of years and was completely unfamiliar with the current B.C. situation. His proposal was a death knell for the union; it suggested a four year contract, accepted the basic

concept of management control of scheduling and did not include an exemption from the notorious Bill Three (a clause that other B.C. public sectors had won in the 1983 strike). This laid drivers open to intensive victimization. The lockout continued.

In early September, the Cabinet acted again, ruling the drivers and company back to work and threatening non-compliance would lead to new legislation removing the right to strike from B.C.'s 250,000 public sector workers. Although the B.C. Federation of Labour promised to support ICTU if it defied, the drivers had had enough. They returned to work and are currently awaiting the findings of Clark Gilmour, the province's chief arbitrator; he will develop the final arbitrated settlement. Bob McLelland, the province's labour minister, will soon initiate province-wide hearings to determine the merits of retaining the right to strike for the public sector in B.C. He has already publically stated that he is opposed to this right. All is not lost, however. To date, civic councils and administrators have called on the province to leave public sector collective bargaining, including the right to strike, intact.

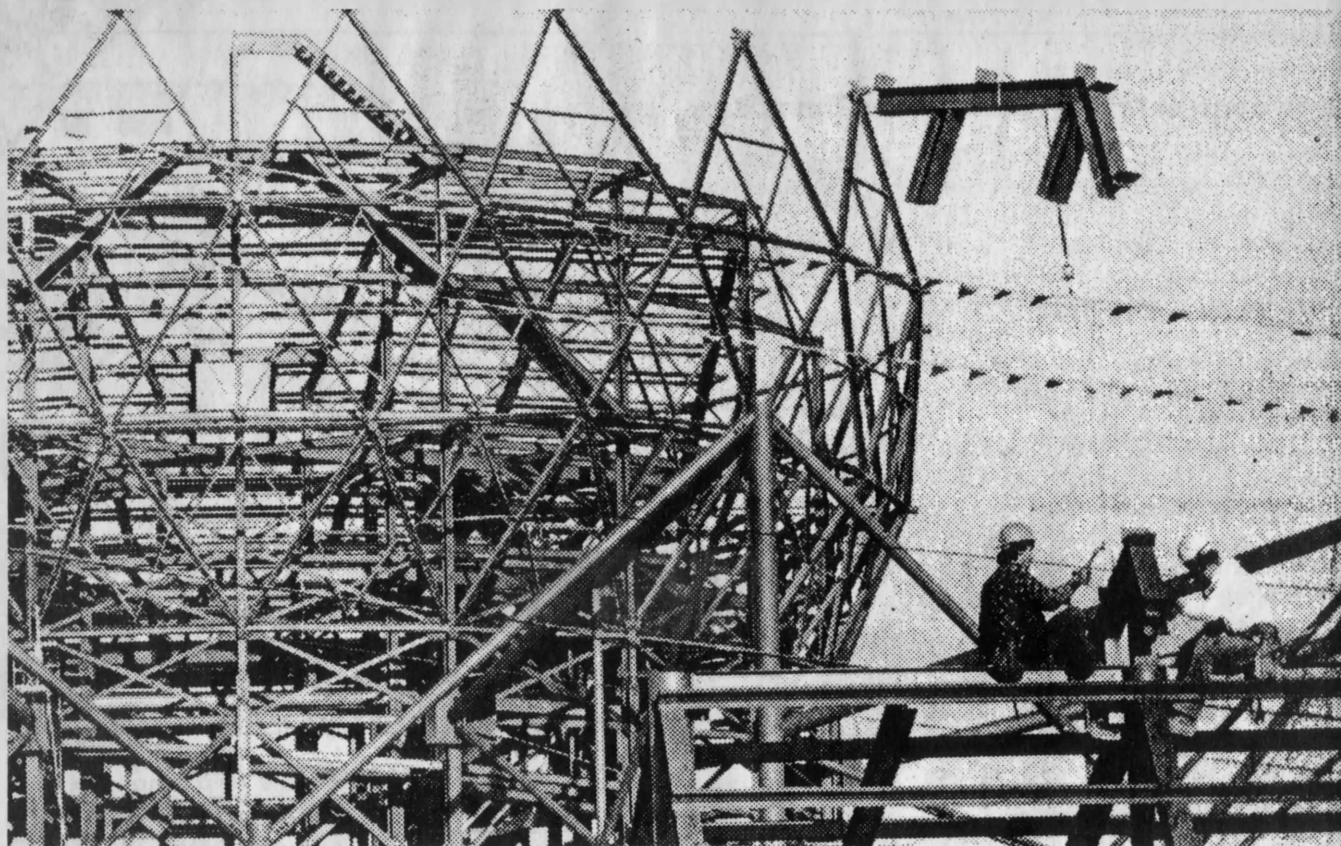
There is little respite in view for trade unions in B.C. Despite the resistance by busdrivers and construction tradespeople, the unwillingness of

the union brass to organize one consolidated fightback sets the way for future losses, as union after union goes down in isolated defeat.

Cutbacks

If any single group is victimized most by the province's government, it is children and youth. The SocCredits, ever Machievellian in its allocation of goodies; realizes that its voting base does not lie amongst those with school age children. Public education is being drastically cut and at the same time, restructured. B.C. is currently number ten of all provinces in terms of university participation and the amount of provincial wealth spent on education. The government is returning the public school system to Dickensian times. The recent white paper on education proposes streaming the public schools into three areas: arts and sciences; applied arts and science; and career participation. The core curriculum will require heavy doses of maths and sciences in all streams; arts, especially fine and performing arts, will be chopped out of existence.

The government introduced ill-prepared and badly administered Grade Twelve provincial exams last summer. Students are still awaiting their results in some cases, and hundreds have been unable to enter univer-



Brian Kent

Non-union workers at EXPO 86 site

sity this fall because their results were not yet tabulated.

The student/teacher ratio in some schools is up to one-to-forty. There are moves afoot to contract out libraries and testing. District budgets are tied to a rigid centrally computer-determined formula and are slated to decline in the next four years, despite rising costs. Children in northern schools may freeze this winter, as budgets cannot cover heating costs, transportation and teaching salaries. While public education is cut to the bone, millions are pouring into the private school system from a government that believes that the best "products" come out of these elitist schools. Cuts in social services intensify the cuts in education spending. As of this fall, there are no childcare workers (guidance counsellors) in the Vancouver system. Principals, overworked teachers and students have already protested the loss as children with problems at home and at school are thrown into direct confrontation in the classroom and corridors, instead of having the support and mediation of counsellors.

Post-secondary education is becoming inaccessible to most residents of B.C., at the same time as its quality

erodes. Universities are becoming "silicone valleys" as industrial parks are built at each campus, funnelling industrial dollars into contract work. The university will soon specialize in business training and "applied sciences". Campus administrations are wildly eliminating curriculum areas in line with provincial curriculum and development priorities. Arts faculties and fine arts are the targets. Last year's closure of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, one of Canada's best art schools, has been followed by a recent cut to Simon Fraser University's Centre to the Arts which amounts to one third of its \$1.5 million operating budget. Also to go are Latin American and African studies, Canadian Studies, language programmes and recreation training. In their place, millions of dollars are to be diverted into a new applied sciences department that will contain computing science, microtech communications, and engineering.

While tuition fees skyrocketed by 116%, the government completely eliminated grants to students, now only loans are available. The provincially funded summer student job programme has also been vaporized.

B.C. pays only twenty percent of the costs of post-secondary education, with the feds picking up eighty percent. The province can allocate these dollars as it sees fit and has cut back on its contribution as federal monies have increased.

Wage levels of teaching staff fall as course loads rise. SFU faculty felt compelled to accept a four per cent cut in wages; other faculties have accepted wage freezes. At Okanagan College, the administration locked out teaching staff to try to force instructors to accept a twenty-five percent increase in teaching time and course loads, without any increase in pay. With the potential removal of tenure through Bill Three, falling wages and a lack of campus resources, many educators have either already fled eastwards or are contemplating the possibility in the near future.

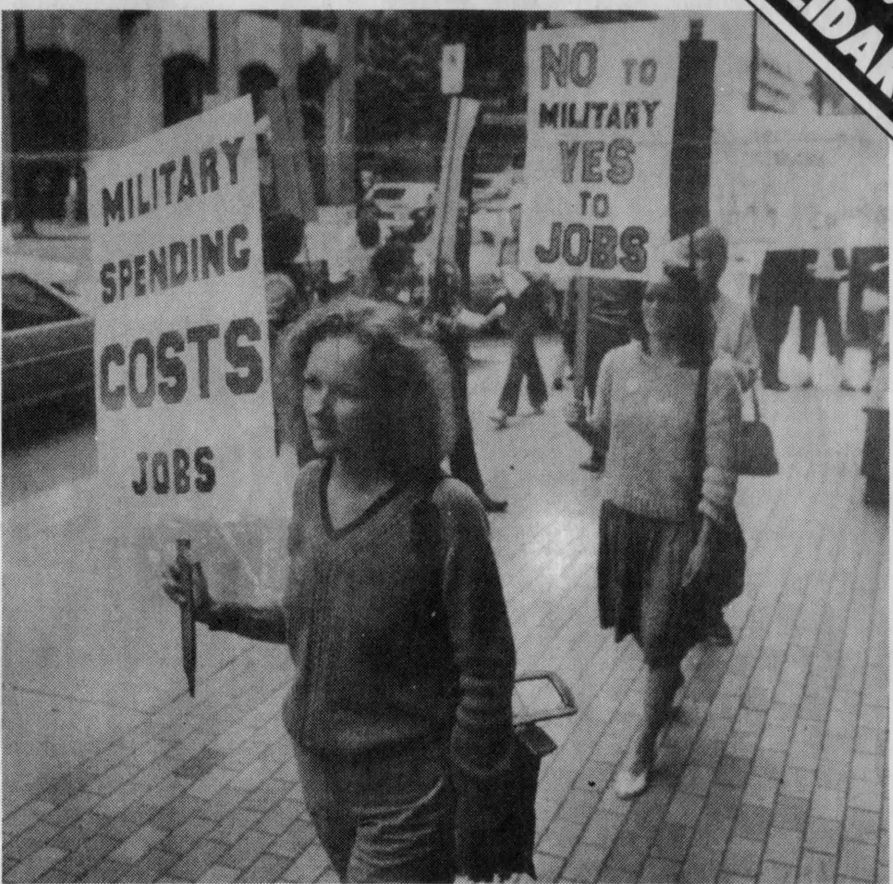
Service cuts continue unabated. In the summer of 1983 the occupation of the Tranquille longterm care facility by its staff made the national news. They were protesting the sudden and imminent decision to close the institution this fall, rather than to phase it out as had been previously planned by the Ministry of Human Resources. In the

Tribune

original plan, patients were to move into community-based care.

Now the crisis has come. Tranquille's residents are being scattered throughout the province, away from family support networks and into already overtaxed institutions. This decision was implemented by MHR without any consultation with parents, many of whom had arranged for their children to move into residential homes in the Kamloops area. As one mother said, "They got Russy. Can you believe that, they didn't even tell me, I didn't even get to say goodbye!" Depressed residents wept as the administration spirited them out the back door, avoiding the many picketing parents and disabled people in front. The protesters carried signs reading, "Homes not hospitals".

In desperation, families called on the provincial ombudsman to mediate. Based on assessments from the skilled medical staff at the institution, he castigated the government. His findings indicated that all but one patient could function outside of a hospital setting.



A demonstration of rejection against military service

When the SoCredits Speak They Mean Business

These attacks on human dignity, union rights and education are fed by a growing ultraright clamour. Brian Smith, the province's Attorney-General and chief strategist/"hero" of the campaign to remove prostitutes from Vancouver's West End, recently attacked the right to political protest. He pointed to a growing "dramatic and political defiance of the law," in his mind caused by the media's coverage of lawless conduct; the breakdown of standards of public morality, the rise of "fanatical causes" groups (such as environmentalists), for whom "disobedience is a religious cult" and the pre-occupation of legislators and government with legal process and not with the content of a crime. In particular, he attacked the labour movement, a "special interest group" for its lawlessness in picketing schools and courts. Smith cited lawyers who were willing to defend the trade union movement as one of the province's problems and ended with a fervent vow to destroy groups such as the Squamish Five.

Meanwhile, the SoCredits are busily preparing policy proposals for the

Mulroney steamroller. Their programme includes a freeze on federal hiring, a review of spending priorities, the dismantling of crown corporations and the cutting of "desirable but not essential federal services", as well as the entrenchment of property rights within the constitution.

This summer birthed a new strategy from the Employers' Council of B.C. to deal with the province's staggering unemployment rates. They suggest that Canada implement compulsory military service (the draft) so that young men on the dole can be bussed off to army camps and make-work projects, to instill discipline and keep them off the streets.

Resistance

Solidarity is over a year old in B.C. The annual July picnic brought out about five hundred. Amidst the myriad of speeches the highlight of the event was the highpowered DOA with their strong *General Strike*. The Operation Solidarity conference in June was lively, with over four hun-

dred delegates, many of whom were still smarting from the November strike sellout by the BC Fed leadership. Delegates pledged a budget of \$800,000 to continue the fight against the government. Papers at the conference proposed a variety of low key activities, such as the monitoring of labour code use and abuse and support for unions that defied the government. No mention of coordinated trade union action was made by the leadership. In the floor debate, delegates urged immediate action, a coordinated strategy and economic retaliation against employers who violated workers' rights.

The International Woodworkers of America is being torn by a wave of internal strife. At its current convention, Willie Fleming, a first aid man from the Zeballos mill on the island is challenging Jack Munro for the leadership of the union. Fleming felt inspired to run against Munro because of the leadership's unwillingness to fight the over 20,000 layoffs in the wood industry over the past few years. (Current cut-backs in forestry management by the province beckon to a continued down-



Peter Battilani

The NEW REALITY ... bus drivers' home will be a 1974 van

swing in the future. The government has reduced treeplanting and maintenance funds by thirty-two percent, research by forty-five percent and pest control by sixty percent.)

Munro defends the non-combative stance of the IWA, stating that a fightback would only bring defeat in the current context of international recession. The companies, he believes, simply cannot grant concessions. "There is no pot of gold that a fresh burst of militancy could open." Fleming, on the other hand calls for a fight for a thirty-two hour week with no loss in pay, voluntary early retirement, redirecting forestry investment to create jobs, organizing the unorganized, assistance for the unemployed and organizing towards a merger of the current three wood industry unions. Munro, under fire for his sellout of Solidarity, has stated that he was only the "messenger" of the BC Fed desire to end the strike, but that "governments are overthrown by general elections, not by strikes." Fleming is estimated to have the support of at least thirty per-

cent of the union's membership. The leadership will be decided by a ballot of all of the membership; if Fleming wins it will usher in a new era in industrial unionism in this province.

The NDP has kept a low profile since their leadership election, but recently offered an "olive branch" to the provincial government. The opposition proposed that the two parties meet to discuss ways of making the B.C. economy work better for the jobless. Bob Skelly, the new leader, suggested in his appeal that the time for confrontation was over and that the trade union movement needed to learn some new, less militant tactics. This was a leadership that was elected on its supposed willingness to lead an extra-parliamentary and militant fight by the party.

While there is little activity on the part of the Solidarity Coalition, its component groups continue to slog along. Women Against the Budget is planning another round of its popular Budget University for the spring. Speak Out Productions, an offshoot of

Woman Against the Budget, has just finished its first videotape, *Fight Back: Vancouver Transition House*, about the privatization of women's services in B.C. The ninety-six day occupation of the David Thompson University Centre by Nelson residents won them the centre's library, which the government had planned to dismantle.

Still, as the rain starts to fall the outlook is pretty bleak. Government cuts continue unabated, while many B.C.ers have not yet recovered from the defeat of Solidarity. Optimistic calls by some left forces to reorganize the Solidarity Coalition are not realistic in the face of massive disillusionment. B.C. residents anticipate yet another round of struggles as the federal government reneges on the once secure commitment to education, medicare and social services. The B.C. fightback will prove to be an important lesson in a battle that will soon have national dimensions.

Sara Diamond