

Handout 12d: Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition in British Columbia

DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

Fresh off an election victory in 1983, the provincial government tabled a breathtaking series of 26 bills slashing social services, public schools, and the rights of trade unions. A furious backlash developed against BC's "Reagan Revolution" that became known as "Solidarity," after the movement in Poland. Thousands joined: for the first time, unions and activists found a common cause. There had been no hint of such a program during the election; and yet, unlike in Poland, the conflict threatened to destabilize a democratically elected government, cripple the economy, and poison the working environment for years to come. The thankless job of peacemaker fell to Jack Munro, President of the IWA. At a private meeting, Munro and the Premier reached a handshake deal that averted disaster, and infuriated activists of all stripes.

When the Social Credit government introduced this unexpected list of bills before the Legislature on July 7, 1983, it resulted in the quick mobilization of individuals and groups across the political spectrum in British Columbia. Contained in these bills was legislation enabling increased governmental control over school boards and colleges, less enforcement of employment standards, the abandonment of the province's human rights commission, less medicare, increased wage control, and the 'gutting' of union contracts in the public sector, meaning employees could be fired without cause or in respect to seniority.

Immediately people started talking, getting together, and expressing outrage. A meeting eight days later saw a historic gathering of various trade unions from throughout the province, with Art Kube, President of the BC Federation of Labour bringing together representatives from every labour organization in British Columbia.

Operation Solidarity was formed, representing 400,000 workers. A protest rally was planned. Although organizers anticipated a strong turn-out, more than 20,000 showed up and marched through the streets of Vancouver. Another rally a week later, this time in Victoria, attracted 25,000 in front of the Legislature.

Throughout BC, in Kelowna, Nanaimo, Nelson, Trail, Kamloops, Cranbrook, Salmon Arm and other smaller towns, people came together and rallied on the streets. On August 10, 45,000 people showed up at Empire Stadium in Vancouver.

The Solidarity Coalition formed as an attached, but separate group during this time. Whereas Operation Solidarity was on the trade union side of the mobilized public, the coalition was a mixed group of activists and community members. Both groups expressed determination to stop what they viewed as the outrageously offensive proposed changes.

Yet the Socred government brushed aside these protests, refusing to take the outcry seriously.



They started all-night sessions to push through their changes, also introducing 'closure', which cut off debate and formal avenues for opposition members to challenge what they were doing. Not one to take this type of affront to political processes quietly, on October 5, 1983, former premier and leader of the opposition Dave Barrett (NDP) was forcibly removed from the Legislature after refusing to remain quiet in his objections.

Tens of thousands of workers were out on strike the following month. Other workers were on the verge of a walkout as part of an escalating strike strategy. Bennett was ready to talk and union leaders, if not the Coalition, were ready to hear what he had to offer. When an agreement was reached, the exhausted activists responded with anger and disappointment, largely because there was no formal announcement that outlined the terms of agreement. Even when details did emerge, however, many remained dissatisfied, because while Bennett made adjustments to some of the legislation affecting labour, the proposed changes in social policies escaped the agreement unscathed.



Bennett was able to proceed with his plans to implement change without the threat of serious disruption across the province. Although workers were back on the job, many activists outside of the labour movement were left outraged that Operation Solidarity stopped short of reaching all of its demands. The Coalition did not immediately disband, however, and continued pressuring the government to ensure greater public involvement in shaping the social and economic policies that governed their lives.

Bill Bennett retired three years later, and did not seek re-election. Operation Solidarity remains a source of contention within the labour and social movement in British Columbia, but many agree that for that brief moment in 1983 almost anything seemed possible.

<http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/project/damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-dont/>

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1.) Summarize the philosophy and goals of Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition.
- 2.) How did the concept of solidarity work in this case? What groups were involved?
- 3.) What was the role of labour unions in this story?
- 4.) Assess the success or failure of this movement. What went well, what did not? Why? What would you suggest could have been done differently, if anything?