

Becoming Common*Struggles of Public Sector Workers in British Columbia*

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Introduction

Since 1983, public sector workers have catalyzed large scale mobilizations against privatization in British Columbia. As the immediate producers of the public domain, their struggles have extended beyond specific wage demands, galvanizing popular opposition in defense of the "social wage". In this paper I will explore the roots of public sector struggles in the transition from Keynesian economic strategies seeking the alignment of mass production and mass consumption to neoliberal strategies grounded in the decomposition of these spheres through the creation and management of crisis. I will go on to argue that the recent labour struggles in the province should be seen not so much as a defense, but rather a creation of the commons through direct mobilization at the nexus of production and reproduction.

Real Subsumption and the Social Wage

The opposition of the "public" domain to the realm of "private" ownership is articulated in a context in which the means of subsistence are administered by a state apparently residing beyond the market. With the ascendancy of the welfare state following the Second World War, education, health care, and other services have become articulated as basic rights that can be accessed by citizens over and above the wage relationship. As people are no longer compelled to sell their labour power in order to

secure basic elements of their subsistence the state provides a space of refuge from the depredations of the invisible hand.

While the public domain provides a space of subsistence ostensibly beyond the forces of the market, it is actually deeply integrated into the process of production serving as a motor for capital accumulation. As Mario Tronti argues, "at a certain level of development this apparently external intervention is nothing more than a very advanced form of self-regulation of the economic mechanism" (Tronti, 1973). The continuing reproduction of capital demands intensive planning that crosscuts the entire circuit of production and reproduction. While production refers to the creation of surplus-value through the labour process, reproduction refers not only to the reproduction of the capitalist class and the working class, but also the reproduction of capital itself through the reintegration of surplus value back into the production process (Marx, 1957). With the intensification of production, there is a corresponding need to develop strategies of accumulation that go beyond the factory floor fusing together mass production and mass consumption and ensuring the ongoing reproduction of capital.

As capital was consolidated in an interlocking network of large conglomerates through the early part of the twentieth century there was increasingly a push to intensify the work process through the introduction of new technologies and management techniques. In 1911, F.W. Taylor introduced his principles of *scientific management*, arguing that productivity could be increased through breaking down the labour process

into its component parts. A rigid division of labour would separate the management, control, conception, and execution of the labour process. However, the decomposition of labour remained inadequate so long as it was restricted to the factory floor.

The tremendous increase in productivity through this time significantly reduced the costs for the reproduction of labour power demanding new strategies to enable the reintegration of capital back into the production process (Goldner, 1981). Exploitation at the immediate point of production was no longer sufficient; rather, there was a growing need to make “the whole life of the nation revolve around production” (Gramsci, 1971, 285). Hence, Gramsci points to the development of new strategies by industrial capitalists such as Henry Ford. By tying productivity increases to increasing wages, Ford was able to effectively combine Taylor’s program of quantification and deskilling on the assembly line with increasing mass consumption beyond the factory walls. Ford had the foresight to recognize that mass consumption could play a productive role; increasing wages would create a consumer base for his products, enabling the reinvestment of capital back into production.

However, the stock market crash of 1929 proved that Ford’s strategy was inadequate so long as it was not applied on a larger scale. The rapidly increasing output through this period was not matched by corresponding consumption, provoking a protracted crisis as surplus-value could no longer be reintegrated back into the production process. There was a need to restructure the wage in a manner that ensured its continuing

reinvestment back into production. Ultimately, this could only be accomplished through the intervention of the state. Thus, Gramsci argues that Fordism derives “from an inherent necessity to achieve the organization of a planned economy” (Gramsci, 1971, 279).

The birth of the welfare state signifies a formal shift in strategies. Its most influential architect, John Maynard Keynes argued that economic stability could only be ensured through the integration of mass production and mass consumption under the state. At times of economic crisis, Keynes argued, the state should increase spending through large public works projects to maintain levels of aggregate demand, reinvigorating the economy. The "social wage", established through the state administration of public services (education, health care, employment insurance, etc.), was linked to growing productivity on the factory floor, enabling the incorporation and management of aggregate demand.

Beginning in 1952, the Social Credit (Socred) Party maintained an enduring hegemony in British Columbia based on moderate Keynesian economic policies. Under the leadership of the agrarian and commercial petite bourgeoisie and the urban professional-managerial class, the Socreds pursued “province-building” projects, while at the same time cracking down on organized labour through a series of anti-union bills (Carroll & Ratner, 1989). Drawing on an economic boom in the resource sector, productivity increases were channeled into intensive capital projects administered by the

state. The Socreds developed a provincial infrastructure for capital accumulation through the introduction of health insurance, the expansion of public transportation, the nationalization of BC Hydro, and the development of post-secondary education.

The formal incorporation of trade unions under the state was undertaken in response to widespread disruptions on the factory floor. Throughout the Second World War workers often ignored the "no strike" pledge set down by the union leadership, directly confronting the intensification of the production process through a series of wildcat strikes, culminating in the massive strike wave of 1943. In 1944, the federal government responded by granting unions collective bargaining rights, transforming the tension between capital and labour into a "legal institution of society" guaranteeing the orderly development of labour claims and fueling the accumulation process (Tronti, 1973). As Palmer notes,

these rights were conceded precisely because they presented no fundamental challenge to the ruling order and, indeed, could be interpreted and lived in ways that in fact deepened and extended the hegemony of particular class interests ensconced in state power and secure in their material hold over productive activity in Canada (Palmer, 1987, 14).

By negotiating long term contracts, trade unions facilitated the uninterrupted intensification of production on the factory floor in exchange for increasing wages.

State recognition of collective bargaining right led to the tremendous growth of unions through the post-war period. By the 1950s, British Columbia had achieved the highest union density in North America (Carroll & Ratner, 1989). However, a "war of

position" taking place within the unions divided those seeking the alignment of wage increases with productivity increases from those fighting against the intensification of the work process. The growth of social democracy through this period was predicated on a fervent attack on union radicals as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) dedicated itself to ridding "British Columbia of communist domination" (cited in Palmer, 1983). Through the cooperation of the state, social democrats and the conservative elements in the union leadership, militants were systematically targeted and weeded out (Palmer, 1983).

In 1958, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) called for "a fundamental realignment of political forces in Canada in . . . a broadly based people's political movement which [would embrace] the CCF, the labour movement, farmer organizations, professional people and other liberally minded persons interested in basic social reform and reconstruction through our parliamentary system of government" (cited in Palmer, 1983, 288). The creation of the New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1961 reflected the formation of a new hegemonic bloc, seeking to integrate the demands of labour and capital through the extension of formal channels of regulation and mediation. The 1972 election of the NDP in British Columbia provided an early prototype. Under the leadership of Dave Barrett, the provincial government introduced a progressive labour code giving provincial employees collective bargaining rights and setting up the Labour Relations Board. They also extended these channels to other segments of the population through the partial democratization of social services, the pursuit of consumer's advocacy

and the promotion of human rights (Carroll & Ratner, 1989, 34). However, when confronted with a mounting economic crisis, the government began breaking strikes and imposing wage and price controls (Palmer, 1983, 291).

The Birth of the Crisis State

The "virtuous cycle" linking mass production to mass composition finally broke down in the late sixties and early seventies as aggregate demand no longer fueled investment. This occurred at the pinnacle of a new wave of resistance marked by a resurgence of wildcat strikes alongside the emergence of "new social movements" demanding the further extension of the social wage. The development of the social wage combined with the extension of collective bargaining through the post-war period culminated in the formation of public sector unions in the sixties and seventies. Large strikes initiated by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the public sector workers in Quebec fueled a new wave of resistance. However, with the deindustrialization of the advanced capitalist countries, the foundations for wage gains were eroding. Rising inflation was compounded with the onset of the oil crisis. "Stagflation" brought about a shift from Keynesian economic strategies to strategies of "restraint".

The "crisis" was used by the state as a means of decomposing emerging class solidarities, directly targeting public sector workers. The Trudeau government implemented a federal wage freeze in order to drive down real wages. Wage controls were imposed and the collective bargaining "rights" of public sector workers were

withdrawn. There was increasingly a shift from corporatism to “permanent exceptionalism”. As Panitch and Swartz note, the new legislation "made explicit the *ad hoc*, selective, 'temporary' use of coercion, not merely directed at a particular group of workers affected or at the particular issue of 'emergency' at hand, but rather designed to set an example for what was considered to be appropriate behaviour throughout the industrial relations system" (1993, 26). This culminated in the restriction of wage hikes for public sector workers in 1982, with the appointment of a government board to oversee all wage settlements. The provinces quickly followed suit with policies of "restraint" pursued in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia.

While the integration of mass production and consumption through state planning established a space for subsistence beyond the market, it also laid the basis for the decomposition of class solidarity along these same lines. The populist portrayal of the welfare state as a commons threatened by the enclosures of global capital overlooks how the welfare state was grounded in strategies for the intensification of production. The extension of the social wage was directly linked to growing productivity on the factory floor.

The shift to neoliberal strategies simply intensified the accumulation process through the adoption of flexible mediation supported by state coercion. As Negri argues, “This ‘neoliberal’ version of the crisis-state form only brings into sharper relief what were the essential characteristics of the Keynesian state-planner form, translating them

into explicitly authoritarian terms” (Negri, 1988). State planning has developed to such an extent that it has become capable of producing and managing crisis. The crisis becomes a sovereign power driving the process of accumulation. It creates the basis for “permanent exceptionalism”, affirming and negating the welfare state in the same moment.

The crisis was internalized through the shift from Keynesian policies of deficit spending to policies of “restraint”. Economic crisis became articulated as a tragedy of the commons and the deficit-spending of the past became irresponsible stewardship over scarce resources. While the economic motor of the welfare state was driven by the alignment of mass production and mass consumption, under the ideology of crisis neoliberal strategies have spearheaded the fragmentation of the wage and the social wage. While in the past “wage gains went hand in hand with advances in the social wage and the conquest of free time,” Negri argues, “[t]he capitalist counter-revolution of today is directed precisely against this homogeneity, this subjective and material quality of mobility of a fully socialized labour-power” (Negri, 1988). The social wage is no longer depicted as an *extension* of the wage; rather, it becomes generated at the *expense* of wage labour.

Restraint not Repression

British Columbia provided an early laboratory for neoliberalism in Canada. As economic crisis deepened in early eighties, the precarious foundations of the welfare state

became evident. As the economy is largely based on exports of raw materials, British Columbia was particularly susceptible to the volatile world market. While government revenues declined, rapidly rising unemployment put increasing strain on the welfare state.

The newly elected Social Credit government internalized the crisis through a shift from Keynesian strategies of deficit spending to strategies of "restraint", introducing 26 bills to the legislature restructuring the public sector around the principle of austerity while dismantling avenues of negotiation and appeal. Public sector workers were directly targeted as wage controls were indefinitely extended, seniority rights were eliminated and the right to negotiate working conditions was withdrawn. Administrative and fiscal power was centralized, the Human Rights Commission was dismantled, and rent controls were abolished.

At the same time, the Socreds continued to invest in provincial infrastructure through a strategy of "bread and circuses", seeking to stimulate investment through spectacular public works projects such as Expo 86. "To be sure," Bryan Palmer argues, "the actual dollars saved in the 'restraint' budget were minimal and the continuing crisis, coupled with the Social Credit penchant for megaprojects, insured that actual spending in the period of economic cuts rose by more than 12%" (Palmer, 1987, 23). While the stated aim of the Socreds was to reduce state spending through the introduction of austerity measures, it was actually a direct attack on the social wage and the wages of public sector workers to finance a deepening process of accumulation.

The drastic measures undertaken by the provincial government galvanized mass opposition bringing together labour and the remnants of the "new social movements". A call for mobilization first came from the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition, a grassroots coalition of labour and community activists who called on the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) "to initiate a province-wide protest" (cited in Palmer, 1987, 27). A series of protests followed reverberating across the province, culminating in the dramatic rally at B.C. Place stadium attended by 20,000 to 30,000 people. Meanwhile, the BC Federation of Labour announced the formation of its own coalition. Operation Solidarity brought together representatives from all of the province's unions in a united front.

Momentum continued to build as the Lower Mainland Budget Coalition was quickly amalgamated with Operation Solidarity under the province-wide Solidarity Coalition. A massive rally at Empire Stadium brought together between 50,000 to 60,000 people, and the call for a province-wide general strike was growing. The Solidarity Coalition adopted a two-point program of defeating austerity and promoting long term democratic alternatives. However, the failure to articulate such alternatives enabled the fragmentation of the movement along purely opportunistic lines (Carroll & Ratner, 1989). Anticipating future events, on the eve of the general strike BCFL representative Jack Munro met with the premiere in Kelowna and negotiated a deal behind closed doors. The agreement was piecemeal, preserving seniority rights and the right to collectively bargain working conditions while largely abandoning social demands. The trade union

leadership thus effectively preserved their position in the self-management of production while delinking wage demands from demands for a social wage.

The collapse of the general strike is explained in different ways. The labour leadership argued that a general strike was not viable. The workers and the general public were not sufficiently prepared. Labour leaders also reinforced their subservient role under the state. Sovereignty could not be effectively challenged through the direct action of workers; it could only be reaffirmed through electoral politics. Jack Munro argued, “We couldn't have handled a general strike. It meant that we were trying to overthrow a democratically elected government. That's not acceptable in British Columbia or anywhere else in Canada” (cited in Spector, 2005). On the other hand, labour militants decried the betrayal of the labour leadership. Through its formal alliances with the NDP, it was argued that the leadership demobilized the action in order to promote electoral strategies.

David Camfield (2005) astutely criticizes the treatment of labour officials “as simply a collection of individuals”, implicit in both perspectives, and argues instead that labour officials should be viewed as a “bureaucratic social layer” whose interests are necessarily distinct from the rank-and-file. While Camfield is correct in pointing to the structural foundations of “betrayal”, he fails to connect this to a distinct historical project with roots in the integration of trade unions through legally mediated channels and the rise of social democratic strategies through the post-war period. The shift towards

neoliberal strategies simply extended this process, restructuring mediation along more flexible lines through the articulation of crisis. In close contact with the New Democratic Party, the union leadership internalizes the logic of scarcity in the structure of its resistance.

While neoliberal strategies were initially articulated as a response to economic downturn, they have increasingly solidified as a stable strategy of accumulation, flexibly incorporating mechanisms of control on a number of levels. Carroll and Ratner note the gradual solidification of neoliberal strategies in the province. Tracing the development of these strategies through the 1980s, they argue that the state has increasingly adopted a "more strategic orientation, aspiring to an organic restructuring of the entire complex of state, capital and labour relations" (Carroll & Ratner. 1989, 43). However, they fail to articulate the role of the union and social democratic leadership in this process of restructuring.

Campbell's Cuts are too Deep

Parallels have been drawn between the recent labour struggles and the 1983 Operation Solidarity movement. While the union leadership pushed for the reintegration of labour under the state, emphasizing an electoral strategy, a growing section of the rank-and-file advocated direct action, pursuing a general strike through the organization of wildcat actions independent of the union leadership. However, the call for a general strike could be recuperated under the strategy of the union leadership precisely insofar it

did not link their specific wage demands with community demands that could effectively break the narrow corporatism of the union leadership.

The BC liberals have pursued a strategy of provoking crisis in order to drive a wedge between the wage and the social wage. The “crisis” was catalyzed after more than 2 billion dollars in tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy. This led to a sizable budget deficit, demanding drastic cuts to government services. In November 2001, it was announced that nearly one third of government employees would lose their jobs. The provincial government engaged in a large scale restructuring of public services, eliminating ministries of Environment and Multiculturalism. Funding for women's centres was eliminated. Capital spending was frozen at colleges and universities, leading to the rapid increase of tuition fees. The frequency of back-to-work legislation was unprecedented in Canadian history.

With all but two seats in the legislature held by the Liberals and the “official” opposition discredited, extra-parliamentary avenues of resistance were widely viewed as necessary. However, this movement remained tightly controlled following the model that had been established in 1983. The shift to extra-parliamentary action was not necessarily incongruent with the strategies of the union leadership. Community coalitions were set up by the BC Federation of Labour. In contrast to Operation Solidarity, the participation of new social movement groups in these coalitions was conspicuously absent. While the Solidarity Coalition was constructed around a coalition of diverse groups, the resistance

to the BC Liberals was shaped around the entitlements of citizens. Extra-parliamentary avenues were to be utilized as a means of appealing to the government and building support for the social democrats, rather than directly constructing "long term democratic alternatives". In the absence of strong community participation many of these groups quickly fell apart. While they remained as informal networks for the mobilization of labour and community participants, the absence of an articulated strategy often prevented them from differentiating themselves from the union leadership.

Following the precedent set by earlier governments, the Liberals targeted education and health care. Drawing on a legacy of progressive leadership, the HEU and BCTF have provided a basis for militant job action in the province. The BCTF and the HEU have also maintained a position of relative autonomy in relation to the broader union structure. Following the elections of the BC Liberals in 2001, they played a key role in fostering the development of formal and informal networks of resistance in support of community and have consistently pushed for a general strike.

Round One

Following their election in 2001, the BC Liberals mounted an assault of health, making cuts to Pharmacare program, while shutting down hospitals, cutting services and privatizing some care services. The government also centralized control over the administration of health care by slashing number of health authorities. In January 2002, the provincial government passed Bill 29, the Health and Social Services Delivery Act.

Enabling the reduction and privatization of care without consultation, the bill was designed to break the power of the Hospital Employee's Union, enabling further privatization.

No longer recognizing collective agreements, the government quickly pursued privatization. In early 2004 the provincial government announced the contracting out of over 10,000 of formerly HEU positions to transnational corporations. The process was facilitated by Local 1-3567 of the Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of America (IWA) who agreed to unionize workers at significantly lower wages and benefits. Workers were forced to accept a collective agreement independently negotiated by the trade union and the corporations.

In April, contract negotiations failed and over 40,000 health care workers went on strike, shutting down approximately 340 care facilities across the province. In response, the provincial government drafted Bill 37, legislating HEU workers back to work, and imposing a fixed contract allowing for open-ended privatization. To add insult to injury, a 15% retroactive pay cut was imposed effective April 1.

The response of the NDP was to condemn the legislation, insofar as it undermined the economic stability of the province. NDP leader Carole James criticized Bill 37 as "a blatant attack on working people . . . that can only create further tension and confrontation in an already poisonous labour relations climate". She demanded that the

legislation be recalled "to put an end to the crisis . . . that threatens to further erode investor confidence in British Columbia and destabilize the BC economy" (cited in Camfield, 2005). The language used is indicative of the NDP position, desiring a harmony between labour, capital and the state through the maintenance of mediation.

The HEU executive decided to continue the strike in defiance of the government, calling for solidarity actions across the province. Wildcat pickets went up in at least 27 locations across the province, including Prince George and Revelstoke where over 100 BC Hydro workers walked off the job, shutting down the three largest hydroelectric dams in the province. In Victoria, the ferries were shut down through flying pickets mobilized through the Communities Solidarity Coalition. The ferry workers, who had recently been on strike, were largely supportive of the actions.

The wildcat actions triggered a broader response by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the larger organization encompassing the HEU. CUPE had adopted an action plan which included the possibility of a one-day work stoppage and demonstration, dubbed "Democracy Day", in defiance of the cuts. As many CUPE locals engaged in wildcat actions across the province, it was decided to implement the action plan. CUPE announced that 70,000 employees would be out on Monday. Momentum was growing with demonstrations organized on May Day and private sector unions including the UFCW, IWA, and CAW announced they would go out on Monday

However, the wheels of containment were turning. The Supreme Court declared the strike illegal, imposing severe fines on the HEU. While the provincial government appealed to workers to “respect the rule of law”, the BCFL leadership sprung into action, planning for the day while voting against a general strike behind closed doors (Isitt & Moroz, 2006). The provincial executive scheduled a weekend meeting with the labour minister to discuss an end to the job action. Late Sunday night a deal was reached. While some concessions were granted, including a reduction in pay cuts and the restriction of privatization, the agreement was widely viewed as a sellout, invoking memories of 1983.

While CUPE ordered its membership to stand down, disappointment and outrage fueled wildcat actions on Monday. Amidst feelings of disappointment, betrayal, and outrage, pickets popped up at a number of worksites. In Victoria, the buses were shut down while pickets remained up at many of the care facilities. However, it was too little to late; the pickets came down at the end of the day leaving feelings of betrayal that would not be forgotten.

Round Two

While the HEU is constituted by some of the most marginalized public sector workers in the province, predominantly women and people of colour, the BC Teacher’s Federation (BCTF) represents skilled professionals with more control over the conditions of their labour. While the provincial government refused to acknowledge collective

agreements of hospital workers, they confronted the teachers capacity to manage their profession and determine their working conditions.

In January 2002, the provincial government passed Bill 28, the Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act, eliminating many provisions from the collective agreement between the BCTF and the B.C. Public School Employers' Association. Public education was deemed to be an "essential service" restricting the job action that could be taken by the teachers. Then, in 2003, the Minister of Education tabled Bill 51, the Teaching Profession Amendment Act, empowering the government to take over the College of Teachers, eliminating the ability of teachers to govern their own profession. Teachers responded by refusing to pay dues to the professional body.

As their collective agreement expired and the provincial government refused to negotiate a new one, the teachers voted 88.4% in favour of a strike mandate. Their chief bargaining demand was reduced class sizes and the restoration of services to students that have been cut by the government. The struggle waged by BC teachers for control over their working conditions resonated across the province as a demand for the maintenance of the social wage.

Building from the experiences of the hospital workers, the rank-and-file demanded that any proposed settlement be first ratified by the membership as a whole. The provincial government responded with the introduction of Bill 12, legislating the

teachers back to work under the same conditions for a year without negotiation.

However, this only fueled their anger as over 42,000 public school teachers walked off the job in defiance of the law, receiving widespread public support.

In the days that followed the strike was ruled illegal by the B.C. Supreme Court. However, the court decided not to fine the union, seeking to deescalate the conflict by freezing the union's assets for 30 days, effectively preventing the teachers from receiving their strike pay. It was the ruling of the Supreme Court that "No citizen or group of citizens may choose which orders they may obey". United in one voice, this position was parroted by the provincial government, the "social democratic" opposition, the corporate media and conservative civil society groups. Labour Minister Michael de Jong argued that "it is troubling to see other organizations wanting to, and apparently on the verge of, linking themselves and their members to behaviour that has already been characterized as illegal -- that is continuing in defiance of the two court orders." Business leaders targeted the union as being responsible for the break down. "People must obey the law," Jerry Lampert from the Business Council of British Columbia warned, "or we are on the short or long road to anarchy in this province, and we just can't afford that". This position was further reinforced by the "social democratic" opposition. Far from defending the illegal actions of the teachers, NDP leader Carol James argued the teachers should "obey the law". The Supreme Court's decision to freeze strike pay was lauded by NDP education critic John Horgan as an opportunity for "cooler heads to prevail".

While the general strike was called off in 2004, the momentum towards large scale action in 2005 was unstoppable. Fueled by growing popular support and thickening rank-and-file networks, the BC Federation of Labour called for a “demonstration” in Victoria on October 24, apparently intended to be part of a larger series of “rolling” actions throughout the week.

This action brought together public and private sector workers in mass defiance of the law. The informal networks mobilized through community solidarity groups played an instrumental role in creating the basis for flying pickets that shut down both private and public worksites in the morning. However, the day remained largely administered from the top-down as an estimated 30,000 workers converged for a march and rally at the legislature. The refusal of the provincial government to respect collective bargaining rights was emphasized by the union leadership, and the action was described as a form of "civil disobedience". BCTF President Jinny Sims proclaimed, "Recently, a person wrote that there is a big difference between breaking the law and having a law created to break you. We will not be broken!"

A mediator was appointed on Tuesday and the government quickly agreed to the terms. The BC Federation of Labour quickly withdrew support from the “rolling” actions planned throughout the week, putting pressure on the teachers to ratify the contract. BCFL president Jim Sinclair insisted that teachers approve the agreement

before they had even seen it. On Friday, the BCTF executive “reluctantly” recommended the deal to the membership.

By the end of the week, 77% of 38,000 teachers voted to agree with mediator’s recommendations to end the strike. They received some minor concessions including funding for disabilities, the "harmonization" teacher salary grids and the improvement of learning conditions, as well as greater job security for on-call teachers, and greater representation at the “Education Roundtable” set up by the government to discuss long term strategies in the public education. However, their major demand for the restriction of class sizes was largely ignored, funneled into an undefined “consultation” process. It is notable that large numbers of teachers still voted no and a number of union locals recommended rejecting the deal.

Conclusion

The recent labour struggles should be understood in the context of a broader historical project emerging with the Keynesian welfare state in the post-war period. This project enables the recomposition of society in order to facilitate the intensification of the production process. The growth of the "social wage" was an expression of tremendous productivity increases on the factory floor which were channeled through the state management of aggregate demand. Through this period trade unions were actively incorporated under the state through the extension of collective bargaining "rights", while the more militant segments of the working class were systematically rooted out.

Gradually a social democratic leadership rose to ascendancy, founded on the maintenance of "labour peace" through the preservation of formal avenues of negotiation and appeal.

While the shift to neoliberal strategies in the seventies and eighties is often seen as a break from Keynesian policies, it is in many ways an extension of the process that was started in the post-war period. While the drive to intensify the production process was initially enabled through the constitution of legal channels for the negotiation of wages, the "new era" demands the flexible management of these channels through coercive measures. The commons becomes articulated as a scarce resource pitting wage labour against the social wage. While social democrats and the trade union leadership seek to maintain the corporatism that grew through the post-war period, linking the state, labour and capital, they presume a climate of scarcity granting concession after concession, refusing to articulate the demands of labour as necessarily separate from capital and the state.

The recent struggles in British Columbia made an important contribution to the recomposition of class solidarities. First, these actions effectively challenged the sovereignty of the state. They created a basis of experience in large scale cross-sectoral action and the defiance of the law became widely accepted as a viable strategy by both workers and the general public. The BCTF effectively challenged the provincial government's imposition of unilaterally imposed contracts and forced the government to accept a mediated settlement.

Second, these actions enabled the thickening of autonomous rank-and-file networks. Through informal channels wildcat strikes effectively pushed the leadership towards cross-sectoral job action. This was reflected on a formal level, with the decision to implement the CUPE “action plan”. Moreover, while the HEU executive was empowered to ratify a contract on behalf of its membership, the teachers demanded that any proposed contract be ratified by the membership as a whole. This fueled momentum for direct action despite the electoral pretensions of the union leadership.

However, these networks have remained largely defensive. While Operation Solidarity had a firm basis in community organizing committed to developing "democratic alternatives", a viable strategic alternative was not advanced in recent job actions. The call for general strike largely served as a surrogate for such strategies and was consequently reintegrated under the demand for mediation. In the absence of strategies that directly address the relationship between production and reproduction, demands have largely been restricted to the sphere of production, to a single segment of workers. Emphasis has been placed on reopening the doors to collective bargaining, rather than advancing the demands of public sector workers as necessarily separate in a climate of austerity. The failure to develop strong networks with the community has enabled the ongoing fragmentation of wage demands from the social wage.

The maintenance of collective bargaining freedoms is not in itself sufficient. Rather than seeking mediation with a state that is fundamentally grounded in crisis, it is necessary for workers to link together with community groups, organizing as direct antagonists to the state, developing a clear strategy that does not accept a climate of scarcity, that does not accept mediation, that evades containment through creating mechanisms for popular control in the community. The commons does not presently exist; it must be actively created in a manner that ensures the direct control over public services by workers and the community.

In its overzealousness, the cult of the “new” often disregards the more enduring aspects of reality. Continuities can be drawn from the welfare state to neoliberalism, from Operation Solidarity to the recent labour struggles, from Expo 86 to the Winter Olympics. The Socred’s strategy of “bread and circuses” has continued to provide a basis for hegemony in the province; although, the state machine is churning out less bread and more circuses. Wage gains are still tied to the development of large scale public projects at the expense of the social wage. The Winter Olympics of 2010, initiated by the NDP and advanced by the Liberals appears to have created the basis for labour peace in the province, but at what price?

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