

The Effect of the 1983 Solidarity Movement on the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF)

By Andy Hanson, March 2017

“There are two inescapable realities about teachers. One is that they are educators: the other is that they are employees.”¹ So begins the Report of the Task Force On Bargaining and Professional Rights presented to the 1985 Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF). The task force had come about as a result of the teachers' participation in the Solidarity movement that began in the summer of 1983.

For the teachers, the rise of Operation Solidarity culminated in a three-day walkout from 8-10 November 1983.² The teachers joined with other unions in a province-wide, political strike that left schools empty and teachers on picket lines. The strike ended when the vice-president of the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFED), Jack Munro, struck a deal with Social Credit Premier Bill Bennett and sealed it with a handshake at the premier's home in Kelowna.³ The unwritten agreement became known as the Kelowna Accord. There have been a number of articles written about the Solidarity movement as well as Bryan Palmer's book, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia*.⁴

My focus is going to be on how teachers were affected by their deep involvement in this very militant response to what has been called “the first wide-ranging neoliberal program in Canada.”⁵ I suggest that, while the collapse of the Solidarity strike was a botched opportunity for the labour movement in British Columbia in failing to build a lasting political movement, it gave birth to the BCTF's enduring militancy.

The *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* calls Bennett's reforms “the most extensive and aggressive attack on the working class of the era. Not even the neoliberal programs of Ronald Regan or Margaret Thatcher entailed the comprehensive assault contained in the social and labour legislation introduced by the government.”⁶ It is important, then, that we examine this moment on the cusp of our current economic regime and understand how workers resisted.

¹ Report of the Bargaining and Professional Rights Task Force, BCTF Archives, November 1984, 1986 reprinting, 4.

² Ken Novakowski, “The Solidarity Strike of 1983,” *Teacher NewsMagazine*, BCTF, January/February 2000, <https://bctf.ca/publications/NewsMagArticle.aspx?id=12834>

³ “Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't,” BC Labour Heritage Centre, <http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/project/damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-dont/> (accessed 6 October 2016)

⁴ Bryan Palmer, 1987, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star).

⁵ William K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, “Ambivalent Allies: Social Democratic Regimes and Social Movements,” *BC Studies*, 154, Summer 2007, 41-66, 41.

⁶ Luis Aguiar and Robert Whitely, “Operation Solidarity,” *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, Gary L. Anderson and Kathryn G. Herr (eds.) 1058-61, 1059.

The Development of BCTF Involvement in the Solidarity Coalition

First elected in 1975, Premier Bill Bennett and his Social Credit Party embraced Milton Friedman's ideas of reducing taxes and cutting social spending. Bennett was one of the first to call upon the Fraser Institute, the right-wing think-tank situated in Vancouver, for ideological justification of his policies.⁷

In early 1982, his government began a restraint program that resulted in significant lay-offs in education. Surrey School District alone lost 92 teachers.⁸ Bennett also established a wage control mechanism, the Compensation Stabilization Program, which was used to roll back negotiated salary agreements in the public sector.⁹

The BCTF formed the Defend Education Services Coalition (DESC) with school support workers, college instructors and post secondary students.¹⁰ By January 1983 the teachers' union had contributed \$62,500 to the DESC.

In July 1983, the newly re-elected Bennett government introduced 26 pieces of legislation that cut social spending, restructured labour relations and eliminated the Human Rights Commission.¹¹

It is important to remember that neoliberal economists think in terms of a "natural rate of unemployment" that disciplines workers and encourages flexibility in the workplace. To Bennett, putting people out of work was not a problem; it was a solution.

In response, Art Kube, the President of the BCFED, organized Solidarity.¹² The DESC immediately joined and chose BCTF President Larry Kuehn as their representative. Some BCTF staff were also committed to work on the new campaign.¹³

⁷ Vancouver Elementary School Teachers Association, 2 November 1983, *V.E.S.T.A. News*, VESTA News, November 1980 to November 1983, inside page; Michael Howlett and Keith Brownsey, 1988, "The Old Reality and the New Reality: Party Politics and Public Policy in British Columbia 1941-1987," *Studies in Political Economy*, 25, Spring, 141-76, 143.

⁸ BCTF, "Cut-Back Crisis Report: 21 September 1982," microfiche, 1982-83 Division of Executive Director, Section 49 16/21, BCTF archives.

⁹ B.C. School Trustees Association, 21 July 1986, "Collective Bargaining History," 3-7, https://dsweb.bcsta.org/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-71690/1986-07-21_Collective_Bargaining_History.PDF (accessed 14 September 2016).

¹⁰ BCTF, "The Steps Leading to Full Bargaining Rights," <http://bctf.ca/AboutUs.aspx?id=18892> (accessed 12 September 2016).

¹¹ Ian Bailey, 10 December 1985, "B.C. Premier Bill Bennett Build a Lasting Legacy," *Globe and Mail*, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/bc-premier-bill-bennett-built-a-lasting-legacy/article27702823/> (accessed 14 September 2016).

¹² BCTF, "Report of the First Meeting of Solidarity Coalition: 3 August 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 20 12/32, BCTF archives, 1-2.

¹³ BCTF, "Memo to Larry Kuehn, Re: Solidarity Coalition, 3 August 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 20 14/32, BCTF archives.

While the BCTF was not a member of the BCFED at the time, it sent “fraternal” representatives to sit at the Solidarity table, in common cause with the other unions.¹⁴

The BCTF worked with both arms of Solidarity, the labour side, Operation Solidarity, consisting of the union leaders who were then answerable to their own executive and memberships, and the Solidarity Coalition, made up of grass-roots community organizations and other non-labour groups opposing the government’s cuts. That division of authority has been partly blamed for much of what went wrong with the strike.¹⁵

Within a few weeks, Solidarity initiatives resulted in over 25,000 people massed on the lawn of the Victoria Legislature in opposition to the government’s legislative package.¹⁶ The Victoria rally was followed by 50,000 at the Empire Stadium in Vancouver in August,¹⁷ and 60,000 outside the Social Credit Convention in Vancouver.¹⁸ Solidarity requested an additional \$340,000 from The BCTF.¹⁹

In September the BCTF Executive prepared to hold an all-member referendum on whether teachers would strike as members of Operation Solidarity.²⁰ The outcome of such a vote was not all that predictable.

Historically, BC teachers had participated in only one province-wide strike, the 1971 one-day strike over pensions. In more recent times, only one strike of note had taken place. That was the year before, in Terrace School District. That strike had resulted in working conditions being included in the collective agreement, something the BC Education Act did not allow.

Bennett’s 26 bills would roll back those gains, and the improvements other locals had made as a result of the Terrace strike and the whipsaw effect. The government promised more lay-offs, which would result in larger class sizes. The new layoffs could be without cause and would ignore seniority.²¹

¹⁴ BCTF, “Executive Committee Minutes, 29 October 1983,” microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 2/30, BCTF archives, 3.

¹⁵ Palmer, *Solidarity*.

¹⁶ Simon Fraser University, Digitized Collections, Pacific Tribune Photograph Collection (hereafter SFUDC-PTPC), Solidarity, “Solidarity Rally, Legislature, [Victoria],” <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/pt-2578/solidarity-rally-legislature-victoria> (accessed 7 October 2016).

¹⁷ SFUDC-PTPC, Solidarity, “Operation Solidarity rally, Empire Stadium,” <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/pt-2618/operation-solidarity-rally-empire-stadium> (accessed 7 October 2016).

¹⁸ SFUDC-PTPC, Solidarity, “Solidarity Coalition rally of 60,000, Queen Elizabeth Plaza,” <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/pt-2756/solidarity-coalition-rally-60000-queen-elizabeth-plaza> (accessed 7 October 2016).

¹⁹ BCTF, 13 October 1983, “Memo to Executive Committee, Re: MGT4.0 Budget Amendments,” COORD, ’83 Strike M40 — Solidarity, Larry Kuehn personal collection.

²⁰ BCTF, “Executive Committee Minutes, 30 September 1983,” microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 2/30, BCTF archives, 1-2.

²¹ Ken Novakowski, January/February 2000, “The Solidarity Strike of 1983,” *Teacher Newsmagazine*, 12, 4, <https://bctf.ca/publications/NewsmagArticle.aspx?id=12834> (accessed 13 September 2016); BCTF, 1 November 1983, “Abbotsford Agreement”, microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 20 25/32.

These were bread-and-butter issues for teachers, but still they did not guarantee widespread support for a provincial strike. BCTF's mobilization efforts included rallies in different locations around the province. Some boards responded with reprisals against teachers.²² The BCTF began to train facilitators for the Solidarity campaign.²³

The package that went out to BCTF members to inform them of the vote included items that the government would need to agree to in order to end the proposed strike. It also notified them that there would be no strike pay.²⁴

When the government subsequently offered a period of consultation, the strike vote was put on hold. At the same time, the teachers strengthened Operation Solidarity by contributing an additional \$5,000.²⁵

Two years earlier, the BCTF had been the first union in the province to install fax machines in its local offices. The new technology made it possible for the provincial office to communicate in a matter of hours with all its locals and allowed for very quick returns of ballot counts.²⁶ The regular and constant exchange of information built a strong sense of involvement in the locals as events moved ahead.²⁷ The results of the vote were not overwhelming, only 60 percent of the membership supported a strike.²⁸ Nonetheless it was enough to give the Executive a mandate.

The news of teachers joining Solidarity was widely reported in the media. The union office and Executive members started receiving threatening phone calls. Individuals and their families were targeted with personal threats.²⁹ The police advised changing phone numbers.

²² BCTF, "Executive Committee Minutes, 25 and 26 November 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 2/30, BCTF archives, 6; BCTF, "Executive Committee Minutes, 9 December 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 2/30, BCTF archives, 1.

²³ BCTF, "Solidarity Coalition Report of the Education Committee to the Assembly of Solidarity Coalition," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 20 12/32, BCTF archives; BCTF, "Solidarity Coalition Developmental Workshop Proposal: 26 September 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 20 29/32, BCTF archives, 1-2.

²⁴ BCTF, "Executive Committee Minutes, 29 October 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 2/30, BCTF archives, Appendix A; BCTF, 1 November 1983, "Report of Meetings of Staff and SSCC," Bullet 2.

²⁵ BCTF, "Executive Committee Minutes, 14 November 1983," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 2/30, BCTF archives, 2.

²⁶ YouTube, 12 November 2015, "Larry Kuehn, Part 2", 21:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMUuNXJfp4g&feature=youtu.be> (accessed 15 September 2016).

²⁷ Larry Kuehn, YouTube, 12 November 2015, "Larry Kuehn, Part 1", 44:40 <https://youtu.be/5rKHFxqQxJc> (accessed 15 September 2016).

²⁸ BCTF, "News Release: Strike Mandate Approved," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 20 25/32, BCTF archives.

²⁹ Larry Kuehn, YouTube, 12 November 2015, "Larry Kuehn, Part 1", 43:47 <https://youtu.be/5rKHFxqQxJc> (accessed 15 September 2016).

Some boards got injunctions against teachers picketing, so teachers switched picketing sites with other unions.³⁰

The strategy of Operation Solidarity was to escalate the number of unions on strike over a number of days, gradually increasing the pressure on the government. The teachers were chosen to go out on the third day, for the reason that most of British Columbia believed teachers would not unite with the other unions.³¹ If the teachers walked, so the organizers' reasoning went, then other unions would be more inclined to follow.

On November 7, 1983, President Kuehn told teachers to leave their classrooms the next day.

They stayed out for three days, while negotiations were underway with the government. BC Federation of Labour Vice-President, Jack Munro, the President of the International Woodworkers of America, the loggers' union, took over the leadership of Solidarity when Art Kube came down with pneumonia.³²

Munro and the private sector union leaders that backed him did not want a general strike.³³ They had little stomach for a campaign that primarily affected the public sector and social policy. Munro made phone calls to his contacts in government and held BCFED meetings that excluded the BCTF.

By Sunday, it was over. Munro had successfully “derailed Solidarity,” as he brags in his autobiography.

Within days Bennett had reneged on the Kelowna Accord and claimed union leaders had misinterpreted its meaning. The one thing the BCTF did manage to get, was the right to negotiate seniority.³⁴

Operation Solidarity had been organized hastily by a leadership that was committed to labour negotiations, and had little experience in political movements. Their sectionalism, anxiety over controlling their own members, and their limited vision of a negotiated settlement, as a solution to legislation, prevented Solidarity from developing into a serious opposition.

The need for political leadership was only too obvious; while the NDP, with its commitment to the legislative process, was unwilling to engage in the discourse of mass protest.³⁵

³⁰Larry Kuehn, YouTube, 12 November 2015, “Larry Kuehn, Part 1”, 53:10 <https://youtu.be/5rKHFXqQxJc> (accessed 15 September 2016).

³¹ Larry Kuehn, YouTube, 12 November 2015, “Larry Kuehn, Part 1”, 46:20, <https://youtu.be/5rKHFXqQxJc> (accessed 13 September 2016).

³² Jack Munro and Jane O’Hara, 1988, *Union Jack: Labour Leader Jack Munro*, (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre), 9.

³³ Jack Munro and Jane O’Hara, 1988, *Union Jack: Labour Leader Jack Munro*, (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre), 6–17.

³⁴ BCTF, 18 January 1984, “AGM Report: Bargaining Committee,” microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 1 4/7, 1.

³⁵ The 1997 strike by Ontario teachers failed for similar reasons.

The Aftershock

The teachers 1984 AGM was distinctly different from previous years. The delegates voted to affiliate with the BCFED. But the most significant, long-term, labour commitment made at the 1984 AGM was the vote not to cross another unions' picket lines.³⁶

This was particularly important for the Canadian Union of Public Employees' (CUPE) workers, who were the non-teaching staff of most schools: educational assistants, custodians and secretaries. In the future, teachers would be paid strike pay for not crossing CUPE picket lines at their schools.³⁷

Teachers' labour consciousness had been aroused. The AGM representatives voted to commit \$50,000 to the continuation of Solidarity.³⁸ Ray Gautier from the Building Trades Council, was on the agenda to speak, after which the members agreed to support the BC and Yukon Building Trades Unions who were in a battle over non-union workers at the Pennyfarthing construction site.³⁹

The 1984 AGM changed the structure and direction of the BCTF. A strategic plan that focused on improving teachers' rights and providing them with the skills to assert and exercise such rights entrenched the training programs that had begun with Solidarity.

The delegates directed the leadership to establish policies and guidelines for job actions, as well as a possible province-wide political strike.⁴⁰ The Bargaining and Professional Rights Task Force was established and instructed to report the following year.

That report, which I quoted from at the beginning of this presentation, would include a section on the professional rights of teachers and the right to collective bargaining.⁴¹

To quote Marx, "Once a certain level of maturity is attained, the [that] particular historical form is shed and makes way for a higher form."⁴²

³⁶ Jinny Sims, "I'm Voting Yes For Affiliation," *Teacher: Newsmagazine of the BC Teachers' Federation*, 18, 4, January/February 2006, 42.

³⁷ BCTF, "Executive Committee Minutes, 11-13 May 1989," Microfiche, 1988-89 Division of Executive Director, Section Executive Committee 7/63, BCTF archives, 16, 24-25.

³⁸ BCTF, "Executive Committee Minutes, Proposed Budget," microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 17 6/30, BCTF archives, 3.

³⁹ Minutes of the 68th Annual General Meeting, AGM, 18-20 March 1984, Minutes and Agendas: Reference Binder 1, from 1978 to 1991, 1, 19, 21.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the 68th Annual General Meeting, AGM, 18-20 March 1984, Minutes and Agendas: Reference Binder 1, from 1978 to 1991, 22; *BCTF News Release*, 17 March 1982, "Results of Referendum"; BCTF, and., "Report of the Labor Affairs Advisory Committee to the 1985 Annual General Meeting," 1984-85 Division of Executive Director, Section 1 3/8; BCTF, 10 March 1986, "Memo to Tom Hutchison, Re: Resolution 130," 1984-85 Division of Executive Director, Section 1 11/12, 1).

⁴¹ BCTF, November 1984, "Report of the Bargaining and Professional Rights Task Force," Ref LB2842.2 B82 C.1, 24.

⁴² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume Three*, (London: Penguin, 1981), 1023-24.

This was that critical moment for BC teachers, and one that could not have been predicted even months before the Solidarity Coalition was formed. Up until the Solidarity strike, teachers had been divided along professionalist and unionist lines. The strike revealed the fallacy of those alternatives being mutually exclusive. The Bargaining and Professional Rights Task Force would fuse the two conflicting identities into the notion of a “Union of Professionals” that they are today.

Beginning in 1984, the BCTF negotiated seniority and severance provisions into all their collective agreements.⁴³

Despite the support of the AGM, the membership would reject affiliation with the BCFED in the all-member vote that followed.⁴⁴ There reflected the feeling among teachers that the private sector unions that controlled the BCFED had betrayed them. The BCTF would not affiliate until 2003, thirty years after Solidarity.⁴⁵

The following year, the 1985 AGM directed the Executive to “work within Operation Solidarity to develop a co-ordinated public sector strategy to ensure free collective bargaining.”⁴⁶ The importance of this resolution is threefold.

First, Operation Solidarity did not end with the collapse of the strike. While the membership rejected joining the Federation of Labour, the leadership was still able to continue to work with other unions to develop campaigns opposing the government’s evolving neoliberal agenda.⁴⁷ Secondly, the representatives attending the AGM indicated that they supported a fight for free collective bargaining as members of the labour movement. Continued participation in Operation Solidarity also provided a space for the BCTF to build alliances with parents and grass-roots organizations. It was the beginning of the BC teachers’ commitment to social justice activism.⁴⁸

The teachers did not simply work with the other unions; they provided funding and seconded a full-time staff member to work for Operation Solidarity. That person was the then Past-President, Larry Kuehn, who had taken the teachers into the three-day strike.⁴⁹

With the funding provided by the teachers, Operation Solidarity was able to continue to operate as a conduit for communication between the member-unions, and to organize campaigns to push back against the Social Credit government.

⁴³ BCTF, 18 January 1984, “AGM Report: Bargaining Committee,” microfiche, 1983-84 Division of Executive Director, Section 1 4/7, 2.

⁴⁴ BCTF, “Minutes of the 68th Annual General Meeting, AGM, 18–20 March 1984,” Minutes and Agendas, Reference Binder 1, from 1978 to 1991, 43.

⁴⁵ Jinny Sims, “I’m Voting Yes For Affiliation,” *Teacher: Newsmagazine of the BC Teachers’ Federation*, 18, 4, January/February 2006, 5.

⁴⁶ BCTF, “Sixty-ninth Annual General Meeting: 1985,” AGM – Minutes and Agendas: Reference Binder 1, from 1978 to 1991, BCTF Archives, 9.

⁴⁷ See various copies of the *Solidarity Coalition Bulletin* from 1984-85. The only source I am aware of is Geoff Peters personal collection, Solidarity=Operation Solidarity, through Larry Kuehn.

⁴⁸ BCTF, 17 January 1985, 1984-85 Division of Executive Director, Section 1 4/8, “Memo to Executive Committee, Re: Executive Leadership Report to 1985 AGM — Draft,” 2.

⁴⁹ Larry Kuehn, Conversation with the author, 21 October 2015.

The teachers' relationship with the state had been irreparably altered. Marching with other workers had politicized the BC teachers and given them a sense of what collective action could accomplish. A later President, David Chudnovsky, said "It was a formative moment for the BCTF, very formative. Because a few months prior to that we had voted not to want the right to strike in a referendum."⁵⁰

Although it would be another four years before teachers achieved the right to full collective bargaining rights, the three days on the picket lines turned the BC teachers toward the right to strike, established their solidarity with other workers and, most importantly, they recognized themselves as a union able to develop their own options for resistance. It was not simply a moment of recognizing the labour movement for teachers.

The rupture in the relationship with the state was not simply a political difference of opinion; it was an ideological shift. Once it had taken place, teachers could not go back to the way things had been. Their experience with Solidarity had given them an awareness that Bennett was attacking them as part of a larger political project.

He threatened their jobs: any teacher could be fired without a reason being given. He was attacking their salaries: reducing their means of paying their rent and mortgages, how they fed and clothed themselves and their families, how they made the payments on their cars so they could get to work. He abolished their right to have some control over their working conditions leaving teachers vulnerable to oversized classes and perhaps unable to carry on with their teaching when it became too difficult.

It was not simply that the Premier and the minister of education were indifferent to what went on in the classroom; it was that they were quite deliberately making the situation worse. Teachers realized that Bennett was intentionally making each of their lives more difficult. The struggle was between the powerful who made policy decisions and those who did the work of educating. Without publicly naming it as such, teachers had become aware of class struggle and the personal affect it had on their work-lives.

The structures developed during Operation Solidarity and its aftermath would form the platform from which teachers could mount future labour actions and political protests (the most recent being the three month strike in 2014). The development of social justice unionism within the BCTF would provide a more transformative unionism for individual activists. Alan Sears contends that movements seeking to contest power structures require a space in which to develop. He calls this an "infrastructure of dissent," a location where the language, theory, resources and practices of a particular form of resistance can develop, evolve and advance at a grass-roots level.⁵¹ The effect of Solidarity campaign was just that, it opened multiple sites for teacher-activists to become engaged; and it provided them with the institutional structures necessary to facilitate and support their campaigns. In addition to this infrastructure of dissent, the BCTF cultivated what I am calling an "ideology of resistance," an ideological space that nurtured rank-and-file activism in support of union militancy. The changes made as a result of the Solidarity campaign would have a long reach. Over the next three decades the BCTF teachers would become the most militant teachers' union in Anglophone Canada.

⁵⁰ David Chudnovsky, personal interview with the author, 13 June 2016, (1:24:00).

⁵¹ Alan Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future*, Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2014, 1-2.