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Socialist Voice #4, May 3, 2004

Health Workers Take on B.C. Liberals

Hospital Employees Union draws province-wide solidarity

by Roger Annis and Derrick O'Keefe

Editor's note: The following analysis of the strike movement in B.C. is reprinted with permission from Seven Oaks: A Magazine of Politics, Culture, and Resistance.

A few hours before this article was posted Monday morning, officials of the hospital employees union and the B.C. Federation of Labour announced an agreement with the B.C. government to end the health care strike. The solidarity strikes that were under way and others due to begin a few hours later were called off. The agreement contains minor concessions by the government to its Draconian Bill 37. Many strikers have reacted with anger and dismay at the agreement. Picket lines stayed up at many hospitals and some solidarity strikes went ahead.

The next issue of Socialist Voice will comment on the dramatic turn in the Iraq war during the past week.—Roger Annis and John Riddell

The B.C. Liberals' war against the labor movement in British Columbia has come to a head as tens of thousands of workers from across the province have joined the fight of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) against draconian back-to-work legislation. Bill 37 orders an end to the week-old strike of the HEU, cuts their wages by 15 percent and offers no guarantees against layoffs through privatization of services.

Workers throughout the province regard this bill as an attack on their own rights. They also see an opportunity to push back a government whose cutback programs have caused great hardship to working people.

“It's important that we support the health care workers,” said Doc Ballard, a Vancouver municipal government employee, while walking the picket line at Vancouver General Hospital. “If we don't, then we may be next.”

“We need a strike of all the unions,” said HEU member Paul Wells while on the same picket line. “If all the unions stand together against this government, we’ll be able to get rid of them eventually.”

Saturday, May 1, saw the largest May Day demonstration in Vancouver in recent memory, as thousands of workers took to the streets in a show of support for the struggle. Major contingents from the HEU and the nurses union were present, but there was also a strong presence of private sector workers and community organizations. Marches occurred in other towns and cities across British Columbia.

B.C. Federation of Labor president Jim Sinclair spoke to the marchers and announced escalating job actions in the coming week if the government of Premier Gordon Campbell remains intransigent on Bill 37. “The labor movement has its divisions, but we’re united this time,” he said. “We are going to fight and we won’t back down”.

Chris Allnutt, secretary-business manager for the HEU, told the May Day rally “it is our right and responsibility to fight unjust laws,” reflecting the militant, defiant mood of the crowd.

Solidarity actions spread across B.C.

Union solidarity with the HEU expanded rapidly. On Friday, April 30, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees walked off the job across the province, shutting down municipal governments, including Vancouver, and closing down the school system in Victoria. Paper mills in Prince George and Quesnel were shut down the same day. Construction workers stayed out for a second day at three BC Hydro generating stations.

On Saturday, Steelworker union members closed the Cominco lead-zinc smelter in Trail, and paper workers in Campbell River walked off the job. Bus drivers, members of the Canadian Auto Workers, had threatened to shut down the transit system in Vancouver and Victoria. Teachers were planning on joining HEU picket lines that day, shutting the schools in the province. At the Vancouver rally, Sinclair announced “a significant portion of the forest industry will be shut down” on Monday.

HEU workers went on strike on April 25, affecting 330 health care institutions across the province. The major hospitals have been ringed every day by hundreds of loud, boisterous picket lines. Workers from other unions joined the picketing in massive numbers, including the BC Nurses Union (BCNU, 35 000 members) and the Health Sciences Association (HSA, 15 000 members). Health care was reduced to “essential service” levels.

Bill 37: Draconian legislation includes roll-backs, green light for privatization

The fight took a sharp turn on Thursday, April 29 when the provincial government passed Bill 37. It imposes a three-year collective agreement containing the employers’ demands for a 15% cut in wages and benefits, extension of the work week by one and a half hours, and no limit to job cuts through privatization. Over the past year, six thousand jobs have been lost to privatization in areas such as cleaning and food preparation. Thousands more are planned.

“This legislation is unprecedented in the modern history of labor relations,” said Vancouver and District Labour Council president Bill Saunders. “To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time in Canada that a government has actually legislated a reduction in the standard of living of a group of workers,” Saunders explained.

The wages of hospital service workers range from \$17 to \$18 per hour. The privatized jobs pay little more than half that, \$9.50 to \$11, and they have minimal or no medical, vacation and other benefits. Under the provisions of Bill 29, a bill that voided existing collective agreements in the hospitals in 2002, companies bidding on contracts are not required to hire the workers whose jobs are lost nor recognize successor rights for the HEU.

Karen Cameron, a laid off cleaner at Vancouver General Hospital, told Seven Oaks, “I’m a single parent. I was laid off in October and my employment insurance runs out soon. I received no severance pay, and I had no option of keeping my old job. How am I supposed to raise my child? I’ve been screwed, and I’m angry.

“I’m here on this picket line for the women who have kids to raise and rent to pay.”

A recent report by the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) entitled, “A Return to Wage Discrimination”, details the effects of privatization on the livelihoods of hospital workers. The report shows that privatized hospital support workers in B.C. are now the lowest paid in Canada. Most hospital support workers are female, and the CCPA report draws particular attention to gains in pay equity for women hospital workers that have been achieved by the unions in British Columbia and are now being reversed.

The report also notes the decline in health care standards that accompany the privatization drive. Workers on the picket line give many examples of this, and this is echoed by constant reports in the media. In Britain, the health authority has been obliged to reverse some of its privatization of in-hospital services because of the decline in standards.

Deep resentment of the Campbell government

The Liberals were elected in 2001 on a platform that promised no radical changes to the rights of workers. But from the beginning, they carried out the most sweeping cuts to social services and workers rights of any government in Canadian history. Thousands of jobs have been lost to privatizations. Scores of hospitals and schools have been closed. Welfare and other social programs have been sharply reduced. Throughout the province, there is an anger and resentment against the government that runs very deep.

The current strike is not the first challenge to the Campbell government. Last year, HEU members turned down a proposal, by 57%, that would have reduced salaries, vacations and other benefits in exchange for a cap on jobs lost to contracting out. In 2001, in the last round of contract bargaining in health care, nurses organized job actions including a ban on overtime. That same year, members of the Health Sciences Association waged two days of illegal, rotating strikes. Teachers undertook job actions in 2001 to press for a new collective agreement and improvements to education services. The government met each of these challenges with special laws that stripped these workers of the right to strike and to protest their conditions of work.

Late last year, ferry workers shut down the coastal ferry service for two days, and for the first time the government was forced to back down in the face of a union challenge. It declined to pursue fines and firings of union leaders when the union defied a return to work order from the Labor Relations Board.

If the government has succeeded with its cutbacks, it is due in part to inadequate solidarity among the unions. The CCPA report highlights one of the most grievous examples of this as it affects the HEU. The corporations bidding on service contracts in the hospitals approached unions other than the HEU with offers to represent the new workforce. Those offers were accepted by the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers Union of Canada (IWA). It is the largest industrial union in British Columbia. Before the new workers were even hired, the IWA “negotiated” agreements with wages of \$10.25, a 44% reduction from the wages earned by HEU members.

Today, the collective agreements of all three health care unions are expired and they are bargaining, but coordination of bargaining and job action is not complete. Nurses, HSA members, and members of the BC Government Employees Union began to cross HEU picket lines after Bill 37 was adopted.

Many workers look to the next provincial election, due one year from now, for an opportunity to elect the New Democratic Party to government and put an end to the Liberal cuts. However, in this battle between the labor movement and Campbell’s regime in Victoria, the stakes are high today. A victory for the unions and their community allies would greatly boost the morale and confidence of workers as they fight to reverse the jobs and services that have been lost to cutbacks. And, over the last week, tens of thousands have been taking to the streets, voting with their feet in defence of the HEU, workers rights and public health care.

As we go to press: As of Sunday evening, May 2, a tentative settlement of the HEU strike has reportedly been reached. News outlets are reporting that transit and schools will be open Monday morning, and that picket lines are expected to come down shortly. The agreement reportedly scraps the punitive retroactive pay cuts included in Bill 37, and caps the number of jobs that can be contracted out.

Earlier Sunday, the B.C. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Labour Relations Board ruling that the HEU was in contempt of court for defying the Liberals’ back- to-work legislation, threatening heavy fines against the union.

Socialist Voice #5, May 5, 2004

U.S. Army Retreats from Fallujah

By Roger Annis and John Riddell

In Fallujah yesterday, “residents flashed V-for-victory signs and mosques broadcast celebratory messages proclaiming triumph over the Americans” (*Washington Post*, May 2). The meaning of the deal by which the U.S. nominally outsourced authority over the city to a little-known general from Saddam Hussein’s army is not yet clear. But the savage U.S. attacks on Fallujah’s citizens appear to be easing; the Marines are withdrawing their snipers who cut down hundreds of civilians in Fallujah’s streets; and the U.S. has dropped demands that Fallujah residents surrender heavy weapons and finger those allegedly responsible for the killing of U.S. personnel. The U.S. generals have abandoned-for now-their plan to take Fallujah by storm.

A similar stalemate has developed at Najaf, held by the insurrectionary Mahdi Army led by Moktada al-Sadr. According to the May 1 New York Times, U.S. commanders “have all but ruled out storming Najaf.”

Business as Usual

The scandal over systematic torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. and British armed forces provides more evidence of the occupiers’ weakness. It is no surprise that military intelligence and CIA officers resort to torture to—in the words of U.S. Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba —“set physical and mental conditions for favorable interrogation of witnesses.” (NYT May 2) The Canadian army in Somalia did the same. Torture is standard operating procedure in all imperialisms’ wars of colonial conquest. Iraq is unusual only in that the occupiers have no local secret police agency to do their dirty work for them. The fact that the crimes have come to light at all testifies to cracks and fissures within the occupying armies.

Washington Seeks Points of Support

Meanwhile, U.S. government spokespersons are talking up new plans to integrate political figures from the Saddam Hussein regime in their new puppet government and to reconstitute parts of Hussein’s army. This comes as no surprise, since the hated butchers of the former regime had been boosted to power as defenders of imperialism against the Iraqi masses. But the reversal of policy on granting them authority shows how difficult it is for Washington to find reliable points of support in Iraqi society.

Washington has also enlisted the United Nations to help shore up the occupation. Capitalist opponents of the Bush regime routinely propose that authority in Iraq be handed over to the UN, but the international body is actually now re-entering Iraq as a political agent for the occupiers. UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has undertaken to set up the non-elected interim government that is to “rule” Iraq after June 30 on behalf of the occupiers. This is consistent with the UN’s role since 1990 as a faithful agency of the imperialist war and then embargo against Iraq.

New Methods, Same Goal

These attempts to broaden the occupation's political base do not signify any retreat from the U.S. rulers' determination to subjugate Iraq by military force. Indeed, President George Bush and Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry have now converged on almost identical positions for prosecuting the Iraq war. Bush's Democratic rivals are if anything more bellicose.

Thus the New York Times devoted an editorial last week to berating Bush for failing to send more tanks and armored vehicles to Iraq. An editorial today in the pro-Democrat Washington Post today called for the U.S. to stay and fight in Iraq "even if a stable Iraq is unattainable," and urged Bush to send many more troops, hinting at possible restoration of the draft. The U.S. rulers hope their tactical retreat in Falluja will be a prelude to renewed assault with overwhelming force.

Resistance Makes Headway

Yet during recent weeks, the best-trained U.S. troops, armed with fiendish weaponry, have been unable to prevail against a courageous and broadly based opposition. Estimates of the number of armed fighters run into the tens of thousands, mostly working people organized in small groups and acting largely on their own initiative. The Iraqi military units formed by the occupiers have proven useless in battle against the resistance, leading one U.S. general to complain, "40% walked off the job ... and 10% actually worked against us." (*Guardian*, May 1)

Workers in Iraq are also making headway in organizing unions, despite the occupiers' attempt to enforce an anti-union ban among government employees. These unions and the armed resistance "share a common goal in the sense that both ... call for ending the occupation." (*Seven Oaks*)

The Iraq resistance is still at an early stage of determining its program and the character of its organization and leadership. It faces a myriad of complex political, social and economic questions such as how to forge unity among Iraq's constituent nationalities and religious groups, maximize women's role in the struggle, defend Iraq's economic patrimony, and enhance the conditions of Iraqi workers and peasants. Opposed class forces will struggle for hegemony. If the struggle for Iraqi independence is prolonged, and that seems likely, the resistance will find the means to discuss its goals and policies. Already this past month, we have seen a pronounced rise in unity of all Iraqis in the struggle to rid Iraq of the occupation.

On May Day 2004, Iraq resistance has emerged as a central issue in the world class struggle and a major problem for imperialism. International protests, meanwhile, continue to bedevil the occupiers, as evidenced by the recent election in Spain and subsequent withdrawal of most of that's country's armed forces from Iraq. These two forces, acting together, have already begun to undermine the cohesion of the occupying armies. This makes it all the more essential to plan a strong follow-up to the successful worldwide antiwar actions of March 20.

Socialist Voice #6, May 16, 2004

Lessons of the B.C. Hospital Strike

by Roger Annis and John Riddell

Editor's note: This issue contains two articles on the hospital workers' strike in B.C.: a discussion of its lessons, followed by a news report of the struggle's final stage. The second article is reprinted with permission from the May 10, 2004, issue of [Seven Oaks: A Magazine of Politics, Culture, and Resistance](#).

Lessons of the B.C. Hospital Strike

by Roger Annis and John Riddell

As the following news article from [Seven Oaks](#) reports, the May 2 agreement that ended the seven-day strike of 43,000 health care workers in British Columbia has stirred up a whirlwind of discussion among working people in that province.

Following the imposition of the strikebreaking Bill 37 by the Liberal Party government, the province was teetering on the brink of a general strike. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, government workers, and industrial workers were poised to join on May 3 those already out on strike in solidarity with the health care workers. A decisive showdown with the government was imminent.

Last-Minute Deal

Late in the evening of May 2, leaders of the BC Federation of Labor and the striking Hospital Employees Union (HEU) pulled back from that showdown and reached a last-minute agreement to end the strike. In exchange, they received a commitment from the government to limit the number of additional job cuts in the hospitals to the equivalent of 600 full-time positions.

Many workers argue there was more to gain by pressing ahead with the strike. We share that point of view. The strike movement in solidarity with health care workers gave expression to the accumulated resentment among all working people against the Liberal government's savage cuts in social programs since 2001. The mass strike scheduled for May 3 was a precious opportunity for the union ranks to take the lead and show their strength. Had the strike been carried through successfully, it would have shifted the relationship of forces in the workers' favor and begun to put in question the legitimacy of the government.

Furthermore, many strikers express concerns about loopholes in the agreement that would allow the government to cut even more jobs.

Unions Strengthened

Despite this missed opportunity, BC unions emerge strengthened by this experience. Many HEU members have a new-found pride and confidence in their union and are anxious to continue to fight the government's cutback programs. Union members throughout the province got a taste of the power that their solidarity can wield and are anxious to do more.

Leaders of the BC Federation of Labor argue that the way to defeat the Liberal Party government's policies is to work for the election of an NDP government in the next provincial election, due in May 2005. But NDP leader Carole James has already stated that a government led by her will not seek to restore what working people have lost since 2001.

The election of an NDP government in BC could indeed create better conditions for a fight to reverse the deep cuts in living standards and democratic rights since 2001. But this can only be won by mobilizing the strength of the unions and its allies, no matter who is elected. Continued union mobilizations against the Campbell government in BC, and the Liberal/Conservative agenda in Ottawa, is the only way for union strength to grow and it's the only way to ensure that an NDP government, if elected in Victoria, is compelled to act on key demands of BC labor.

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Deal With Government Ends Hospital Strike by Roger Annis

The strike of 43,000 health care workers in British Columbia ended on May 2 following a late-night agreement between leaders of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), the BC Federation of Labour and the provincial government of Liberal Party premier Gordon Campbell.

The government had adopted the draconian Bill 37 four days earlier, on April 29. The bill imposed the health care employers' demands at the bargaining table, including a retroactive 15% pay cut, lengthening of the work week by one and a half hours, and the right to contract out hospital jobs to private companies that pay near-minimum wage.

Workers across British Columbia reacted to Bill 37 with a wave of solidarity strikes. Their job actions were picking up steam. Tens of thousands more were slated to walk off the job on Monday, May 3, including teachers, government and industrial workers. The HEU strike thus became a showdown by working people as a whole with the provincial government, which is widely hated for the radical cuts to social programs and working conditions of ordinary people carried out since its election in 2001. Here was a chance to fight back.

Amongst the HEU's own members, there was a range of reactions to the last-minute deal. Some pointed fingers squarely at both the leadership of their union and at Jim Sinclair and the Federation of Labour.

The announcement of the settlement angered and dismayed many workers. Picket lines remained up the following day at most major hospitals. Some solidarity strikes went ahead as planned, including bus drivers and municipal workers in Victoria, and the entire workforce in the town of Quesnel in central B.C. Ferry sailings from Victoria, on Vancouver Island, to Vancouver were delayed at the beginning of the day.

"The government has learned a great lesson," Ken Robinson, an HEU leader in Kelowna B.C. told CBC Radio as he continued to walk the picket line on Monday. "If they pass a really bad bill against workers, all they have to do is take out a little of the worst part and then they can get it passed."

"I Feel Betrayed"

“I feel betrayed,” said Susan Barron, a laboratory technician at Royal Jubilee Hospital in Victoria as she returned to work. She told the Victoria Times-Colonist that she is a single mother who cannot afford a 15 per cent pay cut.

The strike began on April 25. The other unions in health care, including the 35 000 member B.C. Nurses Union and the 15 000 member Health Sciences Association, joined the HEU picket lines for the first four days. Health care in the province was reduced to essential services.

The settlement modified some of the provisions of Bill 37. The principal change was the agreement by the government, on behalf of the employers, to limit to 600 the number of additional jobs that could be contracted out over the two-year term of the new contract. A total of 6,000 jobs have already been cut.

“We were faced with a law and a government that was determined to privatize health care,” said HEU spokesperson Chris Allnutt in explaining why the union accepted the settlement. “Our conclusion was that the best we could do under the circumstances was to limit the damage from that legislation and we did.”

The HEU organized information meetings for members on the day of the settlement and through the following week. A meeting in Vancouver on May 5 was attended by 300 members. Many at the meeting agreed with those who spoke from the floor and argued that the union won important concessions from the government, and that it is a stronger union as a result of the strike action it took.

Wide Range of Views

Seven Oaks talked to health care workers at several hospitals in the days following the end of the strike and found a wide range of views. “I’ve worked here for 10 years and may be out of a job,” explained Francine, a porter at Vancouver General Hospital (VGH). “We had lots of support from other unions, and it was building. Then, it was all gone so fast. I am angry at the union for that.

“The settlement puts a limit of 600 more jobs to be cut. But that’s still a lot of people who will lose their job.”

A member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) was disappointed. Her union had joined the HEU on the picket lines. “The public was on our side. I was surprised that the strike ended. I think we would have won more had we stayed out.”

Cheryl, a cardiology technician at VGH and an HEU member, said that she “was angry at the union when the news broke. But I attended the information meeting later that day and started to think it was the best decision.

“Today, I am honored to be in the HEU. The strike achieved some important things. We made the government limit the number of jobs to be contracted out. The public now knows who we are and what we stand for. A lot of us see the union differently. I’ve never been involved in it before. Now, I’m going to tell everyone I see about our issues.”

Many workers are now anxiously awaiting the next provincial election, scheduled for May 17, 2005. "At the end of the day," said Ken Robinson in Kelowna, "a change in government is where we have to go."

Replacing the Government

"We will have a chance to repeal Bill 37 when we repeal the government," the HEU's Chris Allnutt told CBC Radio.

There will be high expectations of the New Democratic Party (NDP) at that time. It's the party that many working people look to as the alternative governing party to the Liberals. The NDP's two MLAs argued against Bill 37, which was passed in a rare overnight session of the legislature. The party, though, was non-committal on restoring the wages and benefits of the hospital workers. NDP leader Carole James told Vancouver Sun columnist Vaughn Palmer that if elected next year, her party would not undo the legacy of the Campbell government.

"Unfortunately, you can't go back in time," said James, commenting on the privatized jobs in the hospitals.

But before next year's election, the unions and the Campbell government may do battle again. Teachers, nurses, and public sector workers who are members of CUPE are at, or near, the end of their collective agreements.

For Cheryl at VGH, the strike and its lessons will motivate further solidarity. "If anyone else is on strike and needs help, I'll be there. If the government keeps attacking the unions, we'll do it again."

Socialist Voice #7, May 26, 2004

What Socialists Learned from the Winnipeg General Strike

By Ian Angus

Editors' Note: Ian Angus is the author of Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada, first published in 1981. He gave the following talk at the Marxism 2004 Conference in Toronto May 6-9, in a session marking the 85th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike. We believe his conclusions are relevant to all those seeking a fighting response to the capitalist offensive against our rights at home and abroad. It is published here with his permission. Copyright © 2004 Ian Angus. All rights reserved.

I want to discuss the lessons that revolutionary socialists drew from their experience in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, lessons I believe are still very relevant today.

Canadian mythology holds that this is a peaceful country. There's no class struggle here, we never had a revolution, we don't even have much violent crime. In Canada the classic liberal values prevail. The Canadian way is discussion, compromise and mutual respect. We have evolution, not revolution. We don't fight, we have Royal Commissions.

Many academic historians take that as an article of faith.

But such historians face a problem. If Canada is such a peaceful place, how can they explain the revolts, rebellions, uprisings and pitched battles that dot our history? How can they explain Mackenzie, Papineau, Riel, Poundmaker, and other rebels whose actions have disrupted the peaceful flow of Canadian development?

The process of explaining away these inconvenient exceptions has generally taken place in two stages.

1. At the time of the event, and for some time after, the rebels are portrayed as criminals, often as *insane* criminals, who deserve to be punished. At the very least, they should be expelled from Canada, because they obviously are not true Canadians. Their rebellion was defeated, and that's a very good thing indeed.
2. Later, when the events are safely distant, historians re-interpret the rebellion as the result of unfortunate misunderstandings. And they conclude that once calmer heads prevailed, the experience eventually led to the advancement of the liberal values of discussion, compromise and mutual respect.

We've seen this pattern again and again.

William Lyon Mackenzie was exiled from Canada for leading a rebellion. Today he is revered as a founder of Canadian democracy, as "Toronto's first mayor."

Louis Riel was exiled, then hanged. Today he's described as a "father of Confederation" and his rebellion is said to have been part of Canada's evolution to responsible government.

The same thing has happened with the Winnipeg General Strike.

1. At the time, and for years afterwards, it was portrayed as an attempted Bolshevik coup, led by foreign agitators. Its leaders were arrested, and many were deported, even though they were Canadian citizens. Strikers were shot in the streets.
2. More recently, the history of the Winnipeg General Strike has been rewritten by social democrats, who describe the strike as just an attempt to win collective bargaining, and a step in the evolution of liberal Canada. For example, an account of the strike published by the BC Federation of Labour concludes by saying that as a result of this experience, strike leader J.S. Woodsworth went on to found the CCF, which later became the NDP. It concludes: “And in 1969, 50 years after the Winnipeg General Strike, Manitoba elected an NDP government. The workers had won at last.”

This is typical of most writing on the Winnipeg General Strike in the past 30 years or so. The strikers were misunderstood heroes and the government response was reactionary and repressive, but only because it didn't understand.

But glory be! Despite those unfortunate misunderstandings, the strike led to the creation of the CCF, which led to the NDP, the ultimate party of discussion, compromise and mutual respect.

And then victory! The election of Ed Schreyer as premier of Manitoba, a man whose politics were *so very unradical* that Trudeau later appointed him Governor General!

Unfortunately for the social democratic interpretation, most of the leaders of the 1919 strike wave were not social democrats or liberals – they were revolutionary socialists. And the experience did not lead them to the CCF – it led them to build a new revolutionary party, the Communist Party of Canada.

Toward a New Kind of Party

Far from leading directly to Canadian social democracy, the strikes of 1919 led a majority of Canadian socialists to recognize the need for *a new kind of party*. Here's how they described it in 1921:

“It will be a party of action, seeking contact with the workers, a party in which the theorists and doctrinaires as such will find small place, a party of the workers, and with them in their daily struggles against capitalist oppression, seeking always to build up a united front of the working class for Industrial Freedom and Emancipation from wage slavery.” (The Workers Guard, December 17, 1921)

That view—that revolutionaries must participate in the struggles of workers and the oppressed—is today almost universally accepted in the revolutionary left, at least in words.

But it was not a common view in the socialist movement in Canada or elsewhere in the world a century ago. Left wing organizations typically treated political action and economic action as separate, unrelated activities. Socialists promoted socialism, which meant organizing educational programs and running in elections, while unions and other organizations dealt with day-to-day issues.

Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, described in her *Reminiscences of Lenin* how Lenin and his comrades in Russia tried to link Marxist theory to the everyday experiences of the workers.

“The method of agitation based on the workers' everyday needs struck deep root in our Party work. I did not fully appreciate how efficacious this method was until years later, when, living in France as a political emigrant, I observed how, during the great strike of the postal workers in Paris, the French Socialist Party stood completely aloof from it. It was the business of the trade unions, they said. In their opinion the business of a party was only political struggle. They had no clear idea whatever about the necessity of combining the economic with the political struggle.”

There were notable exceptions, but that was the general approach of almost all socialist groups before World War I. Not just in the large parliamentary parties, but also in most of the parties and groups that considered themselves to be revolutionary. They talked about socialism, they held classes and gave lectures and wrote articles about Marxism—but they abstained from the real struggles of the working class.

The Socialist Party of Canada

In Canada, that approach was exemplified by the Socialist Party of Canada. Before the war, it was by far the dominant party on the left in western Canada, with about 3,000 members in the four western provinces.

The SPC viewed itself as a revolutionary Marxist organization. It prided itself on its doctrinal purity. It was for socialism, and nothing less. The SPC even refused to join the Second International, on the grounds that the British Labor Party was a member.

The party's leading spokesman, E.T. Kingsley, argued that the conflicts between employers and workers were not part of the class struggle at all—they were mere “commodity struggles,” disputes over the division of wealth in capitalist society, and hence of no interest to socialists.

Now this was not a unanimous view in the SPC. Many of the party's leaders were also union activists and even union leaders, and obviously believed that labor struggles were important. But even for them there was a disconnect between their political views and their activity as militant unionists.

As militant unionists, members of the Socialist Party won the leadership of the labor movement from Vancouver to Winnipeg in 1918 and 1919.

The March 1919 Western Labor Conference, which voted to create the One Big Union as a competitor for the very conservative Trades & Labour Congress, was dominated by Socialist Party members.

SPC Failed to Lead

But – and this is the key point – the Socialist Party *as a party* played little or no role. Was creation of the One Big Union a good idea? The SPC refused to take a stand, on the grounds that “the comparative merits of various forms of industrial activity do not come within the field of S.P. of C. activity.”

Throughout the 1919 labor revolt, when general strikes were underway in a dozen or more cities from Vancouver BC to Amherst NS, the SPC's weekly newspaper was largely devoted to the same routine expositions of Marxist theory it published before and after the strikes.

So, while Socialist Party leaders played a central role in leading the Winnipeg Strike and in parallel strikes across the country, they did so as labor militants. The SPC *as a party* played a minimal role, and the strike wave had no *political* strategy. That was a critical weakness.

A general strike by its very nature is a challenge to the established order. If it is not to be a brief, symbolic act of protest, a general strike must raise, if only implicitly, the question of control of society. The bread and milk wagons carrying "By Permission of the Strike Committee" placards were symbolic of this.

Even more significant was the fact that the police voted to strike, and only remained on the job because the Strike Committee asked them to.

The strike radically undermined the ability of the ruling class to rule in Winnipeg. Basic day-to-day decisions about the functioning of the city were being made, at least in part, by the Strike Committee.

But the leaders of the Winnipeg strike, including the socialists, failed to see the political implications of this. On the contrary, they did their utmost to confine the strike to simple questions of trade union rights and wages. They exerted every effort to avoid conflict with the government.

Again and again they exhorted the workers to "Do Nothing," to stay off the streets, to avoid parades and demonstrations. The pro-strike parades that did take place were organized not by the Strike Committee but by veterans' organizations.

While the strike leaders urged calm, the capitalist class was preparing to attack—because they recognized what was at stake. The "Citizen's Committee of 1000" stated its view in no uncertain terms:

"This is not a strike at all, in the ordinary sense of the term—it is Revolution.

"It is a serious attempt to overturn British institutions in this Western country and to supplant them with the Russian Bolshevik system of Soviet rule.

"Winnipeg, as a plain matter of fact, is governed by the Central Strike Committee of the Trades and Labor Councils."

Similar statements appeared in almost every daily newspaper, and in the speeches of Liberal and Conservative politicians. The spokesmen of the ruling class deliberately overstated the amount of conscious planning involved in the supposed Bolshevik plot, but their statements show that they understood the dynamics of the crisis.

Revolutionary Strategy

The general strikes of 1919 exposed, as nothing else could, the Socialist Party's total lack of a revolutionary strategy—*as a party*, it didn't even have a militant labor strategy. In the greatest social crisis Canada has yet seen, the Socialist Party was passive.

In Winnipeg, despite the strength of the SPC, Christian radicals and labour party leaders set the Strike Committee's agenda and the strike's tactics. There was no effort to involve the strikers in decision making on a regular basis, no effort to extend the Strike Committee's authority as a direct political challenge to the Citizens Committee of 1000.

Above all, there was no preparation for the clash with the state that would inevitably come, so the arrest of a small number of leaders effectively defeated the strike.

The labor revolt of 1919 raised entirely new questions for the Canadian left. The socialist movement had long restricted itself to educational activities, to "making socialists." The transition from capitalism to socialism was a matter for the far distant future. The assumption most socialists made was that their movement would grow until it encompassed a majority of the population, and then take power peacefully, through parliamentary means.

Now they saw the possibility of a transition to socialism that would result from a revolutionary crisis in which the working class would suddenly rebel against the established order. In Winnipeg, the ruling class demonstrated that it would not be passive in face of such a challenge to its power—it would not yield to the majority.

The Canadian left had never considered such matters. Raising them meant adopting a new approach to socialist politics—and that meant taking up the challenge issued by the Russian Bolsheviks and the Third International to build a new kind of party.

With a handful of exceptions, the revolutionists who had led the strikes of 1919 took that challenge seriously. By the end of 1919 there were underground communist groups in most Canadian cities, affiliated to one or other of the two competing Communist Parties in the United States.

In May 1921, the Canadian communist groups—including some that were working within the Socialist Party, united to form the Communist Party of Canada. By the end of 1921, a majority of the Socialist Party had been won over. The SPC itself went into rapid decline, eventually dissolving in 1925.

Two Lessons of 1919

The experience of 1919 taught Canadian revolutionaries two lessons:

First, that workers power is possible in this country—it existed, in embryonic form, in Winnipeg in 1919.

Second, that a new kind of party is needed to make that possibility real.

Joe Knight was a Socialist Party leader, a key organizer of the left-wing triumph in the western labour movement in 1918-1919, and a founder of the One Big Union. In 1921, he attended the congress of the Communist International in Moscow. I'd like to finish with an excerpt from the speech he gave there, which I think summarizes the real lessons of Winnipeg very well.

First, he explained the significance of the strike:

“All the workers joined the strike, even government employees, postal and telegraph employees. They all participated in the big general rally and in the strike, which lasted

seven weeks. A situation was created in which we were only one step away from taking power. Nothing was done in Winnipeg except by order of the strike committee. The strike committee was no less powerful than the state itself. Of course, Winnipeg is not all of Canada. But had the struggle in Winnipeg gripped all of Canada, it would certainly have led to the revolution. We had a reactionary state against us, and the masses did not follow us. The strike had to be broken off after most of our people had been thrown in jail.”

And then he discussed the relationship between revolutionaries and mass organizations such as unions.

“We must work from within, participate in their struggles, win their trust, and then seek to be elected by them to the most important positions in the movement. So I totally agree that we must go into the trade unions. And I will add that we in the trade unions must maintain as close a connection with the Communist party as possible, because its goal is not to be active as a political and industrial organization, but rather to build a great, unified revolutionary army of the workers of the world to overthrow capitalism.”

The leaders of the 1919 strikes drew those lessons 85 years ago. Their insights are still valid today.