

## Operation Solidarity/Solidarity Coalition Report

I imagine that people are asking themselves what we gained by our participation in last year's mini-general-strike. There has certainly been ample discussion in the press about who won and who lost, various conclusions being drawn. Personally, even though I felt that the 'last minute' deal between Munro and Bennett was raw, I think it would be difficult to deny that the trade unions, at least, made some gains. Bill 2 is dead and buried. Model agreements on exemptions from Bill 3 - the bill that could have had the greatest effect on us - were reached. It is now possible for any public sector trade union to gain exemption from this legislation, although the legislation is still in place, and does still pose some problems for us. There is also an agreement that no changes will be made to the Labour Code without consultation with labour. If you have seen the draft proposal for changes to the Labour Code, you will understand the importance of this agreement. Nevertheless, these agreements are not in writing - except for minutes of the negotiations that preceded them - and it is impossible to say to what extent the government will keep its word. We've already seen them renege on the part of the agreement that concerned the use of the money saved during the teacher's strike. Probably the most significant gain is that we have demonstrated the length to which we are prepared to go to defend hard won trade union rights. Perhaps this will lead to a change of climate in Victoria. It should also be said that the campus community has demonstrated a degree of solidarity that may be very useful to us in the inevitable struggles to come.

I hope this doesn't sound like a post mortem. I really don't believe the battle is over. Things may very well heat up again once the legislature is back in session. The calm we're experiencing is partly the result of disappointment and defeat. Many people feel that the trade union gains were won at the expense of other sectors of the community. The relationship between the trade unions (Operation Solidarity) and the community groups (Solidarity Coalition) was difficult from the beginning. They needed each other, but there was a lack of trust. The trade unions had the ability to organize, and execute, massive demonstrations and strikes, and therefore could put much more pressure on the government than the community groups could alone. On the other hand the demands being made by the community groups had much broader appeal and, as a basis for mobilization, and for garnering public support through the press, were more effective than trade union demands raised on their own. I'm describing the basis of suspicion, not the absolute nature of the relationship. However, when the trade unions called off the escalating strike as soon as minimal trade union gains had been made, those who would have continued the battle, in order to win strong agreements on human rights and other social issues, and this included many trade unionists, felt the agreement to be a defeat (the word sellout was often repeated). They didn't feel that vague promises of consultation on the part of the government were a sufficient reason to take off the pressure. Promises of consultation had been made ever since July 7th. In fact the government claimed that it had consulted with all parties concerned from the very beginning (it hadn't).

I attended two meetings on the Monday after the strike. The Operation Solidarity meeting, at which Kube, Munro, and Kramer explained the Kelowna settlement, was almost funereal. There was very little applause. It was subdued, but most of those who spoke spoke against the settlement. Fairleigh Wellig (I have to tell you this) asked, very eloquently, what was in the settlement for the community at large, the post-secondary education sector, and women. She also wanted to know to what extent Operation Solidarity was willing to back up the smaller, non-affiliate trade unions as they faced future problems arising from the Sacred legislation. The Lower Mainland Coalition meeting later the same day was a very different event. It was held at the Fishermen's Hall and there were at least six hundred people in attendance. The press had to be practically herded out the door. Kube was there to defend the settlement, and I've never

seen so much criticism (I'm tempted to say abuse) directed at anyone in my life. There was an endless line of speakers. The criticism basically centred on the weakness of the agreement, the one-sidedness of it, and the fact that it was made unilaterally by Operation Solidarity (the BC Fed, in effect), without any consultation with the steering committee of the Coalition. At the same meeting a set of strong resolutions were passed. These included: that any consultation held as a result of the Kelowna settlement be conducted by the Coalition if it concerned other than trade union issues; that there be an education campaign conducted through Operation Solidarity networks on the issues of human rights, tenant's rights, social services, health and education; that there be stronger lines of accountability between Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition; that the participation of union locals in the Coalition be encouraged; that there be a one-day special conference of the Coalition; that the Coalition lobby the BC Fed convention; and that there be a demonstration during the week of that convention. In addition to this, the meeting approved a statement which expressed displeasure with the settlement, the lack of consultation with the Coalition, and called for greater solidarity in any future actions, or in any possible consultations with the government.

After those cathartic meetings, the energy level in the Solidarity movement dropped considerably, as people recovered from their exhaustion, disappointment, etc. Both Operation Solidarity and the Coalition are now undergoing a process of rebuilding. Whether the movement builds back up to its previous level of involvement and momentum will depend to a large extent on the actions of the government in the next few months. The leadership of Operation Solidarity took a lot of criticism at the BC Fed Convention. An action proposal brought forward by them was rejected as being too soft. There was a strong affirmation of support for the Coalition, both moral and financial. There was also a joint demonstration held, as proposed by the Coalition. The Convention also reaffirmed its willingness to hit the bricks again if the government didn't follow through on its promises. This threat was made with special reference to current negotiations between BC Hydro and its employees, negotiations which include the question of Bill 3.

There have been several events organized by the Coalition in the past month, but as I indicated, things haven't really started rolling yet. We'll keep you posted. Both the Human Rights Act and the Residential Tenancy Act are due to be ressurected during the new session of the legislature. The threats to job security posed by Bill 3 have not entirely disappeared. Changes to the Labour Code are a fair bet. And cuts in the public sector, affecting education and social services, are continuing to be made.

Ted Byrne