

Ep. 3: The 1983 Tranquille Occupation

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:22] Welcome to another episode of On the Line, a podcast that aims to bring British Columbia's rich labour heritage to life. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. On July 19th, 1983, members of the BC government and Service Employees' Union, better known as the BCGEU, learned that the large Tranquille institution in Kamloops would be shut down. The decision was part of the Social Credit government's all-out assault on social services and long-standing human rights they had announced to a stunned province 12 days earlier. The Tranquille facility housed more than 300 residents living with a combination of mental and physical challenges but no plans or procedures had been put in place for the residents. Their fate was a big question mark. For the 600 BCGEU members at the site, many of whom had worked with the residents for years, this was simply unacceptable. They decided to take matters into their own hands. A hand-painted union flag was raised. Locks were changed, managers evicted and the workers took control. Employees elected a workers' council. Each shift was represented and decisions were made democratically. All services were maintained. The remarkable occupation of Tranquille lasted for 22 days. It was the first action to be taken under the banner of Operation Solidarity, the massive protest movement that brought the province to the brink of a general strike. This is the story of the occupation of Tranquille.

Music: 'General Strike' performed by DOA [00:02:17] We're tired, yeah, tired of workin', we're tired of workin', yeah workin' for nothin'. We all want what we got comin', all we need is a break. Come on, take a break. Everything is not all right and there's no end in sight, you can call it what you like. Come on, stand up for your rights!

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:52] We were given permission by DOA's great Joe Keithley to feature 'General Strike' by the band in our Solidarity look-back two years ago, so we're using it again. It's a local song, a song of the era, specifically released as a single in November 1983 and I quote, "Dedicated to those who stood for their rights and continue the struggle. It ain't over yet."

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:22] First, some background. In the early 1980s, Canada experienced its worst economic downturn since the Depression. The recession was particularly hard on resource-dependent British Columbia. In 1982, the province's GDP fell 6.1%. Unemployment climbed well above the national average. There was also persistent inflation that put pressure on both government spending and unions at a time when resource revenue had been cut in half. To help unemployed workers during these tough times, the BC Federation of Labour set up unemployment action centres across the province in 1982. They functioned as food banks, career counselling services and organizing centres. On the other side, Premier Bill Bennett and his advisers saw the downturn as a chance to slash spending in the public sector and curb the power of their unions. On February 18th, 1982, Bennett announced the province's first public sector wage control program. It was the opening shot in what became an all-out battle to force workers to accept what the premier labelled 'the new economic reality.' When Bennett called a provincial election the next spring, his main platform was 'restraint.' Despite a topsy-turvy campaign, Social Credit was re-elected. No one could have foreseen what was to come down the pike on budget day.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:10] The big day was July 7th, 1983, a date that continues to live in infamy for many British Columbians. The presentation of a budget that slashed funding for core services across the province had been expected, but no one expected what

happened next. After the budget speech, without notice, minister after minister rose in the House to introduce a new bill. When they were done, 26 pieces of legislation had been introduced and they were devastating. In an instant, the Human Rights Branch and the Human Rights Commission were done away with. Commissioners and staff were fired on the spot, told to turn in their keys. The Rentalsman, established to safeguard tenant rights was also wiped out, along with rent controls. Landlords were given the right to evict tenants for any reason at all. The Employment Standards Board, the Alcohol and Drug Commission, vehicle testing stations, the BC Harbours Board and legislative scrutiny over Crown corporations were gone too. The government would have new powers to oversee school district budgets and fire elected school boards.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:28] Two bills targeted public sector workers directly. Bill 2 restricted government workers from negotiating any working conditions apart from wages and benefits, and Bill 3, perhaps the most shocking of all the bills, gave every public sector employer in the province the right to fire employees without cause. No government in Canada had ever delivered such a massive, single day attack on so many existing rights, rights that most British Columbians had long taken for granted. That summer, Gary Steeves was working as a staff member for the BCGEU. He picks up the story.

Gary Steeves [00:07:09] It was middle, mid-July. It was like a week, ten days later. On July the 8th, in this massive assault, Grace McCarthy had announced and had issued a press release saying that Tranquille was going to close, so we knew that the government planned to close it. The government had closed other institutions in Delview and Skeenaview and there was a lot of social pressure to de-institutionalize so I wasn't surprised by that. But they called my office, the Ministry of Human Resources, and they were down on, just off West 12th, just down past the hospital, MHR had an office building and said we need to speak to you about this press release and what our plans are. So we thought it was, you know, five years from now we're going to close. So Jack just said, 'Gary, you deal with the ministry, you go, you'll know what they're talking about.' So I went by myself. I don't know what I was thinking. It was the summertime, everyone's on vacation. It was a beautiful sunny day. I get down there and they have the senior managers and the most senior human relations people and there's a gang of like six of them sitting there. There's me. And so I joked, 'I thought you guys were senior. What are you doing? What are you guys doing here working in the middle of July? Like, you know, I thought you were senior. I'm junior. That's why I'm here.' And so we got to work, and they said, look, they laid out this thing about how Tranquille was falling apart, it needed huge capital investment, they didn't use that word, but it needed a lot of money to fix it and they weren't going to, and they were going to close it. I said, 'oh, yeah, and when is this going to happen?' They said, 'well, it's going to happen by the end of this year. It will be closed by the end of 1983.'

Gary Steeves [00:09:21] So I get back to the office and called Cliff and called Jack and I sat down with them and said, 'you can't believe it, here's what they're going to do.' Jack said, 'well, you've got to go to Kamloops. Get on the plane right now'. This meeting was 2 o'clock in the afternoon, I'd probably been back in the office by 4. I jumped on a plane at 6 o'clock and flew to Kamloops. I called our staff. We had two staff reps in Kamloops, in the Kamloops area office, Dave McPherson and Al Lowndes. I told them what I'd learned and Dave McPherson is a superb organizer. Dave McPherson was just the creme de la creme of an organizer. So he said, 'well, what does Jack say?' 'Cause Jack Adams, in our union, Jack was a superb tactician and strategist. Someone once said that he always used a blunt instrument when a scalpel would do. And he was kind of blunt and he was kind of, you know, he was a Korean War veteran. He was quite militaristic and quite in-your-face,

but he was brilliant at knowing where the buttons were and knowing if you did this, what they were going to do. He had the countermoves, you know, he was always two steps ahead of everybody, in my experience. I enjoyed working with him. He said you just can't go into Kamloops and drop this bombshell on our 600 workers and then get on the plane and leave town. I said, oh, okay, well, what are we going to do? says Gary Steeves, you know, four years on staff with the BCGEU. He said, 'I think you got to have them just sit down and stay right there. No one goes back to work. You just sit right down, right there. Sit in.'

Gary Steeves [00:11:38] So I just told them what happened. I just went through, blow by blow, the meeting and what they said and what was the plan. Then I said, do you have questions? Before we talk further, what questions do you have? Let's get them out on the table. So people asked questions like, well, is this going to be for everyone? But the biggest question that everyone asked and was asked over and over and over again was, well, what's going to happen to these people we look after? They were like teachers. They cared more about the kids than they cared about themselves. They just said this is not right. So I said, look, I have a question. We answered all the questions as best we could and I said, I have a question for you guys. What do you want to do? You have choices. You can do nothing, or you can fight back. And if you want to fight back, I got some ideas. This guy stood up, way at the back of the meeting. He stood up and he said, yeah, we don't have any choices here. Don't give me that. We don't have any choices here. We're not going to take this, and sat down. It was like, I don't know, it was like it was all choreographed. As he sat down, everyone else just stood up and it was just this massive, clapping and cheering and yeah, we're going to do something. So then Dave and I explained, well look, we're going to do it. Let's go occupy the place. Let's get rid of the bosses. First of all, we'll kick the bosses out. We'll send a little message to Bill Bennett that his world's changed.

Gary Steeves [00:13:22] So they loved that and then the shop stewards started scheduling. You would work a shift, sleep in a shift in your workplace, and you'd go home for a shift. The workers, they just handled it all. There was schedules in every department within an hour. I said to Bill, we didn't know how to lock doors. I said, we may have to seal the doors off. And so I got this Saul Alinsky book, I had just finished reading. I think it was "Rules for Radicals" and in it they said, if you take a paper clip and you break the paper clip off and you slide that in the lock, it doesn't destroy the lock. It just prevents the key from going in. So all you need to do is have a little tiny magnet, you put it on the end, it slides out, you put your key in, but you've disabled the door. So I said to Bill, get a whole lot. Get as many paperclips as we've got in the office.' He said, paperclips! What do you want those for? So we had blank picket signs and paper clips and rope and everything we thought we'd need, piled into the back of Bill's station wagon. And then we called the bosses and said, you will not be allowed into work tomorrow. We had sentries on every door and even people that were delivering stuff, you know, food companies or whoever doing deliveries, if you didn't have a union card, you couldn't get on the property. Pretty soon all these companies are saying, oh, well, we contracted it over to here because they're union. Well, this is great. It worked very well. The other thing we did was we elected a council, one or two representatives from every shift in every department. This council, this occupation council made all the basic, all the big decisions, so it was good.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:06] The flag of Operation Solidarity flew over Tranquille throughout the occupation. The mass protest movement had been born on July 15th, when the BC labour movement set aside its internal disagreements to unite under a name, an image inspired by the independent Polish union Solidarnosc, which had been banned in

Poland in 1982. A steering committee of the BC Federation of Labour's executive council and fair representation from non-affiliated unions was given authority to call a general strike, and a \$1 million budget was established to fight back against the government's restraint budget and the 26 bills. Trade unions were not the only groups eager to fight back. Advocates for women, minorities, seniors, children, renters, human rights and civil liberties in general were also outraged by the government's savage restraint program. A few weeks later, a province-wide Solidarity Coalition was formed, designed to harness the energy of all community and social justice advocates in taking on the government. The Solidarity Coalition was chaired jointly by BC Federation of Labour President Art Kube, Renata Scherer, who had been fired from the Human Rights Commission and theologian Father Jim Roberts. Regional coalitions were set up across BC, often through the Federation of Labour's Unemployment Action Centres. Over the rest of the summer, the combination of unions and the Coalition's grassroots enthusiasm sparked the biggest wave of rallies and demonstrations the province had ever seen. The Tranquille occupation, propelled by the dedication of BCGEU members to the people they cared for, stood as an early example to other activists of extraordinary solutions for extraordinary times. Workers recorded their experiences in a daily publication they called the 'Tranquille Tough Times'. Their submissions, often anonymous, chronicled the humour and dedication that powered the workers through those 22 days. A small, unsigned poem published August 7th read:

Danielle Lavalley [00:17:31] Now there's Bill. Hear what he's saying. The people are mad because of the jobs he's slaying. Well, Grace, (whose got heart) though the budget is tight. She's abolished the human right. But don't you worry. And don't you quit. Because the fighting's not quite over yet. We're going to rally and we're going to sit. We've got the best union you've ever met.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:17:56] The epic saga was even captured in songs written by a Tranquille worker, Debbie Forehead, later Debbie Patton. She was invited to perform live on local radio station CKNL and later at the massive August 10th Operation Solidarity rally at Empire Stadium in Vancouver. This spirit of solidarity steeled their nerves as they faced difficult situations while operating the facility on their own.

Gary Steeves [00:18:24] So every day, we let the managers come in on the back end of the property. Tranquille's a huge property. Now they had cottages in the old days, when it was a sanatorium, they built cottages for the doctors. This would be the 1950s. There was a couple of cottages left and they had nothing in them, no furniture, just bare little cottages. So we had all of the managers sit in one cottage. We'd let them go there and they couldn't go anywhere else. So I would take over in the morning, a big folder of everything for them to sign, then the secretaries would ship it into Victoria. They were just, oh, I don't know about that. I said, you're going to sign that or it's going to get a lot worse around here. Oh, okay. So it's pretty well got into a groove until about halfway through the occupation. What happened there was, you know how hot it is in Kamloops. It's hot in the summertime. This is July and August. So it's got down to slightly under 100. I'm talking about the old, we're talking about the old temperature measurements now. It would be the high 90s. You could sit outside at night, you know, in shorts and a t-shirt, just beautiful. But there was one ward called the Greaves Ward, which were all cerebral palsy patients. I got to know a few of them. They had great minds, and they just had a body that didn't work particularly well. So they were, you know, significantly physical disabilities and some of them wise beyond their years. They had, the BCBC had been keeping the air conditioning system going over the years because it was on its last legs and they kept fixing it and gerrymandering and you know, playing with it. So one night I got a call. Actually it was the first night I didn't

sleep in the institution. I had got a hotel in downtown Kamloops just to get a break and Marina was with me, and the phone rings. This is BCBC shop steward and said, Gary, the air conditioning in Greaves has ceased to work. I said, well, can you fix it? He goes, no. He said we've been working on it. We can't make it work. He said we really need a... I said we really need a new system. I said aw geez, how are we going to do that?' And he goes, well, there is one. It's in a warehouse in downtown Kamloops. It's been approved in the budget every year for the last four or five years, but they never wanted to spend the money. It's in the budget, they just haven't spent it. I said is it in this year's budget? He goes yeah. I said, well get a crew, get to that warehouse. Let's put a new air conditioning in it, you know, the big unit that sits on the roof. So BCBC guys got the crane out and they went downtown and got a new air conditioning unit, took the old one off, put the new one on. 9:00 in the morning, new air conditioning system. Beautiful. He said you know, people are going to die. If we don't fix this, people are going to die. and I said you don't need to convince me. Let's do the right thing.

Gary Steeves [00:21:54] Well, you couldn't believe the reaction of management when I took that piece of paper over in the morning for them to sign. They just went nuts. I said you're prepared to let people die. You're more interested in budget and saving money and all of that than you are in the people that you're charged with looking after. I said here's the drill. You can refuse to sign this. And if that's the case-- of course, there was a CBC and a CTV film crew followed us everywhere. They were there. Everywhere I went, they went. I said we're going outside to that picnic table and we're going to have a debate right on television about this expenditure. And I'm going to tell people it's approved. Legislature's approved it. It's in the budget. You guys just want to torture people who have physical disabilities. I mean, they were off the wall. I mean, he was off the wall and then when I threatened to drag him out in front of the cameras, he just said, okay, I'll sign, and they signed it. I was so relieved. Dave McPherson and Bill Rhode and a whole bunch of the activists were back at the office. They were just waiting for me to get back. What happened? They signed. They went ohh. So it was things like that, but it ran. The workers were marvellous. The workers knew what they were doing and they didn't need someone leaning over their shoulder telling them how to look after people.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:23:23] Given the number of jobs involved and widespread compassion for the residents, the people of Kamloops were strongly on the side of the union. But the Tranquille workers could not hold out forever. Inevitably, sleeping and working in the institution for days on end began to wear them down. As actions elsewhere began escalating around them, the occupation of Tranquille came to an end.

Gary Steeves [00:23:49] It lasted until August 10th. August 10th was the Empire Stadium rally. It ended for a number of reasons. One is that we got as much public relations, to be crass about it, we'd gotten the maximum amount of public relations Operation Solidarity fightback propaganda out of it that we could. The workers were getting tired. You can only do that for so long and people need to get back to their normal lives. So workers were getting tired and you could tell from the occupation council, was they were tired. And we had an agreement from the government that if we gave it back to them, there'd be no retaliation. So the government was really on their knees begging basically, like you know, can't we get--can we get back into normal business? We had an agreement that the fate of Bill 3 and Bill 2 were going to be dealt with through the collective bargaining and strikes that were going to take place in the fall. You know, that roster of BCGEU goes first. You remember all of that. So the lineup of unions prepared to walk out to force the government off its legislative agenda, we weren't going to make--continuing the occupation wasn't going to make that come any faster. It seemed an appropriate time to let the workers have

a rest before some more emotional events would take place in the fall. You know, when we'd take the strike vote and go out and everything. It just seemed like the right time.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:25:45] The Tranquille workers later joined other BCGEU members in a successful province-wide strike against the government that fall. Although Operation Solidarity's overall strike plan failed to roll back Social Credit's earth-shattering social measures, the BCGEU managed to get rid of Bill 2 and retain their seniority rights in the event of layoffs, as did other public sector workers. There would be no firing without cause. Tranquille eventually closed in 1985. Thanks to the BCGEU strike, however, workers retained their seniority and security rights. Many were able to transfer to similar institutions in the Lower Mainland. Others opted for early retirement. As for the residents, union members had insisted, in return for ending their occupation, that the government commit itself to working with community care advocates to ensure that all residents were placed in an appropriate residence, usually in a group home. And that's what happened.

Gary Steeves [00:26:48] It depended, you know, if your parents were from Burns Lake, they tried to arrange a group home in Burns Lake for you to go to so you're close to your family and so on. That was partly due to, I mean the government was just going to dump them. It was the union after the fact that had set up a process to make sure that residents were looked after, or we'd still be occupying the place I think. If you couldn't give the workers that--the workers wouldn't have given up on their own account. They would have fought to the very end for the people they looked after.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:27:22] What might a future generation of activists draw from his experiences? Gary Steeve's had this to say.

Gary Steeves [00:27:29] Get the book out. Start reading. You need to know the rules. If you're going to be an effective agent of change, got to know the rules. So I would say to young people, learn the rules so you know how to change something, because the status quo is not good enough, never is good enough. So if you want to change stuff, you got to know how it works, where the little buttons are, where all the little cogs are. Learn the system and figure out from there how to change it.

Music: 'General Strike' performed by DOA [00:28:14] ... up for your rights. Stand up, stand and unite. It's time for a general strike. Stand up, stand and unite. It's time for a general strike...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:28:24] Nearly 40 years later, the historic 22 day occupation of Tranquille still stands as one of the most radical, inspiring examples of workers using direct action and collective bargaining to protect not just labour rights, but human rights too. The interview with Gary Steeves was part of the Solidarity 35 project by the BC Labour Heritage Centre. Thanks to interviewer Ken Novakowski and Gary Steeves and to Bailey Garden for scripting and editing this episode. Danielle Lavallee read the workers poem. You can learn more about this story in Gary's new book, "Tranquillity Lost: the Occupation of Tranquille and Battle for Community Care in BC", which has just been published. A bronze plaque has been commissioned by the BCGEU to commemorate the significant event in labour history. In October 2019, the BC Labour Heritage Centre, in partnership with the Virtual Museum of Canada, launched 'Solidarity, the largest political protest in B.C.'s history,' which tells the tale of those unforgettable months in 1983. You can explore the digital exhibit at LabourHeritageCentre.ca/VMC. You can find more information in our show description. Finally, we would like to thank the Labor Radio Podcast Network for welcoming us into their growing network of labour-oriented shows,

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