**Appendix 2: Solidarity Backgrounder** **Lesson: Solidarity** Lesson: Solidarity

**Back from the Brink, 25 years later**

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It was the night the province of British Columbia stood still.

Twenty-five years ago this month, behind the drapes of Premier Bill Bennett's golden-carpeted, Kelowna living room, the Premier and union leader Jack Munro were engaged in extraordinary, head-to-head bargaining to stave off what was getting closer to an all-out general strike.

More than 40,000 government employees were already toughened by nearly two weeks on the picket line. Tens of thousands of teachers and other education workers had been out for a week. And B.C.'s vital ferry system was just hours from being shut down as the next wave in an escalating strike strategy to combat a government onslaught against public-sector unions, social services and human rights that even Mr. Bennett had called doing the unthinkable.

Finally, with the clock ticking toward midnight, the gruff-talking Mr. Munro stepped out on the Premier's darkened patio to announce that a deal had been reached. The few paltry details of the so-called Kelowna Accord contained little sign of government give, with vague promises of consultation, a commitment to keep money saved by the teachers' strike in the education system, and no reprisals. But that was enough for Mr. Munro, supported by other union leaders back in Vancouver, to declare the strikes were over. So ended - not with a bang, but a whimper - one of the most turbulent times and greatest massing of extra-parliamentary opposition to an elected government in this perennially polarized province's history.

"They were truly amazing days," recalled labour-relations expert Mark Thompson at the University of British Columbia. "I knew I was watching history right there. The sheer size of the protests has never been close to being matched, before or since. I've been here 37 years and I've certainly never seen anything like it."

Years later, on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the movement's demise in Kelowna, few who were part of it have forgotten, and emotions over why and how the strikes were called off remain as raw as if events unfolded yesterday.

"No, they sure as hell haven't forgotten," groused Mr. Munro, who became the target of bitter denunciation both inside and outside the labour movement for his role in negotiating peace.

Yet the former president of the then-powerful International Woodworkers of America is unrepentant over the decision to end the walkouts and the reluctance of his and other private-sector unions to join in.

"It was a serious, serious problem. It would have been a goddamned mess," he said. "You had all these people passing motions for a general strike and none of them was in a union.

"In retrospect, it was a hell of a call. You're damned if you do, damned if you don't. … But a lot of people were pretty mad at me."

The only mistake Mr. Munro will own up to is talking to Mr. Bennett on his home turf. "It was weird," he said. "We should have gone to a neutral place, in a hotel or something like that. But everyone was in such a hurry."

There are those who believe the protests that banded together as Operation Solidarity, inspired by the *Solidarnosc* fight-back against Communism in Poland, were a high-water mark for B.C. trade unions, never to be approached again.

That viewpoint is shared by Art Kube, the rotund, dedicated trade unionist who headed Operation Solidarity and became the leading public figure of the anti-government crusade. "I wish the thing had turned out better. It would have given the labour movement in the entire country a lot more courage," he said. "There's a saying that you never really lose a strike, but at the same time, the labour movement became a lot more conservative afterwards."

**The movement builds**

But what a time it was.

Thousands of people who had never before been part of a union were galvanized to join the struggle, believing it was for social justice, not bread-and-butter labour issues. For the first time, unions, community groups and activist organizations set aside their many differences and banded together in common cause.

Over the course of the summer and into the fall, Operation Solidarity captured the public's imagination. Organizers packed 25,000 people onto the lawns of the legislature. "This is bigger than the Queen," said one admiring police officer.

More than 40,000 union members booked off work one day in August and crammed into creaking Empire Stadium. Two months later, just as observers were writing off Operation Solidarity in the face of government intractability, they gambled on one last protest, knowing that a flop would mean surrender.

Instead, upwards of 60,000 people marched through the Vancouver streets to surround a downtown hotel where the governing Social Credit Party was holding its annual convention, the city's largest-ever political demonstration. Equally impressive rallies were held throughout the province, drawing thousands of protesters in such Socred strongholds as Williams Lake, Kamloops and Prince George.

The explosion had been set off by a breathtaking series of 26 bills, introduced one by one in the legislature on a single, unforgettable day in early July. They wiped out the province's human-rights commission and rent-review office, tightened government control over school boards and colleges, watered down medicare, dropped government enforcement of employment standards, and extended wage controls indefinitely.

The most contentious legislation, Bills 2 and 3, gutted union contracts in the public sector, giving employers the power to fire workers without cause or regard to seniority. Many were let go that very day.

Operation Solidarity took off immediately. Independent Canadian unions sat down with their bitter rivals in the B.C. Federation of Labour. Gays and lesbians discussed strategy with church groups. One prominent activist lawyer was heard to say that his practice was going to seed. "All I do is go to meetings," he said.

"We had book clubs. We studied. We smoked too many cigarettes. We drank too much beer," remembered Frances Wasserlein, a prominent member of a new protest group, Women Against the Budget. "I also recall a lot of pacing and talking at the back of union halls. There were disagreements, but everyone listened."

Activist poet Tom Wayman, who subsequently denounced the Kelowna Accord in a long bitter poem called *The Face of Jack Munro* ("How could it occur/that direction of our struggle/shrank to one man…") said the atmosphere was infectious.

"There was a feeling throughout B.C. that something was happening, that everything was up for grabs. People stopped talking about sports and what was on TV last night. It was heady stuff."

For many, the emotional highlight of the entire campaign took place during the rally at Empire Stadium. After every nook and cranny seemed to be filled, in came the rousing band of the Vancouver firefighters, followed by hundreds of uniformed firefighters marching in step. A roar erupted from the crowd that seemed to go on forever.

"The firefighters risked a huge set of consequences by walking out. Yet there they were," said Ms. Wasserlein, still moved by the memory.

The opposition NDP, meanwhile, staged round-the-clock filibusters in an unsuccessful attempt to halt the bills. At one point, as tempers frayed, party leader Dave Barrett was dragged out of the legislature by two sergeants-at-arms, who dumped him in the corridor on his rear end.

**Champagne and bitterness**

It took until late October for the government to blink, just a bit. By inserting his savvy deputy minister Norman Spector into exhaustive contract negotiations covering the 40,000 members of the B.C. Government Employees Union, Mr. Bennett signalled that he was open to exempting unions from the onerous provisions of Bill 2 and Bill 3.

Still, there was no agreement and the BCGEU hit the bricks on Nov. 1. A week later, the teachers went out, while negotiations continued at the B.C. Labour Relations Board to get the BCGEU a contract and prevent further walkouts. British Columbians held their collective breath.

Diane Woods, a vice-president of the BCGEU and one of the first workers to be fired, said everyone was conscious of the high stakes involved. The tension was palpable.

"It was pretty scary being in that room and thinking what we were involved in. I don't think anyone went through it all without some tear-shedding. I know I broke down from emotion and exhaustion several times."

On the afternoon of Nov. 13, the BCGEU and the government concluded a new collective agreement. Firing without cause was gone. While the BCGEU celebrated with champagne, social activists wondered what would happen to their concerns during Mr. Munro's dramatic meeting with Mr. Bennett.

Basically, they ended up with nothing. When push came to shove, it was a union show. Late in the game, activists learned the hard truth that union leaders were not prepared to sacrifice their members' paycheques for non-union matters.

"The community, the labour movement. It was all so powerful," Ms. Wasserlein said. "We were getting stronger and stronger every day, and then it was trashed. What a waste."

Cliff Andstein, now at the Canadian Labour Congress but then the chief negotiator for the BCGEU, agrees that the final settlement was a bitter pill for Solidarity's activist coalition. But he sees a deeper significance in the struggle, despite the disappointment of the final outcome.

"This was the first qualified success on the continent in combatting or confronting that Reaganomics, Thatcherism ideology that was everywhere at the time," Mr. Andstein said. "It gave heart to the public sector in other provinces. It sent a signal to people that fighting back was possible."

As for Art Kube, who famously told Mr. Munro over the phone at the Premier's house to "get the hell out of there," there are plenty of good memories, but regret at not accomplishing more.

"It came in like a prairie wildfire, and it went out like a prairie wildfire," he said. "We simply didn't have the clout."

Source: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/back-from-the-brink-25-years-later/article20389444/?service=print>