

Singing and Solidarity

By Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat

To hear a couple of thousand people singing to the tune of a well-known Woody Guthrie song,

*So long, it's been good to know you (3x)
Your cutting and slashing's gone on far
too long
So you'd better be drifting along!*

was a delight to the ears of the group that wrote the lyrics—demonstrating that music could do what the best speeches do: enhearten, unite, and celebrate. It happened at the site of a huge rally against the Social Credit government on October 15, 1983. Some sixty thousand people marched past the Hotel Vancouver, the site that day of the Social Credit Party's annual meeting, to the plaza outside the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, on Georgia Street, where speaker after speaker excoriated the government and its 26 bills and sang along enthusiastically with singers on stage.

Much has been written about Solidarity in the summer and fall of 1983, and it is no part of this paper to rehearse it. Suffice it to say that when the budget and the 26 bills that accompanied it came down in July following the Social Credit Party's victory on May 5, it sparked a vast uproar across many social institutions. Though the expressed purpose of the budget and bills was financial restraint, most of the bills that caused the uproar had nothing to do with financial restraint and everything to do with opposing "the left" and its particular causes.

There were two responses to the budget, one based on sanctions brought upon public sector unions, the other based on attacks on social institutions. Some areas of governance, such as education and health, fell on both sides of the line, but in the main, the first response called into existence Operation Solidarity. Here, the major bills affecting (mostly public) employees would remove job security, impose a limit on wage settlements according to the government's "ability to pay," and severely compromise public sector pension plans.

The second response brought about the Solidarity Coalition. It is with the second response that this article mostly deals, particularly with the establishment of Cultural Workers against the Budget, or CWAB.



Teachers march in solidarity, 1983.

Photo: Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat

Here's a brief summary of the issues which most concerned the Solidarity Coalition. The bills

- abolished rent control and closed the Rentalsman Offices,
- gave the education ministry almost complete control over school boards and colleges,
- abolished the Alcohol and Drug Commission, and brought an end to supervised treatment facilities,
- closed the Motor Vehicle Testing Branch,
- increased tobacco taxes by 26 percent,
- increased tax on fuel-efficient automobile purchases, long distance telephone calls, and restaurant meals over \$7.00,
- allowed doctors to "opt out" of the Medicare system, and allowed an increase of "user fees,"
- repealed the Human Rights Code and abolished the Human Rights Branch and Commission.

A chronology might be useful here. The budget was followed four days later by a rally initiated by the Vancouver and District Trades and Labour Council that was much larger than anyone expected. It resulted within days in the creation of the Lower Mainland Solidarity Coalition, the largest of many town- and city-based organizations throughout the province. The coalition members were social organizations represented by delegates. One such organization quickly formed—it comprised singers and musicians and

other cultural workers, and it named itself CWAB.¹ The organization took as its task the creation of cultural presentations. One of its most memorable creations was “The Wheel of Fortune,” a two-metre-tall wheel mounted on a frame, and bearing on its face, as in a pie chart, each of the 26 bills and what each signified. The frame had an arrow at the top, and when the wheel was spun and came to rest, the arrow designated one of the bills. A “barker,” a sideshow performer dressed in an ice-cream suit, read off the result, expatiated on what it would mean, and told the crowd, “You lose again!” It was certainly a crowd-pleaser.

Much of the work of CWAB, however, had to do with making appropriate songs. This tradition goes back as least as far as the early Victorian era in England, with the making of “The Song of the Shirt,” by Thomas Hood. In the 1880s, the Knights of Labour made songs, but the best known of these early progenitors was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or the “Wobblies.” This syndicalist organization, formed in 1905, was particularly strong in the Pacific Northwest, where it organized loggers and miners and invented street agitprop. It is related that IWW speakers would stand on a street corner, crying out “I’ve been robbed! I’ve been robbed!” When a crowd gathered to hear more, the speaker told them that he’d been robbed by the capitalist class, and the pitch began. The songs the Wobblies made were published first on a hand card and then in a little red book suitable for back pockets. The book has never left publication since 1907. Many of the songwriters were widely known, but none so well as Joe Hill (1879–1915). The songs he made are still well known in labour circles, and some have reached out beyond to the general public—“Pie in the Sky,” for example, or “Casey Jones, the Union Scab.” Ralph Chaplin, another songmaker, made “Solidarity Forever,” and Valentine Huhta, or “T-Bone Slim” as he was more generally known, made “The Lumberjack’s Prayer.” In the 1930s, new songmakers added to labour’s repertoire with such songs as “The Banks Are Made of Marble” and “Roll the Union On.”

In BC, the songmaking tradition was strong. The songs of the civil rights movement in the US (such as “We Shall Not Be Moved” and “Oh Freedom”) began to appear on union songsheets, particularly unions not affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress—bus drivers, teachers, and smelter workers have had a strong tradition of making their own songs. Two non-union groups in BC played an important role in songmaking. A group of women calling themselves “The Euphoniously Feminist and Non-Performing

Quintet” began life in the early 1970s, singing at street demonstrations, the yearly International Women’s Day events, and peace marches. They produced a series of songsheets, with a dozen or so songs on them, to encourage others to sing with them. Similar actions were taken by the Vancouver Folk Song Society. In the early 1970s, society members began to make songs to sing on the early peace marches, which in 1986 had one hundred thousand participants. Hundreds of songsheets were made and distributed for each march. The Vancouver Folk Song Society banner was preceded in the march by several singers with guitars, walking backwards to lead the singing.

It was the intention of CWAB to follow these examples, making songs that were both socially relevant and singable. To this end, they used popular song as a framework. The Wobblies had used Christian hymns, which were, of course, better known in the days before the First World War. For example, “Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow” became “Praise Boss when morning work bells chime/Praise him for bits of overtime/Praise him whose wars we love to fight/Praise him, fat leech and parasite!” BC songmakers in the early years of the twentieth century used pop songs, one of the best known being “The Hard Rock Miner” to the tune of “When You Wore a Tulip.” In more modern times, the Raging Grannies, a group of senior women who are, as they say on their website, “out in the streets promoting peace, justice, social and economic equality through song and humour,”² and dressed to the nines for the occasion, also use popular song tunes. “Advice on Canadian Economy” goes to the tune of the chorus of “After the Ball.”

CWAB got to work and made a number of songs, sung by enthusiastic singers at many of the protest events organized by the Solidarity Coalition. Here are some examples.

“Which Side Are You On?”

*Come all you BC people, a story I will tell
About how Solidarity has come in here to dwell.
Which side are you on, Which side are you on?
The Socreds got elected, they told a pack of lies,
Us citizens don’t have a chance unless we organize
Which side are you on, Which side are you on?*

There were a total of nine stanzas, each of which alluded to one of the bills passed by the government. The song was modelled on the familiar civil rights song of the same name. Its familiarity and singable chorus made it one of the frequent “go to” songs on the marches.

“Which Nobody Can Deny”

*The Socreds brought down a budget (3x)
Which nobody can deny.
They did it all without warning (3x)
Which nobody can deny
They fired government workers (3x)
Which nobody can deny*

Again, the stanzas referred to the government bills. The last stanza, “We can shut it all down if we want to,” when sung from the stage at both the Empire Stadium rally in August and on the Queen Elizabeth Plaza rally in October, brought explosive cheers from rally participants. CWAB found out later that some of the BC Federation of Labour leadership was not happy with the singing of this stanza.

One of the wittiest and most fun-to-sing songs that came out of the Solidarity Coalition was a remaking of “Teddy Bear’s Picnic.” The song made its debut at the Stone Soup Luncheon in front of cabinet minister Grace McCarthy’s house in Shaughnessy on August 27, 1983.

“People against the Budget”

*If you come out on the streets today, you’re sure of a
big surprise:
McCarthy dear, if you’ve a heart, you may have to
dry your eyes.
Some people here have hardly a cent while fighting
off an increase in rent,
So be prepared for People Against the Budget.
Action time for People Power; we’ve had it up to here,
This government’s really had its hour;
Action time for workers all: we’re really sick of this,
This cabinet’s going to have to fall.
But it won’t just happen, so we have to work like hell
To give them the kick they need;
Let’s all do it together and happiness we’ll find
In building true Solidarity!*

“So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You”

CHORUS

*So long, it’s been good to know you (3x)
You may have been working for twenty-five years
But you’d better be drifting along.
Well, the telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall,
It was Bill Bennett paying a call.
He said, “Look at the state that our coal deals are in
There have to be cutbacks—you’re where we begin.”
Well, the telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall,*

*It was Bonkers McCarthy paying a call.
She said, “You’re ungrateful—why make such a fuss?
If you’d save up your money, you could live just like
us.”*

(LAST STANZA)

*Well, the telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall,
My next-door neighbour was paying a call.
She said, “There’s a rally, we’re marching today.
We’ll send them a message and here’s what we’ll say:
So long, it’s been good to know you (3x)
Your cutting and slashing’s gone on far too long
So you’d better be drifting along!”*

The song was based on Woody Guthrie’s well-known dust bowl ballad of the same name. Its heartfelt, singable chorus made it a popular song on the marches.

The role of song as part of union and political struggles is likely in jeopardy because the well of singable, popular songs is drying up. The proliferation of individual playlists results in a balkanization of musical tastes. Given that, what familiar songs could be used as templates for picket line singing? The Solidarity movement involved a lot of baby boomers who experienced regular singing in elementary school and who came of age during the folk revival. They thus shared a body of songs that could be “recycled” for political purposes. Singing is a morale booster and a unifier at rallies and on picket lines. How will future generations of activists lift their spirits? ■

Endnotes

1. The Cultural Workers against the Budget (CWAB) was formed to respond to the budget bills. Members together created the songs and planned how and where to sing them. They produced a songsheet titled “Songs for the March.” All these songs are in the public domain.
2. Raging Grannies International, homepage, para 1, raginggrannies.org.



Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat are singers and cultural historians. They are the coauthors of *Dead Horse on the Tulameen: Settler Verse from BC’s Similkameen Valley* (Canadian Folk Workshop, 2011) and *Soviet Princeton: Slim Evans and the 1932–33 Miners’ Strike* (New Star, 2016), as well as seven CDs of traditional songs of BC and Canada.