No Music, No Painting
Education Cutbacks in British Columbia
by Chris Creighton-Kelly

it's the first day of classes. The in-
formation mongers are hawking
"The End of Summer... Back to
School!" It seems to be the story of
the week. And there is a chance in
the air: it's raining for the first
time in months and the tempera-
ture has gone from July to Novem-
ber overnight.

Unfortunately, many other changes
await students returning to
British Columbia's beleaguered
education system. Headlines -
Vancouver Sun, front page, "Cuts
to be Felt"; page eight, "Univers-
ities Paint Black Picture of Fu-
ture"; page nine, "Special Ed
School Loss Angers Parents". On
the editorial page, a writer laun-
ches a liberal defence of academic
freedom in the classroom, fram-
ing it within "the rise of what
might be called the conservative
society". The lead editorial
screeches, "End the Dictatorship",
pleading for an elected school
board once again in Vancouver.
The board was fired by Education
Minister Jack Heinrich back on
May 6. These, by the way, are
items in a single day's newspaper.
It's impossible to tell the whole
story; to know fully the extent and
the impact of the cuts in educa-
tion; to measure the damage to
day-to-day learning, to the critical
intellect, imagination and hopes
of students. The litany is endless.
Music and art programmes are
cut. University of British Co-
lumbia president quits. David
Thompson University in Nelson is
closed. Cuts are made to English
as a Second Language program-
mes to the schools. The provincial
student grant for post-secondary
education is eliminated. Seven
thousand teachers are out of work.
At one school students sit
on the lunchroom floor to eat
lunch; at another, washrooms in
disrepair pose a health hazard.

The superintendents of BC's school districts - an august, neo-
conservative group - issue a white paper on education which is
highly critical of Socred policies. Clerical staff, maintenance staff
and teaching assistants are cut; their unions negotiate "down" at
the bargaining table. Thousands of parents attend public meetings.
Administrators and school boards that fight back are threatened and
in some cases fired.

The Social Credit agenda is clear. In the past two years, using
the rhetoric of "restraint", they have mounted an ideological and
material attack on their political enemies - unions, teachers, the
poor, feminists, political activists, community groups. Education is
no longer for special needs, for cultural production, for learning.
Education is for training - be-
cause training is what you need for
the jobs of the future. Jobs? What
jobs in a province where one out of
five receive some type of social
assistance?

It's enough to make people
angry. It's enough to cause several
hundred high school students to
strike until they are told that's not
the way democracy works. But is
enough to change anything? Why
is it that any fightback seems limp
and inadequate, unable to con-
struct a serious political chal-
lenge? Concerned persons on the
street will give you any number of
explanations. There are at least
five reasons:

1. Residual demoralization from the Solidarity fightback of two
years ago persists. Personal re-
actions range from confusion to
"we gained nothing" to sell
out. What it translates into is
political immobilization. What
was the point of community or-
ganizing, mass rallies and a
general strike? Bill Bennett and
the Socreds never could answer
that question. Ultimately, ne-
either could the Solidarity
"leaders". Ever mindful of
their agenda to keep the social
peace, a no-win deal was struck
at all costs. One of those costs
was the demoralization of a
public (72 percent according to
one poll) who opposed these
Socred policies.

2. Cuts to education are only part
of Bennett's determination to
radically dismantle the social
fabric of BC-style welfare-state
capitalism. The food bank line-
ups get longer. Women occupy
Vancouver's Transition House
in an attempt to maintain shel-
ter for women in crisis. Health
care services are declining.
Legal aid has been cut. A
woman in Victoria appeals a
sexual harassment decision
against her because the Human
Rights Commission has been
abolished. The Rentalism
and the provincial Ombuds-
man are gone. Each day brings
news of yet another skirmish.
And it's rare when the Socreds
lose one. Resistance is frag-
mented; specific groups fight to
maintain whatever ground they
can. For other folks just fight-
ing the day-to-day cycle of
welfare, not enough food, not
enough hope, is political work.

3. We are on the defensive, con-
stantly reacting to the right-
wing onslaught. No sooner has
one protest been organized,
than the Socreds introduce
another attack. In the wake of
the school board firing, a Rich-
mond high school principal as-
serted his graduation address as an
opportunity to talk about the
effects of cutbacks on students'
careers. Health Minister Jim
Nielsen's response was to
threaten new legislation restric-
ting what teachers could say
publicly.

4. There is a lack of a clear-cut
strategy. What is to be done?
Community education, public
meetings, demonstrations -
these tactics have little or no ef-
fect. There is a call for a new
school board election in Van-
couver. Next "Return Our
Elected School Board" lawn
signs and bumperstickers have
appeared, but the political
momentum is waning.

5. Finally, the current political
situation in BC must be partly
attributed to the failure of the
electoral left. The NDP provin-
cially, and to a lesser extent,
COPE (Committee of Pro-
gressive Electors) municipally,
are political election machines.
They don't know nor do they
want to know how to mobilize
popular protest. The NDP
leadership is currently engaged
debugging and debating for the
next election.

Others on the left worry if buy-
ing a ticket to Expo 86 will make
them politically incorrect. Many
people seem resigned, waiting,
taking meager solace from the
politics showing Socreds trailing
the NDP. There is a kind of fragile
hope that they will not be re-
elected. But on the horizon looms
Expo, which will be "successful" (or figures will be adjusted to
make it appear successful). And
an election. And somewhere a
strange, stinking feeling of what
might happen if they are re-elec-
ted. Stay tuned.