

No Music, No Painting

Education Cutbacks in British Columbia

by
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It's the first day of classes. The information mongers are hawking "The End of Summer...Back to School". It seems to be the story of the week. And there is a change in the air: it's raining for the first time in months and the temperature has gone from July to November 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, "Universities Paint Bleak Picture of Future"; page nine, "Special Ed School Loss Angers Parents". On the editorial page, a writer launches a liberal defence of academic freedom in the classroom, framing it within "the rise of what might be called the conservative society". The lead editorial screams, "End the Dictatorship", pleading for the 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 to education; 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 Columbia president quits. David Thompson University in Nelson is closed. Cuts are made to English as a Second Language programmes in 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 Socreds 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 — because 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 it enough to change anything? Why is it that any fightback seems limp and inadequate, unable to construct a serious political challenge? 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 reactions range from confusion to "we gave nothing" to sell out. What it translates into is political immobilization. What was the point of community organizing, mass rallies and a

general strike? Bill Bennett and the Socreds never could answer that question. Ultimately, neither 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 Socreds 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 lineups get longer. Women occupy Vancouver's Transition House in an attempt to maintain shelter 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 Rentalsman and the provincial Ombudsman are gone. Each day brings news of yet another skirmish. And it's rare when the Socreds lose one. Resistance is fragmented; specific groups fight to maintain whatever ground they can. For other folks just fighting the day-to-day cycle of welfare, not enough food, not enough hope, is political work.

3. We are on the defensive, constantly 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 Richmond high school principal used 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 restricting 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 effect. There is a call for a new school board election in Vancouver. Neat "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 provincially, and to a lesser extent, COPE (Committee of Progressive 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 in debating strategies for the next election.

Others on the left worry if buying a ticket to Expo 86 will make them politically incorrect. Many people seem resigned, waiting, taking meager solace from the polls 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, sinking feeling of what might happen if they are re-elected. Stay tuned.

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