

## INSIDE

I get off the bus on the outskirts of Chinatown and walk through streets still bearing traces of a rare Vancouver snowfall. The thought of a hot coffee served in a thick old-style mug at one of the Chinese cafes takes the edge off the chill. What begins as a familiar process for killing time during the last year and a half of unemployment has a radical difference: I am going to my Expo 86 orientation session. I finally have a job.

My destination is the Fields complex, a series of imposing brick buildings which once housed Chinese railway workers now tarted up to contain meeting rooms and rehearsal spaces. Posters lining the stairway exclaim what a big deal this exposition is going to be. I enter a hallway full of registering hopefuls and proceed to the registration desks and hand in my orientation slip. "Good morning, Mark" chirps a recent initiate, "Welcome to the Expo team. Here's a name tag. Wear it so people will know who you are." I mumble my thanks and decline. This forced familiarity is uncomfortable. There are about 200 of us. Being a weekend, the room is full of eager-faced students. Our "instructor," a spritely woman dressed in tasteful skirt and blazer, leaps onto the stage and begins shrieking a welcome. For the next four hours, we will be treated to a litany of ideological half-truths in the manner of a Grade 4 social studies class. The agenda will be long on expectations from the workers and short on their rights. It will be an interesting experience for the new employees, 60% of whom will be earning \$4.50 an hour or less.

We are told how lucky Vancouver is to host the fair, how lucky we are to be working there and how lucky the people who visit will be. The speech is punctuated by the incessant use of the words "terrific" and "right on" and by insincere talkshow host chuckles. At one point, a mock seriousness begins to pervade the proceedings. "Why do we have world's fairs anyway?" she asks, scanning the crowd for a readable name tag. "Jobs?" someone named Mary answers. "Yes! . . . Jobs! . . . Terrific!" replies our instructor and flashes a slide of the word "employment" on a screen. This continues for half an hour. After the scripted hard-sell, it is difficult for even the most jaded not to believe that Expo will salvage the respective economies of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada as well. Virtually absent from this rosy picture is any mention of the projected deficit of \$400 million. This additional burden will be inflicted on a province which has already suffered brutal cuts in the areas of health, education and social services. Curiously missing as well is any allusion to the hundreds of evictions of long-term tenants -- many of them sick and elderly -- from downtown hotels by landlords cruising a fast buck. Two people forced out of their homes committed suicide. A third, Olaf Solheim, stopped eating from disorientation and died two weeks later.

We are then divided into two teams according to the department we will be working in. We are engaged in a competition to try and identify various site features from a huge map on the wall. Site orientation will be of crucial importance in our "ambassadors to the world" role. Someone correctly identifies one of the amusement rides: The Scream Machine. "You'll never get me on that thing. It's sca-a-a-ary!" trembles our instructor. More kiddie talk and tales of economic benefits. I expect milk and cookies any time now. None arrive.

The list of employee do's and don'ts is especially extensive. The rigorous dress code goes as far as limiting the number of rings on one's hand (the number is different according to gender). It "suggests" shades of make-up for women. According to our handbook, our appearance is to be "neat, natural and nothing extreme." It is ironic that a fair which allegedly celebrates world cultures would suppress those found in the host city. The assumption is that cultural expression is fine when it is contextualized by a stage or performance space but not as a product of day-to-day life in a particular milieu. Ideas of what is normal and what is not continue to be reinforced for the benefit of the Expo audience which is predominately white, English-speaking, middle-class families. We are told further that once we have our photographs taken for the I.D. cards, we cannot alter our appearance for the duration of the fair so that positive identification can be made by security. Speaking of security, we agree, in writing, to submit to searches of our person and belongings at any time.

We are informed that there are four (count'em) employee break areas, with toilet, for the 173 acre site. Food may be purchased from vending machines in these stark buildings. Food cannot be purchased from any of the outlets available to the public. One woman, obviously perturbed by this information but still anxious to conform asks for permission to ". . . bring my own apple or orange to work." The figure at the podium smiles and says it's okay.

The Grounds for Dismissal section of the orientation includes a host of specifics, but also such vague actions as "insubordination," "harassment," and the catch-all "any other activity detrimental to the Exposition." When asked to provide specific examples of the above, there was a brief acknowledgement of the "subjectivity" involved. And when asked to outline mechanisms in existence to protect employee rights, the reply was that the hierarchy of supervisors could be approached to air grievances. My confidence soared.

Perhaps the vaguest area in terms of policy was that of overtime. "Overtime is a no-no" our instructor warned, wagging a finger to and fro. Supervisors in future indoctrination

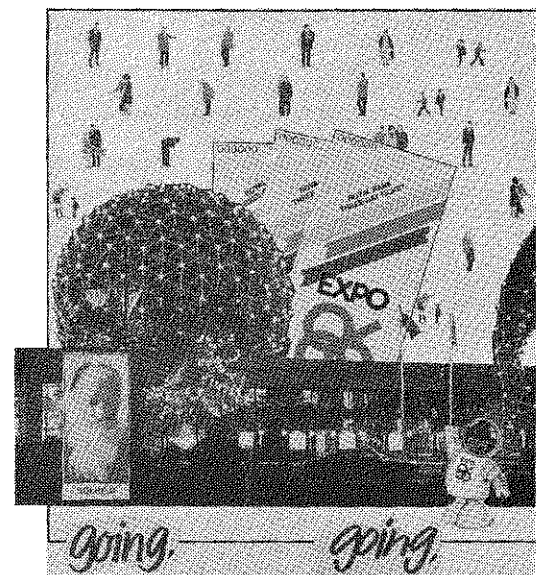
sessions stated flatly that "overtime does not exist." This was certainly true, but only in terms of being paid for it. Much was made of the fact that the Corporation would provide two paid 15 minute coffee breaks even though it was not mandatory according to the provincial labour code.

The session began to wind down with a discourse on providing "a genuine, not phoney, smile and sense of warmth for our guests." It was suggested that one could accomplish this, even while dealing with a belligerent guest for the umpteenth time that day, by thinking of "laying on a hot, sunny beach" or if that fails . . . wait for it . . . "thinking of me here today."

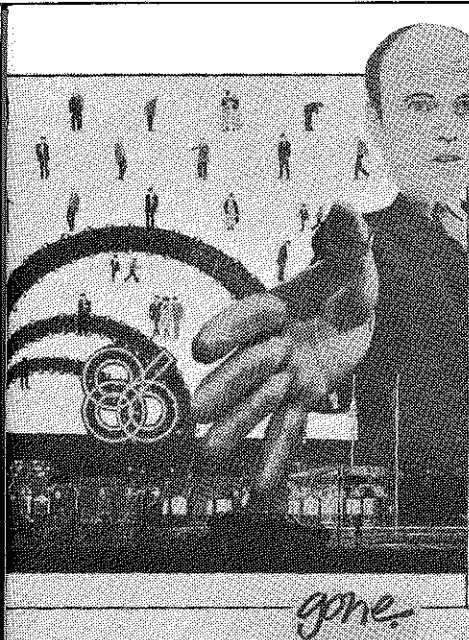
It would take a lot more than thinking about beaches to help the employees once they were on the job. The stress produced by attempting to be warm and accomodating to 130,000 impatient and demanding people every day, for five and a half months is staggering. The employer's expectation of paying a worker to repeatedly exhibit an emotional response totally contrary to the immediate social context does not make for a calm and well-adjusted person.

The session ends by viewing a slick slide-tape featuring the fabled, ever-courteous, vigilant and genuinely warm employee. The subsequent portrayal of the typical Expo guest is honed from the same myth. It's a far cry from the type of guest we will actually witness during the summer. Imagine a half-drunk man, potbelly distending his "I Tanned My Buns In Puerto Vallarta" t-shirt to the ripping point, wanting to know if the Native elders cooking bannock over an open fire are making "Italian food" and where can he buy some?

Memories of the winter orientation dimmed as I found myself near the fair's end. By all official accounts, Expo is deemed a huge success. Final attendance figures probably exceeded original projections by 40%. It is a different story behind the scenes, however. The board of directors remain tight-lipped about expenditures despite a government ordered request for complete disclosure at the beginning of the year. The government's insistence has waned for the moment, probably because it is in no hurry to have the embarrassing figures made public. Even though attendance was up, a new series of budget cuts were implemented. Lay-offs



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# P O N D O U T

were rife -- many losing their jobs overnight. Staff morale was low and some departments had a turnover rate approaching 70%. The expected spin-off benefits of increased tourism in the rest of the province and higher sales for area merchants have not materialized. Things are not that "right on" anymore.

Nevertheless it's business as usual on the shore of False Creek. The expo site looms as a garish and cacophonous assortment of unwieldy pavillions, hotdog stands, and hackneyed heavy metal bands. Corporate logos festoon everything from beverage cups to monorail trains. The Expo 86 theme of "transportation and communication" has manifested itself in a series of glib assumptions and pronouncements about the future: everyone will driving around in computerized cars and robots will be taking out the garbage. Absent from the majority of the pavillions is any mention of social conflict. Culture has been amputated from its historical and political context. World salvation is seen purely in terms of technological innovation; it is not seen as a product of increased international dialogue, untainted by rhetoric and propaganda. The reality of bigger and better jet planes is of little consequence to the majority of world citizens who are still bound by unjust economic policies and are denied basic rights and freedoms. The net result is that for many Expo visitors, stereotypes and preconceptions concerning the world will be reinforced rather than challenged.

Our instructor thanks us profusely, smiling in the knowledge of having tailored another batch of successful employees. "Please pick up your personalized diplomas at the back before you leave," she adds happily. There is a clamour while people rush to the table. I grab a brown piece of paper and hurry out into the street breathing refreshing mouthfuls of cold air. I pause, look at the page and read the dedication:

"When history remembers Expo 86 let it note the achievements and contributions of every individual, but let it also record that here we honoured our humanity and reaffirmed the hope and promise of tomorrow in a celebration that belonged to the world."

Terrific! Right on!

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## ONSITE

**T**here is a place in between. A place which sees, if not understands, its own contradictions. Maybe an uncomfortable place.

It's clear that a whole lot of folks from California to Newfoundland have bought the Expo hype. And this includes many red, white, and blue British Columbians. But it is equally certain that many have not. For reason after reason -- the labour struggle to keep it a union site, the cultural protest insisting on local artists, the eviction of long time hotel residents -- Expo was ignored, if not boycotted in an organized way.

But still there is that place in between. There are people who are not crazy about the Social Credit government yet they still went. Boycotters worried that attending Expo would change these people's attitudes, maybe even their vote. I asked 17 Expo visitors who had not voted for the Socreds if they would change their vote because of the fair. None would. Not social scientific, I know, but it indicates something. Most of them found it quite possible to maintain a critical view of Expo and the parties responsible for creating it even while on the site.

Why then do they go? Here are some answers.

*I'm going for the kids. I promised them that we would go as a family. All their friends are going too. But it's been a hell of a day . . . like everything else in this province, nothing works. We had to wait 45 minutes just to get on the monorail. And then it was stalled for half an hour. No, I figure we paid for this Expo thing and I want to see what it looks like.*

*a grocery clerk*

*I came because I got a free ticket pure and simple. I hate this government. I've been on welfare for almost two years. I'd take any job . . . even applied to work at this place but no way . . . I think I blew it at the interview. Anyway things are supposed to get better with Expo but I can't see it. There will be thousands more people unemployed after it's over. What's going to happen to them? I don't know, really . . . I guess I came to see about other countries, some of it is pretty interesting but most of it seems like they want you to buy things.*

*an unemployed typist*

*We are not in any way supporting the government by visiting the fair. We've come to see various countries that we have not visited in person . . . planning future trips. There are wonderful presentations about places I don't know that much about. For me it is a chance to learn. But there is too much noise, everywhere you go one hears loud music or sounds. It would be good to find a quiet resting spot . . . But I don't feel we're voting today, oh no, that's something we do on election day.*

*a doctor*

*To see the propaganda. To see how the other side does it, man. This Expo shit is just a big commercial for a certain way of living . . . it's like television and like I'm fascinated by that. I've got to see it to get a fix on it 'cause I don't know why people fall for it. I mean things are not really getting any better, are they?*

*a musician*

*Expo is not only the Socreds. I will never vote for them because of their attitude towards the poor. I'm not happy that many people who paid for this fair cannot go. I can afford it easily but not everyone can . . . I mean the cost is just too much for some families. Maybe Expo should never have been built, not with everything else being cut back. I came down just to see how they spend all this money.*

*a homemaker*

*Attendance at a world's fair does not constitute approval of any particular mandate of this government; they are just not the same thing. But still I don't think it's been planned very well . . . the site is very noisy, it seems people are celebrating the death of culture. There are a lot of issues left untouched in the pavillions. And it's a trade show, a huge commercial, a carnival atmosphere.*

*an Expo food worker*

*I haven't been really hardline about boycotting Expo. It's here, I've just tried to accept it. But I still feel critical of it. I don't like being here all that much. I feel completely overstimulated. There's a whole lot of stuff here I really don't like, everything seems propagandized. I find it excessive, it confuses me. I don't like the architecture, I find it too busy. It's the sort of thing when I'm here for a long time it gives me a headache. It makes me tired.*

*a Vancouver city employee*

And it makes me tired. That strange place in between that we often find ourselves in in this capitalist, contradiction-ridden culture. Pleasure and guilt. Desire but inertia. Political awareness yet impotence. An uncomfortable place indeed.

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