

# Birth of our Power: The British Columbia General Strike of 1983 and what it means for us today

by Kevin Annett, a participant, on its fortieth anniversary



*It wasn't a protest; it was a revolution. We had everything shut down. A lot of us wanted to go all the way even though we didn't know how. The power was in our hands and we couldn't let go of it. But we did. - Glen McCauley, General Strike picket captain*

*Either we would have got clobbered or the government would have fallen. I didn't want either of those things, so I called it off. In any strike, you can go only so far and then people have to go home. - Art Kube, Chairman, Operation Solidarity*

*Those who make revolutions halfway merely dig their own graves. - Louis St. Just,*

1793

The rippling crowd of humanity stretched as far as I could see, adorned with hundreds of banners and the sound of a vast multitude united in one voice. Our numbers were so huge that none of us could move, just stand and shout and laugh in our triumph as we held on to strangers' arms so we wouldn't fall. There wasn't a single vehicle or cop in sight.

The streets of downtown Vancouver were ours. It was October 15, 1983.

So, it's true, I remember thinking: those immortal words of the poet Shelley,

*Rise like lions after slumber, in unvanquishable number;*

*Shake your chains to earth like dew, which in sleep had fallen on you;*

*You are many, they are few.*

The old man who stood next to me clutching my arm must have caught my thought, for he turned and gave me a toothless grin and shouted,

*"We've won, by God! We've won!"*

How could it have seemed otherwise to those of us who were there that day, as we learned firsthand what it means to reclaim our world?

And how could we have known that even such a massive mobilization was insufficient if it did not seize power?

## The Stage Setting

Some say it all began the previous July, after the provincial Social Credit government brought in a budget that sacked thousands of its workers, gutted labor and human rights laws, and slashed funds for education and social services. But a foul neo-conservative tide had been rising for two years by then, after the world had plunged into the worst economic depression since the 1930's.

Across the world during the Eighties, governments decided that it would be workers and the poor who would bear the cost of a so-called "New World Order": a growing oligarchy of big money that would eventually destroy liberal democracy and establish a tyranny we know as the global Corporatocracy. (1)

British Columbia has been on the frontline of that global transformation for decades because it's awash with the natural resources hungered after by a rising Chinese superpower and its corporate allies. That makes B.C. the epitome of the Canadian Fact: a resource hinterland controlled from abroad and vulnerable to foreign market fluctuations and high unemployment. Such structural instability has made the west coast Canada's historic weak link, sprouting strikes and raucous political protest movements like the one that swept 80,000 people into the streets of Vancouver during the fall of 1983. (2)

It's no coincidence that British Columbia has also been a hot spot for Canada's genocide. More indigenous people have been exterminated on the west coast than anywhere in the country: over one million of them, slaughtered for the profits of timber, fishing, mining, and oil companies and their loyal partners of Church and State. This ongoing crime is one of the indicators that B.C. remains a "Wild West" in the Canadian body politic: a murky grey zone where women and children go missing and PetroChina routinely kills native people to get their oil and gas. The gloves are always off on the Pacific coast. And so it was, too, during the fall of 1983.

The biggest *General Strike* in Canadian history was preceded by the usual trademarks of a classic Canadian tragicomedy.

On July 7, 1983, in an obvious provocation, newly elected Premier Bill Bennett - a former car salesman whose claim to "fame" was that his father "Wacky" Bennett had run British Columbia like a Czar for twenty years - declared war on trade unions and the welfare state, babbling from a stale Red Scare script written by the corporate think tank called the Fraser Institute.

Sacking a quarter of the provincial civil service for starters, "Mini B" rewrote labor laws to allow employers to fire anyone without cause and scuttle existing contracts. Then he did away with the minimum wage, rent controls, human rights agencies, and funding for schools and hospitals. And all that after only one week in office.

In hindsight, Bennett's slash and burn budget was part of a bigger corporate experiment to see how big a foothold the Neo-Con agenda could win in the Great White North. And on cue, Social Credit's actions prompted an equally rapid reaction.

On July 15, Operation Solidarity was launched by the B.C. Federation of Labor and the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) with the aim of rolling back the entire Social Credit budget. But this parliamentary-oriented, union-run "Op Sol" campaign emerged after a separate grassroots revolt had erupted calling itself the Solidarity Coalition. It was this alliance of community groups that launched the first anti-government protests, as the NDP and labor officials of Op Sol debated and dawdled.

Each of these movements represented not only different responses but distinct politics. Operation Solidarity was focused on parliamentary lobbying and getting out the NDP vote for the next election. The Solidarity Coalition was launched by left-wing socialists and Communist Party activists who shunned electioneering and launched immediate resistance by occupying government offices and calling for a General Strike to shut down the province.

At the time, I was entering law school at the University of B.C. But when the first Solidarity Coalition rally was held on campus, I dropped my legal tomes and leaped into the fray, helping to form Students against the Budget and the UBC Strike Committee that encompassed the entire campus workforce.

During those heady weeks, hundreds of us, students, faculty and workers, shut down the campus and held huge teach-ins, plastering UBC's walls with posters calling for the General Strike. It wasn't an idle call, for the strike fever was spreading.

Across Vancouver, the Solidarity Coalition quickly outflanked Op Sol officials and set the political opposition agenda. Barely three weeks after Bennett unleashed his budget, on July 27, 1983, we held the first Solidarity demonstration in downtown Vancouver. The response was tremendous. Over 40,000 people turned out.



All of us were fighting mad that day. Even more, the demonstrators were reaching beyond mere protest. Talk of revolution was everywhere. In barely a half hour, I distributed nearly a thousand copies of a leaflet entitled "*For a Workers' Socialist Republic*" as demonstrators enthusiastically grabbed them. Even the cops stopped to read them.

One of the best speakers at that first protest was an aged man named Hugh Donnelly who as a young railway mechanic had taken part in the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. To the cheers of thousands of us, he shouted into the microphone,

"Gettin' my jaw broke by a Mountie's club turned me into a god damn radical for life! And it woke me up to what side of the barricade I'm on! You either work for the rich man or for the workin' man! And you won't get a scrap of justice until you chuck out this sick, dog eat dog system and bring in the Cooperative Commonwealth where the workers are in charge and the wealth is shared with everybody!"

Hugh's words and our protest made the headlines, and not only "Mini B" started worrying. Operation Solidarity's labor and NDP leaders realized they had lost control of the movement and needed to feign militancy to recapture it. So, shortly after our July 27 protest, Op Sol chairman Art Kube, a stereotypically fat labor bureaucrat, announced to the press that province-wide protests would be launched soon, leading towards "*possible extended job action*".

This reference to a potential *General Strike* not only stole the *Solidarity Coalition's* thunder but was quickly followed by a purge of known radicals and Communists from its leadership, like *George Hewison* of the *Fishermen's Union*, who had helped to launch the *Solidarity Coalition*. (3)

I witnessed up close how this purge worked. Unfamiliar guys in suits from the *B.C. Federation of Labor* showed up at our *Solidarity Coalition* meetings and flatly told us that they were now in charge of the movement. They offered us money and organizers as a sweetener. Power play aside, many people were taken in by the show of unity and power that *Operation Solidarity* represented. In this manner, by early September the *Op Sol* labor leaders had reasserted control over the movement and after that steered its course.

Originally, *Operation Solidarity* had issued five "non-negotiable" demands to the *Social Credit* government. They included rehiring the 1,600 fired civil servants, restoring rent controls and human rights legislation, refunding schools and hospitals, and so on. But after grabbing the movement's reins again, *Op Sol* increasingly focused its demands on the reinstatement of the public employees, restoring contract provisions, and other purely sectional, union-oriented issues. The special needs of tenants, welfare recipients, immigrants, women, students, and others in the movement were suddenly tossed aside.



Until then, the focus of the movement that had united and enflamed so many people was the struggle to roll back all the regressive legislation. But now that focus was lost. This strategic blunder sowed the first seeds of division and defeat in our ranks. Fortunately, this official step backwards didn't dampen our movement. On the contrary, it activated more rank and file people who realized that the struggle was up to them now. Spontaneous sit-ins began at government offices, often led by rank and file workers. Independent groups began forming, like Women against the Budget, which held sit-ins at the homes of Social Credit cabinet ministers, to the horror of the Op Sol and NDP leaders, who publicly disavowed their actions.



Equally encouraging was that a left-wing opposition formed within the Solidarity movement that aimed to oust the Op Sol bureaucrats and launch a *General Strike*. We called ourselves the Socialist Caucus. Hundreds of people attended our meetings.

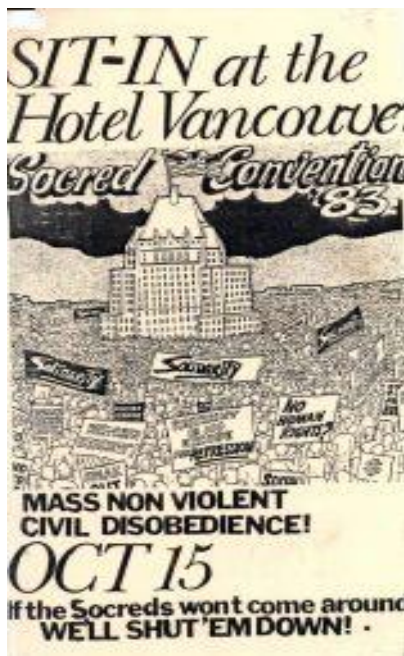
The battle lines were forming quickly by then, on every front. Egged on and paid by the Fraser Institute, the corporate media heightened its red baiting hysteria and called for "citizen volunteers" - glorified strikebreakers - to take strikers' jobs and keep "essential services" running during a General Strike. Independent truckers and small business groups held counter protests that physically attacked Solidarity Coalition rallies. The Bennett government announced that "special courts" would be set up armed with "special constables" to prosecute and jail protesters and deport non-citizens. It was the Dirty Thirties all over again.

Meanwhile, avoiding any show of support for the Solidarity protests, the NDP confined itself to the B.C. legislature to filibuster and block any further Social Credit legislation. "Mini B" responded by invoking closure on debate twenty times in one week, when parliamentary closure had been used only once before in B.C. history.

This draconian measure was followed on October 6 by a physical assault on NDP leader Dave Barrett by police and his expulsion from the legislature when Barrett refused to abide by a closure ruling. The press applauded the attack on Barrett. (4)

By this time, events were reaching a critical point. Our demonstrations had swelled to 60,000 people, employers began lock outs, and contract negotiations by teachers and hospital workers broke down. Many people were calling for a General Strike, including conservative union leaders. The masses were rapidly moving to the left.

This radicalization was evident at the largest protest yet, on October 15. Called by the Op Sol leaders, it escalated beyond their control into a wave of sit-ins and occupations, including at the Social Credit convention in the prestigious Vancouver Hotel. The terrified delegates were trapped in the hotel by our 70,000 protesters who surrounded the building and held the police at bay. It felt like an insurrection!



His back to the wall, Op Sol's boss Art Kube was prompted into more pretend militancy. Soon after the October 15 mass action, Kube announced that unless the 1,600 civil servants were rehired by November 1, an escalating General Strike would begin across British Columbia. But Kube's statement was designed for the crowd. Behind the scenes, he was working frantically with Premier Bennett to prevent a General Strike. But "Mini B" had his own agenda.

As was later disclosed, Premier Bennett was under pressure from corporations, the Fraser Institute, the feds, and the Americans to "teach the Left and the unions a lesson", to quote Fraser Institute chairman Michael Walker. In fact, some of the CIA dirty tricks experts who had conducted black operations against Dave Barrett's NDP government from 1972 to 1975 were in Vancouver during the Solidarity Days, ready to employ what the CIA refers to as the "Chilean Option". (5)

As it turned out, such extreme measures would not be necessary. The Big Fix was in long before the first of us hit the bricks on November 1, 1983.

### **The General Strike**

The official Op Sol plan called for the B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU) to walk off the job first, followed by all the teachers on November 8, and the transport and civic workers on November 15. By then, the entire public sector workforce would be on strike. Significantly and fatally, all private sector unions - including the weighty International Woodworkers of America (IWA) - would remain on the job.

The only other general strike in B.C. and the first one in Canadian history had happened in August 1918, to protest the police assassination of the miner's union leader and anti-war socialist Ginger Goodwin in Cumberland, B.C. So, our November 1 action was a leap in the dark for everyone. But the mood was fantastically optimistic.

I was part of a roving strike support team that our Socialist Caucus organized to bring food, news, and encouragement to people on a thousand different picket lines. I saw firsthand how people's ideas change rapidly when they're under fire, and how one hour of hard experience in the class struggle is worth more than years of talk.



I remember visiting a group of government employees in Port Moody. One of them was reading from the movement's newspaper *Solidarity Times* and looking pissed off.

"Who's writing all this bullshit about the negotiations?" he exclaimed. "You can't negotiate with those bastards! You've got to toss them out on their ass!"

The other strikers smiled or nodded their assent as he continued,

"And I don't mean those dumb ass politicians! I mean the fat cat money boys on Howe Street who are pulling the strings! Where's the Red Army when you need it?"

I encountered many such remarks among the strikers we visited. Whenever I spoke to people about the need for a grassroots revolution and I shared the program of our Socialist Workers' Group, I received only support and even some new recruits. Everywhere, the Solidarity strikers showed a political awareness that rose far above the usual "bread and butter" trade unionism.

"There's too much at stake to back down," said Sheila Dempsey, a Vancouver nurse.

"This isn't just about money or contract rights. It's about whether we live in a democracy that's for everyone or just for the rich people and their friends in government." (6)

The government didn't take any of this lying down. The day that the BGCEU workers struck, injunctions banned them from picketing at court houses, schools, and police stations. On November 3, teachers were threatened with firing if they walked off the job. Nevertheless, on November 8 all the teachers struck, closing over 90% of the schools across the province. Parents and students joined the teachers on the picket lines, even as the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* newspapers screamed headlines like "*Solidarity Perpetrating Terrorism*" and encouraged vigilante groups to oppose the strikers.



On November 10, Op Sol leaders seemed to raise the stakes when they threatened for the first time to launch private sector strikes: an announcement that evoked cheers and ecstasy on the picket lines. But Op Sol's verbal militancy was once again a bluff to camouflage what turned out to be an impending sellout by Op Sol officials who were moving even further to the right as workers' militancy was growing.

Part of this conservative shift was evident by the sudden elevating of an unknown Catholic priest, Jim Roberts, into the Op Sol leadership. Roberts condemned the occupations by Solidarity Coalition and union members, making divisive remarks like *"You mustn't attack Bill Bennett. He's your Premier, he's my Premier, he's no enemy."*

The attempted use of Roberts as a firehose on the strikers' fervor did nothing to quell it, which left Op Sol leaders with the option of either escalating the General Strike or cutting a deal with Bennett. Their choice was a foregone conclusion.

On November 11, as enthusiasm among strikers soared and the civic and transport workers prepared to join the strike, two Op Sol officials met privately with Premier Bennett in Kelowna without the knowledge or consent of anyone else in the movement. Jack Munro and Art Kube agreed to end the General Strike if Bennett agreed to rehire the 1,600 fired civil servants and engage in "closer consultation" with the unions. The rest of Op Sol's five "non-negotiable" demands were dropped.



*"Mini B" Bennett (left), Jack Munro, and Art Kube (right)*

Without any authority or explanation, Kube and Munro decided to end the strike in return for peanuts for their people and handsome payoffs for themselves. (7) Naturally, Premier Bennett agreed to the notorious "Kelowna Accord".

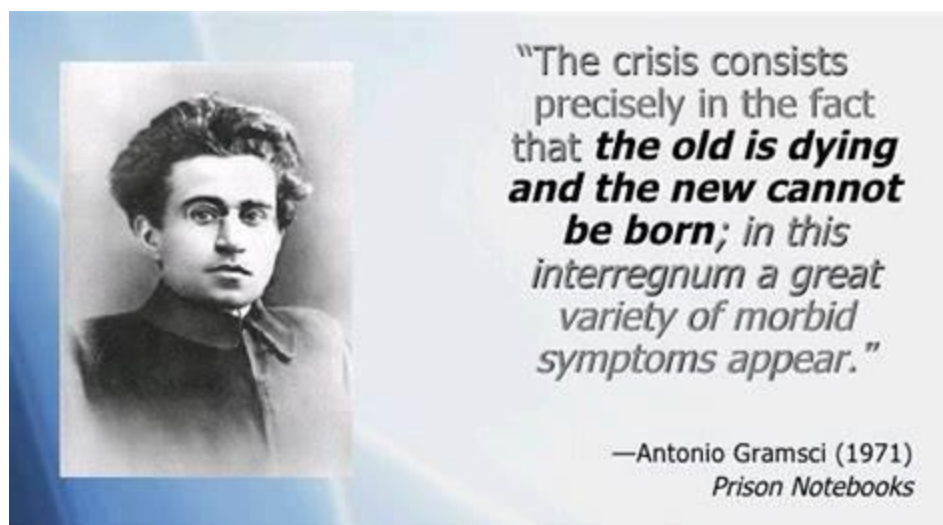


There was, of course, the little problem of how to make a quarter of a million militant workers go back to work and cut their own throats.

The fact that they did is the essential issue.



*"You can all go home now": Art Kube telling the masses what to do*



## The Lessons of November: Aftermath and Prospects

*"If by freedom we mean the responsibility of people to shape their existence, it is undeniable that there is no greater fear among the masses today than the creation of freedom. Until this dread is overcome, no amount of spasmodic revolt will bring about a just society."* - Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1934)

*"The Eighties and what followed represented more than a 'neo conservative' era of buccaneer capitalism. That period was an enormous sledgehammer that smashed not only bourgeois democracy but the politics and thinking of the working class and the Left. We have not yet emerged from the shadow of that Corporate Totalitarianism."*  
- Chris Harman, from a lecture at London University, May 19, 2008

Most of us refused to believe the news when the big sellout was announced by a gleeful corporate media. But disbelief quickly turned to outrage and blame. The fact that two union officials had betrayed the hopes of the rest of us for a few scraps for their own members drove a permanent wedge between the labor movement and the community groups that had united with it. That breach has never been mended.

*"What happened, and the way it happened, seemed tailor-made to destroy the spirit of the Left and the progressive labor movement,"* wrote one of my comrades in the Socialist Workers' Group shortly after the debacle.

We witnessed the truth of this in the weeks that followed, as the protests we called to oppose the sellout shrank to a few hundred dispirited people. But even worse, all the strikers who had at first refused to return to work quickly lost their resolve and surrendered. As one of my friends, a Burnaby teacher, remarked,

*"What could we do? Stay on strike and defy our own union? Nobody was providing an alternative leadership to Kube, not even the so-called radicals. When he said jump, everybody jumped. Don't ask me why."*

I began to ask why. For me, the question wasn't why Art Kube and Jack Munro stabbed us all in the back. As labor officials whose job was to manage and control the workforce for the State and Capital, they were doing what they were supposed to do - and were amply rewarded for it by the system.

The real issue was why 250,000 people who wanted to continue the fight obeyed two bureaucrats and, against their own interests, returned to work.

Part of the reason, of course, is that in a hierarchical class society, workers are conditioned from birth to defer to authority figures and feel collectively incapable of defying them and governing themselves. As well, unions have become incorporated into the capitalist state as managers of the workforce and are ideologically straitjacketed by the system, as Leon Trotsky warned nearly a century ago:

*As capital is concentrated and with it the oligarchic power of the state, the political options for reformist labor leaders diminish. Increasingly, union officials can benefit from monopoly capitalism only by their direct incorporation into the bourgeois state apparatus and their enslavement to the logic and requirements of capitalism. (8)*

The fact that the government was threatening anyone who stayed off the job with jail time and daily fines of \$10,000 helped to force the Solidarity strikers back to work. But a major factor in their defeat was the lack of an alternative political leadership that could have led them in an active resistance to the Kube-Munro deal.

The "far Left" within Solidarity was tiny and unorganized, and tended to look to "progressive" union leaders for direction. But the so-called "Left" officials, like Larry Kuehn of the Teachers' Federation and Fishermen's leader George Hewison of the Communist Party, fell into line after the Kelowna Accord was announced and made no effort to oppose the sellout. Militant talk or action by even the most radical labor leader was quickly silenced by *realpolitik* and the fact that, their politics aside, the Kuehns and Hewisons were as regulated by their dependence on the system as Kube and Munro. Together, they constituted the left and right wings of the same bird.

Such a post-mortem on the Solidarity defeat was common in our political circles after November 1983. But knowing the cause of a defeat is fruitless unless we can learn from its lessons and apply that understanding to our long-term struggle.

Unfortunately, that has not happened, and not primarily because of any subjective failure by erstwhile radicals. A more dire fate has struck all of us.

In the forty years since the Solidarity days, the world political economy has fundamentally changed, and with it the labor and socialist movements. What has emerged is a new global order we call the Corporatocracy: the direct political rule of the capitalist class without the traditional mediators of bourgeois democracy and its so-called rule of law.

As I describe in my recent book *Recovering the Dream*, since the 1990's the system of Corporatism that was pioneered by European fascism during the 1920's and 1930's has metastasized into a global order that has rendered capitalist nation states obsolete. Monopoly capital has morphed into a transnational corporate oligarchy that has subordinated all countries, classes, ideologies, and cultures to the needs of its Corporatocracy. (9)

In effect, we are living in a new kind of Bureaucratic Collectivist society that, like the former regime of the Soviet Union, controls the entire economic engine to prevent fluctuations in supply, demand, production and profitability.

This new corporatist oligarchy was forecast by George Orwell in his book *1984* and by revolutionary Marxists like Hal Draper, who presciently wrote in 1948,

*"The emerging world economy will be neither capitalist nor socialist, but a system of total domination by a bureaucratic oligarchy that eliminates the destructive cycles of the capitalist market while keeping the masses enslaved and dependent. It will embody the worst features of Stalinism and monopoly capitalism within a worldwide fascistic Super State." (10)*

The result of this New Order has been the political genocide of revolutionary socialism and the eradication of its class-conscious proletarian base. Under the weight of the new technocratic tyranny, the ossified remnants of the so-called "Left" have gone the way of trade unions and become ideologically indistinguishable appendages of the Corporatocracy. (11) This political disintegration has prevented the lessons of Solidarity and similar battles from serving as an impetus and a guide for a revived revolutionary socialist movement.

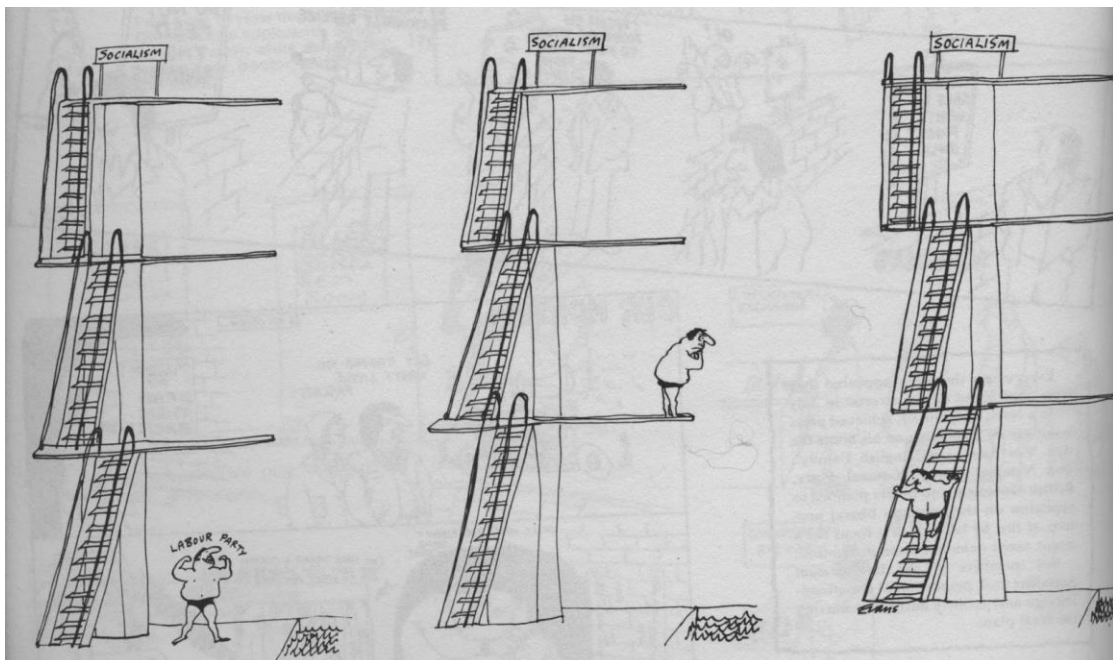
That said, it behooves us to understand those lessons and allow them to help light our way forward out of the present tyrannical morass.

As a frontline participant in the Solidarity movement and a fifty-year veteran of the revolutionary socialist movement, allow me to offer a summary of what those times have taught us and how we can use such knowledge to begin again.

## 1. On the nature of the system and the limits of reformism

Even in 1983 when the Corporatocracy was just emerging, capitalism was outgrowing its dependence on the nation state and national market economies. As the Solidarity union officials learned quickly, the huge global recession of 1981 dried up the system's willingness to grant concessions to workers. Employers began slashing wages or sacking the workforce and moving their capital to the third world; a process that transformed the southern hemisphere into today's global economic powerhouse. (12)

What this meant for labor was that the union officialdom's ability to routinely provide benefits to its membership had evaporated. Reformism reached the limit of its elusive aim of ameliorating rather than abolishing capitalism, resulting in the decline of the power of unions and their social democratic parties.



This collapse of reformism's power has left union officials no other option than their incorporation into the corporatist state. The refusal of every union official to oppose the draconian *COVID* measures or to even defend their own members from punitive actions is but one indicator of the destruction of independent trade unionism. (13)

Potentially, this disastrous situation for workers has created the objective basis for the growth of a revolutionary alternative within the working class. Until now, that potential has remained stillborn because of the obscuring of revolutionary socialism as a coherent tradition. But objective conditions still favor its rebirth.

The inherently unstable nature of an interdependent global Corporatocracy continues to radicalize workers by plunging the system into its usual economic crises. But now, the system's overly centralized nature causes downturns to ripple destructively through an integrated global financial system with disastrous economic and political consequences that affect hemispheres and not just nations. (14)

Combined with the fact that oligarchies are by their nature prone to instability since their power rests on naked force, Corporatism's discarding of its previous political camouflage of bourgeois democracy and its "rule of law" has meant that the naked barbarism of its system lies exposed to even the most obtuse person. Consequently, the legitimacy of "official" society lies everywhere in ruins, breeding a general social unrest.



For years, this unrest has birthed many populist "freedom" movements across the world. Paradoxically, and like the Nazis before they achieved state power, these movements have both an anti-capitalist and fascistic character, in part because of the absence of a viable socialist alternative. Under these conditions, it is neither possible nor desirable to "rebuild the Left" when realistically it no longer exists.

Today's remnant Marxist groups are ossified in their thinking and influence and remain blind to the nature of the present global Corporatocracy and its genocidal roots. (15) And as the *Art of War* teaches, "*Whoever does not know an enemy will be defeated by it in every battle.*" However, it also points out that there is no final outcome in war, only shifting power balances that can be exploited by one's forces provided that they retain their will, audacity, and clarity.

So, while it is clear that there exists the objective basis for a revival of a more matured revolutionary socialism, it must arise not according to habitual thinking or self-defeating practices, but from an original understanding of our circumstances and a determined will to achieve the victory of a self-emancipated working class.

Towards this end, the subjective factor of how we work and act at this critical juncture is critical; especially how we establish a genuine revolutionary leadership rooted in the advanced sectors of the working class.

## 2. Building a conscious revolutionary leadership and forming cadres

One of the reasons that revolutionary socialists were a miniscule presence in the Solidarity movement and had little impact on its events was that the Canadian "far Left" has never taken seriously the task of developing seasoned cadres of operational leaders. A critical look at the Left since then, as well as my experience as a local organizer in revolutionary Marxist groups before and after the Solidarity struggle, bear witness to this failure. (16)

In none of the groups I worked in nor in the Left generally was the critical task of forming full-time cadres ever taken seriously or attempted in an organized way. As a result, there existed no middle-level leaders who could bridge theory with practice, put flesh on the group, and unite it with class conscious workers. And so, these groups have remained tiny, top-heavy, insular talk shops bifurcated into a few "political leaders" and a majority of "activist" followers.

A major cause of this absence of mid-level cadres was the lack of theoretical and personal development and practical skill-teaching among the groups' members. The latter's worth was measured by their "workhorse activism" as newspaper sellers or protesters rather than by their understanding of the groups' politics and their capacity to argue and demonstrate those ideas in practice.

As well, any independent thinking or contrary position voiced by members was not only discouraged but seen as rank insubordination and heresy by the invariably self-appointed "leadership", in the manner of any religious cult.

This analogy to religion is fitting, since the purpose of any church or political sect is not to grow or evolve but to remain uniform and unchanging, as a cozy sanctuary for the few who are "redeemed". In that sense, the mindset and practices of political and religious sectarians are remarkably similar and equally stagnant and undialectical.

Contrarily, any genuine revolutionary group places cadre formation at the center of its work, since, to quote the *Art of War* again,

*"Battles are won not by the mass of soldiers but by seasoned veterans leading by personal example the sluggish majority."*

Such is the dynamic in any revolutionary group and movement. The leadership of experienced veterans is always the critical element in determining victory or defeat. But that leadership is acquired and demonstrated only in practice: in our case, by those revolutionary worker-cadres whose focused, lifelong purpose is to achieve the triumph of the socialism through the self-emancipation of the working class.

Recognizing this, the way that revolution grows and establishes its rule over society becomes all important.

### 3. On Mobilizing versus Organizing

As the Solidarity Days displayed, when it comes to fighting for social change, people tend to think first of holding protests. Such thinking is actively encouraged by the ruling class, since even the most radical demonstrators are merely asking the authorities for something. If the latter say no to their demands, people are demoralized and defeated and their fight collapses, as happened in November 1983.

What is much more difficult to contain and terminate is when people ignore the authorities, retain their own power and initiative, and create change directly for themselves by organizing at the grassroots to build something new. Instead of mobilizing people for a brief, spasmodic protest that builds nothing long term, revolutionaries organize a working alternative to the status quo that deflates its authority and power.

The creation of such an alternate power occurs in every genuine revolution, like in the American Constitutional Assemblies after 1775, the Paris Commune in 1871, and the Russian Soviets in 1917. Only such counter-institutions can create a situation of dual political power that disestablishes the old system and lays the basis for a direct, grassroots democracy.

As the veteran American civil rights worker Colia Clark told me in 2017,

*"The protests and sit-ins were good for raising our spirits and grabbing headlines, but then we had nothing left after. It was the patient slogging in the community that made the biggest impact, when we organized people to form their own Freedom Schools, co-ops, and political parties that took back power. Organizing people always takes longer than mobilizing them, but it pays off a lot more in the long run."*

This distinction continues to elude revolutionary socialists, perhaps because their miniscule size makes holding protests their *de facto* only course of action. But more fundamentally, the Leninist Left retains a principled and unreasonable opposition to building a new classless society today, deferring such direct social transformation to a future time after the conquest of state power by the working class.

This rigid, idealistic formula belies the dynamic reality of how revolutions occur. In today's context of a massive, supra-national corporate state, directly conquering such a system is unachievable, since capitalist power resides no longer in a fixed institution or nation state. It did, of course, during Lenin's time, where in Russia a weak bourgeoisie was utterly dependent on the Tsarist state whose overthrow by the Bolsheviks caused the collapse of the capitalist class. But the Leninist Left has clumsily grafted the Russian experience onto its political outlook and, spurning dialectics, insists that the overthrow of the state must precede any social transformation. In fact, the opposite is true.

Modern corporate capitalism survives not primarily through state power but by means of a complex of institutions and international relationships that are impervious to direct assault. In the words of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci,

*"Leninism restricts our combat to a conquest of state power that does not in itself overthrow bourgeois hegemony. If the state was toppled tomorrow, capitalism would continue because of its international character and the powerful cultural, customary, religious, and ideological sinews that bind it to the people."* (17)

Gramsci not only had a sharper strategic acumen than Lenin when it came to the class struggle. He was the first Marxist to recognize that fascism, as the fusion of big capital and the state, was the wave of the future, portending today's Corporatocracy.

Today's transnational bourgeoisie is far more complex and powerful an enemy than in Marx or Lenin's time, but its complexity makes it even more vulnerable, once we understand how one ruling class gives way to another.

As I describe in my book *Recovering the Dream* (2023), history shows that the hegemony of any class is never toppled in one blow but eroded over time and replaced by the power, worldview, and institutions of another class. The systematic organizing of that counter-hegemony to replace the old regime, and not simply "mobilizing the masses", is the key to any successful revolution.

One of the primary lessons of the Solidarity struggle was that without the existence of such a living working class hegemony, no amount of strikes or protests will sustain workers in battle or erode the power of their capitalist class enemy.

As I've described, signs of that counter-hegemony were everywhere during the 1983 General Strike. As the picket captain Glen McCauley told me, *"It wasn't a protest; it was a revolution. A lot of us wanted to go all the way ..."*.

Unfortunately, that common, proto-revolutionary attitude among Solidarity strikers did not become a permanent political force that could not only survive the defeat but disestablish workers' class enemy at the point of production by taking over the economy and running it in their own interests.



*Flint, Michigan autoworkers occupying their factory, 1937*

The Solidarity strikers could have defied the back to work order by creating their own workplace assemblies and courts to pass laws and enforce them with their own militia, replacing the organs of capitalist power altogether. But such a creative empowerment was never attempted, and a rising proletarian hegemony was scuttled.

Even without these counter-institutions, a revolutionary socialist party would have been widely vindicated by the Solidarity sellout, grown in influence from the struggle, and prepared the more conscious workers for the next fight. In this unpredictable, flowing, and dialectical manner, the working class learns to discover its power and organizes its hegemony as the foundation of a new, classless society.

That hegemony was best expressed by the young municipal worker in Vancouver who said to me just after the return to work,

*"When I saw the power we have, it made me wonder why we need the government or the bosses at all. Nothing comes from them. It all comes from us."*

#### **4. On Strategy and Tactics: Applying the Art of War**

*"In war there is but one favorable moment. The great art is to seize it."* - Napoleon

One of the maladies of Canadian Marxists, such as they are, is that because of their general isolation from the working-class movement and combat situations, they think theoretically and not operationally.



Down the years, the political discussions of the Left have hung suspended in abstractions unrelated to the practical wartime realities of the class struggle.

One of Lenin's favorite, oft-quoted sayings was from Hegel:

*"Theory, my friend, is grey; but green is the eternal tree of life experience."*

These words are not platitudinous but sound strategic advice for those caught up in battle. For without a clear understanding of one's situation, defeat is never far off.

General Sun-Tzu, the author of the *Art of War*, writes that the will and the clarity of the commander of an army are the decisive factors in any battle. Both qualities are sorely lacking among would-be revolutionaries, but especially clarity.

In politics and war, successful operations are impossible without knowing how to apply one's theories and plans to the constantly shifting circumstances of a conflict.

When asked how he planned a battle, Napoleon said,

*"I never plan one. I start something and then I see what happens."*

Napoleon understood that, as in life, change and unpredictability are the only constants in war and quickly overwhelm fixed thinking and defenses. Therefore, one must never do what an enemy expects, and must always prepare for the unexpected from the enemy.

Such battlefield common sense is strangely absent from the staid thinking of socialists, who rely, for instance, on the predictable and containable tactic of public protests, even when the Solidarity events proved the limitations of such gestures.

The weapons, expertise, and technology of our class enemy have vastly improved, but the Left's assumptions and methods have remained disastrously mired in the past, like the World War One generals who, with suicidal obstinacy, employed Napoleonic mass infantry assaults against the new reality of barbed wire and machine guns.

To survive and master the present times, we must begin our strategy and tactics with Sun Tzu's foundational prescription to know ourselves and know our enemy as they are, and not as we imagine them to be.

To know ourselves is to recognize that revolutionary socialists are few in number, isolated from working class militants, mired in routine, and devoid of original politics and strategic acumen. To know the enemy is to see that traditional capitalism, bourgeois democracy and its rule of law are dead and gone and have been replaced by a corporatist oligarchy that cannot be pressured, reformed, appealed to, or protested. Such a system is waging a permanent war of extermination against humanity and must be attacked, undermined, disrupted, and destroyed, creatively and unpredictably. To wage such sustained combat, we must measure all our aims and actions in operational terms, as one does in wartime.

To make revolutionaries' thinking operational rather than theoretical we must take to heart and apply to our struggles the *Art of War's* basic maxims on strategy and tactics. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Defeating your enemy by striking at its heart is the foundational doctrine of conflict and must guide all strategy and action. To avoid this doctrine and assume a defensive or static posture is to invite defeat.

2. To win any battle you must first summon your enemy and not be summoned by it, forming the ground of conflict so that the enemy must fight on your terms. Similarly, you must never respond to the ground prepared by an enemy or to its words and provocations. Instead, you must determine the conditions of battle so that your enemy will be led by you.

3. There is only one favorable moment in every battle. Swiftly seizing it will ensure you victory, regardless of the strength of your enemy. Your operations must always be geared towards exploiting this key moment in battle, which can never be predicted, only watched and prepared for vigilantly.

4. Be invisible and unfathomable to your enemy and never do what it expects or prepares for. Instead, hide your attack from the enemy and strike unpredictably at what your enemy loves or where it is weak in order to negate its strength and plans.

5. Whoever relies on great numbers of people must reflect their weakest aspects and thereby will be easily defeated. Victories are won by seasoned veterans leading the inexperienced mass in their wake. The leadership of this vanguard of veterans is the key to victory in every battle.

6. When you are few and your enemy is many, the enemy is made unwieldy and inflexible by its greater size and can be attacked at many points. The enemy's strength thereby becomes its weakness.

7. Always discern an enemy's purpose. Such knowledge comes from active contact with the enemy through reconnaissance and accurate intelligence. Provoke the enemy to make it reveal itself and probe it to test its strengths and learn its weaknesses.

8. Never reinforce error or defeat but be fluid in your understanding and plans. There is never a final outcome in war if your army is like water. By remaining supple and mobile you force your enemy to defend against you at every point. This dissipates and weakens the enemy and keeps it ignorant of your purpose while forcing it to reveal its condition to you.

9. Never repeat a successful tactic with the same enemy or it will recover and adapt and turn the tactics against you. Tactics are transitory and must never be enshrined as permanent doctrine or strategy, or they can lead to disaster.

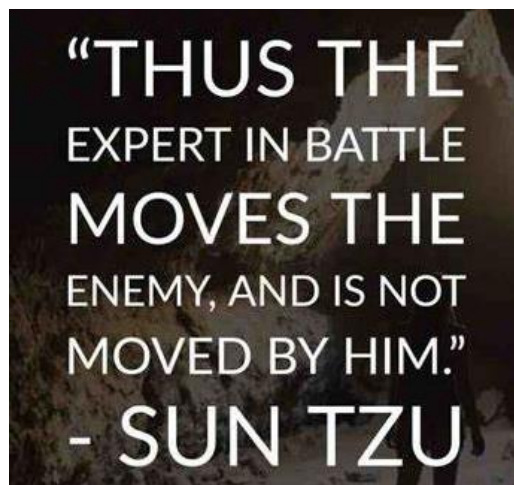
10. Respond to an attack by a larger enemy by creating space to dissipate its power.

Resist and you will swell the attacker; maneuver and you can guide its actions.

11. Use hopeless situations to your advantage by letting them strengthen the resolve and courage of your army. Place your fighters where they cannot retreat, and they will discover a deeper strength and unity.

12. Devotion, persistence, courage, and an unshakeable will to pursue victory are the essential qualities of good commanders. These personal virtues overcome every defeat or unexpected turn of events and allow commanders to lead their army; not with words but by example.

These maxims are general guides to action and must be applied selectively according to one's circumstances. But without them our vision and politics will remain quaint artifacts encased in glass and not discover the rich soil of humanity in which to grow.



## 5. How do the Few rule the Many? Understanding and Applying Mass Psychology

We began this post-mortem discussion of the Solidarity days by asking how a quarter of a million strikers complied with the orders of two labor officials and, against their will and self-interest, returned to work.

This weighty issue is part of a bigger historical question of how the few have ruled the many for millennia: an obviously critical matter for revolutionaries.

Marxists have traditionally explained class rule purely in political and economic terms. They have disregarded question of crowd psychology, even when the latter has been a critical factor in the rise of Nazism and its offspring, the modern Corporatocracy, and in the events of the Solidarity battle. At every key moment in the class struggle, the thinking of the mass of workers is a fundamental issue that can make or break their movement.

Hitler was a master craftsman of mass psychology. As he wrote in *Mein Kampf*,

*"The individual man naturally seeks out a crowd, for by joining it he loses his terror of death and disappears into the joyous companionship and immortality of the mass of his fellow men. In such a state of surrender he acquires a new personality that is greater than himself, like one cell in a brain. The astute leader knows how to manipulate and direct that single national mind and bend it to his will."*

Despite his accuracy in describing the human need for group solidarity and identity, Hitler's prescription referred not so much to the working class as to the alienated "little men" of the petit bourgeoisie who constituted the foot soldiers of the Nazi movement. Workers are already part of a commonality forged by their position in production, and need no overt manipulation to act as one in a common cause: a fact that explains why German fascism had difficulty making inroads into the trade unions but not into the ranks of shopkeepers or the unemployed.

The truth is that workers are predisposed to collective action and group identity of their own making, provided that they develop what Antonio Gramsci called the "*organic intellectuals of the proletariat*": the leaders from their own ranks who can lead the struggle for a classless, communist society.

It is for this reason that in critical struggles like the Solidarity campaign, the question of developing an original working class leadership separate from the union officialdom is of fundamental importance. For despite their natural inclination to think and act as a class, workers have little experience under capitalism of asserting their group identity. They tend to reflect bourgeois ideology and interests, like considering themselves "Canadians" or allowing union officials to "negotiate" on their behalf the terms of their own wage slavery. Such dependency is broken in a situation of class struggle, and especially in a universal confrontation like a General Strike.

Class conscious workers instinctively seek to consummate their power by nullifying that of their class enemy. Only workers' inexperience and habitual deference to others stand in the way of such a revolution. And only the more conscious ones from their own ranks can overcome such barriers and unite working class as a whole to toss off the bourgeoisie and its state like so many parasitic fleas.

The philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote of the "hegemonikon", or Higher Mind, of society. The transition from the rule of one class to another involves imposing a new Group Mind on society: the abandonment of an old worldview for a new revolutionary ideology that expresses the interests of a new dominant class. The rising bourgeoisie in England, France, and elsewhere achieved such an ideological shift over centuries by means of the Renaissance, the Reformation, nation states, and parliamentary democracy. All these institutions provided the capitalist class with its own counter-cultural bases of power through which they undermined and replaced aristocratic absolutism and created the foundations of modern capitalism and its group mind. (18)

By contrast, the working class has lacked such means to establish a similar ideological hegemony, and consequently has been historically hemmed in by bourgeois values. This is evident in the few counter-institutions workers have established, like trade unions and cooperatives, which are defensive and reformist in nature and so have been easily absorbed by the bourgeois state.



Lacking their own autonomous bases of power through which they can become "a class for itself" - like through their equivalents to a bourgeois government in their own workplace assemblies, peoples' courts and popular militias - workers have remained divided and imprisoned by the group mind and institutions of capitalism.

This ideological dependence was vividly demonstrated during the Solidarity strike, when even the most radical workers were governed by the "facts of life" of bourgeois legality and "orders from above". In Art Kube's trite words, "*In any strike, you can go only so far and then people have to go home*". There can be no better description of the straitjacketed thinking and options of union officials under capitalism.

To imagine and create an alternative to such banal reformism requires the existence of an altogether new mass psychology in the working class: a revolutionary counter-ideology without which workers' power and socialism from below is unachievable.



## Carrying it on

A half century ago when I was seventeen, I was friends with a blacklisted communist longshoreman named Joe Hendsbee. One night over a beer, I asked him how he had survived decades of persecution, assault, and the loss of wives, friends, and family.

Joe gave me a smile that seemed to wipe years off his face as he said,

*"It was 'cause of that time back in '49 when we backed the Seamans' strike and shut down every big port in the world. The sight of all those ships sitting idle in the harbor and knowing it was the same deal in Frisco and London and Shanghai because of guys just like me, hell. That made all the bullshit worthwhile."*

I had the same feeling as Joe Hendsbee on that day in November 1983 when I gazed along Georgia Street at our endless stream of humanity and I knew that, win or lose, we had the bastards by the balls. In an instant, it was clear as crystal that our power was like an immortal sleeping giant that need only flex its muscles for the worst tyranny to fall. Once you experience that strength, it casts an unfading light down every corridor of defeat and leads us ever onwards to the land that is to be.

Of all the lessons I took with me from the General Strike, the most enduring one is that inner certainty that a workers' revolution is possible because I saw it starting to happen in the streets and in a thousand different faces.

Once our socialist vision moves like that from thin paper to thick action, we learn that everyday people have it in their power to begin the world again. What matters now is that we never let go of that vision or our revolutionary heritage, and fight ceaselessly to spark the latent, self-emancipating power of the working class.

The present generation of emerging revolutionaries is scattered in its work between a hundred different causes, striking at the branches rather than the root of the disease. They are like amnesiacs who cannot recall their own history and nature. They are befuddled by an absence of solid, updated Marxist theory and a consistent political practice that breeds seasoned worker cadres and their revolutionary party.

But alongside that effort runs the wider and ultimately more crucial movement to establish working class hegemony on many different fronts - through workers' universities, workplace assemblies, peoples' courts, and popular militias - so that socialism from below emerges as a living and working alternative for humanity.

A saying from the Psalms asks, *"Many will boast of their goodness, but where can be found an honest man?"*. With equal realism we ask, *"Many will talk about revolution, but where can be found people willing to act?"*.

The Lessons of November reveal the magnificent possibilities that await those who do act and seize the times, and the terrible cost levied on those who do not.



## Footnotes

1. An elaboration of the origin and nature of the Corporatocracy can be found in my book *Memoirs of a Revolutionary: A Political Biography (1971-2021)*.
2. For a discussion of this subject see "The Political Economy of B.C.: A Marxist Perspective" in Essays in B.C. Political Economy, eds. P. Knox and P. Resnick (1974)
3. Hewison, a Communist Party of Canada (CPC) member, chaired the Lower Mainland Solidarity Coalition (LMSC) that led the first resistance to the Social Credit budget. But he was pressured by his party to refrain from opposition to the Op Sol officials because of the CPC's elusive effort to forge an alliance with the NDP.
4. The *Vancouver Sun*, traditionally considered a "liberal" publication, supported Barrett's expulsion from the provincial legislature in its editorial columns with the remark, "If the NDP leader refuses to abide by norms of parliamentary democracy he can expect nothing less than what happened. There are limits to free speech."
5. In 1998, the CIA admitted to its role in monitoring and sabotaging the B.C. NDP government after its election in August 1972. Referring to Premier Dave Barrett as "the Allende of the north" after the NDP announced a surcharge tax on B.C. mining exports and the creation of public car insurance, the CIA funded the opposition Social Credit party and the anti-NDP, red-baiting campaign in some Canadian media.

During the Solidarity struggle in 1983 and in conjunction with the RCMP Secret Service (SS), the same CIA program infiltrated Operation Solidarity and funded the right-wing Fraser Institute that formulated Social Credit policies and legislation, according to former CIA agent Philip Agee. Based on the success of these efforts, the RCMP's SS morphed the following year into the secret spy agency the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

6. As quoted in the November 6, 1983 issue of *Solidarity Times*.

7. Before his death in 1993, former Social Credit Finance Minister Elwood Veitch stated that Kube and Munro each received a remuneration of \$25,000 for signing the Kelowna Accord that ended the General Strike, along with "other benefits". Jack Munro later became the Chairman of the Forest Alliance of B.C., a pro-industry lobby group, and along with Art Kube, was awarded the Order of Canada.

8. From Trotsky's article "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Capitalist Decay" in the August 1932 issue of *Bulletin of the Left Opposition*, Paris.

9. My discussion of the Corporatocracy in my book *Recovering the Dream* is based in part on the post-war writings of Hal Draper, the American Trotskyist, the earlier works of Bruno Rizzi in his formulation of the theory of Bureaucratic Collectivism, and writers like Tony Cliff and Ernest Mandel.

10. From an article by Draper in *International Socialist Review*, June 1948, New York.
11. Examples of the Canadian Left's uncritical parroting of the position of the federal government can be found when it comes to diverse issues like the COVID "pandemic", mandatory vaccinations, the truckers' convoy protest, Universal Basic Income, the Ukraine, and multi-genderism.
12. As I describe in my book Memoirs of a Revolutionary (2021), two thirds of world economic growth now occurs in the Indo-Pacific region, where GDP growth rates of over 1000% per year are common in countries like Vietnam, Thailand, and India.
13. Not one Canadian union has opposed the COVID mandates, even when they have violated contract provisions and the civil liberties of their members. A senior Canadian Autoworkers Union (CAW) official told the author, "If we resisted the mandates, we'd be breaking the law and committing treason." (Treason?)
14. As I describe in my book Memoirs of a Revolutionary (2021), by the year 2010 the world economy was dominated by 149 corporations that employed barely one percent of the global workforce. Financial power is even more concentrated in the coffers of two "extra-territorial" banks: the Geneva-based Bank of International Settlements (BIS) and the Vatican Bank (IOR), which together control over 80% of the world's deposits.

15. A survey that I've conducted of North American Marxist groups since the spring of 2020 reveals that none of them had a position on or the slightest awareness of the nature of the Corporatocracy or its roots in Christian-led genocide. These groups (Trotskyist, neo-Maoist, anarchist, orthodox "communist") cling to a traditional view of modern capitalism and function as *de facto* liberal reform wings of the system.

16. The author was a branch organizer with the Canadian International Socialists from 1975 to 1979, a founder of the "left caucus" of the B.C. Green Party from 1983 to 1985, has been an organizer with the Socialist Workers' Group since the spring of 1983, and presently helps lead the global Socialist Republic Alliance.

17. This analysis of modern capitalism by Antonio Gramsci in his seminal work *The Prison Notebooks* was written in a fascist prison during the 1930's. It remains a more accurate depiction of the nature of the global system than do traditional Marxist analysis, based as it is on 19<sup>th</sup> century laissez-faire capitalism. The quote is from his Commentary on the Prison Notebooks (Paris, 1934)

18. For an excellent discussion of the "counter cultural" rise of the English bourgeoisie see The English Revolution of 1649 by Christopher Hill (London, 1949)

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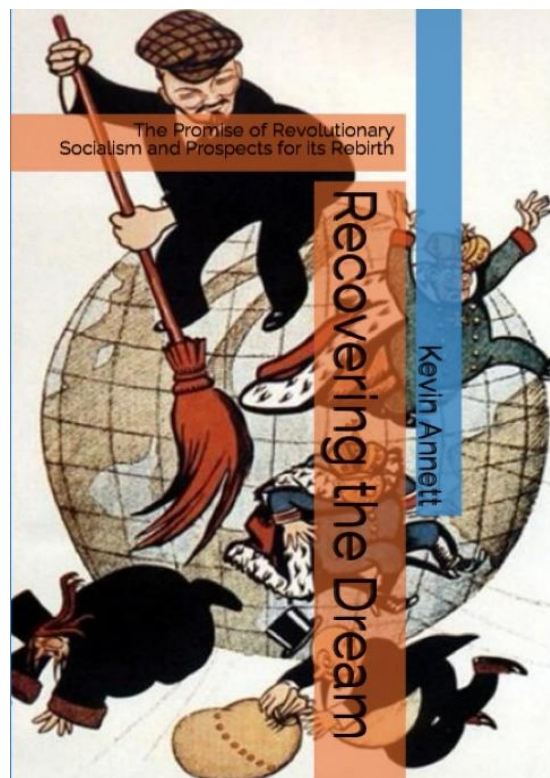
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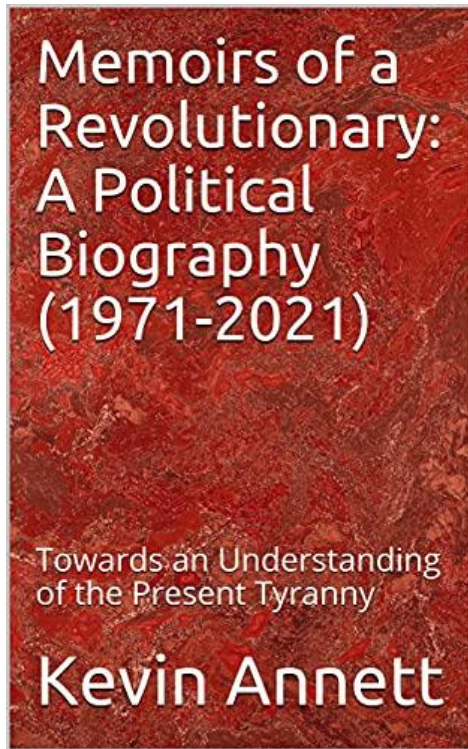
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