

# Canadian Labor Politics

I emigrated from the United States to Canada in 1974, in the aftermath of the period covered by Benjamin Isitt's *Militant Minority*, becoming actively involved in British Columbia's (BC) social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) as well as its labor movement. Isitt's work deepened my understanding of both. By providing detailed histories of strikes, intra-union political struggles, and portraits of various segments of BC's political left, he filled a number of gaps in my knowledge.



During the era described in *Militant Minority*, BC's labor and political scenes differed greatly from those in other parts of Canada. The province's economy, based as it was in logging, mining, fishing and other resources, was conducive to industrial unionism. As a result, the level of union militancy, the frequency of strikes, the standard of living enjoyed by the organized portion of the working class, and the stridency of differences between electoral parties all served to give the province a well-deserved reputation for progressive activism.

The bare-knuckle relationship between labor and capital in BC was rooted in the dominance of these extractive industries, often characterized by robber baron bosses on one side and militant trade unionists with roots in English and Scottish labor on the other. As Isitt puts it, "Benefiting from enduring frontier characteristics and from an influx of class-conscious British immigrants, BC's working class developed a political culture that was independent from the old-line [capitalist] parties and collectivist in orientation."

Isitt describes the central role played by the Communist Party in organizing and running BC's militant unions, including the Fishermen; the provincial district of the Mine,

Mill and Smelter Workers; the Marine and Boilermakers; and Vancouver's Civic Employees Union. In my view, however, he overstates the case when he argues that the province's union and left political organizations challenged the assumptions and structures of postwar capitalism. While they succeeded in extracting a standard of living as well as a degree of control over their working lives not seen in other parts of Canada, neither mounted a fundamental challenge to the workings of the system.

Given the high profile, active presence of the Communist Party, it is not surprising that anti-communism played a major role in the province. White Bloc elements in the unions were aided by stridently reactionary politicians and newspaper columnists. But the combined efforts of such forces proved insufficient to blunt the militancy that characterized the province's unions. As Isitt explains, "Facing internal and external competition from communists, non-communist leaders in BC were more inclined to embrace militant action and a confrontational stance with employers" than was the case in other provinces, where the communist influence was not as strong.

*Militant Minority* provides insight into the role of "international" (i.e. American) unions in aiding anti-communist forces within BC's labor organizations. Isitt details, for instance, how George Gee, business agent for International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 213, was expelled because of his relationship with communists. One of the charges against Gee was that he had attended the famous concert given by Paul Robeson at the Canada-U.S. border. Isitt also describes how the company and the international worked together to back an apolitical union during Local 213's organizing drive at the Alcan smelter in the northern town of Kitimat.

It is difficult to determine the accuracy of the accusation coming from one of the White Bloc unionists, cited

by Isitt, that at one time one third of BC's organized workers were members of communist-led unions. But it is undeniably the case that the Communist Party's influence was substantial. As he puts it, "The Communist Party, warts and all, helped sustain an oppositional working-class culture in Cold War BC."

The amount of historical information included in *Militant Minority* is enormous. Fully half the work is comprised of appendices, notes and bibliography. But while the work supplies exhaustive detail about BC labor and political history in this era, it does not place all this in an analytical framework. In the absence of such analysis, it is difficult for the reader to understand how a provincial labor movement that once represented more than 50 percent of the workforce could, within a matter of years, enter the same precipitous decline that now afflicts labor across North America and beyond.

My personal history in British Columbia picks up where Isitt's work ends. When I immigrated to Canada in the summer of 1974, there was a federal election in progress. Our moving trailer heaped high with all our worldly belongings, we crossed the border to be greeted by an array of election campaign signs—including signs for candidates from the Communist Party of Canada! I harbored few illusions about the CP, but coming as we did from the United States, where McCarthyism was still alive and well, the sight of these signs was an enormous culture shock.

Next we encountered what was then a regularly occurring province-wide beer strike, when militant workers shut down their breweries at the peak of summer beer-drinking season. Communist candidates for public office? Militant, focused strikes? The reality in BC was clearly different from what we were used to in the United States.

Shortly after we emigrated, my wife and I got involved in the New Democratic Party, which had formed the provincial

government in 1972. There we encountered a number of dedicated, predominantly working-class, rank-and-file members with strong, progressive political values. After the disheartening experience of party politics in Nixon America, we found the NDP refreshing and inspiring.

*Militant Minority* describes a time when radical left politics was still practiced openly in BC, inside the NDP and beyond, depicting the prominent role of a number of Trotskyist groups and that of the Communist Party. As new immigrants, we found the level of political energy exhilarating. What we didn't realize was that after having taken office the NDP was moving to the right in the name of electoral realism. At that juncture the influence of professional party bureaucrats had just begun to eclipse that of focused, articulate leftists.

After settling in to our new environs, I returned to school to study economics, armed with a dual desire: to get an understanding of the forces driving the world and to acquire analytical skills that might make me useful as a union staffer. By 1977, I had my Master's degree in economics from Simon Fraser University, but it wasn't until 1980 that I was able to land a job as a union staffer. In that year I was hired by the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU), which represented the workers at BC Tel, the company that provided phone service in the province. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

By early 1981, the TWU was involved in a nose-to-nose confrontation with BC Tel. The two had engaged in a series of knock-down-drag-out battles for years. Picking up where it had left off in the last dispute, the company was trying to break the militant union and get rid of gains the union had made in the areas of work jurisdiction and contract language. The union was equally determined to defend these gains, which it had achieved through decades of militant struggle.

The dispute escalated, culminating when union members

began occupying BC Tel exchanges across the province. When the company sought redress from the courts and the TWU faced the threat of crushing fines and jailings, the province's entire labor movement responded by mounting a series of regional general strikes that forced BC Tel to back down. The contrast with my earlier experience, in an environment in which unions had little visible presence, could not have been more dramatic.

Little did I know that the province was just two years away from the onset of the corporate-driven attack that has continued to overwhelm both organized labor and the left ever since, in BC and beyond. On July 7, 1983, the right-wing provincial government introduced a legislative package of 26 bills, initiating what in retrospect marked the onset of neoliberalism in BC. Inspired by the ideology of Milton Friedman, the various pieces of legislation attacked renters, immigrants, women's rights, tenants' rights, anti-poverty groups, students, seniors, environmentalists, and the province's human rights commission. It slashed social services and gutted labor laws. One of the pieces of draft legislation allowed public sector employers to lay off their employees without cause.

In response to the government's announcement, the BC Federation of Labour invited all of the unions of the province to the founding meeting of Operation Solidarity, whose purpose was to oppose the legislative package and pressure the government to withdraw it. At the same time, the Fed encouraged the social groups that were targeted by the legislative assault to join together in what became the Solidarity Coalition. Never before in the province's history had labor and community united in support of a common agenda.

Confrontation with the government escalated. At the end of August 50,000 people attended a protest rally at Vancouver's Empire Stadium. By the middle of October 80,000 people marched past the convention of the governing Social

Credit party. As a final showdown approached, Operation Solidarity announced a strategy that would have union members come off the job in waves, joining striking government employees in stages, until the entire labor movement was out.

In early November, however, the leadership of Operation Solidarity met behind closed doors with the premier of the province to negotiate an end to the escalating job action. Contrary to the expectations that had been raised by the rhetoric of the union leaders who had launched the movement, the settlement was a very narrow one that addressed only the key concerns of the striking provincial government employees. The community partners who had joined the Solidarity Coalition were left high and dry, their issues unaddressed.

The behavior of BC's unions and that of the NDP, which was anxious to put a damper on the escalating crisis, demonstrated that despite their militant history, neither was prepared to support the kind of push back that would have been necessary to force the government off of its regressive agenda. The lesson drawn by capital was clear: stick to a draconian agenda. Labor and the left are not prepared to mount sustained resistance.

Some years later, the TWU engaged in a depressingly similar retreat, when Canada's tele-communications industry was deregulated and competition was introduced. Under the changed circumstances, the TWU proved as incapable of mounting the necessary response as had the BC labor movement in 1983.

In 1984, the U.S. government forced the break-up of the AT&T company. As the effects rolled out, phone workers employed by regulated monopolies who had earned wages superior to those of most other organized workers saw their relatively privileged existence begin to unravel.

Hundreds of thousands of union jobs were lost. Telecom companies that had been constrained by government regulation

established and purchased non-union subsidiaries. They installed a range of new technologies, including digitalized networks, e-mail, the internet, and cell phone service. At the same time, telecom companies went all-out to prevent cellular, the fastest growing and most profitable part of the industry, from being unionized. All of these factors combined to increase the power of telecom companies relative to that of their unionized employees, power the companies used to take back the gains that telephone workers had won earlier in the post-war era.

Because these changes rolled out more slowly in Canada than in the States, it took years before telecom unions north of the border faced the day of reckoning. But it was only a matter of time before the same developments caught up with them. The TWU's problems began in earnest in 1999, when BC Tel merged with the provincial phone company in Alberta to form a new corporate giant called Telus.

Despite the changes wracking the industry, the TWU hoped to maintain the gains it had achieved through decades of struggle, which had given the union unparalleled control over job content, job descriptions, bargaining unit jurisdiction and the administration of technological change. But the tough new CEO hired by Telus to tame the TWU was determined to force the kind of change that had swept the rest of North American telecom by re-writing the union's collective agreement to rid it of language restricting management's rights and doing away with the TWU's unique achievements.

After years of legalistic jousting in the courts and before labor boards, Telus threw down the gloves in 2005. The company mounted a "soft lockout," suspended the remission of union dues, ignored the grievance and arbitration process, and initiated a series of workplace harassments. Finally Telus announced its intention to impose a new contract on the union unilaterally. Having tried its utmost to avoid a confrontation, the TWU was compelled to pull its members off

the job.

Telus followed up by mounting a coordinated attack on the union, maintaining its operations through the combined use of scabs, automation and the electronic transfer of work. The TWU did nothing to create a coherent counter-strategy. In contrast to the powerful response mounted by the BC Fed in 1981, when all of the province's unions came to the aid of the TWU, in this confrontation there was no serious effort made by the labor movement to slow the Telus juggernaut. As a result, the company's comprehensive, lavishly funded strategy overwhelmed the union's ad hoc resistance. Two months into the dispute, Telus operations were largely back to normal and its financial results were the best of any phone company in the country. In the end, the TWU had to scramble back to the bargaining table, where it capitulated to preserve its very existence. Holding all the cards, Telus stripped the TWU's contract of the ground-breaking protections that had taken decades of struggle to achieve.

What is the conclusion we can draw from all this? That despite their significant differences from their counterparts in the rest of Canada described in *Militant Minority*, BC's unions and their allies on the left have yet to mount a serious response to the neoliberal assault that has wracked society for the last thirty years. In this context, Isitt's failure to provide an analysis of the factors that enabled labor and the left in BC to exert a significant progressive influence in the postwar era and how these factors have changed leaves the reader without a perspective on the particular circumstances that made such success possible and the steps that must be taken to reverse the disastrous situation facing us today.

It may be countered that Isitt's work is not unique in this respect. True enough. But if the history of labor and the left is to be more than a pastime for academics and intellectuals, this deficiency must be addressed.