

The Hospital Employees' Union Strike and the Privatization of Medicare in British Columbia, Canada

Benjamin Isitt

University of New Brunswick

Melissa Moroz

Canadian Union of Public Employees

Abstract

In April 2004, the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) waged an illegal strike that mobilized sections of British Columbia's working class to the brink of a general sympathetic strike. Influenced by BC's class-polarized political culture and HEU's distinct history, the 2004 strike represents a key moment of working-class resistance to neoliberal privatization. HEU was targeted by the BC Liberal government because it represented a bastion of militant, independent unionism in a jurisdiction that appeared overripe (from the neoliberal standpoint) for a curtailment of worker rights and a retrenchment of public-sector employment. HEU also represented a direct barrier, in the language of its collective agreements and collective power of its membership, to the privatization of health services and dismantling of Medicare. The militant agency of HEU members, combined with anger generated by a constellation of social-service cutbacks, inspired rank-and-file workers and several unions to defy collective agreements and embrace sympathetic strike action. This revealed differentiation in the strategy and tactics of BC's labor leadership, and enduring sources of solidarity in labor's ranks.

In April 2004, forty thousand members of the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) participated in an illegal strike to prevent the privatization of their jobs and health services in British Columbia, Canada. At the height of the dispute, thirty-thousand unionized workers in the public and private sectors took sympathetic action in support of HEU, with the strike extending to sawmills, public schools, power plants, food retailers, municipal halls, transit yards, and BC's ferry fleet. Community coalitions provided "flying pickets" to evade "no strike" language in collective agreements. An anticipated province-wide general strike coordinated by the BC Federation of Labor (BC Fed) was averted when HEU's leadership reached an agreement with the provincial government. The union won restrictions on future contracting out, but accepted a fifteen-percent wage rollback. Existing contracts covering housekeeping, food, and laundry services remained in the hands of private healthcare corporations such as Compass Group and Sodexo.

The 2004 HEU strike provides a compelling window into the response of a regional working class to neoliberal policies and privatization.¹ It reveals

the limits of BC labor's challenge to the implementation of the "lean state."² The dispute, though centered in BC, highlights important themes in labor and working-class studies generally, including the transition from the theory to practice of the general strike, the propensity of women, immigrants, and workers of color to engage in illegal job action, conflict within and between public- and private-sector unions and the nonunionized workforce, and tension between elected union leaders and a more militant rank-and-file leadership.³ The strike also reveals the impact of postwar collective bargaining procedures on labor organization and militancy, the influence of an institutionalized social-democratic party on labor's strategy and tactics, and the response of workers and community coalitions to the retrenchment of the welfare state.

This study situates the HEU strike in a changing economic and political climate, with reference to the militant tradition of BC's working class. Unlike David Camfield, who emphasizes the role of the labor bureaucracy in curbing HEU militancy, this study highlights sources of solidarity within BC labor's ranks, particularly the role of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in mobilizing sympathetic action.⁴ This fresh interpretation locates BC labor's response to the HEU strike within a pattern of class solidarity. With a union density exceeding fifty-five percent during the heyday of postwar growth, and a class-polarized party system that more closely resembles European patterns of partisan alignment than North American brokerage politics, BC occupies a distinct location within continental labor and working-class history.⁵ In 2004, BC workers responded to the contracting out of healthcare services and a broader privatization agenda by gravitating toward a general strike in sympathy with HEU. This challenge to privatization demonstrates distinctions within BC's labor leadership and the willingness of a layer of workers and community supporters to defy the legal restrictions of postwar industrial relations.

British Columbia's Militant Tradition

As Martin Robin argued, BC's political culture bears the imprint of an "industrial frontier," where the extraction of primary resources under frontier conditions fueled radical political alternatives such as Marxism, and bred overt conflict between owners and managers of capital and the working class.⁶ The Industrial Workers of the World flourished in BC prior to the First World War, on the heels of the Western Federation of Miners and American labor organizers, who straddled both sides of the international boundary conveying the message of class struggle to itinerant workers.⁷ The Socialist Party of Canada, avowedly Marxist, elected Members of the Legislative Assembly from coalmining districts, establishing a tradition of independent labor politics that grew over the twentieth century.⁸ While ethnic and gender tensions endured,⁹ radicalism and militancy took root among BC workers, many of whom had migrated from Britain with previous contact in the labor movement and a desire to escape the rigid class system.¹⁰

Throughout BC history, periodic episodes of industrial solidarity have mobilized working-class people behind the bargaining demands of one section of workers—as the ephemeral slogan “general strike” moved from syndicalist theory into practice. Early episodes of solidarity centered on the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees’ Strike (1903), Vancouver Island Coal Miners’ Strike (1912–1914), and Winnipeg General Strike (1919). The latter coincided with a continental upheaval, which gave rise to the breakaway One Big Union, headquartered in Vancouver and led by BC socialists.¹¹

Each of these episodes revealed common attributes, of relevance to the 2004 HEU strike. All were defensive in character, representing collective responses to attacks on one section of workers. All occurred in the absence of electoral mechanisms to seek redress, fueling the perception that workers must take action themselves. All encountered rigorous opposition from employers, backed by governments, police, media, and a judiciary that openly favored employers’ interests. All elicited rigorous opposition from sections of the labor leadership. All were made possible by independent organizing among rank-and-file workers that provided alternatives to the established leadership. All were undermined by the absence of an effective political strategy, both in narrow terms of articulating an “end-game” for the strike, and more broadly in terms of articulating a path to a more egalitarian social order. Finally, all these episodes of solidarity relied too heavily on unionized workers, lacking support among the nonunionized—and often most exploited and least powerful—workers. This provided an opening for employers, state institutions, and labor officials to amplify divisions and reestablish traditional patterns of authority and domination. After each major episode of solidarity, the general strike receded from the consciousness of BC workers for a time, only to return.

The era of industrial legality following the Second World War enabled workers to secure a portion of the benefits of an expanding economy, while placing severe limits on working-class agency through “management rights” clauses and prohibitions on the right to strike during the life of collective agreements. This measure was aimed at blunting labor’s historic weapon—the general sympathetic strike. What has been called the “postwar compromise” between capital and labor seldom resembled compromise in BC.¹² Workers and employers engaged in a perennial tug-of-war over the shape collective bargaining would take: certification procedures, the right to strike and picket, the operation of the Labor Relations Board and Workers’ Compensation Board, and the use of court injunctions in labor disputes were hotly contested. Employers were formally required to recognize and bargain with unions chosen by workers, in a political and economic climate favorable to employers. Inaugurating a pattern that persists today, organized labor railed against specific pieces of legislation, such as Bill 87 in 1948, amendments to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act that AFL and CIO unions felt were “not designed to foster industrial peace.”¹³

Public-sector workers’ bargaining rights were contested as the welfare state expanded in postwar Canada.¹⁴ A 1959 illegal strike by BC government workers

signified the changing composition of organized labor.¹⁵ The traditional locus of militancy—the Communist-dominated unions in fishing, mining, shipbuilding, and forestry—shifted toward growing unions of white-collar and public-sector workers, such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), founded in 1963 and today Canada’s largest union.¹⁶ The election of the New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1972 extended collective-bargaining rights throughout BC’s public sector, but tensions remained. Strikes at the government-owned Insurance Corporation of BC and BC Ferry Corporation revealed conflict between organized labor and the labor-aligned social-democratic party. Mirroring developments in all countries, the NDP’s electoral considerations conflicted with demands for militant action arising from the working class.¹⁷

BC elected its first labor-aligned government as changes in the structure of international capitalism eroded the economic basis for the welfare state. Economic growth in North America, sustained since the war, slowed in the face of energy crisis and increasing competitiveness of Japanese and German manufacturing. The process intensified whereby capital became unhinged from the nation state and its regulatory apparatus. As Gary Teeple has argued, this internationalization of capital (“globalization”) was accompanied by the political ideologies of neoconservatism and neoliberalism and the erosion of public support for the postwar welfare state and labor’s social wage.¹⁸

In 1983, the implications of these global shifts arrived in BC. Social Credit, a free-enterprise coalition party, was narrowly reelected, despite forty-five percent support for the NDP.¹⁹ Social Credit premier Bill Bennett announced a sweeping “Restraint” program, eliminating rent controls, firing government workers, and closing the Human Rights Branch.²⁰ The BC Fed joined forces with dozens of community organizations under the banner “Operation Solidarity.”²¹ Unlike its Polish namesake, however, BC Solidarity failed to defeat Social Credit and its “Restraint” policies. The first stages of a province-wide general strike—which saw teachers strike in sympathy with government workers—won some job protection, but cuts to human rights, tenancy protection, and community services remained. What was widely referred to as the “sellout” of Solidarity left a deep bitterness toward organized labor—and the BC Fed in particular—a rift that never fully healed.²²

In 1991, the NDP returned to power. Social Credit had imploded, a worn-out machine discredited by a record of slashing social programs and attacking workers.²³ The resurgent NDP moved to restore social services, but the old contradictions of social democracy resurfaced. Logging of old-growth rainforest on Vancouver Island cut into the NDP’s base, and cuts to social-welfare payments fed the perception that the party had lost direction.²⁴ The NDP was narrowly reelected in 1996, but atrophy was developing in labor’s ranks, particularly among public-sector workers who had earned a reputation of militancy under Social Credit. BC’s labor leaders were unwilling to confront “their government,” even when this government introduced policies favoring employers more than workers. However, pockets of independent unionism remained. HEU social-service workers struck for eleven weeks in 1998, and a

CUPE school-support strike in 2000 ended in back-to-work legislation.²⁵ By 2001, the NDP itself resembled a worn-out machine, driven more by electoral calculations than a commitment to social-justice principles and workers' rights.²⁶ The party was routed in a general election, falling from government to two seats in a seventy-nine seat legislature.²⁷ The resurgent BC Liberal party—out of office since 1952 but revived under Gordon Campbell's leadership as the new free-enterprise coalition—took full advantage of an iron-clad majority, embarking on what the probusiness *Globe and Mail* described as an agenda of "legislative vandalism."²⁸

HEU as a Militant, Independent Union

HEU was located at the nexus of the Liberal agenda of cuts and privatization. It was a bastion of militant, independent unionism, a "black sheep" that had severed and then reestablished affiliation with parent-union CUPE, and demonstrated a willingness to strike—in 1992 and again in 1998—against "labor's" NDP government. This pariah in labor's ranks was an obvious target for a government intent on privatization and a curtailment of working-class power. More directly, HEU represented an institutional barrier to the dismantling of universal Medicare. Through the language of its hard-won collective agreements and the collective power of its membership, HEU had established a line of defense for its workers, who counted themselves among the most vulnerable strata of the unionized working class. Unlike the white male workers in the heavily unionized resource sectors, HEU consisted mostly of women, immigrants, and workers of color. Fully eighty-five percent of HEU members were women.²⁹ Immigrants accounted for twenty percent of BC's population, but thirty-one percent of HEU members; people of color represented nineteen percent of the general population, but twenty-seven percent in HEU.³⁰ Employed in housekeeping, food services, laundry, and support services in hospitals and health facilities, HEU workers provided services that appeared ripe for privatization. Transnational healthcare corporations lobbied the Campbell Liberals to tender for-profit contracts and eliminate publicly administered HEU jobs.³¹

The Hospital Employees' Union was formed in 1944 when female and male employees at Vancouver General Hospital merged their separate organizations. HEU's growth in subsequent decades paralleled the rise of public healthcare in BC and Canada. Federal grants for hospital construction in 1948 were followed in 1949 by a provincial hospital insurance plan, as a Liberal-Conservative Coalition government scrambled to keep the socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (predecessor to the NDP) out of office.³² In its first decade, HEU expanded to nineteen locals; it began negotiating regional contracts in 1961 (rather than separate contracts with each hospital) and in 1968 achieved its first master agreement, bargaining with an employers' association representing sixty-six BC hospitals. That year, the federal Medical Care Act established public health insurance in every

Canadian province, a universal single-tier comprehensive system that labor had demanded for decades. The struggle over adequate health funding and health-care workers' bargaining rights continued, however, as HEU moved outside the house of labor.³³

In its early years, HEU was an active participant in Canada's labor movement, a directly chartered affiliate of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada (AFL) and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). In 1963, it was a founding member of CUPE. HEU's first secretary-business manager, a Scotsman named Bill Black, served as NUPE vice-president in the 1940s, and as BC Fed president following the AFL-CIO merger in 1956. However Black's narrow defeat for the CUPE presidency in 1967—amid allegations of vote-rigging—set HEU down the road to secession. A CUPE organizing drive in acute-care hospitals inflamed HEU, which resented incursions into its jurisdiction. In 1970, HEU voted to leave CUPE, leading to the expulsion of HEU activists from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), BC Fed and local labor councils.³⁴

As a breakaway union in the 1970s, HEU successfully organized long-term care homes and private hospitals, and led its first province-wide strike at acute-care hospitals in 1976.³⁵ These successes fueled a “go-it-alone” attitude, a self-confidence that became engrained in the internal culture of the union and informed later bargaining strategies. The rise of neoconservatism and 1983 Operation Solidarity mobilization underscored the importance of greater cooperation, however. According to the union's official history, “it was clear to the HEU's leadership that strength lay in unity with community groups and labor organizations.”³⁶ In 1984, HEU signed a letter of agreement with CUPE, establishing a trial period of affiliation and facilitating HEU's readmission into the CLC and central labor bodies. This agreement was renewed twice, and in 1994 HEU returned to CUPE, as a fully autonomous union with control over name, constitution, and structure. Fred Muzin, HEU president since 1993, serves on CUPE's National Executive Board.³⁷

During its time inside and outside the house of labor, HEU has extended the benefits of unionization throughout BC's health sector. Its experience as a breakaway union, isolated from the rest of organized labor, provided impetus to the 2004 strike. An HEU activist, who agreed to an interview on the condition of anonymity, confirms this view:

[HEU members] couldn't always depend on others to back them up and they did their own thing. They achieved one of the best health-care collective agreements in the country and therefore got their name as a fairly militant union, even though many of those achievements were made without strikes but just with a good membership base that took the issues on.³⁸

Union president Fred Muzin, who began working at Vancouver's St. Paul's Hospital in 1977, attributes the union's tradition of militancy to “leaders who have been very forward thinking... very progressive.” The membership

“keeps its leaders very accountable. They don’t give us an easy ride on anything The membership push the leadership.”³⁹

Muzin also points to a succession of fiscally conservative BC governments “that have not believed traditionally in investing in the public service.” Finally, he identifies the experiences of HEU members, many of them immigrants, combating oppression and injustice in their countries of origin:

We tend to be militant because a lot of our members come from other cultures that have been military dictatorships. Like some of our members from El Salvador, where the doctors led a strike for nine months in health care. They have a tradition of fighting much more draconian regimes. And they bring that sense of fighting for justice.

Muzin equates the targeting of HEU with “what Thatcher did in Britain to the mine workers.” The Campbell government felt if it could destroy the most militant organization, “the organization willing to go on strike and shut down an essential service, if they could limit or destroy us they would basically have control of labor. They would be able to deunionize the province.”⁴⁰

By the 1990s, HEU was the largest union of women in BC.⁴¹ Former HEU shop steward Glenda Hemstreet, who lost her job as a care aid because of contracting out, believes gender was a factor in the government’s attack on HEU.⁴² Hospital workers were targeted, Hemstreet suggests, “because we’re women and they want to bring our levels down. This government wants everybody broke, everyone poor. They want to get rid of the middle class and why not pick on women?”⁴³ In their 2001 collective agreement, HEU members had narrowed the wage differential between male and female workers in various classifications to below four percent.⁴⁴ However, shortly after assuming office, Liberal Labor Minister Graham Bruce told the legislature that “we all benefit from the flexibility of the free market,” foreshadowing a rollback of pay-equity gains; Colin Hansen, Minister of Health Services, pledged to give “the health authorities as much flexibility as possible.”⁴⁵ The attack on women healthcare workers belonged to a broader policy agenda that disproportionately impacted women. As the authors of the study *Losing Ground* conclude, Liberal policies “tossed equality and justice overboard.”⁴⁶

HEU’s militant tradition reflected its history and its composition as a union of women, immigrants, and workers of color, who in all jurisdictions have been among the first to feel the impacts of neoliberal privatization. HEU leaders and activists, however, have differing views on the extent to which tradition influenced the 2004 strike. President Muzin emphasizes provincial-government policy over tradition: “It was more the pent up frustration of negotiating an agreement and having a government break it, fire 8000 people, primarily women, for no legitimate reason . . . The employers never bargained. It’s like they knew there was going to be legislation. Because the collective bargaining process, especially after Bill 29, had really been destroyed.”⁴⁷ One HEU activist, however, views the union’s independent tradition as a major factor behind the

strike: “[HEU members] went into it knowing they weren’t getting a lot of support from leaders of other labor organizations. But where that might have intimidated some other unions, lacking that support, they had a long history of acting on their own and forged ahead with a plan to win.”⁴⁸

Throughout the 1990s, BC’s NDP government had resisted healthcare privatization as Canada’s federal government offloaded social spending onto the provinces. From a fifty-fifty funding formula when Medicare was established in 1968, the federal contribution withered to fourteen percent, the remainder falling on cash-strapped provincial governments.⁴⁹

The 2001 BC Liberal victory opened the floodgates to privatization. BC’s fifty-two regional health boards were amalgamated into five health authorities, empowered through legislation to find “efficiencies” in service delivery.⁵⁰ Bill 29, the Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act, suspended the bargaining rights of HEU members and other healthcare workers, enabling public-sector employers to unilaterally alter or remove hard-fought provisions in collective agreements that restricted contracting out.⁵¹ A \$2-billion tax cut created a fiscal crisis, providing a pretext for spending cuts and layoffs.⁵² Tenders were issued for housekeeping, food, and laundry services in hospitals and care homes, under the guise of “cost-savings” but driven by ideological motives.⁵³ Six thousand HEU members were fired, replaced by low-wage workers employed by transnational contractors, including Compass, Sodexo, and Aramark.⁵⁴ Glenda Hemstreet was among those whose job was contracted out: “Once all this stuff starts it’s the management that starts attacking. People feel like they are being harassed and isolated and picked on.”⁵⁵ In the midst of the layoffs, HEU members voted fifty-seven percent to reject a concessions agreement negotiated between their union and the Health Employers Association of BC, which would have limited contracting out.⁵⁶

Across the province, sweeping cuts to social services alienated women, social-assistance recipients, seniors, people with disabilities, students, aboriginals, and union members, giving rise to community coalitions in dozens of towns and cities.⁵⁷ When the remnants of the HEU contract expired in spring 2004, the battle lines were drawn.

The Strike

On Sunday, April 25, 2004, the anticipated conflict in the health sector came to a head. A mediator had walked away from negotiations saying the sides were too far apart; health employers sought \$750-million in concessions, while HEU members voted eighty-nine percent in favor of a strike.⁵⁸ The union launched a full-scale, legal strike, picketing every hospital and long-term care facility in BC.⁵⁹ “They ripped up the contract and over 6000 workers were tossed on the street,” HEU secretary-business manager Chris Allnutt said. “Look at the trust level. Since starting talks another 2500 workers have been tossed on the street.”⁶⁰ Both sides had carefully marshaled their forces, but subsequent events were not entirely anticipated. Importantly, the HEU strike

(which began as a wider health facilities strike encompassing several unions) assumed the character of something greater than a conventional labor dispute—it came to symbolize the fight for public healthcare in BC. This helps explain massive public support for the strikers, and the depth of anger directed toward the Campbell government. The discontent generated by the constellation of cutbacks in the preceding three years was channeled through the agency of the HEU strike.

Community coalitions generalized HEU workers' grievances to other sections of society, pulling diverse groups of workers into the strike. Tactically, community coalitions mobilized non-HEU members to HEU picket lines. Since 2001, HEU members had joined nurses, teachers, and other public-sector workers in building linkages with community organizations. While the success and staying power of these coalitions varied greatly, they provided crucial sites of activism, popularizing direct action and picketing in a series of protest days in 2002 and 2003. From Nanaimo to Nelson, Delta to Dawson Creek, and Vernon to Victoria, these coalitions provided a forum for cross-fertilization on a range of issues. Hospital workers supported the demands of antipoverty groups for social housing and a guaranteed annual income; teachers advocated for seniors and against the closure of women's centers.⁶¹ When the strike erupted in 2004, healthcare workers—HEU, BC Nurses' Union (BCNU), Health Sciences Association (HSA), BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU), International Union of Operating Engineers—were joined by citizens on large and militant picketlines. Passing motorists and pedestrians indicated emphatic support; cars honked frequently with little visible opposition.⁶²

The extent of public support, combined with picketline strength, inspired HEU workers to defy Bill 37, back-to-work legislation passed during an all-night sitting of the legislature on April 28. The Health Sector (Facilities Subsector) Collective Agreement Act prohibited picketing and imposed a contract containing a fifteen-percent wage rollback, an extension of the workweek from 36 hours to 37.5, and a "retroactivity" clause that required employees to pay two week's back wages.⁶³ It was essentially the same contract that had been rejected by HEU members a year earlier, only devoid of any restrictions on contracting out. The retroactivity clause inflamed public opinion, strengthening support for HEU and intensifying hostility toward the Campbell government. "It's an absolute abuse of power to pick on the working people," James Donaldson, a cook at Victoria's Royal Jubilee Hospital, told the *Times Colonist*.⁶⁴ Even members of the BC Liberal caucus expressed concern over the retroactivity clause.⁶⁵

Bill 37 drew a line between HEU and all other unions in the health-facilities bargaining group. As one HEU activist recounts:

Remember, this wasn't an HEU strike, it was a facilities sector healthcare workers strike, which included many other unions. All of those unions, with no exceptions, went back to work the day of the legislation . . . Many individual members didn't

cross the line but the direction from their leadership certainly was to cross the lines.⁶⁶

Following passage of Bill 37, confusion developed when BCNU, HSA, and BCGEU members crossed picketlines in accordance with the law, but within hours the lines held firm.⁶⁷ The character of the dispute changed in this new context into a wholesale rejection of the legitimacy of the Campbell government. The flouting of the government's legal authority by HEU members, and the widespread sympathy for this illegality among sections of the public, moved the dispute toward a general sympathetic strike—a tactic popularized by the community coalitions and a Vancouver group calling itself the Prepare the General Strike Committee, which consisted of seasoned militants around the Vancouver & District Labour Council. The general strike was no longer a matter of conjecture. Confidence within the rank-and-file leadership was evident in an email forwarded by Victoria's Communities Solidarity Coalition (CSC) to activists across BC: "General Strike—Monday Noon. Pass it on."⁶⁸

The HEU strike occurred in a changed political culture, amid structural changes in BC's economy and state. The 1983 Operation Solidarity mobilization coincided with an opening volley in capital's attempt to rollback the welfare state and labor's social wage. It conflicted with widely accepted notions of government's role in society, of social rights of citizenship that had gained acceptance in preceding decades, among both unionized and nonunionized workers. In contrast, the HEU strike coincided with a belated attempt to implement neoliberal privatization; the BC Liberal agenda had already been carried out by kindred governments (wearing the party label Conservative) in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Ontario.⁶⁹ In the two decades since Operation Solidarity, working-class British Columbians were bombarded with neoliberal propaganda from increasingly concentrated media organizations, aligned with private-enterprise political parties.⁷⁰ A layer of BC workers, particularly in the nonunionized tertiary service sector, accepted neoliberal prescriptions of privatization, public-sector layoffs, user fees, and deunionization.⁷¹ The once-powerful private-sector unions—the Industrial Wood and Allied workers (IWA) and United Fish and Allied Workers Union—had experienced massive declines in members, finances, and power in the face of resource depletion, technological change, and corporate consolidation. The IWA responded to its waning power by entering into "partnership agreements" with the Campbell government and transnational health corporations—described as "rat agreements" by HEU—that facilitated the privatization of HEU jobs.⁷² Finally, as mentioned earlier, working-class militancy atrophied during the decade of NDP government (1991–2001), as labor leaders aligned with the government consolidated power. BC's working class was demobilized and vulnerable to the ensuing attack.

Despite these internal tensions, thousands of BC workers mobilized to support the HEU strikers and defend Medicare. In the absence of a viable electoral vehicle to seek redress—with the NDP reduced to two legislative

seats—BC workers once again gravitated toward the general strike. Bills 28 and 29, passed in 2002, had inaugurated instability in the public sector, revealing the government's lack of respect for "the sanctity of collective agreements"; the legislation signified capital's unwillingness to operate within the existing rules-based system of industrial relations, and produced openness among sections of workers to engage in "illegal" strike action. In December 2003, ferry workers had struck illegally for several days, defying a government-imposed "cooling-off" period and paralyzing the thirty-one ferry routes on BC's coast. When the union reached an agreement ending the strike, some workers and community activists voiced the word "betrayal."

The development of a grassroots leadership within the community coalitions was a determining factor in the movement toward a general strike, but so too was the divergence of strategy *within* organized labor—particularly the independent stance of CUPE's BC division. Labor has never been an undifferentiated mass, a monolithic bureaucracy that mechanically blocks efforts toward solidarity. Along with assisting the formation of community coalitions, CUPE BC actively prepared its membership for sympathetic job action. In 2002, a "Solidarity Vote" was conducted in every local empowering the provincial union to respond to attacks on one section of workers with tactics including a province-wide walkout.⁷³ When CUPE workers at the University of British Columbia struck in 2003, and were legislated back to work, CUPE was pressured to act on the Solidarity Vote; the threat of coordinated CUPE action forced UBC workers and the employer into binding arbitration.⁷⁴ At the 2003 BC Fed convention, CUPE delegates urged coordinated action against the Campbell government. Meeting in caucus, CUPE agreed to "take action ourselves," as one delegate described it.⁷⁵

During the 2003 ferry workers' strike, local CUPE leaders voted to "support and commit to mobilizing our members to respond to a call from CUPE BC and/or the BC Fed for a political protest that would include walking off the job."⁷⁶ Such a protest, called Democracy Day (and later Community Action Day), was contemplated in support of ferry workers, but no action taken. Early in 2004, CUPE BC appointed zone coordinators for each region, distributed information on legal issues, action guidelines, and provision of vital services, and debated the timing of the proposed protest strike. Some wanted to set a firm date, while others believed the protest should be tied to a specific issue, or "trigger event." Locals were informed to prepare for action on twenty-four to forty-eight hours notice, to avert preemptive court injunctions. On April 21, CUPE BC met in convention on the eve of the looming HEU dispute. Zone coordinators were supplied with picket signs for distribution to locals.⁷⁷

On April 29, responding to HEU's defiance of Bill 37, CUPE leaders in Victoria decided to act.⁷⁸ Inspired by media reports of wildcat strikes at sawmills and power plants, the leadership of several Victoria locals agreed to strike the following day. CUPE BC was notified, and at a conference call of zone coordinators that evening, union president Barry O'Neill declared: "This is the trigger . . . We are invoking the Solidarity Vote."⁷⁹

On Friday, April 30, an estimated thirty-thousand workers across BC struck in support of HEU, and as a protest against the legislated contract and government interference with the right to strike.⁸⁰ In Victoria, several thousand public-sector workers participated in the sympathetic job action, which disrupted ferry and transit operations and paralyzed the public school system when teachers refused to cross CUPE protest lines. Thirty-nine thousand students were affected. From community colleges and libraries to municipal halls and public-works yards to the regional landfill, CUPE members walked off the job. “The walkouts centred primarily on Vancouver Island but appeared to spread by the hour,” Victoria’s *Times Colonist* reported.⁸¹ In Quesnel, a resource town in the central interior, workers in two sawmills walked out, as did pulp-and-paper workers at the Elk Falls mill in Campbell River.⁸² At BC Hydro, a government-owned electricity company, nearly one-thousand electrical workers and clerical staff joined the wildcat strike.⁸³ In Nanaimo, bonds of solidarity nurtured during the ferry workers’ strike resurfaced when “community pickets” shut down BC Ferries operations at Departure Bay. CUPE municipal workers also walked out. The April 30 wildcat strike disrupted schools and municipal services from Richmond, Burnaby, Vancouver, Delta, and Pitt Meadows in the Lower Mainland to Kelowna, Kamloops, Quesnel, Prince George, and Dawson Creek in the interior.⁸⁴

As CUPE BC president O’Neill reported to zone coordinators on a conference call that night, 15,000 to 25,000 CUPE members in twenty-seven locals had walked out, with 60,000 members expected to strike on Monday, May 3.⁸⁵ However a crucial decision of CUPE also impeded a widening of the strike: zone coordinators were instructed to remove all picket lines by 3 PM on April 30, a decision that was resisted at several CUPE worksites, where members feared—correctly—that “if they took the lines down, they would not go back up again.”⁸⁶ The April 30 strike was also undermined by the absence of the BCGEU, which had experienced concessions and layoffs at the hands of the Campbell government but refused job action. Nonetheless, the militant example of April 30 forced the hand of the BC Fed, which began preparations for wider action on May 3. BC was on the brink of a province-wide general strike.

On Saturday, May 1, retrospective commemorations of International Workers’ Day were usurped by more immediate forms of working-class action. Millworkers from Campbell River, Quesnel, and Prince George continued to strike, as HEU picket lines held firm and large protest marches wound through Vancouver, Victoria, and other urban centers.⁸⁷ “I’ve never seen the kind of labor activity in many decades in this province that we’re seeing the last twenty-four hours,” BC Fed president Jim Sinclair said.⁸⁸ Ken Georgetti, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, called the retroactivity clause in Bill 37 “an affront to democracy,” and said the CLC’s BC affiliates and fifty-three local labor councils were mobilizing behind HEU.⁸⁹ Importantly, two private-sector unions, the Canadian Auto Workers and renegade IWA, declared their intention to join the May 3 strike, as did the BCGEU, BC Teachers’ Federation, Canadian Union of Postal Workers

(CUPW), Workers' Compensation Board Employees' Union, and Greater Vancouver transit workers.⁹⁰ A "Coordinated Job Action Plan," prepared by the BC Fed and leaked to the *Vancouver Sun*, revealed an escalating series of wildcat strikes, culminating in the targeting of major hotels, cruise ships, retail outlets, and other private-sector workplaces in metropolitan Vancouver.⁹¹

The government and its allied agencies responded to this working-class challenge in predictable ways. The Labor Relations Board (LRB) ordered CUPE school-support staff back to work, and prohibited picketing. Complaints were also levied against millworkers at Campbell River and Prince George. The HEU appeared in BC Supreme Court for violating Bill 37 and a LRB back-to-work order, and Judge Robert Bauman found the union guilty of contempt.⁹² "They should stop breaking the law," Campbell said in a televised address. "It is absolutely wrong for patients to be held hostage."⁹³ BC Fed officers met in emergency session with Labor Minister Bruce in an attempt to reach a settlement. The government's message—that it was "Fighting Big Labor"—concerned union leaders, particularly since internal polling suggested this resonated not only with the general public, but with their own members. When the government asked "Who Runs This Province? The Unions or the Government?" it acknowledged the potential of working-class power, but also framed the debate in ways that left labor leaders scrambling for a solution short of a province-wide strike.⁹⁴

Strategically, BC's working class was sandwiched between a labor leadership that had never intended to lead a general strike (and was therefore unprepared to do so), and a rank-and-file leadership that was feverishly agitating to pull workers out, with no plan in place. Groups such as Victoria's CSC provided determined leadership on the picketlines, but lacked a broader strategy. Neither the elected leadership nor the militant leadership that arose from the rank and file had prepared for a strike of any duration or intensity. The old dilemma of political strategy reappeared at the crucial hour. For years, organized labor had deferred political leadership to the NDP, with labor leaders serving on the party's governing bodies and subordinating rank-and-file demands for sympathetic job action to the party's electoral strategy. Union members were urged to seek redress at the ballot box rather than take action themselves by striking in support of HEU. No political vehicle existed to provide the direction necessary to sustain a successful general strike.

Confusion and lack of strategy were evident at a coordinating meeting of Victoria unions in the BCGEU hall on May 2, in which the CSC played a major role. A heated debate developed over whether the proposed May 3 strike signaled the beginning of an unlimited general strike to force the resignation of the Campbell government, or was merely intended as "strike support" for HEU. Several speakers insisted that the "HEU brothers and sisters are in the drivers' seat," that their jobs were on the line, and that Monday's action had to be considered in this context. "If they get a resolution to their dispute,

it's over," speakers argued, asking rhetorically, "What are our demands, otherwise?" As one activist later recounted:

This wasn't about toppling the government. This was about a labor dispute. . . [HEU members] were fighting to achieve specific goals. Once they had achieved those goals, in whatever form they were comfortable with, that was it.⁹⁵

Others argued emphatically that a decisive moment had arrived, that the sympathetic strike had grown into something larger than HEU. This position was voiced by rank-and-file leaders from CUPW, CUPE, and HEU. This debate highlighted the basic contradiction between those subscribing to an implicit syndicalism—embracing the strike tactic as a vehicle for political change—and those more modest in outlook and approach, supporting a general strike as a defensive measure to support HEU's bargaining demands.

On Sunday, May 2, as workers at the BC Railway walked out and union locals throughout BC prepared to strike the following morning, negotiations between the HEU, BC Fed, and provincial government continued.⁹⁶ According to one observer, "going out Friday strengthened the bargaining hand of the Fed," revealing that union members were willing to walk and intensifying the government's desire to resolve the dispute at the negotiating table.⁹⁷ Finally, on the evening of May 2, a deal was struck and approved by HEU's provincial executive by a vote of thirteen to seven, at a meeting attended by several BC Fed officers. The agreement retained the fifteen-percent wage cut, but removed the retroactivity clause, limited further contracting out to 600 FTEs, and provided an additional \$25 million in severance pay.⁹⁸ According to HEU president Fred Muzin:

We felt that it was the maximum that we were going to be able to achieve at that time and place . . . There was a great ground swell to the point where people forgot that the genesis was a bargaining dispute. Because people felt the injustice was so great, they felt that the fightback was an ability to redress all the ills of society.

HEU's decision to accept the government's offer and call off the strike without a ratification vote reflected a belief that BC labor could not sustain the kind of action necessary to force a change in government:

We would have liked to see Bill 37 eliminated. In effect, when you have a government with two opposition members, that's tantamount to overthrowing the government. Was that achievable? At the end of the day the executive decided no, it wasn't. That would have been unprecedented in Canada and we didn't think there was enough momentum to do that . . . We needed to get the government to step down and order another election which really requires, in a country where there is no precedent, sustained job action. . . So Monday would have been a party but Tuesday would have been a massive hangover. That's the challenge of leadership. Having to make really tough unpopular decisions.

Muzin says the executive was motivated to ensure HEU's survival: "We didn't want to become the sacrificial lamb for a government that was intent on making an example of HEU and destroying us as an organization."⁹⁹

In a notice advising members to "stand down," CUPE BC took credit for forcing the Campbell government "to blink."¹⁰⁰ Those who had envisioned a heroic fight between BC's working class and the neoliberal regime, however, had hoped for more than a "blink." From union offices across BC, telephone networks were activated and members informed that the next day's disruption was not required. Confusion could be detected in some circles, relief in others, as BC's working class stepped back from the brink of a general sympathetic strike.

On May 3, the anticipated shutdown did not occur. However, demonstrating the extent of organizing independent of the BC Fed and provincial labor leadership, many HEU picketlines held firm throughout the day. In Victoria, transit buses remained in the barn, BC Ferries operations were disrupted, and Quesnel experienced a sympathetic strike of 5000 workers—a majority of the town's workforce.¹⁰¹ "We're suffering here," Quesnel teachers' president Brian Kennelly said, expressing how anger at social-service cuts translated into support for HEU.¹⁰² The Quesnel strike closed virtually all public services, two sawmills, and major grocery stores.¹⁰³ Despite these examples of sympathetic job action, the May 3 solidarity strike was scattered unevenly in different communities and across different economic sectors. It lacked the mass character the proposed BC Fed action would have entailed.

The sentiment of a layer of rank-and-file workers was evident when picketlines appeared outside the Burnaby and Victoria HEU headquarters, and clerical staff refused to cross.¹⁰⁴ This represented a final act of defiance, however, rather than the stirrings of a determined challenge to the labor leadership. "For those of you who see events of the last few days as a political call to arms, please holster your weapons until the next election," the *Vancouver Sun* advised.¹⁰⁵ Business leaders called for an overhaul of collective bargaining in BC's public sector.¹⁰⁶ By May 4, the picketlines were gone. BC returned to the more orderly pattern of industrial relations where the balance of social forces favored employers rather than workers.

"My personal feeling is that we could have achieved a lot more if that support had been there or if there was a better plan in place before they took the strike on," an HEU activist laments. "It seemed to me there wasn't a plan going into it."¹⁰⁷ However one CUPE activist, who was influential in the Victoria strikes, is less pessimistic about the outcome:

We scared the shit out of the Fed. We scared the shit out of the government. We gave the members the confidence that they could actually do something. If people had been smart, they would have been patting themselves on the back afterwards, instead of pointing fingers. But everybody needs to be more radical than everyone else . . . And anything we do is never good enough.¹⁰⁸

HEU president Muzin is appreciative of the support his union received:

I think the grassroots members were out in front of their leadership and that was reflected in some of the decisions. But I think the affiliates in the Fed provided as much support as they could understanding they each have their own cultures, they each have their own histories, their leadership each have their own pressures. The support was great. Could it be more? Sure. But that will evolve.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

HEU was uniquely situated to find itself at the epicenter of the conflict that erupted in spring 2004. A fiercely independent union, consisting mainly of women, immigrants, and workers of color, HEU was empowered by its tradition of militancy and role as a defender of Medicare. The union's history and the language of its collective agreements made HEU the vehicle for a broader working-class challenge to privatization. HEU's relative distance from the mainstream of organized labor was both an asset and a weakness. Independence fueled the perception among HEU members and leaders that internal strength was essential, but also foreshadowed ambivalent solidarity in response to the strike; independence was essential to mobilize HEU members to fight against privatization, but looked increasingly like isolation as BC's labor leadership lobbied HEU leaders to call off the strike.

The ambivalent working-class response to the HEU strike—from enthusiastic support and sympathetic job action to reluctance and opposition—highlights political tensions within BC labor's ranks. As Peter McNinnis observed in his study of the making of Canada's postwar industrial relations system, formalized collective bargaining facilitated "political atrophy, which has left workers ill equipped to confront a resurgence of employers' reactionary incursions within today's 'global' economy."¹¹⁰ Social democracy, because of its orientation toward electoral success, operates within a sharply defined tactical and organizational framework that has shunned militant action and adapted slowly to neoliberalism. To achieve far-reaching objectives—and even defend existing social-democratic gains—BC labor must confront its incomplete understanding of the purposes and exercise of the general strike, and its complex relationship with the NDP.

The mobilization surrounding the HEU strike suggests the tendency toward class solidarity forms a persistent, if contested, tradition within BC's working class. In 2004, opposition to neoliberal cutbacks and privatization was channeled through the agency of the HEU strike, as workers defied collective agreements to support hospital workers and defend Medicare, a cherished Canadian institution. Community coalitions and CUPE were integral to the movement for a general strike. However the absence of a coherent strategy for the effective use of this tactic—by both elected and grassroots leaders—was labor's Achilles heal, mediating against a widening of the strike and

producing disillusionment in the strike's aftermath. The 2004 HEU strike reveals the possibilities and dangers in working-class struggles globally. It demonstrates the agency of a regional working class to mobilize against privatization, but also reveals contradictions in labor's ranks that inhibit more successful challenges to the political prescriptions of globalized capital.

NOTES

1. Neoliberalism is examined in Gary Teeple, *Globalization and the Decline of Social Reform: Into the Twenty-First Century*, Second Edition, (Aurora, 2000); Harvey Feigenbaum, Jeffrey Henig, and Chris Hamnett, *Shrinking the State: The Political Underpinnings of Privatization* (Cambridge, 1998); John Shields and B. Mitchell Evans, *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration "Reform"* (Halifax, 1998); Stephen McBride and John Shields, *Dismantling a Nation: The Transition to Corporate Rule in Canada* (Halifax, 1997); Mike Burke, Colin Mooers, and John Shields, eds., *Restructuring and Resistance: Canadian Public Policy in an Age of Global Capitalism* (Halifax, 2000). For healthcare restructuring in Canada and BC, see Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *Wasting Away: The Undermining of Canadian Healthcare* (Don Mills, 2003); Sylvia Fuller, Colleen Fuller, and Marcy Cohen, *Health Care Restructuring in BC* (Vancouver, 2003).

2. Alan Sears, "The 'Lean' State and Capitalist Restructuring: Towards a Theoretical Account," *Studies in Political Economy* 59 (1999), 91–114; Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (London, 1997).

3. See Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto, 1995).

4. David Camfield, "Neoliberalism and Working-Class Resistance in British Columbia: The Hospital Employees' Union Struggle, 2002–2004," *Labour/Le Travail* 57 (Spring 2006), 9–41.

5. BC working-class history is not, however, "exceptional" or isolated from developments in other jurisdictions. See Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class and the Writing of BC History," *BC Studies* 111 (Autumn 1996), 61–75. Union density in BC peaked at 55.4 percent in 1958. Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Historical Review* (2004).

6. Martin Robin, "British Columbia: The Company Province," in Robin, ed., *Canadian Provincial Politics: The Party Systems in the Ten Provinces*, 2nd Ed. (Scarborough, 1978), 29–60.; also Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967).

7. Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1990).

8. Ross Alfred Johnson, "No Compromise—No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia" (Ph.D. diss., UBC, 1975); Ronald Grantham, "Some Aspects of the Socialist Movement in British Columbia" (M.A. thesis, UBC, 1942); Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labor* (Kingston, 1968).

9. For racism and ethnic tensions, see Gillian Creese, "Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the 'Oriental Problem,'" *BC Studies*, 80 (Winter 1988–89), 24–51. The struggle for women's equality in organized labor is examined in Betty Griffin and Susan Lockhart, *Their Own History: Women's Contribution to the Labour Movement in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2002).

10. See, for example, Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver, 1977).

11. David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto, 1978).

12. See Peter McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950* (Toronto, 2002); Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*, 3rd Ed. (Aurora, 2003), 9–21; Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of An Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1987), 14–19.

13. "AFL and CCL Unions Combine to Oppose ICA Act Amendments," *CCF News* (Vancouver), April 22, 1948; also "Labor fights fascist curbs," *Pacific Tribune* (Vancouver),

April 23, 1948. Roly Gervin, secretary-treasurer of the Vancouver and New Westminster Trades & Labour Council (AFL), and William Mahoney, western director of the Canadian Congress of Labour (CIO), represented BC affiliates in a joint delegation to the legislature.

14. British Columbia, *Report of a Board of Reference into the British Columbia Civil Service Act* (Victoria, 1959).

15. Bruce McLean, *A Union Amongst Government Employees: A History of the BC Government Employee' Union, 1919–1979* (Victoria, 1979).

16. Jo Dunaway, *We're Your Neighbours: The Story of CUPE BC* (Vancouver, 2000); "Union Membership in Canada—2004," *Workplace Gazette* 7:3 (2005), 44. Communist influence in BC unions is explored in Jerry Lembcke and William M. Tattam, *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America* (Madeira Park, 1984); Homer Stevens and Rolf Knight, *Homer Stevens: A Life in Fishing* (Madeira Park, 1992); Howard White, *A Hard Man to Beat: The Story of Bill White, Labour Leader, Historian, Shipyard Worker, Raconteur* (Vancouver, 1983); and Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935–56* (Toronto, 1973), 111–138.

17. Frances Fox Piven, "The Decline of Labor Parties: An Overview," in Piven, ed., *Labor Parties in Postindustrial Society* (Cambridge, 1991), 1–19. The 1972–1975 NDP government is examined in Lorne John Kavic and Gary Brian Nixon, *1200 Days: A Shattered Dream: Dave Barrett and the NDP in BC 1972–75* (Coquitlam, 1978); Dave Barrett and William Miller, *Barrett: A Passionate Political Life* (Vancouver, 1995).

18. Teeple, *Globalization and the Decline of Social Reform*.

19. British Columbia, *Statement of Votes* (1983).

20. Magnusson et al., eds., *The New Reality: The Politics of Restraint in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1984); Palmer, *Solidarity*, 21–24.

21. William K. Carroll, "The Solidarity Coalition," in Magnusson et al., eds., *The New Reality*, 94–113.

22. Thom Guine, *How Operation Solidarity Became Operation Soldout* (Toronto, 1985).

23. British Columbia, *Statement of Votes* (1991); Stan Persky, *Bennett II: The Decline & Stumbling of Social Credit Government in British Columbia 1979–1983* (Vancouver, 1983) and *Fantasy Government: Bill Vander Zalm and the Future of Social Credit* (Vancouver, 1989); Magnusson et al., eds., *After Bennett: A New Politics for British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1986).

24. See Debra J. Salazar and Donald K. Alper, "Reconciling Environmentalism and the Left: Perspectives on Democracy and Social Justice in British Columbia's Environmental Movement," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2002), 527–66; "Welfare fraud report to be released soon," *Vancouver Sun* (hereafter *Sun*), January 11, 1993; "Beware," *The Peak* (Burnaby), September 16, 1996.

25. HEU Activist. Interview by authors (hereafter HEU Activist interview). Digital recording. Victoria, BC. September 28, 2005; *Hansard: Official Report of Debates of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia*, April 2, 2000.

26. William K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, "The NDP Regime in British Columbia: A Post Mortem," in Carroll and Ratner, eds., *Challenges and Perils: Social Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Halifax, 2005), 105–136; Jim Herring, *Labour, the NDP... and our Communities* (Victoria, 2003), 2–4.

27. British Columbia, *Statement of Votes* (2001).

28. "Campbell's Breach," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), January 30, 2002. Before the 2001 election, Campbell told the HEU's *Guardian* newsletter: "I am not tearing up any agreements." See "Gordon Campbell Interview: Moving to the Middle," *Guardian* 18 (November–December 2000).

29. McIntyre & Mustel Research, HEU Member Profile Survey, March 2002, as quoted in Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Destroying Pay Equity: The Effects of Privatization in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2003), 10.

30. *Ibid.*

31. "FHA turns over hospital cleaning functions to French corporation," HEU Press Release, 1 Oct. 2003; also "Union tackles hospital company," *The Record* (New Westminster), July 28, 2004.

32. "Election Fantasia," *CCF News*, March 27, 1948; "Hospital Plan for \$10 a Year," *CCF News*, March 11, 1948; Patrick L. McGeer, *Politics in Paradise* (Toronto, 1972), 99–101;

Dorothy G. Steeves, *Builders & Rebels: A Short History of the CCF in British Columbia, 1932–1961* (Vancouver, 1961), 17–18.

33. Patricia G. Webb, *The Heart of Health Care: The Story of the Hospital Employees' Union, the First 50 Years* (Vancouver, 1994), 19–26, 33–37.

34. For developments culminating in the split, see Webb, *Heart of Health Care*, 37–42.

35. *Ibid.*, 42–62.

36. *Ibid.*, 80.

37. *Ibid.*, 80–81.

38. HEU Activist interview.

39. Muzin, Fred, Interview by authors (hereafter Muzin interview), Digital recording, Burnaby, BC, September 19, 2005.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Webb, *Heart of Health Care*, 6.

42. This view is echoed in Jerry P. White, *Hospital Strike: Women, Unions, and Public Sector Conflict* (Toronto, 1990) and Judy Darcy, “The Right to Strike,” in Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto, 1983), 171–179. The right to strike is a women’s issue, Darcy argues, because those occupations most often subject to antistrike restrictions—such as healthcare and teaching—are women-dominated.

43. Hemstreet, Glenda, Interview by authors (hereafter Hemstreet interview), Digital recording, Victoria, BC, September 30, 2005.

44. Cohen, *Destroying Pay Equity*, 9.

45. *Hansard*, August 16, 2001 and January 27, 2002.

46. Gillian Crease and Veronica Strong-Boag, *Losing Ground: The Effects of Government Cutbacks on Women in British Columbia, 2001–2005* (Vancouver, 2005).

47. Muzin interview.

48. HEU Activist interview.

49. Canada, *Final Report of the Commission on the Future of Healthcare in Canada* (The Romanow Report) (2002).

50. Zoe Towle, *Report to PAR-BC Members on the Health Authorities Health Services Redesign Plans*, April 23, 2002, <http://www.par-bc.org/uploads/news/1071174415-health-authorities.redesign.may3.2002.pdf>

51. Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act, [SBC 2002] Chapter 2, http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/H/02002_01.htm; *Hansard*, January 27, 2002.

52. “Dealing with the Cuts,” *The Peak*, February 4, 2002.

53. Niknaz Kahnamoui, “After Outsourcing: Working Collaboratively to Deliver Patient Care?” (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2005), 13–15.

54. “Hospitals: 27 surgeries cut on Island,” *Times Colonist* (Victoria), April 25, 2004.

55. Hemstreet interview.

56. “Hospitals: 27 surgeries cut on Island,” *Times Colonist*, April 25, 2004. This 2003 agreement would have limited contracting out to 3,500 jobs.

57. David Beers, ed., *Liberalized: The Tye Report on British Columbia Under Gordon Campbell's Liberals* (Vancouver, 2005).

58. “Hansen warns of strike legislation,” *Times Colonist*, April 25, 2004.

59. “Lengthy surgical backlog forecast,” *Times Colonist*, April 26, 2004.

60. “Hospitals: 27 surgeries cut on Island,” *Times Colonist*, April 25, 2004.

61. HEU Activist interview.

62. *Ibid.*

63. “The Terms of Forced Return,” *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004; “HEU defies work order,” *Times Colonist*, April 29, 2004.

64. “Jobs on the line,” *Times Colonist*, April 29, 2004.

65. “MLAs worried about retroactivity,” *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004.

66. HEU Activist interview.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Text of email, April 29, 2004, in possession of authors.

69. James M. Pitsula and Ken Rasmussen, *Privatizing a Province: The New Right in Saskatchewan* (Vancouver, 1990); Yonatan Reshef and Sandra Rastin, *Unions in the Time of Revolution: Government and Restructuring in Alberta and Ontario* (Toronto, 2003).

70. BC’s three largest newspapers, the *Vancouver Sun*, *Vancouver Province*, and *Victoria Times Colonist*, were owned by Canwest Global Communications, which contributed

\$30,000 to the BC Liberals in 2001. Canwest founder I.H. Asper was former leader of the Manitoba Liberal party. David Black, publisher of eighty weekly newspapers, chaired the government-appointed BC Progress Board and won an untendered \$101,252 government contract in 2004. See "Premier's Office Offers Contract to Publisher," *Georgia Straight* (Vancouver), June 3, 2004; Elections BC, *Political Party Financial Disclosure Statements* (2001).

71. Campbell's Liberals received fifty-eight percent of the popular vote in 2001. In federal politics, BC voters gravitated toward the fiscally conservative Reform Party and Canadian Alliance, which captured forty-nine percent in 2000. British Columbia, *Statement of Votes* (2001); Elections Canada, *Thirty-Seventh General Election 2000: Official Voting Results*.

72. "IWA condemned," *Georgia Straight*, February 26, 2004.

73. Solidarity Vote ballot (2002), CUPE BC, in possession of authors.

74. "UBC Crisis Heats Up," March 23, 2004, <http://www.cupe.bc.ca/1280>. CUPE president Barry O'Neill said the strike was "now a dispute between UBC, the government and the 67,000 CUPE members in BC."

75. CUPE Activist. Interview by authors (hereafter CUPE Activist interview). Digital recording. Victoria, BC. May 20, 2005.

76. Resolution approved at CUPE BC All-Presidents' Meeting, December 15, 2003, Vancouver, in possession of authors.

77. CUPE Activist interview.

78. Ibid.

79. "Notes on CUPE BC conference call," April 29, 2004, in possession of authors. O'Neill reported that eleven locals were committed to action on April 30 and fourteen more on May 3. Eighteen locals were "not sure," while another eighteen did not respond. Two unidentified locals said "no" to the request for strike action.

80. "Labour crisis deepens," "Strike domino topples wide range of services," and "Tense standoff grips province, unions as 70,000 protest," *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004; "Pickets, Protests and Promises of More to Come," *Sun*, May 1, 2004.

81. "Tense standoff grips province, unions as 70,000 protest," *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004.

82. "Strike plans were extensive as other unions were joining HEU," *Vancouver Province* (hereafter *Province*), May 3, 2004.

83. "Hydro wildcat slows services," *Province*, May 1, 2004.

84. "HEU defies labour board, continues strike with new public service allies" and "Expect a patchwork labour situation in BC Monday," *Province*, May 1, 2004.

85. "Notes on CUPE BC Conference Call," April 30, 2004, in possession of authors; also "Around the Province," *Sun*, May 1, 2004.

86. CUPE Activist interview; see "Tense standoff grips province, unions as 70,000 protest," *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004.

87. "May Day marchers threaten major labour disruptions in BC," *Sun*, May 3, 2004; "Hansen: Illegal pickets must stand down," *Times Colonist*, May 2, 2004.

88. "'Deep Struggle,' says BC labour boss," *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004.

89. "National labour leaders back HEU," *Sun*, May 1, 2004.

90. "Teachers to honour HEU picket lines—schools would close," *Sun*, May 1, 2004; "Brace for manic Monday," *Times Colonist*, May 2, 2004.

91. "Coordinated Job Action Plan," reprinted in "A blueprint for havoc," *Sun*, May 1, 2004.

92. "Hated retroactivity clause dumped," *Times Colonist*, May 3, 2004; "Talks resume to settle HEU dispute," *Sun*, May 3, 2004.

93. "'Deep Struggle,' says BC labour boss," *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004.

94. "This was the argument that was going to kill the general strike," a participant on a May 1 CUPE conference call suggests. CUPE Activist interview; also "'Deep Struggle,' says BC labour boss," *Times Colonist*, May 1, 2004; "Voices of reason struggle against a darker tune," *Sun*, May 1, 2004.

95. CUPE Activist interview.

96. "BC may avert massive labour shutdown," *Sun*, May 3, 2004.

97. CUPE Activist interview.

98. "Deal leaves strikers furious, but union leaders urge return to work," *Times Colonist*, May 3, 2004.

99. Muzin interview.

100. "Privatization curbed but BC health care workers still hit hard," CUPE Press Release, May 3, 2004, http://www.cupe.ca/www/media/health_care_privatiz

101. "Hospital workers feel betrayed" and "Health workers feel 'sold out' by their union leaders," *Sun*, May 4, 2004; "Hospitals rush to recover," *Times Colonist*, May 4, 2004.
102. "Hospital workers feel betrayed," *Sun*, May 4, 2004.
103. Ibid.
104. "Some hospital workers remain defiant," *CBC news online*, May 3, 2004, http://www.cbc.ca/bc/story/print/bc_heu20040503; "Hospital workers feel betrayed," *Sun*, May 4, 2004.
105. "It's time to cool down and focus on the sick," *Sun*, May 4, 2004.
106. "Find new ways to resolve disputes: business leaders," *Times Colonist*, May 3, 2004.
107. HEU Activist interview.
108. CUPE Activist interview.
109. Muzin interview. At HEU's next regular convention, held in Burnaby in October 2004, fifty delegates questioned the provincial executive's decision to call off the strike. Despite the tense debate, Muzin was re-elected president. Chris Allnutt, secretary-business manager and the union's lead negotiator, resigned prior to the convention. See "Sparks fly at HEU convention," *People's Voice* (Vancouver), November 1–15, 2004.
110. McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation*, 192–93.