

# THE CAPITALIST WANK-OFF

# EXPO 86

The 1986 World's Fair celebrating the marvels of technology and the progress of capitalism has come to British Columbia—the Canadian province with the highest unemployment rate and most dismal and regressive record of social spending and labour legislation. For a couple of years now Expo has been "the only game in town" for this economically depressed region, not only for the media and labour, but for the left as well. But while the media have agreed to uncritically boost Expo, and labour to ignore the bigger issues involved, the left is at times sharply divided over how to approach the fair and what it represents.

Many people outside BC, even those who fully criticize the government here, fall short of really understanding the nature of Expo. You almost have to live here to see how closely linked it is to the political party that spawned it. It's propaganda not only through its advertising campaigns and corporate links but in almost every aspect of its planning and management.

British Columbia is a hinterland in a country already dominated by the United States. When the world trade in lumber and minerals shifted and declined in the early 1980s, BC's resource-based economy essentially collapsed. Donation-funded "food banks" feed 70,000 a month out of a population of three million, and are found not only in traditionally poverty-stricken areas like downtown Vancouver, but in small logging and fishing towns throughout the province. The 14 per cent unemployment rate climbs to 21 per cent for youth under 25, and the minimum wage is the lowest in the country.

The provincial government, however, claims it knows the way to economic recovery. The Social Credit party has held power in BC almost continuously since 1952. Originally a right-wing, pseudo-populist party with a nifty monetary policy, the Socreds have charged into the Eighties re-armed with the ideology of Reaganite 'restraint', mega-project spending and centralization of government power, while their professed free-enterprise support goes to tax breaks for foreign capital.

None of this has been successful in pulling BC out of the hole, but wait—it's all part of a plan, and Expo 86 is the main component. The idea is to lure American and Pacific Rim capital to Vancouver, preferably in the form of high-tech manufacturing. To do this the BC government must provide huge tax concessions and drive down wages—and what better way than union busting, creating special 'economic development zones' exempt from labour laws, and beating the workers and everyone else numb with massive public sector layoffs and social service and education cuts.

The other option for the province is voting for the pro-labour leftish New Democratic Party in the upcoming election. But in BC's polarized political scene, economic questions take precedence. The Socreds' 'restraint', and their new concern for "cooperation between business and labour"—which in effect means unions not striking—to many people seems better than the NDP's generic program of social spending and broad promises of job creation.

Expo is a re-election strategy. The rhetoric surrounding it has been almost entirely regional and trade-oriented. "It will be good for BC, it will put Vancouver on the map, attract investment, create jobs for the next 20 years..." But we also can't forget just who it was who brought us this wonderful circus.

The new provincial logo, highly identified with the Socreds, is plastered over everything, including the new \$700 million transit system, and Premier Bill Bennett has made sure he and his friends are the most visible Expo-boosters in town.

They are certainly the most enthusiastic, and no wonder. The city of Vancouver had little or no input into many decisions around the fair, which is quite consistent with the Socreds' hostility to local autonomy. When city council tried to get the province to pass laws protecting poor and elderly residents of downtown 'skid road' hotels from being evicted to make way for tourists, they were refused. Free enterprise must have its way—and small business people like hotel owners make up a significant portion of the grassroots Socred vote. The strained relations between Vancouver and the provincial government were made public when the city's social democrat mayor was not even invited to the official Expo bash for Prince Charles and Lady Di.

come to Expo, make it a success, and then vote against the Socreds in the upcoming election. After all, who wants to be held responsible for the fair's failure by having a "negative attitude?" Certainly not the NDP, who have a fair chance of taking this election.

Many people in the left aren't going to Expo on principle, even if they could afford a ticket. But even among these Expo-bashers there's disagreement over whether it's okay to work there—not so much in shit jobs like frying burgers, which may be excusable in a province with a 14 per cent unemployment rate—but particularly in the cultural sector.

The role and responsibility of cultural producers has probably created the biggest rift in the more radical left. Should consciously political left wing performers like American folkie Pete Seeger or British progressive theatre group Test Department bring their message into this kind of context? Some people say no.

But a lot of other radicals waffle on this one, particularly if the performer is marginal.



Expo has been a highly centralized and secretive project from day one, with management and financial decisions kept in the rarefied ranks of the Expo Corporation, the Social Credit party and their hand-picked group of corporate consultants. Expo, a public corporation, has yet to open its accounts to public scrutiny.

Expo is not just the capitalists having their party, not for those of us who live here. Every dollar we see put into Expo is a dollar taken directly from education and social services, and every time a politician says they are opening BC up for business, we know it's at the expense of organized labour and a living wage. When we see the disruption Expo has caused in our back yards, and the money that's been sunk into it and other money-losing mega-projects around the province, we know it's an assault on communities and local self-sufficiency. By extension, it's an assault on all the things that raise our spirits a bit when they happen, from workers' cooperatives to community-run daycare. Expo has taken away from its 'host city' to provide a party for tourists and a monument to the government.

So how do you oppose a project that came bulldozing through with no input allowed? Well, labour and the mainstream left are keeping quiet. The unions are busy fighting wage rollbacks and major concessions, while the NDP's final word was that people should

lized. "Political performers really need the money," is one line. Well, okay, but we all know there's limits. Seeger wouldn't play a Republican convention or a Tory fundraiser, which brings us back to the nature of Expo and its connection to the Social Credit party. By and large, people outside BC either don't understand it, or choose to underplay its importance.

"If the bourgeoisie builds a stage, one should stand on it," is what the man responsible for bringing so many political performers to Expo's 'Folklife' Pavilion says. But there's a difference between taking the stage and being offered a small corner of it so the bourgeoisie can claim all subcultures and points of view are represented. There is even a festival of independent recording artists that has snapped up some bands who, if not strictly political, have played benefits and even anti-Expo gigs in the past. Playing Expo has become a 'personal' decision, and no-one really wants to talk about the politics of it.

Another argument is that political performers can bring their message to tourists who have never been exposed to such material before. Is the content mediated by the context? Or is it, in the face of such a dearth of organized protest, the best we can hope for? And would these performers have gone on even in the face of vocal and cohesive public protest?

Even this debate, however, isn't really happening in the Vancouver community. Of course none of us like Expo, but beyond that there's a lot of unspoken disagreement, and it's helped stall protest and debate. If even progressive groups can't come to consensus, let alone the radical community or the mainstream left, there's not much hope of organizing a boycott or speaking out. The few groups hoping to do protests at the gates or get press coverage for anti-Expo sentiments have dissolved or are largely invisible. The biggest public outcry so far has been over the evictions of the poor from downtown hotels, but, while it's alerted people to the 'plight of the homeless,' the issue has been kept carefully away from Expo itself.

Another argument is that public protest could lead to the 'failure of Expo', thus hurting the economy and the very people we profess to be concerned about. If the point of Expo really was to make money and get the province out of debt, this might make sense. But Expo officials have already budgeted a 3 to 400 million dollar deficit. And the poor will be hit no matter how Expo does, because cutbacks and deficits are an integral part of Social Credit policy, not a temporary side effect.

So why was there so little protest? Well, besides the lack of wholehearted support from the radicals and the neutral stance of

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