

## David Spaner, *Solidarity: Canada's Unknown Revolution of 1983* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2021)

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Volume 90, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094784ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0012>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Magnusson, W. (2022). Review of [David Spaner, *Solidarity: Canada's Unknown Revolution of 1983* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2021)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 90, 293–294. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0012>

## REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

**David Spaner, *Solidarity: Canada's Unknown Revolution of 1983* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2021)**

I APPROACHED THIS book with a great feeling of nostalgia. Like the author, I was deeply affected by the Solidarity movement – named, as Spaner says, after the more famous uprising in Poland three years before – which brought British Columbia to the verge of a general strike in 1983. Outside BC, there was the scant appreciation of the significance of what was going on here: struggles that foreshadowed what was to happen in Ontario and elsewhere a decade later. When militants in Ontario got into a fuss about the Harris government, elected in 1995, I had a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

Spaner is a journalist, and his book has the virtues and defects of that craft. It does not offer the sort of analysis an academic would like, but it is based on extensive interviews with key participants, who opened up to him about many things. The book is lively, engaging, and highly informative about what was going on behind the scenes of the great rallies, marches, and protests that involved tens of thousands of British Columbians in more militant actions than they had ever contemplated. Much of the leadership and most of the funding came from the labour movement, which was then much stronger than it is now. It is hard to imagine a labour-led protest movement having such powerful effects in 2023.

Spaner seems to have interviewed all the cool kids of the time. Never having

been a cool kid myself, I got a bit impatient with account after account of how different people of my generation – many of whom seem to have grown up in the US – left the rest of us behind and got into various combinations of sex, drugs, rock 'n roll, and political activism. I am not sure how people's reactions to Elvis or the Beatles help us understand what happened in 1983, but Spaner evidently has a different view. His account is Vancouver-centric, unfortunately; one gets little sense of what was going on in the rest of the province – even other parts of the Lower Mainland – at the time. The cool kids did not live in the suburbs or places like Kelowna, Nanaimo, and Victoria, let alone Smithers or Fort St. John.

Spaner was a participant-observer at the time, and his account reflects the views of people like him – activists of a particular generation in Vancouver. Although it seemed like there might be a general strike in November of 1983, that never happened because the leadership of the BC Federation of Labour balked at going that far. Spaner well captures the feelings of militants who felt that they had been betrayed by labour leaders who pretended to be committed to a broader political struggle, but in the end, only wanted to do what they thought was best for their unions. Although I sympathized with those feelings at the time, now I would like to know more about what people on the other side were thinking, and what debates they were having among themselves. Forty years on, you would think that at least some of the

people concerned would open up to a good interviewer. If Spaner tried to get them to talk, there is no evidence of that in this book. He evidently wanted to tell the story from the point of view of left activists, and he did that reasonably well. If you want to know what those people were thinking and doing at the time, this is a good source.

As for other questions, you will not find the answers here. For me, one of the puzzling things is why the newly re-elected Social Credit government decided to bring everything in its radical program forward at the same time. The package of twenty-six bills that the government introduced in July 1983 managed to engage human rights activists, anti-poverty campaigners, environmentalists, and a host of others while posing a fundamental threat to organized labour. So all the government's usual opponents were attacked at once. The result was that people who previously had little to do with one another – or even were seriously at odds – came together in a common campaign that was quite threatening to the government. Did the government's leaders not anticipate that, or were they hoping to trick the opposition into a struggle they were bound to lose? A more cautious approach, followed by most governments on the right, has been to focus on one thing at a time and avoid getting everyone riled up at the same time.

One of the complaints about the July legislative package is that it had not been foreshadowed in the legislative campaign just two months before. What Spaner and his friends missed in the subsequent debates on the left – but which the politicians of the NDP well understood – is that, despite this, the Socreds would have been re-elected with an even bigger majority had they been forced by a general strike to call a snap election. The Socreds knew this too, which perhaps accounts for their

lack of caution. It is one thing to get your people out onto the streets waving banners; it is another thing to get people who wouldn't vote for you before to do so now in support of the protesters. The Socreds were confident that their traditional supporters would stick with them. The electorate can be surprisingly forgiving of politicians who promise one thing and do another: it all depends on what the alternatives are, and in BC the majority of voters have generally been unwilling to entrust the NDP with governmental authority. (The present situation is anomalous in that regard.) The politicians in the NDP – and the labour movement – have always understood that they are fighting an uphill battle. Whether circumstances could change is an open question. In retrospect, it seems clear that BC was not as ready for fundamental change in 1983 as many members of the Solidarity Coalition hoped.

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**Joan Sangster, *Demanding Equality: One Hundred Years of Canadian Feminism* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020)**

THERE ARE FEW, if any, historians better placed than Joan Sangster to write a history of a century of feminism in Canada. The author of numerous books on women, work, protest, progressive politics and, most recently, of the overview of women's fight for the vote in Canada, published in the multi-volume UBC Press series entitled "Women's Suffrage and the Struggle for Democracy," Sangster has produced innovative scholarship in the field of women's and gender history for over thirty years.

The book under review here is a thematic synthesis consisting of ten chapters, framed by an introduction and a