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### Résumé de l'article

Grace à l'étude approfondie des organisations et des militants syndicaux dans la région métropolitaine de Vancouver, cet article offre une critique à deux volets de la thèse selon laquelle des «nouveaux mouvements sociaux» remplacent le mouvement ouvrier en tant que principaux agents collectifs de changement dans les sociétés post-modernes. Dans la première section, nous résumons brièvement les revendications de la nouvelle théorie des mouvements sociaux et indiquons quelques unes des difficultés analytiques qu'entraînent une nette distinction entre «vieux» syndicats et «nouveaux» mouvements sociaux. Nous présentons alors des études comparatives de deux organisations ouvrières actives dans le Lower Mainland, suivies de trouvailles provenant d'interviews avec des militants de ces groupes, et de comparaisons entre les orientations politiques de militants syndicaux et celles de militants de nouveaux mouvements sociaux. Nous remarquons l'existence d'un mouvement ouvrier de plus en plus ouvert aux luttes populaires extérieures à son d'intérêt immédiat, sensible aux besoins de clientèles diverses et marginalisées, tactiquement prêt sinon psychologiquement prédisposé à céder un rôle dirigeant dans toute coalition du genre, et capable de saisir les liens entre le militantisme social et les activités quotidiennes. Le futur du mouvement ouvrier dépend largement dans la réalisation de ces sensibilités politiques à travers une solidarité croissante avec d'autres mouvements progressistes — dont le propre futur est lui-même déterminé par les perspectives du mouvement ouvrier.

# Old Unions and New Social Movements

William K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner

## *Introduction*

IN THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE of recent years, unions have often been interpreted as social organizations bereft of transformative potential. In a stream of critical scholarship running at least from Marcuse through Gorz to contemporary meditations on "new social movements," trade unionism has been depicted as an institutionalized practice of organized capitalism, integrated into the legally-sanctioned apparatuses of industrial relations, and capable of lending at most a social-democratic inflection to the political life of the state.

From such a vantage point, unions appear as a reactionary foil to the more dynamic and contemporary social movements that revolve around the various politics of identity and of everyday life. Within this discourse, as Alan Scott points out, qualitative differences are traced between the labour movement and new social movements as to social location, aims, organizational form and medium of action.<sup>1</sup> Movements such as environmentalism, gay/lesbian liberation and feminism are said to occupy the terrain of civil society, in contrast to the increasingly state-centric strategies of labour. New social movements, it is claimed, embrace a politics of everyday life that prioritizes changes in lifestyle and values in the defence of civil society. Their "self-limiting radicalism"<sup>2</sup> rejects the modernist project of large-scale transformation through unified agency in favour of a concern for autonomy, both of individuals, who are involved in multitudinous projects of self-reconstruction, and of movements themselves, which construct their agendas "without subordinating their demands to other external priorities."<sup>3</sup> The organizational corollary of these distinctive aims is an emphasis on informal networking at the

<sup>1</sup> Alan Scott, *Ideology and the New Social Movements* (London 1990), 18-9.

<sup>2</sup> Jean L. Cohen, "Strategy or identity: New theoretical paradigms and contemporary social movements," *Social Research*, 52, 4 (1985), 664.

<sup>3</sup> Scott, *Ideology*, 20; Paul Patton, "Marxism and beyond: Strategies of reterritorialization," in Cary Nelson and Laurence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago 1988).

William K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, "Old Unions and New Social Movements," *Labour/Le Travail*, 35 (Spring 1995), pp. 195-221.

grassroots which in turn enables new social movements to operate outside of institutionalized channels by taking direct action around a limited range of issues and by fashioning cultural innovations that challenge the codes through which subjectivity is constructed.<sup>4</sup>

On all these points, unions are characteristically viewed as limited to an older style of political contention. Their aims are framed in terms of the political *integration and economic rights of workers* — the pursuit of full social and economic citizenship — objectives that may be given a radical or a reformist accent but which in either case are silent on issues such as local autonomy and micro-politics. Their modes of organization are instrumentally adapted to more abstract aims, and hence take on formal, hierarchical and bureaucratic dimensions. Conversely, their actions place an emphasis upon a narrowly-defined political mobilization, as in supporting a social-democratic party.

Yet as Scott himself points out, these dualisms — through which “new social movements” are constituted as an analytic category — often turn out to be misleading when applied to those very movements. Often times, such movements address the state and make citizenship claims (as with the civil rights movement); they may adopt formal-organizational structures and even participate directly in electoral politics (as with the Greens); and they may also embrace the politics of cross-movement coalition formation in the service of structural transformation (as with the rearticulation of “peace” as a transcendence of structural violence and social injustice in its various manifestations). Indeed, Barry Adam has recently argued that new social movements have two faces. In addition to the ‘cultural nationalism’ that valorizes particularistic identity politics and that is highlighted in NSM theory, there is a socialist face of new social movement mobilization. The latter “includes a great many participants who understand their *praxis* within a comprehensive worldview which recognizes and supports subordinated people wherever they exist.”<sup>5</sup>

If the dualisms that analytically constitute new social movements obscure as much as they reveal, might it be the case that these same distinctions frame an account of unions that underestimates the extent to which trade unionism has from its inception practised a politics of collective identity formation, and the extent to which the contemporary labour movement is reconstructing its identity and re-inventing its project, drawing in part upon the sensibilities of feminist and other new social movements?<sup>6</sup>

There are good theoretical and empirical reasons to support this claim, particularly in the context of contemporary Canada. Theoretically, Offe and Wiesen-

<sup>4</sup>Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present* (Philadelphia 1989).

<sup>5</sup>Barry Adam, “Postmarxism and the new social movements,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 30 (1993), 330.

<sup>6</sup>Stanley Aronowitz, *The Politics of Identity: Class, Culture, Social Movements* (New York 1992).

that have shown that the subject position of the wage-worker supports two contradictory self-concepts: that of market participant and that of wage labourer, which together render the construction of working-class collective identity permanently problematic, as the worker is continuously faced with dilemmas between individualistic and collective improvement of one's condition, between economic and political conceptions of one's interest, between the identities of consumer and producer, etc.<sup>7</sup> In view of this ambiguity, and of the equally compelling fact that a unions' power rests ultimately upon the willingness of members to act collectively, labour movement mobilization requires a "dialogical" logic of collective identity-formation through practices of internal democracy. Although unions may adopt opportunistic strategies that substitute bureaucratic practices and external guarantees of survival for the dialogical cultivation of members' willingness to act, such opportunism incurs long-term costs of demobilization and the weakening of collective identity. Continued survival then requires reactivation at the grassroots.

Empirically, a large body of historical literature supports E.P. Thompson's famous claim that "the working class made itself as much as it was made"<sup>8</sup> and that labour movements have continued to pursue a cultural politics of collective identity formation.<sup>9</sup> North American trade unionists often sing "Solidarity Forever," for instance, at the end of significant union meetings to express their belief in the message that "collective solidarity is the basis on which the labour movement can maintain a distinctive identity, culture and power in a society dominated by private capital, individual competitiveness and mass alienation."<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, the development of bureaucratic forms of business unionism or state-centred corporatism during the "golden age" of post-war democratic capitalism comprises an important chapter of this narrative. But even these ideological divisions have faded since the 1970s, as the globalized exigencies of falling corporate profits and state fiscal crises have removed whatever "external guarantees of survival" the labour movement may have negotiated in earlier times. As John Calvert has commented, writing in a Canadian context,

Governments and private employers have shown themselves increasingly willing to extinguish the rights of workers and unions. Under such conditions, to remain marginal institutions whose appeal is restricted to a narrow conception of bargaining is to risk being

<sup>7</sup>Claus Offe, and Helmut Wiewenthal, "Two logics of collective action: Theoretical notes on social class and organizational form," *Political Power and Social Theory*, 1 (1980), 92-3.

<sup>8</sup>E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1966), 194.

<sup>9</sup>Aldon D. Morris, "Political consciousness and collective action," in Morris and Carol M. Mueller, eds., *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven 1992). See also, Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992).

<sup>10</sup>Rosemary Warskett, "Defining who we are: Solidarity and diversity in the Ontario labour movement," in Colin Leys and Marguerite Mendell, eds., *Culture and Social Change* (Montréal 1992), 109.

gradually pushed out of existence. Unions will have to change into different kinds of organizations if they are to survive at all.<sup>11</sup>

The challenges and stakes for labour are indeed enormous. Murray has delineated six structural changes that oblige unions to reconstruct their collective identities: (1) the restructuring and relocation of capital on a global scale, (2) postfordist flexibilizing shifts in corporate strategy and organization, (3) the increasing bifurcation of the external labour market into established-worker and marginalized categories, (4) the entry of "new" groups in the labour market such as women and visible minorities and departure of other groups such as older workers, (5) the state's embrace of neoliberalism, and (6) the commodification of everyday life which has spurred both rampant consumerism and critical concerns about health, environmental and community issues. These changes confront the labour movement with "questions about its representativeness and, ultimately, its legitimacy."<sup>12</sup>

What is crucial in terms of the response to these changes is the question of who is included and who is excluded when working-class solidarity is invoked. Warskett's analysis of the labour movement in Ontario suggests that,

recent labour market changes, together with the rise of certain popular movements, have provided openings for marginalized identities within the working class to make their particular experience and needs felt. Acting on the basis of their experience, women and minority groups have made existing divisions visible. They bring to the forefront their subordination within the labour movement and the working class, challenging the ways in which union identity and solidarity have been constructed in the past.<sup>13</sup>

An optimistic reading of this infusion of new-movement sensibilities is that the labour movement is in the process of re-inventing itself along more politically inclusive lines, as in the "social unionism" that has been vigorously endorsed by the leadership of the Canadian Labour Congress.<sup>14</sup> Warskett seems to share this optimism about labour's prospects. She concludes: "The democratic processes that have become increasingly crucial for Ontario unionism offer the possibility of important new connections between the unions and other popular and progressive political movements, because it is now necessary to construct a union solidarity

<sup>11</sup>John Calvert, "Uncharted waters: The labour movement's dilemma in developing a new role beyond the bargaining system," in R. Argue, et al., eds., *Working People and Hard Times* (Toronto 1987), 312.

<sup>12</sup>See Gregor Murray, "Union culture and organizational change in Ontario and Quebec," in Colin Leys and Marguerite Mendell, eds., *Culture and Social Change* (Montréal 1992), 47.

<sup>13</sup>Warskett, "Defining who we are," 110.

<sup>14</sup>Bob White, "An agenda for working people," inaugural speech as President of the Canadian Labour Congress, Abridged in *The Tribune*, 22 June 1992, 4-5.

that is critical and democratic in nature, that continually questions and pushes back the boundaries between the workplace, society and politics."<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Peter Bleyer's study of the labour-sponsored Action Canada Network (ACN) notes that the ACN's attempts to constitute a new democratic practice that respects difference but understands the importance of a struggle-based unity "has opened the way to a gradual reconstruction of the political identities of participants and to the construction of a new collective identification around which any new 'historical bloc' must be built."<sup>16</sup> By implication, Bleyer cautions against any rigid distinction between old and new movements and affirms that the trajectory of the ACN "points to the crucial place of an activist labour movement in any potentially transformative political project."<sup>17</sup>

Yet, just as many counter-examples could probably be cited to illustrate labour's difficulties in breaking out of ossified practices and identities, whether in the heat of political crises that test its commitment to a social agenda or in more routinized circumstances.<sup>18</sup> A particularly telling example — where the clash of unreconstructed identities seems practically inevitable — is that of the strained relations between labour and environmentalism. In the British Columbia forestry sector, for instance, large corporations have funded an anti-environmental opposition whose leading spokesperson, Jack Munro, only recently retired as president of the International Woodworkers of America (Canada).<sup>19</sup> But the problem is hardly a matter of labour's narrowness in the face of environmentalists' wider vision: many environmentalists show little sensitivity to the class biases of mere preservationism and to the need for a coherent strategy of "ecological conversion."<sup>20</sup> In this instance as in others, the challenge is not to replace old collective

<sup>15</sup>Warskett, "Defining who we are," 122.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Bleyer, "Coalitions of social movements as agencies for social change: The Action Canada Network," in W.K. Carroll, ed., *Organizing Dissent* (Toronto 1992), 115.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>18</sup>See Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition* (Vancouver 1987); W.K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, "Social Democracy, Neo-Conservatism and Hegemonic Crisis in British Columbia," *Critical Sociology* 16, 1 (1989), 29-53.

<sup>19</sup>Of course, as economic security comes increasingly under attack, the natural reaction of blue-collar leaders is to circle the wagons. Organized labour's apprehension about identifying with new social movements is the fear that once single-issue movements achieved their objective, they would disappear. As Munro stated in a characteristic mixture of reality and braggadocio, "But the IWA and I have survived. And today we're a really respected organization because of the action we took (referring to the Kelowna Accord that stopped the Solidarity Coalition). And what about all the hotshots who were going to set the world on fire? Well, they aren't here anymore. But I am." Jack Munro and Jan O'Hara, *Union Jack: Labour Leader Jack Munro* (Vancouver 1988), 17.

<sup>20</sup>On the concept of ecological conversion, see Foster whose comments on the consequences of "environmentalism without class" in the US Pacific Northwest are illuminating: "It is surely inadequate to say that environmentalists are not costing workers their jobs when these jobs are being threatened as a result of environmentalist actions, with environmentalists

actors with new ones, but to move beyond narrow political conceptions on the part of both labour and NSMs; thus it is not merely a question of labour's willingness to form coalitions with popular movements and *vice versa*, but of the *terms* under which such articulation might occur, and *whose* voices are hegemonic within this articulatory process.<sup>21</sup>

The literature reviewed above is suggestive of serious anomalies on both sides of the discursive divide between old unions and new social movements. If, as Adam holds, there are a considerable number of socialists among NSM activists, it is also the case that the ranks of the labour movement include a substantial number of feminists and other NSM activists. If, in practice, the movements refuse to respect the distinction between "old" and "new," perhaps the pronouncements of adieu to the working class and of the "end of politics" in the sense of radical transformation are also misleading. Perhaps, then, Gramsci's vision of counter-hegemony, of an organic alliance of class and popular forces for change, is not a relic of a bygone era, but a real though elusive prospect. In this paper we explore some of the possibilities by drawing on a series of in-depth interviews conducted recently with 30 labour movement activists in Vancouver.

Our analysis of these interview protocols is framed by three questions which bear directly upon labour's capacity to re-define its project by adopting some of the sensibilities characteristically attributed to the new social movements:

1. To what extent and in what ways have labour activists incorporated a "politics of difference" into their discourses and identities that goes beyond traditional homogeneous definitions of solidarity which, in practice, have reinforced the gendered, racial and productivist hegemonies of organized labour?
2. To what extent and on what terms do labour activists embrace a coalition politics that could have counter-hegemonic ramifications?
3. Do labour activists valorize a cultural politics — a "politics of everyday life" — or do they conceptualize politics in more traditional, instrumental and state-centred ways?

On each of these questions we make two sets of comparisons that are meant to foreground political differences within the labour movement. In view of the increasingly important role feminism has played as a political current within the labour movement, we compare 14 women respondents with 16 men. From the same sample of 30 respondents we also compare the protocols of 15 activists in the BC

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doing very little directly to aid the workers caught in this situation.... Nor should one be overly hasty to condemn forest product workers, the majority of whom believe in promoting a sustainable relation to the forest at some level, for adhering to destructive attitudes toward the natural world." John Bellamy Foster, "The limits of environmentalism without class: Lessons from the ancient forest struggle in the Pacific Northwest," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 4, 1 (1993), 30.

<sup>21</sup>Laurie Adkin, "Counter-hegemony and environmental politics in Canada," in Carroll, ed., *Organizing Dissent*, 85.

Federation of Labour (BCFed) with 15 activists in the Vancouver and District Labour Council (VDLC). As sites of pan-union activism, these are the key labour movement organizations in the Vancouver area. This is not to say that the two organizations are by any means interchangeable, or even harmoniously in tune with each other. Indeed, their distinctive histories, their niches within the movement overall, and their present political orientations reflect longstanding and multifaceted tensions between these labour organizations. Part of our project here is to consider how these tensions problematize the division between "old" and "new" as applied to entire social movements.

### *BCFed AND VDLC*<sup>22</sup>

THE BC FEDERATION OF LABOUR and the Vancouver District Labour Council are two highly important regional labour organizations whose history, evolution, and political impact illustrate the tensions and collaborative potential between unionized labour and the new social movements, and underscore the dilemmas facing the contemporary labour movements during the current period of economic restructuring. The British Columbia Federation of Labour, otherwise referred to as the BCFed, is a provincial organization that represents some 900 unions and 57 other labour organizations or councils that are affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). It is a federation that organizes and coordinates the activities of its affiliates at a provincial level. As its constitution indicates, one of the Federation's goals is to support the CLC and to "generally advance the economic and social welfare of workers of British Columbia."<sup>23</sup> It is not only concerned with organizing labour at a provincial level and advancing its economic position in the province, but also seeks "social justice." To give some idea of its varied activities, the Federation supports local labour councils, helps to organize unorganized workers, assists striking workers, coordinates the activities of different unions, offers resources for collective bargaining, promotes education of the labour movement, encourages the sale of union-made goods, organizes boycott lists, and addresses itself to provincial legislation that affects the lives of the 275,000 workers it represents.

The Federation's constituency has changed in a number of ways during the course of its history. For instance, the number of women it represents has increased

<sup>22</sup>The following account is based on comparative case studies of the VDLC and BCFed. Each case study involved oral-history interviews with four long-serving activists and an extensive examination of archives and documents kept by the organization. In addition to the review of organizational documents (including study of minutes of meetings from the 1950s to the present) and oral histories, follow-up interviews of organization leaders were conducted in April 1994. We wish to thank George Pavlich for his assistance in developing the case studies of the two labour organizations, and Donna Vogel, Barbara Serafim, Jordie Allen-Newman and Peter MacDougall for assistance in the coding and analysis of interview data.

<sup>23</sup>BCFed, *Constitution* [amended as of November 1991], (Vancouver 1991).



dramatically — in 1966, women made up only 12 per cent of the Federation's total membership, whereas they now comprise 38 per cent. As a result, the concerns of working women have been placed more prominently on the organization's agenda. In addition, there has been a proportionate decline in the number of workers represented in the trade/industrial sector of the economy, and a proportionate increase in those who are part of the public/service sector. In particular, the BC Government Employee's Union and the Hospital Employee's Union are now influential players within the overall structure. Despite certain building trades withdrawing from the BCFed in the 1980s, the BCFed remains a large labour organization whose growth patterns have maintained an upward trend since it was established in its present form in 1956.<sup>24</sup>

Since the BCFed is a provincial organization, mandated to deal with provincial labour legislation, its interactions with the provincial government are necessarily frequent. At present, it enjoys a close relationship with the New Democratic government that is characterized by a certain 'integration of roles' (i.e., the government consults, both formally and informally with the Federation's leadership on a range of issues which, in turn, takes heed of government concerns and promotes the New Democratic Party [NDP] among its membership). Critics wary of this association argue that while good relations with government are useful to labour, Federation goals should not be subordinated to those of any political party.

The Vancouver and District Labour Council (VDLC) was so named in 1957 when the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council formally merged with what had been its local rival, the Vancouver Labour Council. (The latter group had adopted a more radical stance on such issues as compulsory conscription and racism.) As may be seen from the principles laid out in its constitution, the aims of the VDLC are diverse, ranging from a concern with worker safety, to ensuring that the labour movement remains democratic and incorruptible, to promoting international "peace and freedom."<sup>25</sup> In general, however, and somewhat like the BCFed, the organization sees its role as that of supporting "the principles and policies of the Canadian Labour Congress," promoting the interests of its affiliates, and steadily advancing the economic and social welfare of workers.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, it is a local umbrella organization (with 105 affiliates representing about 50,000 workers in the Greater Vancouver Area) which seeks to nurture solidarity between unions at a

<sup>24</sup>The British Columbia profile on unionization rates parallels the Canada-wide picture and contrasts markedly with the decline in union membership in the US since 1983. Some decrease in unionization has occurred in the Canadian private sector, but the public sector growth in union membership has been appreciable. See John Anderson, *Trade, Technology and Unions: The Theory and Practice of Free Trade and its Implications for Unions* (Toronto 1993), 23-4.

<sup>25</sup>Vancouver and District Labour Council, *Constitution and By-Laws of the Vancouver and District Labour Council*, 1989b, 3-5.

<sup>26</sup>Vancouver and District Labour Council, *100th Anniversary: Vancouver and District Labour Council, (1889-1989)* (Vancouver 1989), 3.

municipal level, serving as an intermediary between the national Canadian Labour Congress and local unions with ties to the BCFed. Concretely, the VDLC provides a place for union representatives to meet on a regular basis, and provides its affiliates with information sessions on a wide range of issues, including worker safety, labour legislation that might affect affiliates, labour disputes, upcoming rallies, protests, demonstrations, and international labour struggles. The VDLC also tries to build coalitions between 'like-minded' progressive groups and to coordinate the activities of labour and community groups.

During one extended period in its development as an organization (from the 1920s to the 1960s), the VDLC kindled close ties with the Communist Party — a move that was not favoured by all affiliates and which brought a cleavage between the political 'left' and 'right' into sharp focus, eventually leading to the establishment of the New Westminister Council, with some of the less progressive unions leaving the Vancouver branch. Despite a weakening of the Communist Party in recent years (long-term members of the VDLC report that the "communist thing" died in the 1960s and 1970s, and has been a non-issue in the VDLC since then), traces of a left-right political split are still apparent, as, for example, in the IWA defection to the New Westminister District Council three years ago, and the instruction from the leadership of the BC Government Employees Union in the early 1980s that its members join the New Westminister Council rather than the VDLC, which was less constrained by the political authority of the CLC and the BCFed. Notwithstanding these internal political struggles, the VDLC sees itself more modestly as a democratic organization which strives to take progressive and practical stances on a range of local, national, and international issues of concern to labour in the province.

Concerning its relationship to the BCFed, the VDLC is represented in the Federation at both a Convention and Executive Board level; however, the 'sibling' rivalry between these two CLC affiliates is noticeable and has its own history.<sup>27</sup> In general, the VDLC views itself as more 'progressive' — politically 'left' — than the BCFed, and tries to serve as the Federation's 'social conscience', as shown, for example, in the recent efforts of the VDLC to push the BCFed to support the ACN, a broad-based coalition against neo-conservatism. Critics of the VDLC argue that it is unable to match its rhetoric with concerted action, especially since the VDLC's membership at large often rejects the stances adopted by its Executive (regardless of whether delegates vote for them or not). Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that the VDLC has played an important role in organizing labour at a municipal level.

In terms of both its conceived mandate and its organizational features, the VDLC more closely resembles a new social movement organization than the BCFed. The VDLC is a less "professionalized" movement organization: except for the secretary-treasurer, VDLC activists are not employed by the organization itself, and

<sup>27</sup>Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1967).

many are presidents of union locals or shop stewards whose supervisory duties in the labour movement are unpaid. In contrast, many of the BCFed activists are full-time paid staff or full-time leaders of unions represented on the Federation's Executive Council — the latter constituting a provincial labour elite. In terms of decision-making processes, compared to the BCFed the VDLC has a flattened hierarchy of authority, with fewer echelons, and its monthly meetings are open to other politically active, or curious, individuals. Similar to many NSM organizations, the VDLC is more oriented toward local issues than the BCFed, and somewhat distanced from centralized institutions of state power such as the provincial government. The BCFed has, as part of its project, the task of representing the interests of organized labour at the level of the provincial state, which has typically meant a range of behind-the-scenes lobbying ventures as well as corporatist manoeuvres such as the Federations' participation in the Pacific Institute of Industrial Policy. Finally, although both organizations have standing committees concerned with social action, the VDLC has shown a more sustained commitment to grassroots coalition-formation. Over the years it has sponsored and maintained close relationships with Vancouver-based movement organizations such as End the Arms Race, End Legislated Poverty, and the ACN, developing coordinated strategies to address specific problems of mutual interest while stressing the importance of maintaining the autonomy of the groups involved. In addition, the VDLC has been unhesitant in declaring its support for such politically sensitive initiatives as the Vancouver-based Gay and Lesbian Games and the Mohawk insurrection at Oka in 1990. While its principal involvements are local, it also forges links with international labour groups such as the South African Congress of Trade Unions and the United States Agricultural Workers Union, and has recently attempted to work with Mexican representatives in search of alternatives to 'free trade.'

Of all its 'social conscience' involvements, the most enduring has been its support for the Committee of Progressive Electors (COPE), a left-wing municipal political party largely funded by the VDLC since its origins in 1968. Initially a political arm of the VDLC and bearing the stamp of its political consciousness, COPE combined with the NDP Civic Democrats to form a unity slate in the 1993 municipal elections.<sup>28</sup> This resulted in a broader-based coalition of progressive activists that outnumbered the unionists and Communist Party members prominent in the party's first two decades. Although the VDLC insisted on this unity slate — to avoid a bifurcation of the progressive vote — it was taken aback by the plethora of NSM candidates, and by the extent to which the new membership core sought to distance itself from the 'working-class' paragons long dominant in COPE. At the party's 1994 annual general meeting, for example, delegates defeated the VDLC candidate

<sup>28</sup>Frank Kennedy, then the Secretary-Treasurer of the Vancouver District and Labour Council, was the President of COPE in its first three years. For a history of COPE and its electoral experiences, see John Church, Elaine Decker, Gary Onstad and Ben Swankey, *1968-1993 — COPE: Working for Vancouver* (Vancouver 1993).

(ironically, COPE's founding president, Frank Kennedy) who was standing for vice-president on the COPE Executive, a position normally reserved for the VDLC representative.

Notwithstanding its greater adherence to the traditional goals of the labour movement and its more tangible ties to government, the BCFed, it must be noted, is also involved in building coalitions with community groups, although the legacy of the 1983 'Solidarity Coalition' has left many members ambivalent about the value of coalition-building.<sup>29</sup> Its professed aim, however, is to forge alliances and coalitions with a range of 'social forces' in its efforts to bring about social justice, even if this be done more prudently and less conspicuously than would be so under the VDLC. Indeed, in 1986, the Federation formed the Community and Social Action Committee which is mandated to liaise with "community groups" to encourage labour's participation in the community, and to recommend, "strategies and programs for working jointly with other community groups and institutions on issues of mutual concern."<sup>30</sup> The Federation has also produced a booklet that offers prospective community groups guidelines on how to organize "for change,"<sup>31</sup> and which underscores the concerns of women's groups, environmental organizations, and First Nations. Proceeding more cautiously than the VDLC, the Federation attempts to avoid ad hoc, insufficiently conceptualized reactions; instead, seeking pro-active strategies that allow it to set the agenda of struggles which are likely to produce long-term benefits.<sup>32</sup>

As a relatively effective coordinating organization, the BCFed has become a central player in the province's labour movement. Its pragmatic approach to strategy and its quest to secure broad community support attest to its increasingly 'mainstream' institutional status, a status deprecated by the more 'progressive' elements of the Federation who regard the euphemized "intelligent militancy" strategy as inevitable capitulation to the corporate agenda.

### INTERVIEW FINDINGS

HAVING ESTABLISHED a historical and political context, we turn now to findings from interviews with activists in the VDLC and BCFed, conducted between February

<sup>29</sup>This ambivalence was well-registered by a member of the Teamsters, also engaged in writing a graduate thesis on the truckers union. Commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, he wondered why unions should feel obliged to respond to the demands of 'external' groups. "Would that be democratic? And anyway, what solidarity do lesbians and truck drivers have in common? Or boilermakers and any secretary of any middle-class elitist social movement? ... But perhaps the failure to build alliances is due to a lack of worker education, a lack of articulation of points of congruence."

<sup>30</sup>BCFED, *Standing Committees: Terms of Reference* (Vancouver 1989).

<sup>31</sup>BCFED, *Making It Work: Organizing for Change in the Community* (Vancouver 1989).

<sup>32</sup>BCFED, *Summary of Proceedings: 33 Annual Convention, 19 November-2 December* (Vancouver 1988).

and September of 1992 as part of a larger study of social movements in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. For present purposes, our sample includes 15 labour activists from each group, who were selected using a snowballing method that began with organization leaders and oral-history respondents and that cumulated as we conducted our interviews. To be included in the sample, an activist had to have been a resident of the Lower Mainland for at least one year and show current involvement in the aims and activities of the VDLC or BCFed. In addition to these "filters," we endeavoured in our selection of respondents to balance several substantively important concerns. We chose some higher-echelon leaders and some rank-and-file activists; we ensured that the samples included both long-serving activists and activists whose involvement was more recent; we strove to include both women and men. These, then, are not statistical samples; they are purposive cross-sections of two key labour-movement organizations.

Each respondent was interviewed using a schedule comprised mostly of open-ended questions spanning a wide range of issues. Responses to the open-ended questions were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim into a qualitative database manager. Our analysis here concerns mainly respondents' answers to some of the open-ended queries that pertain to our research questions, but as background we first provide a socio-demographic profile of our respondents.

The samples were very similar in terms of gender, age, race, and year that respondent became active in the organization.<sup>33</sup> VDLC respondents tended to have more working-class family backgrounds, whereas a majority of BCFed respondents had fathers or mothers who owned their own businesses.<sup>34</sup> Organizational differences make it more difficult to compare the samples in terms of respondents' positions. VDLC respondents fell into three categories in this regard: table officers (n=3), other elected members of the Council's executive (n=7), and other elected

<sup>33</sup>Six of the 15 VDLC respondents were women; eight BCFed respondents were women. The mean age of VDLC respondents was 46; for BCFed respondents it was 45. On average, VDLC respondents became active in the VDLC in 1980; the same year applied to BCFed respondents. All respondents in both groups were caucasian.

<sup>34</sup>This rudimentary comparison of class background relies on the class categories developed by Wright and used recently in Clement and Myles's 1994 comparative study of class and gender in Canada, the US and Scandinavia. Seven VDLC respondents and four BCFed respondents had working-class backgrounds — that is, their parents were employed in nonsupervisory, nonprofessional positions when they were growing up. Two respondents each from the VDLC and BCFed had "new middle class" backgrounds — their parents having been employed as managers or professionals when they were growing up. Three VDLC and two BCFed respondents had petit-bourgeois backgrounds — their parents having owned a business but employed no more than one employee. Three VDLC and seven BCFed respondents had parents who were small business employers, with between two and 24 employees. See Erik Olin Wright, "Marxist class categories and income inequality," *American Sociological Review*, 42, 1 (1977), 32-55; also see, Wallace Clement and John Myles, *Relations of Ruling: Class and Gender in Postindustrial Societies* (Montréal 1994).

delegates from individual union locals (n=5). The BCFed, in comparison, has a greater number of table officers (including 12 vice-presidents) and a number of full-time staff-persons who are appointed by the President as Directors of ongoing Federation activities in areas such as Women's Rights, Aboriginal and Environmental Affairs, Health and Safety, and Community and Social Action. Thus, BCFed respondents fell into four categories: table officers (n=5), staffpersons (n=5), members of the executive council (n=2), and members of standing committees and/or elected delegates to the convention (n=3).

Our discussion of substantive findings begins with the question of a *politics of difference* and how it might find expression among union activists. We then consider the issue of *coalition formation* and the role of labour in social movement coalitions. Finally, we address the question of whether and how labour activists embrace a *cultural politics of everyday life* that reaches beyond traditional boundaries of the political.

### *Gender, Race, and the Politics of Difference*

IN THEIR DISCUSSION of postmodernism and new social movement politics, Best and Kellner raise the possibility of combining a politics of difference with a politics of identity. By articulating *differences* between groups and crucial issues for a variety of movements, a politics of difference can prepare the ground for more multi-issue movements; and by fostering the development of political and cultural *similarities* and *solidarities*, a politics of identity can advance the struggle against oppression and for a more just society. Yet both forms of politics have their limitations. "Differences can become reified and fetishized, and can produce rigid barriers between individuals and groups, leading to a replication of special interest group politics"<sup>35</sup>; a politics of identity can foster the chauvinistic attitude that one's own group struggles are more important than those of others.

These risks can be said to apply as much to labour as to other movements. Throughout the era of Fordist class compromise and even to some extent today, labour's right wing has pursued a narrow, business-unionist agenda that resonates subtly with liberal pluralism in reducing labour to no more than a 'special interest group.'<sup>36</sup> Labour's left, on the other hand, has sometimes embraced a workerist politics of identity that privileges class and "class unity" at the expense of other progressive struggles around gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality and the environment.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory* (New York 1991), 213.

<sup>36</sup>See especially Linda Briskin, "Women's challenge to organized labour," in Linda Briskin and Linda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters* (Toronto 1983), 259-71; also see, W.K. Carroll and Rennie Warburton, "Capital, labour and the state: The future of the labour movement," in B. Singh Bolaria, ed., *Social Issues and Contradictions in Canadian Society* (Toronto 1991), 317-36.

<sup>37</sup>Aronowitz, *The Politics of Identity*.

We might expect a sensitivity to difference to take two forms: (1) an opening out of labour to *other* struggles, which recognizes the multiform character of popular struggle and its irreducibility to labour's own agenda, and (2) a sense of openings *within* labour, a recognition of diversity in the movement's constituency, of the differing needs of women, minorities, etc., and of the problems in translating many voices into a single voice.

With regard to the latter, we asked our respondents if they perceived any tensions between members of their organizations, having to do with class, gender or race differences. In all, a third of our respondents denied that such differences existed in any meaningful sense, one fifth perceived differences of a benign nature, two fifths perceived frictions and conflicts stemming from such differences, and the remainder did not offer an opinion. There was considerable variation in these perceptions both by gender and organization. Most men in the VDLC (56 per cent) did not see class, race and gender as a source of meaningful differences, whereas most women in the BCFed (62 per cent) did view such differences as sources of tension and conflict. For respondents overall, class (30 per cent) and race (23 per cent) were cited as sources of tension and conflict much less often than gender (63 per cent). Again, most men in the VDLC (56 per cent) did not acknowledge significant gender differences, whereas women in the VDLC (50 per cent) and in the BCFed (88 per cent) did, as did most men in the BCFed (71 per cent). The VDLC was described by Cathy,<sup>38</sup> a delegate from a public-sector union, as dominated by a white male leadership which, however, has dealt fairly with women's issues, making structural changes unnecessary. A majority of women in the VDLC, however, reported no more than partial satisfaction with decision-making by the Council. George, a VDLC executive member, pointed supportively to a "fairly strong core of feminists at the Council," but also noted a pervasive resistance among other council members to entrenching gender equity on the executive board, on the universalist grounds that elections should call forward the most capable people of whatever background.

At the BCFed, which introduced affirmative-action executive seats for women in 1986,<sup>39</sup> gender tensions were seen by female respondents as stemming from the debates associated with the introduction of those positions and from the ongoing work of the Women's Rights Committee; that is, these tensions were perceived as byproducts of progressive movement toward "gender parity" within the organization. However, activists in both the BCFed and the VDLC also noted that the barriers to women's participation at a grassroots level (e.g., childcare responsibilities) needed to be addressed more adequately.

Although not a major source of tension, the lack of adequate representation of visible minorities was seen by several BCFed respondents as a looming political problem, potentially rivalling the priority given to women's issues. Margaret, a

<sup>38</sup> All names have been changed to protect respondents' anonymity.

<sup>39</sup> Julie White, *Sisters and Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada* (Toronto 1993).

public-sector union activist on the BCFed Women's Rights Committee pointed to the absence of any women of colour from the committee. Peggy, a member of the BCFed Executive Council, stated:

People of colour complain that because women in particular have gotten more vocal and more demanding to have people on committees and whatever, they say "well, what about people of colour, we hold up half the sky. Let's cover us first and then we'll move on." ... But every group in society with any kind of special needs, I think, has to fight their way to the front and say, "time for us."

Finally, despite continuing gender and race inequities, a number of respondents in both groups emphasized the dramatic attitudinal and policy changes that have taken place in recent years, whether through internal seminars on race and gender, through the activism of women's committees, or through formal procedures such as the BCFed's equity policy.

We find in these comments evidence of a labour movement grappling with the issues raised by a diverse constituency in which one historically marginalized identity — that of the working woman — has become politically mobilized, bringing in its train a heightened reflexivity concerning the more general question of differences. Such reflexivity is, according to Giddens the defining criterion of the "life politics" that predominates in NSMs.<sup>40</sup>

#### *Labour and Cross-Movement Coalitions*

THE OTHER ASPECT of a politics of difference cited above — the possible opening out of labour to popular struggles — is directly implicated in the question of coalition politics as a form of counter-hegemonic struggle. One criterion of "opening out" is the extent to which activists construct collective identities for the labour movement that are inclusive of other groups. All of our respondents indicated that they consider their respective organizations to be part of a broader social movement. When asked to indicate which other groups in the Lower Mainland they considered part of the same movement, activists from both the VDLC and the BCFed enumerated a wide range that included woman's groups, other labour groups, anti-poverty organizations, church groups, gay and lesbian groups, peace organizations, disabled groups, multicultural groups, and the ACN. *This finding is in itself interesting, as it indicates that many labour activists locate their activism not in the narrow sense of trade unionism but in a broader context of social-justice struggles.*

To some extent, this relatively inclusive conceptualization reflects the changing terrain of movement politics. As Jim, a BCFed staffer put it, "... there are many more bridges to other kinds of groups today than there were ten years ago ... and they're not the ones that labour's been involved with before." But David, another

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA 1990), 156.



BCFed staffer, expressed doubts about the legitimacy of other social movement organizations as representatives of collective interest. Many of these organizations "don't truly represent a constituency of any size." He went on to comment that other than the labour movement, the other large social movement "that has a constituency, that has some power and effectiveness is sitting in Victoria now as government." For David, NSM politics were cast in a distinctively secondary — and suspect — role compared to a more traditional axis of organized labour and electoral politics.

Regarding our second query on coalition formation, we first asked our respondents whether they thought it necessary for the various social movements "to work together in more overt or tangible ways in order to fulfil their objectives." Nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of the entire sample unreservedly endorsed this idea; the remainder expressed some reservations but were still favourably inclined. Among women (86 per cent) and VDLC activists (80 per cent), unreserved endorsements were especially prevalent.

We also asked about the importance of the role of the labour movement in social movement coalitions, and found that all respondents viewed labour's involvement as necessary. Indeed, most respondents (84 per cent) favoured an important role for labour in such coalitions, with the remainder holding that labour must be involved, but not necessarily in an important role. A common theme among VDLC activists was that of labour as a central organizing element in a developing field of progressive coalitions — a position that is problematic for a politics of difference but that is not unreasonable in light of the VDLC's successful sponsorship of numerous popular organizations and coalitions. Among BCFed respondents, especially the staffers (part of whose mandate is to "build bridges" to the community), there was a tendency to view coalitions less as durable social blocs centred around key resourceful organizations and more as informal, decentred, ad hoc arrangements that cohere and disperse on an issue-by-issue basis. This latter approach might be read as both an NSM-style embrace of "autonomy" as a norm governing inter-movement politics, and as a studied reaction to the political fallout from the Operation Solidarity campaign of 1983. In that instance, the BCFed was widely perceived by social activists as having reneged on its commitment to the multiform struggles of other movements, by ultimately privileging labour interests with the infamous "Kelowna Accord."<sup>41</sup> As Karen, a BCFed staffer put it:

I tend to think that coalitions work better when they're issue-specific. It's my personal preference to make sure that you know what you're doing, why you're doing it, why you're working together, and when you stop, because that safeguards all the partners in that alliance. ...the issue of the day should set the priorities and then who's prepared to commit what resources is related to the issue; and if we do anything else we're going to get ourselves in acute political difficulty. That's exactly what happened with Solidarity.

<sup>41</sup>Carroll and Ratner, "Social democracy."

*Cultural Politics and the Everyday*

**FINALLY**, regarding cultural politics and the politics of everyday life, we first asked our respondents how they gauged the importance of alternative cultural events (such as the Vancouver Folk Music Festival, the Gay Games, the labour-sponsored May Works, and Women's music and cultural events) in promoting social change. Of the 29 respondents who answered this question, 83 per cent saw such events as useful and 10 per cent saw them as somewhat useful. The one respondent who dismissed the usefulness of such events put forward a narrow definition of politics as the electoral contention for state power. Most of the labour activists, however, were enthusiastic supporters of these forms of cultural politics, citing their value in popular education and collective empowerment. In the words first of Greg, a VDLC delegate from a blue-collar union and then of Margaret, a BCFed activist from a public-sector union:

... certainly the Stein Valley Festival, the Gay Games, I think, in different ways, allow people to come together to see that they are together, that they're not isolated, and there's actual cultural expression of their existence that allows them to discuss what should be done, what kinds of activities they should be under-taking within a cultural, but also within the general political arena.

I think culture is a way of really reaching people. And there is a political perspective to culture and to art. And I just think it's part of any social movement. Quite directly or indirectly, it challenges how our society operates.

Frank, active in a public-sector union and on the VDLC executive, pointed out that it is such cultural events and initiatives that make change possible, even within the labour movement itself. Citing the increased profile of the gay community, he commented, "That's something we've been discussing in our provincial body [of the union]: how to make gay members feel more comfortable in our organization."

We followed up our third query on cultural politics by asking the activists whether the phrase "a politics of everyday life" had any meaning in the context of their social movement activities. Seventy percent responded that the phrase had considerable meaning; 17 per cent ascribed some meaning to the phrase; and 13 per cent considered the phrase meaningless. There were no major differences between the two organizations or between men and women in the distributions of these responses, except that three of the four respondents who found no meaning in the phrase were men. More significantly, perhaps, men and women differed in the meanings they ascribed to the phrase. Most women emphasized the connection between the personal and the political (often using those terms), whether in the sense of such everyday practices as shopping decisions or in the sense of assigning political priority to changing how people interact with each other at the grassroots level. Although such a sensibility was not entirely foreign to the male activists, a number of them emphasized their own everyday lives as engaged labour activists

working tirelessly on behalf of rank-and-file members, while others noted the difficulty of making everyday life politically meaningful. There was a tendency, then, for women to view everyday life as a *field of political action* and for men to view everyday life as a *problem for political action*. Below we provide some examples of the range of responses to the query “Does that phrase — a ‘politics of everyday life’ — have any meaning for you in the context of your social movement activism?”

... it’s actually changing things at the grassroots level, changing how people interact with each other and doing that kind of educational type of work, for personal political change. (Jane, VDLC)

I mean, turning off the water while you’re brushing your teeth is making a change in the politics of your everyday life, which will affect the environment in some small way or in a large way in your whole lifetime. (Peggy, BCFed)

I think that one of the major strains that people go through if they have an alternative vision of the society in which they live is that they cannot implement that in their personal lives in any real meaningful way. (Nick, BCFED)

... women have raised valid criticisms of the way they’re treated in the labour movement and at home and I think those are things we all have to be aware of. It has an accumulative effect and the attitudes that are brought into the labour movement and the social movements have to be genuine; they can’t just be contrived. And if people are acting contrary to that in their personal lives, then it is contrived and it’s not genuine. ...you can somehow change the state authority through a revolution or whatever, but if you haven’t changed the culture and society it will quickly be undone. (John, VDLC)

It’s pie in the sky. You’ve got to be practical. And that’s rhetoric as far as I’m concerned. (Henry, VDLC)

... the politics of everyday life — of what does sending my kid to school have to do with politics — is part of what unions try to get across in the workplace when we’re sitting in coffee shops to talk about how that impacts on you. ... but people have to understand where the decisions come from that affect them coming to work, and who makes these decisions. (Cheryl, BCFed)

... I think that everyone needs to identify that what they do and experience is political and there are reasons for it happening. ... I see politics of everyday life as just being aware of what you’re involved with on a daily basis. (Margaret, BCFed)

### *Labour and New Social Movements in Comparative Perspective*

THE FINDINGS presented above cast doubt on the notion that labour activists are mired in obsolete approaches to political contention. Yet their significance must ultimately be appraised in a comparative context. This article has focused on key organizations and activists in the Greater Vancouver labour movement, but in our larger study we interviewed a great many activists in other social movements. Tables 1-3 allow us to compare the BCFed and VDLC respondents with respondents active in four “new social movements,” namely gay and lesbian liberation, femi-

nism, environmentalism, and the peace movement.<sup>42</sup> Each of these has a rich history of its own in the Lower Mainland area, but in view of space limitations we will limit ourselves to considering whether and how labour activists *differ* in their political sensibilities from activists in these four key NSMs.

On the issues of coalition formation among various social movements and labour's role in such coalitions, we found *no evidence of systematic differences* between the views of labour activists and NSM activists. A majority of activists in all the movements maintained that it is necessary for movements to work together in more overt and tangible ways. The percentages of respondents who affirmed the need for social movement coalitions ranged from 80 per cent (of VDLC activists) and 79 per cent (of gay/lesbian and peace activists) to 68 per cent (of feminists), 67 per cent (of BCFed activists) and 65 per cent (of environmentalists). With regard to labour's role in social movement coalitions, 93 per cent of VDLC and 79 per cent of BCFed activists were in favour of labour playing an *important* role, yet most peace activists (79 per cent) also expressed the same opinion.<sup>43</sup> Smaller majorities of feminists (65 per cent), environmentalists (63 per cent) and gay/lesbian activists (52 per cent) favoured labour playing an important role, and one in five gay/lesbian activists were either unsure of how necessary labour's involvement was or felt such involvement unnecessary.

On the issues of cultural politics and the politics of everyday life, the cross-movement comparisons are especially instructive. Labour activists were actually *more inclined* than others to view alternative cultural events as useful in promoting social change (see Table 1). However, large majorities of feminists and gay/lesbian activists — movements that are said to practice a cultural politics — also viewed alternative cultural events as valuable. Only among environmentalists and peace activists was there a noticeable current of opinion skeptical of the political value of alternative cultural events.

Feminists and environmentalists were most inclined to embrace a politics of everyday life (see Table 2), but on this issue the responses of labour activists did not diverge from those of gay/lesbian activists. And although there was a minority current of opinion in the BCFed that found no meaning in the politics of everyday life, half of all peace-movement activists also showed some skepticism to such

<sup>42</sup>This sample of 120 NSM activists was assembled in much the same way as our sample of labour activists. We first identified key movement organizations active in the Lower Mainland, including three caucuses within the provincial NDP which have provided organizational bases for feminist, environmentalist, and gay/lesbian politics within BC's main party of the left. Next we prepared case studies of each group. Finally, we sampled activists from each organization or from other movement groups engaged in similar activism and interviewed them using the same schedule as used for the labour activists.

<sup>43</sup>This reflects the strong support that the VDLC has provided over the years to End the Arms Race, the leading peace coalition in the Lower Mainland. This support has gone well beyond financial contributions. Indeed, throughout the 1980s Frank Kennedy served as both secretary-treasurer of the VDLC and as president of End the Arms Race.

politics. Of course, the fact that in our interviews most labour and other activists found meaning in the phrase "a politics of everyday life" begs the question of *what meaning* they found. We noted earlier the gender-related differences in this phrase's meaning among labour activists, and such differences may well exist within and between other movements.

Our findings are admittedly provisional, but they assuredly question the notion that labour activists and NSM activists have qualitatively different political sensibilities. Both labour and NSM activists favour fostering cooperative relations across movements, and see labour playing an important role in that process. Our findings on cultural politics suggest that such politics are hardly the exclusive domain of new social movements. Rather, labour activists show considerable sensitivity toward an enlarged conception of "the political." Certainly, the differences in political sensibilities that we can observe *among the NSMs* are as great as the differences *between labour and the NSMs*.

What *do* stand out are the striking differences between labour activists and NSM activists in *political party activism*. In Table 3 activists from various movements are categorized as to whether they have ever been active in a political party, and if so, which party or parties.<sup>44</sup> *Overwhelmingly, labour activists have also been party activists* — predominantly in the NDP but also in COPE and the Communist Party. Only one of 30 labour respondents had not been active in a political party. Among the NSM activists, however, the opposite trend held. *Most feminists, gay/lesbian activists and peace activists had never been active in a political party*, and most environmentalists had either absented themselves from party politics or had been active in the Green Party — a formation that has consciously striven to be a "movement-party," or even an anti-party party.<sup>45</sup> It is in their active support for party politics — and of the NDP and COPE as political instruments — that labour activists may be said to differ from NSM activists, although even on this score it is important to note that the NDP, and not a bourgeois party, was the party of choice for those feminist, gay/lesbian and peace activists who had participated in party politics. Moreover, although the ties between labour and the NDP are particularly strong, the BC NDP also contains subgroups that have attracted a number of NSM activists, such as the Women's Rights Committee and the Gay and Lesbian Issues Caucus.

<sup>44</sup>This tabulation excludes 36 NSM respondents who were selected for the sample precisely because each was an active member of the Green Caucus, the Gay/Lesbian Caucus, or the Women's Rights Committee, all social-movement groups within the BC NDP. Even if these NDP activists are included in the tabulation, the relationship in the table remains statistically significant at the .001 level, according to the Chi-Square statistic.

<sup>45</sup>Kate Sandilands, "Ecology as Politics: The Promise and Problems of the Ontario Greens," in Carroll, ed., *Organizing Dissent*, 157-73.

### PROSPECTS FOR RENEWAL

OUR INTERVIEW FINDINGS show evidence of a labour movement increasingly open to popular struggles outside its own immediate orbit, sensitive to the needs of diverse and marginalized constituencies, tactically prepared if not psychologically predisposed to yield a leading role in any such coalitions, and capable of grasping the connections between social movement activism and everyday life activities.

Whether our respondents' replies to our interview questions merely represent facile rhetoric in the aftermath of the Solidarity Coalition experience can be roughly gauged by considering the extent to which these activists are actually involved in political struggles beyond those of the labour movement. When asked about other social movement organizations in which they were presently active, 14 of the 30 respondents — seven in the VDLC and seven in the BCFed — each listed one or more non-trade union groups.<sup>46</sup> In addition to these 14, eight respondents (five from the BCFed and three from the VDLC) reported being in touch with other social movement groups as part of their labour activism. The groups with which our respondents were networking took in a great range of contemporary movements, including the women's movement, coalitions like the ACN, international solidarity groups, the environmental movement, the peace movement, gay and lesbian liberation, and progressive municipal politics.

At both the organizational level and the level of individual activists, we find that unions have begun to join forces with the new social movements in various coalition practices and strategies. The VDLC, as noted previously, has taken a leading role in this new campaign in relation to coalitions, while the BCFed remains divided and tentative about links to community groups, preferring to regard its alliance with the NDP as *its* coalition. While each organization stresses the goal of 'justice for working people,' they differ in their methods for obtaining this objective. The Federation is typically against confrontation, favouring a traditional middle-of-the-road social democratic approach; the VDLC implements a more 'radical' social change modality that draws upon a wide array of community groups. These differences have been particularly evident in the two organizations' stances toward the ACN-BC. The VDLC helped sponsor the ACN-BC and its predecessor, and a number of VDLC respondents reported being active in the ACN-BC. The BCFed refused until 1992 to recognize the ACN-BC — arguing that the ACN-BC was no more than a Vancouver network of leftists, unrepresentative of BC as a whole

<sup>46</sup>One BCFed respondent and three VDLC respondents were currently active in the ACN; three BCFed respondents and two VDLC respondents were currently active in one or more feminist groups; two BCFed and two VDLC respondents were currently active in international solidarity groups. The remaining involvements included healthcare and disability issues as well as two activists in the Vancouver-based Labour Left, an alliance that has been attempting to bring progressives from different movements together to discuss common issues and interests.

— and has only recently become a formal member.<sup>47</sup> The danger in the BCFed *mainstreaming* philosophy is that it may lead to eventual cooptation and threaten organizational survival, whereas the *radical activism* of the VDLC confers a marginalized image, which may, however, ensure survival in the long run. The same strategic tension has been noted in other movements, notably feminism.<sup>48</sup>

In all of this, the attraction of an electoral party ally, especially one in government, is irresistible, but may prove illusory. Concerns about 'excessive reliance' on the New Democratic Party were frequently expressed by the activists we interviewed —nearly all of whom have been active in the NDP. As one oral history respondent put it, with considerable prescience:

Labour is going to have to build a sophisticated political movement that can push the NDP. Just electing the NDP isn't the end of it. The NDP could become mere managers of the economy, instead of leaders of the people. The world didn't change because we elected the NDP. Free Trade is still there. So it comes back to labour being political and building a political movement. We can't go to sleep because our friends are in power. (Dan, VDLC)

And, although the BCFed worked diligently for the election of the NDP (and is even viewed by many as its 'silent partner'), another oral history respondent — and a former executive officer of the BCFed — aired these solemn reflections:

During my reign, I got many unions to affiliate with the NDP, but now I see the dangers. It's a tightrope that the union has to walk. The labour union has had to be first, and the political party second. What hurts the movement now is that there is no Communist party. They keep us on our toes. In effect, there is no opposition. We are now moving toward labour-management-government cooperation, although I don't know if that's the answer. The better for working people, but as everyone says, "... we can't afford to have too much struggle and conflict, given the world competition." There is pressure today to adopt a more conservative position. (Ed, BCFed)

Similar concerns were expressed by our interview respondents, as only 5 of 30 thought that political parties 'encouraged' social movement coalitions, and only 2 of 30 believed that the NDP was more than 'moderately responsive' to social movement coalitions.

<sup>47</sup>The BCFed has attended some meetings of the ACN, has provided partial funding, and has accepted the 'place' reserved for it in the general membership; but it continues to resist active involvement in the coalition without prior agreement on its provincial structure (Cf. letter of Ken Georgetti, President of the BCFed, to Jeff Keighley and Ellen Woodsworth, executive members of the Action Canada Network-BC, 28 May 1993).

<sup>48</sup>Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change* (Toronto 1988), 176-90.

Ironically, the proven failures of the neo-conservative agenda have created a political climate highly receptive to alternatives.<sup>49</sup> In this beckoning ideological space, the idea of building grass-roots and international alliances to oppose the corporate agenda can find fertile soil. As Drache notes:

In Canada, there is a large, important broadly-based popular sector comprised of churches, trade unions, women's groups, social agencies and voluntary associations, which reject the tyranny of market economics as the best method of determining Canada's economic future. In their totality, they constitute a *deuxieme gauche* of an unconventional sort. They are an alternative to both party politics and a simple two-class model of society.<sup>50</sup>

The 'alternative' recognized by Drache is not merely labour solidarity, but 'human solidarity' — the building of a political struggle with world-wide links, which rejects a 'New World Order' that simply reconstitutes the basis for domination. Of course the problem of forging alliances on an international scale is even more daunting than the search for a local cross-movement identity. If a 'new historical bloc' is foreseeable, it will certainly require *local* starting points, enjoining an exchange of sensibilities between 'old' unions and 'new' social movements that upholds grass-roots autonomy *and* challenges the social and economic maxims of capitalist society.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup>John Anderson, Director of the Ontario Federation of Labour Technology Adjustment Research Programme, argues that unions in Ontario are receptive to new social movements, an openness largely attributable to three factors: the effects of globalization; changes in the composition of unions leading to higher percentages of women, minorities, and public sector workers; and opportunities for union staff positions now extended to people who come out of the new social movements. None of these developments means that 'social unionism' will be *effective* in bringing about progressive social change, but they do reinforce the lesson that unions have learned during the tenure of NDP provincial governments — that unions cannot afford to abandon political work to the NDP. (Paraphrase of remarks at the meetings of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Learned Societies, Carleton University, June 1993). For lucid discussions of the failures of ideologically supine NDP provincial governments to devise innovative policies in the face of 'globalization imperatives' and 'deficit-reduction' strategies advanced by the political Right, see Panitch and Swartz, who liken the NDP to "a Trojan Horse in the House of Labour" and the reviews by Watkins, Cohen, and Hansen, critical of the performances of the three NDP governments currently in power. Leo Panitch, and Donald Swartz, esp "The Social Contract: Labour, The NDP, and Beyond," in *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Wage Controls to Social Contracts* (Toronto 1993), 159-88; also see, Mel Watkins, Marjorie Griffen Cohen and Phillip Hansen, "Forum: NDPs in Power," *Studies in Political Economy; A Socialist Review*, 43 (Spring 1994), 137-67.

<sup>50</sup>Daniel Drache, "The deindustrialization of Canada and its Implications for Labour" (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 1989), 36.

<sup>51</sup>Daniel Drache and Meric S. Gertler, *The New Era of Global Competition: State Policy and Market Power* (Montreal 1991); Daniel Drache and H.J. Glasbeek, *The Changing Workplace: Reshaping Canada's Industrial Relations System* (Toronto 1992).



In this regard, and notwithstanding the enormous challenges facing labour that we have reviewed, our findings give some basis for guarded optimism. They enable us to dispute the notion that unions are anachronisms inhabiting a fixed position in a shrinking space of conventional politics. Although the BCFed and VDLC have developed different approaches to coalition-formation, we find in their recent histories a growing commitment to building solidarity ties to other movements, on an equitable, if cautiously implemented basis. Although our interview respondents presented a wide range of viewpoints, we find in their diverse reflections definite resonances of the concerns for difference, autonomy, and cultural politics that are characteristically ascribed to NSMs.

To be sure, in circumstances where capital is amassing all the structural power that accrues to its tendential globalization, the reconstruction of labour as a progressive force is not guaranteed, nor is such a transformation simply a matter of replacing the "old" with the "new." It can be granted, for instance, that the increasing feminist strain in labour politics — clearly discernible in the typically more progressive views of the women whom we interviewed as compared with the men — has shifted the movement's focus away from earlier patterns of political contention. Yet there is some doubt as to whether a feminist framing of issues can *in itself* suffice for the articulation of labour interests in general. As June, a feminist prominent in the BCFed, put it:

The things that we complain about or have concerns about ... they're rooted in some fairly fundamental problems which we never address. Not only do we never address them, but there is a genuine animosity between the Federation and the groups who are prepared to take a far more radical analysis. Now you can take the radical analysis and you can couch it in feminist terms, and you can just about get away with it. Couching it in strict economic terms ... you can't, because it's going to be labelled Communism. So, I think the unwillingness of the Federation ... of the labour movement in Canada, to really understand where its critique is heading, is preventing it from achieving its goals. I don't have the answers for it. I mean, we're not even asking the right questions.

An important task before labour, therefore, is to discover and carry out its obviously salient role in the coordination of diverse social movement objectives. In meeting this challenge, labour's traditional concern with economic justice cannot be abandoned; indeed, we agree with June: labour needs to achieve greater clarity about where its critique is heading. A concern with economic justice and a thoroughgoing critique of capital are essential if workers are to resist ideological integration as "market participants," but the implications go beyond class politics. For in the absence of a vigorous struggle for economic justice, many of the claims pressed by feminist, environmental, gay/lesbian and other movements prove either materially insupportable or tend, like the atomized worker, to be easily deflected into liberal-democratic discourses of individual freedom and equal opportunity, leaving untouched the prevailing structures of wealth and power. At the same time,

economic justice can no longer be pursued in ways that presuppose the superiority of the labour-NDP axis as a vehicle for democratic action. The partial unravelling of that axis in Ontario — a development that as of yet has no parallel in BC<sup>52</sup> — points to the inadequacies of a labour strategy that is exclusively party-centred. For unions to survive as a form of political mobilization, they must now move beyond recognition of popular movements to vigorous coalition-formation with them, involving, so to speak, a fluid synthesis of the 'old' and the 'new.'

<sup>52</sup>In a context of relative economic buoyancy since its election in 1991, the NDP provincial government in B.C. has implemented a series of reforms in labour relations and employment standards, has improved minimum wage rates, and has brought in a "fair wage" policy for government-sponsored building projects — all with the strong support of the labour movement.

*This is a revised version of a paper presented at a joint session of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association and the Society for Socialist Studies, Learned Societies, Ottawa, June 7th, 1993.*

**TABLE 1**  
**Activists Crossclassified by Type of Movement and Opinion about**  
**Political Usefulness of Alternative Cultural Events**  
*Type of Social Movement*

Usefulness of alternative cultural events	Labour						TOTAL
	VDLC	BCFed	gay/lesbian	feminism	environmental	peace	
Useful	87	86	69	70	46	43	64
Somewhat useful	13	7	28	24	37	43	28
Not useful/un- sure/don't know		7	3	6	16	14	9
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Ns	15	14	29	33	43	14	148

**TABLE 2**  
**Activists crossclassified by type of Movement and Meaningfulness of**  
**"Politics of Everyday Life"**  
*Type of social Movement*

Meaningful- ness of "poli- tics of every- day life"	Labour						TOTAL
	VDLC	BCFed	gay/lesbian	feminism	environmental	peace	
Very mean- ingful	73	67	69	88	79	50	75
Somewhat meaningful	20	13	24	9	14	43	18
Not meaning- ful/unsure/ don't know	7	20	7	3	7	7	7
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Ns	15	15	29	34	43	14	150

**TABLE 3**  
**Activists Crossclassified by Type of Movement and Political party Activism**  
*Type of Social Movement*

Political Party Activism	Labour						TOTAL
	VDLC	BCFed	gay/lesbian	feminism	environmental	peace	
Green					26		7
NDP	60	93	18	23	19	29	36
NDP and COPE			12		3	14	8
CP (and COPE)	27 7	7		4		7	4
Other			6		10		4
None	7		65	73	42	50	42
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Ns	15	15	17	22	31	14	114

# REVIEW

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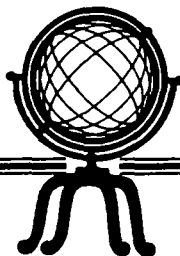
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