

Canada's elite eulogizes union boss Jack Munro

Carl Bronski

22 November 2013

The death last week, at the age of 82, of long-time British Columbia union bureaucrat Jack Munro has elicited a series of fawning retrospectives and eulogies from a veritable *Who's Who* of the political, media and trade union establishments. Munro was a career union executive in the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and a former vice president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

Munro is perhaps best remembered for his role in scuttling the mass mobilization of hundreds of thousands of workers in British Columbia during the 1983 Operation Solidarity crisis that had threatened to bring down the government of right-wing Premier Bill Bennett. With the movement threatening to escape the union bureaucracy's control, Munro spearheaded the drive to shut it down—an act of sabotage for which the ruling class was forever grateful.

From 1973 to 1992, as president of the forestry workers union—for many years, the largest private sector union in British Columbia—Munro cultivated a combative, foul-mouthed, “lunch-box” image with his membership and the West Coast media, whilst representing the most conservative layers of the British Columbia and national trade union bureaucracies.

A dyed-in-the-wool nationalist, Munro led the Canadian section of the IWA out of the international union in 1987, facilitating the multinational lumber companies' attempts to pit Canadian and US workers against each other, the better to impose job cuts and concession contracts. Munro also consistently took positions supporting the ever right-ward lurch of the New Democratic Party and was an enthusiastic supporter of the current NDP leader, the ex-Quebec Liberal cabinet minister Thomas Mulcair.

Upon his retirement from union officialdom in 1992, Munro took up a position as head of the B.C. Forestry Alliance, an industry lobby group funded by the giant lumber companies and dedicated to counter “degenerate” (according to Munro) environmentalist opposition to clear-cut logging and wildlife habitat destruction. Munro had earlier established his credentials for the position, when, in 1990 he stated, “I tell my (members) if they see a spotted owl, shoot it”.

The Canadian elite often make an effort to take care of their servants. Near the end of the 1990s, Munro landed a sinecure with the B.C. Ferries Board to go along with his Forestry Alliance placement. In 1999, Munro was invested into the Order of Canada for services rendered to the Canadian establishment. Remembered also by the union bureaucracy, Munro was appointed to a sinecure on the board of the United Steelworkers (USW) retirees' organization after the IWA merged with the USW in 2004.

In the wake of his death, no accolade was too generous for the deceased bureaucrat. The Canadian Press news agency and *McLean's* Magazine described him as a “titan” of the labour movement. CTV

News agreed, describing him as “legendary”. The right-wing *Vancouver Sun* ran an effusive, extended biography with a photo spread of the union “everyman” bellowing at union events, riding motorcycles and tending his rose-bushes.

Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti dubbed Munro a “hero for working people”. Ken Neumann, United Steelworkers National Director praised him as a “giant of the labour movement.” The current right-wing Liberal premier of the province, Christy Clark, saw Munro's contribution as “immeasurable”. And without a trace of irony, Adrian Dix, before stepping down as B.C. NDP leader, hailed Munro's “tenacious” contribution, without which “British Columbia would be a very different place today”.

A different place, indeed. How different can be gleaned from the statements from his supposed opponents. Jim Maikin, former head of the provincial business council, thought Munro had “a large dose of common sense. People in the business community know that you can talk to him and he sees reality.” John Fryer, former head of the B.C. Government Employees Union, and a regular adversary of Munro in the public/private sector turf struggles of the union bureaucracy, concurred: “There was no, as he would call it, ‘loony left’ radicalism about Jack.” But it was left to Bud Smith, secretary to Social Credit Premier Bill Bennett during the historic Operation Solidarity strike movement of 1983 to say directly what all the eulogizers were merely thinking. “Jack Munro became the spokesperson on behalf of trade unionists to make an accommodation with the Premier so that they didn't go down the general strike path.”

And what an “accommodation.”

In the summer of 1983, a freshly re-elected Bennett announced an agenda of 26 separate pieces of legislation that sought to impose the Reagan-Thatcher model of de-regulation, privatization and massive social spending cuts on the province's working class. Not one of the proposed “reforms” had been mentioned in Bennett's just concluded election campaign. The list of government demands was breathtaking.

Rent control, substance abuse and human rights agencies were to be abolished. Landlords were given the right to evict tenants at will. Onerous user fees were added to the public health care system and doctors given the right to “extra-bill” their patients and opt out of providing Medicare. Pension entitlements for laid-off workers were reduced. Government was given control over curriculum in the schools. The sales tax was increased. A public sector wage freeze was indefinitely extended. Government enforcement of employment standards was ended. Unions were stripped of the right to negotiate overtime, work hours, seniority rules or job security. Public employees could be terminated without cause or without regard to seniority. Upon legislative approval, firings and victimizations in the

workplace were to begin immediately.

So too would a mass mobilization of the working class. Spontaneous demonstrations sprang up overnight. A “Solidarity” movement was quickly formed comprised of a trade-union and a community-group wing. However, the movement, although comprised of hundreds of thousands of workers, young people and unemployed was in fact controlled and funded by a handful of union leaders. Jack Munro became the lead spokesman for the private sector unions in the coalition. Munro was strongly opposed to any industrial action outside the confines of strict collective-bargaining boundaries. Indeed, in the 1970s he had clashed with pulp and paper workers who had launched secondary picket actions in workplaces organized by his own union.

As Bennett’s legislation was passed into law over the late summer and early autumn, a series of demonstrations were held. Tens of thousands of workers marched on the provincial legislature. Cabinet offices were occupied. A mass rally at Vancouver’s Empire Stadium was jammed by over 40,000 attendees. Up to 80,000 marched on the Social Credit Party convention in the largest demonstration in the province’s history. Tens of thousands more mobilized throughout the province in Prince George, Kamloops, Williams Lake and Prince Rupert.

By early November, firefighters had taken strike action. 40,000 government workers were about to enter their third week on strike. 160,000 other public sector workers were awaiting the call to join them. Tens of thousands of teachers were entering a second week on the picket lines. Provincial ferry service workers were poised to take all-out strike action that would have cut off Vancouver Island and the provincial capital, Victoria, from the mainland. Workers were raising the demand for a general strike.

One participant summed up the situation in the province. “There was a feeling throughout B.C. that something was happening, that everything was up for grabs. People stopped talking sports and what was on TV last night. It was heady stuff.”

The leaders of the unions were terrified. The movement was poised to get out of their control. Bennett was threatening back-to-work legislation backed by stiff penalties. As a “negotiating tactic” but with little actual commitment, the private sector unions had made dubious pledges that they would join the strike movement if the government did not back down. Bennett was about to call their bluff.

Dave Barrett, the leader of social-democratic NDP, made a show of opposing the Socreds’ volley of anti-working class legislation and had himself physically ejected from the legislative chamber by Bennett’s Sergeant-at-Arms. But the movement of the working class provoked an angry and frightened denunciation from Barrett, with the NDP leader declaring that any opposition that went beyond such impotent parliamentary protests and token demonstrations was impermissible. The burgeoning strike actions, proclaimed Barrett, were “illegal and a threat to democracy.”

For their part, the trade union officialdom made no criticism of the NDP. Indeed, as workers came into open conflict with the government they ceased to speak of “labor’s” ostensible party at all. This was because they wanted to make clear to the Social Credit government and the ruling class that they were in no way challenging Bennett’s “right to govern,” they merely wanted negotiations. No less than Barrett and the social-democratic politicians, the pro-capitalist union bureaucrats were adamantly opposed to the working class bringing down the Bennett government, because they recognized such action would have enormously strengthened the working class and objectively posed the need for a workers’ government. Similarly,

pseudo-left groups in the orbit of the NDP, who had viewed the “general strike” not as a means to bring down the government but to pressure Bennett into a legislative climb-down began to prevaricate.

It was under these conditions that Munro initiated secret talks with the government and over the course of more than a week worked with Bennett and his top advisors, and his fellow union bureaucrats to isolate the public sector workers and torpedo the strike movement.

On November 13th, the B.C. Federation of Labour withdrew their demand for the repeal of Bennett’s legislation. In return for the signing of a new collective agreement with the government workers’ union that withdrew the threat of firings, the labour bureaucracy moved to scuttle the mobilization against the entire legislative program. They received full backing in this decision from the Stalinist Communist Party of Canada, which, at that time, had a not insignificant presence amongst the union officialdom, including controlling the leadership of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. The Stalinists would later join the other labour bureaucrats in asserting that the abject sell-out that was being prepared was in fact a “victory” for the working class.

That same night the B.C. Federation of Labour quietly dispatched Jack Munro on a government jet to the Premier’s Kelowna estate to work out a final “accommodation.”

Munro had been chosen for the job because it was believed that no union leader, other than the iron-fisted IWA president, could withstand the wrath of their own membership for the planned surrender. After all, he had already squelched opposition to a new IWA contract prepared earlier that same year that had imposed a significant cut in the real wages of his members. By midnight a verbal “agreement” had been struck between Munro and Bennett. The insurgency in the streets would be ended and picket lines shut down in return for Bennett’s vague promise for future “consultations”—consultations that never materialized. This betrayal emboldened the Socred government to press forward with the assault on the working class, beginning the next year with further legislation attacking the right to strike.

Such was the stuff of the “legendary” Jack Munro.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact