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Working People Take Aim at Hated Government in B.C.

By Roger Annis

This article, by Socialist Voice co-editor Roger Annis, was first published in the April 5 issue of Seven Oaks magazine.

Working people across the province of British Columbia are eagerly anticipating the opportunity to throw the Liberal Party government of Premier Gordon Campbell out of office on May 17, the date of the upcoming provincial election.

The B.C. Federation of Labor has launched a “Count Me In” campaign to canvass and mobilize union members in support of the opposition New Democratic Party. It has hired six organizers to conduct this campaign, aiming to reach every workplace in the province.

Members of the NDP are hitting the streets and neighborhoods to talk to voters and distribute a pre-campaign flyer that opens with, “Gordon Campbell has run a one-sided government that helps the powerful, but squeezes middle class people and working families, and punishes the most vulnerable. It’s a trail of broken promises.”

Meanwhile, the pro-business, anti-NDP campaign is beginning to heat up. The first blast was fired on February 28 by the chief executive officers of the largest computer technology companies in B.C. They held a press conference to state that future growth and investment in their industry will be jeopardized if the NDP is elected. They worry that the NDP will cancel or tinker with the myriad of tax breaks and handouts that the Liberal government has provided the industry.

Anger at the record of Campbell government

Since its election in 2001, the Liberal government has made savage cuts to the rights and living standards of the working class in British Columbia:

- Hospitals have closed, waiting lists for treatments are longer, service and cleanliness within hospitals has declined, the cost of premiums has risen by fifty percent (to \$108 per month for a family), the number of long-term care beds for the elderly has declined, and the conditions of work for many health care workers have drastically declined.
- One hundred and thirteen elementary and secondary schools have closed since 2001, and there are 3,500 fewer teachers. Classroom sizes are up, and there have been sharp

reductions in library services and services to special needs students such as Aboriginals and the physically handicapped. Spending cuts by local school boards leave students and parents paying for many services and supplies.

- The Liberals lifted a freeze on post-secondary tuition fees that had been in place for six years during the preceding NDP government. The result has been a seventy percent rise in fees. Financial aid to needy students has also been cut.
- \$881 million has been cut from the so-called misery ministries—Human Resources; Children and Family Development; and Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services. Almost 100,000 people have been thrown off the welfare rolls. Legal aid services to the poor have been cut, and eliminated altogether for family law cases. The hardest hit in these cuts have been Aboriginal people and poor women.

Several tens of thousands of jobs in government services have been eliminated by the Liberals, and wage freezes have been the norm for those who have kept their jobs. To implement these cuts, the new government tore up existing collective agreements with the affected unions, something which it explicitly stated it would not do during the 2001 election campaign. It also outlawed the right to strike for teachers.

The union hardest hit by these cuts has been the Hospital Employees Union. Thousands of its members have lost their jobs as services they performed were contracted out to private companies paying a few dollars per hour above minimum wage.

The most exploited workers in the province—youth, and agricultural workers—have also felt the wrath of the Liberals. Changes to the province’s labor code strip away protection to agricultural workers in many areas such as hours of work and payment for statutory holidays and overtime. A new slave-labor minimum wage for youth allows employers to pay \$6 per hour to workers with less than 500 hours of verifiable lifetime work experience. (The full minimum wage is \$8.)

Money for the rich

The wealthy class has enjoyed a tax-break bonanza. The first act of the new government was to implement tax reductions totaling nearly \$1.5 billion. Taxpayers earning less than \$30,000 per year—almost one million people—shared \$181 million of those reductions, while the 8,200 richest people in the province—those earning \$250,000 or more—shared \$191 million. A blizzard of new fees or fee increases for government services have more than cancelled out any tax relief that lower income people may have received.

Another bonanza for the rich is looming on the horizon, in the form of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver/Whistler. The federal and provincial governments will be shelling out billions of dollars of tax revenue to build and operate the Olympic facilities. Companies engaged in construction, engineering, transportation, tourist accommodation, and real estate will make a killing from this, while desperately-needed social services will continue to be neglected.

Strikes and protests

The government's attacks have not gone unchallenged. Health care workers staged strikes and protests soon after the election of the Liberals. Teachers organized protests and strikes in late 2001 against wage freezes and cuts to education services, culminating in a walkout of 46,000 on January 28, 2002. Ten thousand community service workers struck a few months after that.

In late 2003, more than 4,000 members of the ferry workers union closed down the vital coastal ferry network for four days to protest wage freezes and the threat of job losses. For two of those days, they defied special anti-strike legislation.

The most spectacular job action against the Liberals occurred in late April, 2004 when more than 40,000 health care workers went on strike for seven days. Thousands of workers in other industries walked off the job in solidarity, to the point where the province teetered on the edge of a general strike on May 3. At that point, officials from the major unions in the province called off the strike. (For background to this strike movement, see *Socialist Voice #3* and *Socialist Voice #5*).

Many local protests marked the years of the Liberal regime. In the summer of 2004, residents of the small town of Forest Grove in the B.C. interior occupied their elementary school after the local school board announced it would be closed. Plans to privatize the Coquihalla Highway had to be called off by the government in the face of stiff opposition.

Recent actions are a hopeful sign that victims of the Liberals' policies will not be silent during the election. Residents of the town of Lytton are campaigning for the reopening of their local hospital. Its services have been reduced to little more than that of a first aid station.

Hundreds of residents of the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of northern B.C., have closed down logging operations for two weeks now at two locations. They are saying "No!" to the environmental destruction by planned logging operations and are demanding that no logging, mining or other resource extraction permits be granted by the government without first negotiating with islands' population, especially its Haida aboriginal people.

NDP platform

In the upcoming election, two parties will vie for the vote of socially-progressive people. The New Democratic Party is the majority party of the working class. Most trade unions are affiliated to the party. The unions play a central role in its policy making.

The NDP governed the province from 1991 to 2001. In 2001, its vote dropped from 40 percent in the preceding election to 22 percent. It won only two seats out of 79. Today, it is running neck and neck with the Liberals in pre-election polling.

The Green Party is a rising political force that taps into widespread concern over the practices of resource-extraction industries and other causes of decline in the natural environment. Its vote rose from 2 percent in 1996 to 12 percent in 2001.

The NDP says it will not issue an election platform until one month before the election. But the outline of its program is already clear. Leader Carole James has said that the party will not

reverse the policies implemented by the Liberals. “I’ve been clear from the start that you can’t turn back the clock four years,” she told the Vancouver Sun on February 28. “We won’t be rolling back any of the tax cuts that have been given.” She told the Sun that complaints from business about NDP policies “come from a lack of information and a lack of research.” She argues that her party’s policies will be business friendly.

James gave a similar message to nurses when their union met earlier this month and announced a political campaign leading up to the election. Explaining that 1,300 acute-care hospital beds and 4,000 long-term care beds have been closed by the Liberals, the union wants an end to bed closures and urges construction of facilities for 1,000 new long-term care beds.

Carole James responded to this demand by stating, “I am not interested in signing on to things that are not costed.” The NDP has said it would provide 1,000 long-term care beds by reopening some of the closed facilities.

James is seeking to distance the NDP from its trade union base. Shortly after her election as party leader in 2003, she struck a committee to come up with recommendations to weaken or end union affiliation to the party. But opposition to this course resulted in a deadlock on the committee.

Green Party alternative?

The Green Party in B.C. describes itself as “Fiscally conservative, socially responsible”. While it posits itself as a party that would curb the environmentally and socially destructive practices of big business, its program raises few demands that would challenge the domination of big capital. In fact, the Greens pride themselves on a political orientation that aims to convince big business that socially progressive policies are in its best interests.

The Greens supported the hospital workers strike in 2004, but its platform has no proposals to reverse the destruction of union and social rights that is the legacy of the Liberal government. It supported the deal that ended the strike and resulted in thousands more union members losing their jobs to privatization.

The Greens advocate measures that would make it illegal for working people, through their unions, to support a political party such as the NDP.

The Greens’ proposals are no better than those of the NDP and often worse. More important, they lack the NDP’s overriding positive feature: the web of bonds that link the NDP to the B.C. labor movement and working class. In other countries where Green parties have been elected, such as Germany, they have entered capitalist governments and carried out policies identical to the big business interests they claim to oppose.

World events: a “provincial” issue too

The Canadian government is playing an increasing role in imperialist military adventures abroad. Canada has 3,000 troops currently engaged in the imperialist occupation of Afghanistan. It was a central actor in the coup against the constitutional government of Haiti last year. It supports

efforts to legitimize the puppet occupation-government in Iraq, and it is party to the international gang up against the peoples of Palestine and Iran.

The NDP and its supporters should join in solidarity with the victims of this new imperialism. The provincial election campaign will be a time of heightened political awareness, so it's a time to convince people that we have common interests with those who are under attack from the Canadian government and its allies.

We can join with those in Iraq and Haiti who are fighting the illegal and repressive foreign occupations of their countries. Canadians have a special responsibility to act in solidarity with the people of Haiti because the Canadian government was party to the February 29, 2004 coup in that country.

We have much to learn from those in other countries who are showing a way forward in the fight for a just society. That means supporting and learning more about the socialist system created in struggle by the people of Cuba. It means acting in solidarity with the people of Venezuela as they mobilize to create a new society of social solidarity.

Needed: political power for working people

The attacks on social and political rights in British Columbia are part of a broader pattern, nationally and internationally. Employers are increasing their attacks on the working class and other exploited classes and peoples in order to shore up declining profit rates and deal blows to rival competitors in other countries.

The government in Ottawa has set the lead in Canada for these policies. Provincial governments have been willing and enthusiastic partners, including the two NDP governments that ruled British Columbia from 1991 to 2001. With only a few exceptions, such as a six-year freeze of post-secondary tuition fees, the NDP governments' actions were indistinguishable from their counterparts in other provinces. Big cuts to social welfare and health care began under the NDP, only to be deepened by the Liberals.

This ruling class offensive will not be stopped by electing a provincial NDP government pledged to keep things as they are. It will take a mighty wave of working-class struggle, expressed in strikes, street protests, and political organizing.

In this election, working people will vote for the NDP in their tens and hundreds of thousands, and every class conscious worker should join them in this effort. A defeat of Campbell's Liberals will encourage and strengthen the struggles that have been waged against its policies. But if the NDP is elected, we must challenge it to break with the attacks by Ottawa. We will need more movements like the strike last year of B.C. hospital workers or the massive student strike movement that is shaking the province of Quebec right now.

This is not a simple task. It is the basic challenge faced by the unions today—how to replace the existing capitalist governments with a government of working people that is not simply a “lesser evil” but a government that rules on behalf of working people and refuses to cater to the privileges of the wealthy minority.

Socialist Voice #45, April 26, 2004

Ecuador: People Drive Out President

by **Duroyan Fertl**

[This article was first published in the Australian radical paper Green Left Weekly. We have corrected several dates which were given as “February” when “April” was clearly meant.]

After four months of mounting political pressure and constitutional crisis, the people of Ecuador have driven President Lucio Gutierrez from office. In the face of unstoppable mass protest, and growing calls for the dissolution of Congress and establishment of popular assemblies, Ecuador’s right-wing Congress abandoned Gutierrez, leaving vice-president Alfredo Palacio to assume the role.

Gutierrez was overwhelmingly elected in late 2002, on a campaign supported by the left. Styling himself an “Ecuadorian Chavez”, he promised to destroy corruption in Ecuador, remove the contentious United States military presence at the Eloy Alfaro Air Base, and free the country from neoliberalism. Gutierrez had supported the 2000 uprising, led by indigenous groups, that overthrew a corrupt president.

Like most Latin Americans, Ecuadorians have been hit hard by neoliberal economic policies pushed by the US and international financial institutions, including privatization of basic services that has led to increases in the cost of living; and increased debt that imposes crippling repayments. These policies have increased the economic and political subordination of the country to the US, which has strengthened support for left-nationalism.

Upon his election, however, Gutierrez quickly revealed himself as another US puppet, increasing US military ties; embroiling Ecuador in Plan Colombia (the Washington-Bogota-led war on Colombian left-wing insurgents); increasing Ecuador’s IMF debt; supporting the war on Iraq; privatizing basic services; agreeing to negotiate a free trade agreement with the US; and approving oil exploration in indigenous and environmentally protected areas.

As his popularity plummeted, and his attempts to replace fleeing left-wing allies with right-wing ones were largely unsuccessful, Gutierrez began to act increasingly autocratically.

The current crisis was sparked by his sacking of the Supreme Court in December, using a slim Congress majority. The old court was dominated by opposition parties — notably the right-wing Social Christian Party (PSC) and centre-left Democratic Left (ID).

The new president of the court that Gutierrez appointed, Guillermo Castro, then cleared former president, and Gutierrez’s ally, Abdala Bucaram, of corruption charges, allowing him to return on April 2 from eight years of exile in Panama. Bucaram’s populist Roldosista Party (PRE) then provided Gutierrez with support in Congress.

A Country Fed Up

On April 13, a general strike called by Quito mayor and ID leader Paco Moncayo condemned the Supreme Court sacking, and called for Gutierrez's resignation. Although poorly attended, the protests were violently dispersed early in the day by police.

As the news of the police repression spread, an independent Quito radio station, La Luna, invited listeners to speak their mind on air. A spontaneous outpouring of mostly young, middle-class Ecuadorians hit the airwaves, frustrated by decades of political corruption and nepotism. Callers condemned not only Gutierrez — who had called the protesters *forajidos* (outlaws) — but the political system as whole, and called on the people of Quito to protest.

By that evening, 5000 people gathered together, banging pots and pans. This was followed nightly by ever larger demonstrations, calling for Gutierrez's resignation and the dissolution of the whole Congress, which one banner described as a “nest of rats”. Adopting the president's slur as a badge, protesters produced numbered “forajido certificates”, as well as placards, T-shirts and posters.

La Luna and a few other radio stations, rather than political parties, became rallying points as young people, families and pensioners used them to incite their neighbours to join the protests.

Attempting to calm things down with a carrot and a stick, Gutierrez dissolved the new Supreme Court on April 15 and declared a state of emergency in Quito, suspending civil rights and mobilizing the armed forces.

To many it seemed Gutierrez was assuming dictatorial powers. Gutierrez was forced to lift the state of emergency the following day, as protests swelled, and spread to the city of Cuenca. Students from Cuenca University commandeered buses to blockade roads and highways and threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at police and tanks.

Sections of the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE) organised road blockades in other areas in Ecuador, and its national president Luis Macas called for a national mobilization, blockading the roads in many areas, and bringing out demonstrators in several small cities. While CONAIE led the 2000 uprising, its popularity has since suffered because of its earlier support for Gutierrez.

When former CONAIE president Antonio Vargas, a veteran of the 2000 uprising, declared his support for Gutierrez, he was expelled from CONAIE. Threatening to set up a rival indigenous organization, he claimed he would bring busloads of armed Gutierrez supporters to Quito to combat the demonstrations.

In Quito, the situation was deteriorating rapidly. Police tear-gassed protesters, badly injuring dozens. On April 19, Chilean-born journalist Julio Garcia died from asphyxiation after being tear-gassed.

Protests Escalate

That night, the protests escalated. Up to 30,000 people engaged in street battles with the police until 3am. Thousands of riot police, with armoured vehicles, dogs, horses and tear-gas were used to disperse the demonstrators, some of whom managed to break through the encirclement of

troops and razor-wire that surrounded the presidential palace. More than 100 people were wounded, and dozens arrested.

The next afternoon, led by 30,000 high school and university students, 100,000 Ecuadorians descended on the presidential palace chanting “Lucio out” and “They all must go!”. Police attacked the protesters as Gutierrez moved to fortify the building with razor-wire and a brigade of Special Forces. In other parts of the city, Gutierrez supporters clashed with the protesters.

Several thousand paid government supporters were brought to Quito, where they occupied the social welfare ministry, shooting at the crowds and killing two students. In response, the building was ransacked and set ablaze by the angry crowd.

As protesters prevented them from entering the Congress building, 62 opposition legislators from the 100-strong Congress held an emergency session that afternoon in the CIESPAL building. After deposing the speaker, a PRE member, and appointing a member of the right-wing PSC to the post, the meeting voted 60-0 with two abstentions to fire Gutierrez for “abandoning his post” and replace him with Palacio, a long-time critic of the president.

The Congress invoked constitutional article 167, which was used to fire Bucaram for “mental incapacity” in 1997. Many of the absent members of Congress labeled the decision unconstitutional. Gutierrez refused to accept the decision, arguing that a two-thirds majority of Congress members had to vote for it for it to be valid. He refused to resign, even as the army deserted him, and the Quito chief of police resigned rather than be responsible for the police repression.

Finally, surrounded by tens of thousands of angry protesters, the disgraced leader fled from the roof of the palace in a military helicopter, and headed to the international airport. However, his plane was unable to leave, because 3000 protesters charged out onto the tarmac.

Forced back into his helicopter, Gutierrez headed to the Brazilian embassy. By now, an arrest warrant had been issued against him for “major offences”, and Brazil had offered asylum. There he has remained, with the new government unable to secure him passage out of the country.

Popular Assemblies?

Meanwhile, Palacio went to address the hundreds picketing the CIESPAL building. Calling for the nation to be “refounded” with a referendum to create a new constitution, he refused to call new elections before those scheduled for the end of 2006.

The crowd responded by drowning him out with chants of, “Popular assemblies!”, “Thieves! Dissolve the congress!”, and “They all must go!”.

While Palacio is regarded as a left-wing opponent to Gutierrez, and has been promising to move away from neoliberalism, the Congress as a whole is generally regarded as even more corrupt than Gutierrez, and is certainly more right-wing.

The protesters prevented Palacio from leaving, demanding the resignation of the congress and the new president, yelling that they would not be fooled. They stormed the building, chasing the legislators out the side entrances, injuring several, and occupied the building. They then

convened a “popular assembly” to debate solutions to Ecuador’s legal and political crisis. Resolving to create similar assemblies across the country in the lead-up to a national assembly, they demanded the government break with Plan Colombia, declare a 10-year moratorium on repayment of foreign debt, and expel US marines from the Manta air base.

International Reaction

The response by Latin American governments to the events was initially cautious — not surprising given the number of them that are afraid of being overthrown, either by a left-wing uprising or by a right-wing US-backed coup.

Cuba was one of the first to respond, President Fidel Castro commenting on April 19 that it was “not unexpected” that Gutierrez had fallen, given his support for imperialism. Cuban newspaper Granma International pointed out on April 21 that the protesters demands for dissolving the Congress had not been met. Cuba’s Prensa Latina news service added on the same day that Palacio could also be “ousted by the people” if he did not “pass the governability test”.

On April 20, Venezuelan foreign minister Nicolas Maduro said that Venezuela viewed the overthrow “with sadness”, but that it was a “consequence of the pact that [Gutierrez] did with the international financial elite”. The Bolivian Movement for Socialism has also welcomed the change of government.

On April 22, the Brazilian foreign minister told the media that the offer of asylum to Gutierrez was motivated by a desire for “stability”, not by “sympathy”.

Washington, which had supported Gutierrez right until the Congress decision, has refused to recognize the new government. On April 21, secretary of state Condoleezza Rice called for “a constitutional process to lead to elections”.

International economic markets went wobbly on April 20, when Palacio appointed a known anti-neoliberal as finance minister, and others reputedly hostile to Washington to cabinet posts, but Palacio was quick to reassure international capital. On April 22, he told reporters that he would keep paying the nation’s debts while investing more in education, health and the oil industry, and would also negotiate a free trade agreement with the US.

Meanwhile, smaller scale protests continue. On April 22, thousands of forajidos marched peacefully to demand “dignity and sovereignty”, in a reference to fears that there would be attempts to reinstate Gutierrez from outside Ecuador. The Brazilian embassy has had small numbers of protesters outside it demanding Gutierrez’s arrest.