Since the end of the nineteenth century, the evolution of social democracy has been marked by a characteristic paradox. On the one hand, its rise has depended upon tumultuous mass working-class struggles, the same struggles which have provided the muscle to win major reforms and the basis for the emergence of far left political organizations and ideology. The expansion of working-class self-organization, power and political consciousness, dependent in turn upon working-class mass action, has provided the critical condition for the success of reformism as well as of the far Left. On the other hand, to the extent that social democracy has been able to consolidate itself organizationally, its core representatives – drawn from the ranks of trade union officials, parliamentary politicians, and the petty bourgeois leaderships of the mass organizations of the oppressed – have invariably sought to implement policies reflecting their own distinctive social positions and interests: positions which are separate from and interests which are, in fundamental ways, opposed to those of the working class. Specifically, they have sought to establish and maintain a secure place for themselves and their organizations within capitalist society. To achieve this security, the official representatives of social-democratic and reformist organizations have found themselves obliged to seek, at a minimum, the implicit toleration and, ideally, the explicit recognition of capital. As a result, they have been driven, systematically and universally, not only to relinquish socialism as a goal and revolution as a means, but beyond that to contain and at times actually to crush those upsurges of mass working-class action whose dynamics lead to broader forms of working-class organization and solidarity, to deepening attacks on capital and the capitalist state, to the constitution of working people as a self-conscious class, and, in some instances, to the adoption of socialist and revolutionary perspectives on a mass scale. They have done this des-

pite the fact that it is precisely these movements which have given them their birth and sustained their power, and which have been the only possible guarantee of their continued existence in class-divided, crisis-prone capitalism.

The paradoxical consequence has been that, to the extent that the official representatives of reformism in general and social democratic parties in particular have been freed to implement their characteristic worldviews, strategies, and tactics, they have systematically undermined the basis for their own continuing existence, paving the way for their own dissolution.

ROBERT BRENNER (1985)1

Perhaps no contemporary slice of North American history corroborates so completely Brenner’s assessment of the character and trajectory of reformism as the 1983 experience of Solidarity in Canada’s west-coast province, British Columbia (BC).2 Organised to oppose a legislative assault on workers, the poor and all sectors of the population who live daily with forms of special oppression (women, gays, racial and ethnic minorities, the disabled, and the elderly), Solidarity was the most important moment of class struggle in the Canadian far west since the organisational upheavals of the province’s resource-sector workers in the 1940s. It drew hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, students, women, community activists, and previously uninvolved citizens into a politicised crucible of opposition to the state and the politics of socioeconomic retrenchment so championed by the New Right. As it ran its course, a perceived general strike seemed to be in the offing. For 130 days British Columbians were caught in a vice of class struggle from which there was no escape. ‘Just how close the province came to spilling over the brink we need not speculate’, editorialised the Vancouver Sun as the situation calmed in mid-November. Five months later, the Toronto Globe and Mail correspondent would write: ‘Class warfare used to be a joke in this province. In the spring of 1984 no one is laughing’.3

2 This article is based on the more extensive treatment in Palmer 1987b. Those wishing for access to fuller documentation and more detail should consult this study.