

# Quebec separatist win - whose victory?

North America's own home-grown secessionist movement has shifted into second gear in French-speaking Quebec with the election victory last October of the Parti Quebecois under the leadership of former Liberal Party technocrat Rene Levesque. It's not the Social Revolution by a long shot, however, since the PQ is the kind of social democratic party that won't really disturb the basic social equation, even while it brings in a fair number of welfare measures.

The PQ, or at least its ruling, Levesque cabinet, seems to visualize Quebec independence in the form of a customs and monetary union with English-speaking Canada—a sort of common market for the free movement of goods, labor and capital. The PQ hopes to separate peacefully after a "national" (Quebec-wide) plebiscite, promised for within the next two years. (Recent polls seem to indicate that most French-speaking Quebecers, while they voted for the PQ, are happy to remain in Canada.) The plebiscite is based on the assessment that the federal government won't use force to keep Canada from unravelling.

In speeches since the election, including an important address to the international financiers of the Economic Club of New York, Levesque has advertised Quebec as a safe and stable environment for foreign investment. Still, with a militant trade union movement and well-organized left and progressive

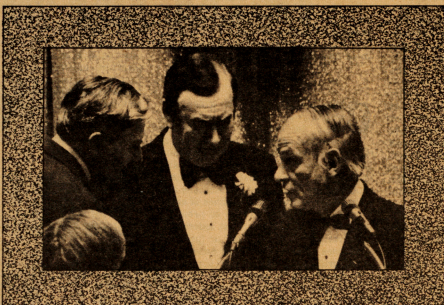
elements in most key popular organizations, the potential for some significant social transformation can't be dismissed now that the independence option has an authoritative forum from which to propagandize.

The political climate in Quebec has been moving leftward since the late 1940's, especially since the historic 1949 strike of asbestos miners. That strike which was violently suppressed, created the first breach between the old reactionary regime and the Quebec people, and it baptized a whole generation of intellectuals and workers into political struggle.

## Quiet Revolution

The early Sixties in Quebec were marked by the "Quiet Revolution"—the development of the educational and social infrastructures demanded by a modern capitalist economy. The movers and beneficiaries of these changes were a new stratum of highly-educated, French-speaking professionals and managers employed directly or indirectly by the burgeoning Quebec State.

The original political vehicle for this elite was the Liberal Party, but the Liberals were eventually cast aside because of their corruption, inefficiency and involvement in federal politics. During the late Sixties, the PQ came into being to represent these new interests, along with trade union elements, student groups and Movement remnants.



Rene Levesque (right) confers with banker David Rockefeller (left) and New York Gov. Hugh Carey at black-tie dinner with American money interests.

The birth and development of the PQ coincided with one of the most intense periods of social agitation in Canadian and Quebec history. The urban guerrilla Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) peaked severely a series of bombings and other actions with two political kidnappings in October, 1970. The federal government responded by imposing the War Measures Act (virtually a State of Siege) and sending in the Army to detain hundreds of Quebec activists in a vain attempt to stem the growing tide of separatist opinion.

In April, 1972, more than 200,000 public service workers in a Common Front of three main labour organi-

zations staged a general strike, but were forced back to work by reformist leadership. When three militant union leaders were jailed as a result of the strike, the workers disrupted the province for ten days with demonstrations, occupations and walkouts.

More recently, another Common Front general strike occurred in the construction industry, and there have been major strikes in the asbestos, metallurgical, hydro-electrical and textile industries. Two-thirds of all organized workers have confronted the State directly or indirectly in the past few years. Even teachers have defied court orders to return to work; workers of the

government-operated hydro-electric company controverted their defiance right through the election campaign.

Much of the impetus for this militancy has come from the Confederation des Syndicats Nationaux (Confederation of National Trade Unions), the closest thing to a mass-based syndicalist trade union federation existing in North America. The CNTU, which represents about 150,000 workers in the public service and industrial sectors, is somewhat to the left of the social democrats, and has a strong tradition of workers' control of union affairs.

## Macho Challenge

Since the election, opinion-molders in English Canada

have attempted to characterize the PQ victory as mainly a vote for "clean" government and against the corrupt Liberal machine. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (himself a Quebecer but a federalist) has said he intends to stake his political career on the coming of the plebiscite and he has issued a macho challenge to Levesque to do likewise.

The federal Liberal party's main selling point to the electorate outside Quebec has been its ability to keep Canada together. But there has been a lot of indifference and outright opposition to attempts to increase the use of French in the federal civil service and media. Last Summer, English-speaking air traffic controllers, joined by English-speaking pilots, successfully struck against the use of French in communications in the Quebec airspace. The capitulation of the federal government to their demands and the massive, barely disguised racist support which the controllers got all across English Canada, can only have the effect of increasing nationalist and separatist sentiment.

It's clear that the PQ downplayed the independence issue during the election (the original PQ position was that independence is a sentiment, not a goal). The more militant elements of the PQ are sorely under-represented in Levesque's cabinet, which is made up mostly of middle-class professionals and technocrats.

However, the election was a result of strong working class support for the PQ. Levesque, whose attitude toward labor up to this time can be described as negative (tending toward hostility, is going to have to be prepared to offer some concessions in terms of more social services and more favourable labour legislation. But this comes at a time when Quebec is plagued by one of the highest rates of unemployment and inflation in the country. The Quebec economy is already facing problems due to the lack of a large industrial base and mammoth debts to pay for the Olympics and the James Bay hydro-electricity project.

The strategy of the PQ will be to attempt to isolate the militant left in the labour movement by appealing directly to the rank-and-file. There will be the familiar calls for "self-sacrifice" for the nationalist cause in an attempt to defuse labour militancy and wage demands. This may backfire, though, because it was the rank-and-file, and not the union bureaucrats, who took the lead during the major strikes and in defiance of the back-to-work orders.

(Thanks to *Our Generation* Vol 11 No. 4, an English language libertarian socialist magazine, available from 3834 rue St. Urbain, Montreal, Quebec for much of the information in this article; for another view, check *Canadian Dimension*, Vol 11, No. 7, available at Box 1413, Winnipeg, Man.)

# Canadian labour runs on the spot

North America's first nation-wide general strike last October 14 may have drawn over one million Canadian workers off the job, but it also exposed significant weaknesses within the Canadian trade union movement.

Organized by the federal government to release its stranglehold on wage increases of Canadian workers.

Organized by the Canadian Labour Congress — a national labour body affiliated to the AFL-CIO and composed of 22 million unionists — the "Day of Protest" was promoted by the CLC organizers as an opportunity for Canadian workers to show the government they were prepared to fight the year-old wage controls imposed on them as part of the Trudeau government's anti-inflation measures.

Claiming that labor costs are the main cause of inflation, the Liberal government has limited the annual wage increases of over 1,000,000 workers to an official guideline of 8 per cent since October, 1975.

Hundreds of thousands more workers have had their negotiated wage increases rolled back. Those appealing the rulings of the government's Anti-Inflation Board

(AIB), which administers the anti-inflation program, have been penalized by further wage cuts.

During this time, prices and profits have gone unchecked and continue to climb, while the government, in a further attack on the living standards of Canadians, has begun a program of "restraint," cutting back on needed social service expenditures.

The bulk of trade unionists joining the protest rallies on October 14 had mainly economic goals — they were out

simply to protest the wage controls. Their show of strength was clearly visible.

The work stoppage in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, was the largest with 440,000 trade unionists participating. Over 240,000 downed tools in Quebec, British Columbia, a long-time bastion of labour militancy, had 190,000, and the largest demonstrations proportional to population.

In B.C. the forest industry was almost completely shut down; two-thirds of the construction projects in and around Vancouver were at a standstill; and waterfront activity was non-existent.

## No Reprisals

Demonstrations of up to 10,000 workers took place in major Canadian cities. Reprisals in the form of firings or suspensions were virtually non-existent, since most bosses took the position that it was healthy for the workers to blow off some steam.

The strongest support for the protest came from mem-

bers of the industrial and construction unions across Canada, while public service sector workers were conspicuously weak.

And with only half of its membership out, the CLC obviously lacked the full participation it desired, especially from the key transport sector. The rail ways were not shut down, and except for a stoppage of a few hours in Vancouver, nationwide city transit drivers continued working. Support from unorganized labour was just about non-existent.

The call for a general strike originated at a May CLC convention in Quebec City, where labor delegates from across Canada mandated the CLC executive to "organize and conduct a general work stoppage or stoppages if and when necessary to defeat the wage control program."

## Labour Manifesto

At the same time, they had approved a CLC "Manifesto for Labour," which, in denouncing the wage controls, also called on organized labour to enter into a sharing of national power with business and government in a "tri-partite" arrangement. The proposals for "tripartism" were aimed at



Day of protest brings 10,000 workers into Vancouver streets.

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