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# ELAY

A SOCIALIST PROJECT REVIEW



ISRAELI APARTHEID, ISRAELI WARS • U.S. ELECTIONS  
AMERICA SINKING? • CUBA IN THE COMING PERIOD  
PINOCHET IS GONE • DEMOCRACY IN GREECE



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Relay, A Socialist Project Review, intends to act as a forum for conveying and debating current issues of importance to the Left in Ontario, Canada and from around the world. Contributions to the re-laying of the foundations for a viable socialist politics are welcomed by the editorial committee.

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# RELAY II ■■■ CONTENTS

January/  
February #15

2007

## Canada

|   |                                |   |
|---|--------------------------------|---|
| A Proposal for a Discussion on Party Building .....           | Ken Kalturnyk and Karen Naylor | 4 |
| From the Food Bank to the Luggage Carousel .....              | Kevin Skerrett                 | 5 |
| It's Time to Wise Up, Fellow Workers: The IWW in Canada ..... | Len Wallace                    | 6 |
| Venezuelan Solidarity Wins New Ground in Toronto .....        | Suzanne Weiss                  | 8 |

## U.S. Mid-term Elections

|  |                   |    |
|--|-------------------|----|
| The 'I Am Fed Up' Vote: A Quick Look at the Nov. 7 Elections ..... | Bill Fletcher Jr. | 9  |
| The 2006 U.S. Congressional Election: Hold the Champagne .....     | Simon Enoch       | 10 |

## Middle East

|  |                 |    |
|--|-----------------|----|
| Continuing Gains in the Struggle Against Israeli Apartheid ..... | Zac Smith       | 12 |
| Far From Being the Last Arab-Israeli War .....                   | Hassan Husseini | 14 |

## Labour

|                            |   |    |
|----------------------------|---|----|
| Echoes of the 1930s .....  | Sedef Arat-Koc, Aparna Sundar and Bryan Evans | 16 |
| Challenging Wal-Mart ..... | Herman Rosenfeld                              | 18 |

## Cuba

|  |                                |    |
|--|--------------------------------|----|
| Cuba: The Trials and Tribulations of Socialism .....     | Carlos Torres & Carolyn Watson | 23 |
| Cuba's Revolution Marks its 50th Anniversary .....       | John Riddell                   | 26 |
| The British Left and the Anti-imperialist Struggle ..... | Ernie Tate                     | 29 |

## Culture Front

|   |                  |    |
|---|------------------|----|
| 'Neoliberalism and Canada's Ruling Class' .....       | Greg Albo        | 32 |
| The Orientalist Technique and the Western Media ..... | Nishant Upadhyay | 34 |

## International

|  |                       |    |
|--|-----------------------|----|
| Pinochet is Gone but Neoliberalism Remains .....                   | Carlos Torres         | 35 |
| Epitaph to the death of Death .....                                | Carlos Torres         | 36 |
| Is the Big Ship America Sinking? Contradictions and Openings ..... | Sam Gindin            | 38 |
| Greek Democracy in the Post-Euro Era .....                         | Michalis Spourdalakis | 42 |

## Quebec

|  |                |    |
|--|----------------|----|
| Canada, Quebec and the Left: Outflanked Again? .....   | Nathan Rao     | 46 |
| Quebec Solidaire Adopts a Program for Government ..... | Richard Fidler | 51 |

# A Proposal for a Discussion on Party Building

Ken Kaltornyk and Karen Naylor

In the autumn of 1998 Sam Gindin wrote an essay entitled: “Is the Party Over?” In that essay he presented the thesis that the NDP could not be considered a party of socialism and that a new party was needed to lead the struggle against neoliberalism and for the construction of socialism. However, he noted, correctly in our opinion, that conditions did not exist at that time to establish such a party. Therefore, he proposed an interim measure, the creation of an organization that was more than a movement or coalition and less than a party – a structured movement against capitalism.

That essay sparked a heated discussion in socialist circles and led to several attempts to create such an organization, including Rebuilding the Left, Structured Movement Against Capitalism and Socialist Project. These experiments have met with varying degrees of success.

In the July-August issue of *Relay* Sam revisited this question in the article “Beyond the CAW-NDP Divorce: Towards a New Politics?” Once again he noted that a new socialist party is needed but that conditions do not yet exist for its creation. He then went on to propose the establishment of People’s Assemblies as an interim measure. We agree with Sam’s assessment regarding the lack of conditions to establish a new party. We also agree that some form of mass organization for the broader movement is required and People’s Assemblies may be the answer. However, we do not believe that the establishment of such organizations will get us any closer to establishing a new party. In fact, in some ways we think it represents a step backward from Sam’s earlier proposal.

In our view the problem stems from our collective hope that conditions for establishing a new party will emerge spontaneously in the course of carrying out joint political organizing in the broader movement. However, six years of this kind of activity has brought us no closer to our goal. We would suggest that unless the revolutionary socialists create such conditions on a systematic basis conditions to establish a party will never exist. If we do not begin discussions about what kind of party we want and what kind of party we need, the project will never get off the ground.

We fully recognize the reality that many, many people who consider themselves socialists, communists or revolutionaries have had negative experiences with political parties spanning the spectrum of “left” politics. This leads, understandably, to a certain reluctance to go down that path again. However, this could prove to be a fruitful starting point. Why not begin from our negative experiences and discuss what we do not want to see in a political party and what measures could be adopted to guard against those negatives? It’s quite possible that such a discussion could lead to a broad consensus of how a new party should be structured and how it should operate.

In our experience, the vast majority of complaints about political parties centre around the issue of internal democracy or lack thereof. These complaints take many forms. Members of social democratic parties complain that the parliamentary caucus ignores the decisions of the membership taken at conventions. Members of “far left” organizations complain about infringement on freedom of conscience once a decision has been made. In virtually

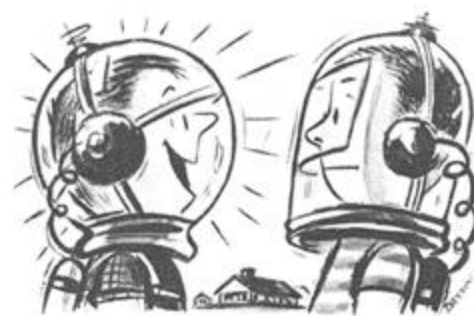
every party there are complaints about the usurping of the rights of the members by the executive. Lack of internal democracy is also reflected in the failure or refusal of individuals or groups of individuals to carry out decisions that have been taken collectively.

The problems of democracy are not easy to solve, whether within a single organization or within society as a whole. On the one hand, the broadest possible democracy is crucial in releasing the initiative and creativity of the members; on the other hand, without a strong executive there is no focus and very little gets accomplished. On the one hand, democracy is undermined if the minority refuses to accept the will of the majority; on the other hand, democracy is undermined if the opinions of the minority are ignored and their rights are trampled on. On the one hand, democracy works best in small groups of 10 or less; on the other hand, effectiveness dictates large organizations. In other words, there is a constant balancing act between the rights of the individual members and the interests of the collective, between democracy and effectiveness. Having said that, if socialists cannot solve these fundamental problems of democracy within their own organizations, how are we going to solve them at the level of society as a whole?

Of course, the issue of internal democracy is not the only problem facing a political party. There are also the problems of achieving a balance between theory and practice, between electoral and movement work, between intellectuals and workers, between local and national work, and so on. Nor is all of the experience of past party-building negative. However, the main hang-up at present seems to be on the issue of internal democracy, so that would seem like the logical place to start.

We are not suggesting that individuals and groups should drop their own work or should postpone dealing with how to organize the broader movement. What we are suggesting is that those individuals who agree on the necessity to establish a new party should start discussing these issues of party-building and begin systematically working out their positions. Local and regional forums should be held to present position papers and raise the discussion and debate to a higher level. Then the same should be done nationally. We also propose that a reasonable timeline be established to carry out these discussions and that the aim of actually establishing a new party be kept in the foreground. After all, while we are trying to get our act together our enemies are organizing a broad offensive against the working class. **R**

Ken Kaltornyk and Karen Naylor are Winnipeg-based activists and members of the [Manitoba Regional Committee](#) of the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist).



# From the Food Bank to the Luggage Carousel, Capitalism is Hurting All of Us

Kevin Skerrett

Who truly suffers in difficult times such as these?

A casual read through the November 29 edition of the *Globe and Mail* might leave the impression that years of neoliberal attacks on wages, housing programs, unemployment insurance, pensions, public services and trade unions have been borne primarily by working class and poor people.

For example, in a two-inch digest article published at the bottom of page A20, we read about this week's publication of a research report from the Ontario Food Bank Association that indicates a surge in food bank use in the past five years:

*...More than 330,000 Ontario residents use food banks each month – a spike of 18 per cent since 2001. Of those food bank users, the Ontario Hunger Report found 40 per cent were children and almost 20 per cent people with disabilities. The report found 17 per cent of food bank users hold jobs. People have lost good manufacturing jobs and are now working part-time or in the retail sector for an inadequate minimum wage.*

This certainly sounds pretty bad.

But any readers concerned that the pain of social and economic adjustment has not been fairly shared across the class spectrum should flip over to the front page of the same paper's Travel section, which features a moving story of high-earner hardship in an even longer, six-inch column titled "Executive Class".

The column profiles Mat Wilcox, owner of the Wilcox Group, who describes the serious decline in working conditions that she faces as a frequent business traveller. As just one illustration, she points out that she now faces such severe wait-times at the baggage carousel at Pearson airport that she has been forced to alter her basic housing:

*I'm in Toronto every other week for a week, so I can tell you it takes 52 minutes to get your luggage at Pearson, 19 minutes in Vancouver. And that's the new Pearson terminal. It's been frustrating for me. I bought a condo in Toronto because I can't stand waiting so long for luggage. Now, I can just walk on and off the plane.*

Fortunately, Ms. Wilcox's executive ingenuity has been deployed to solve the resulting challenge of needing more clothes than she is permitted to "carry on":

*I try not to check luggage. If I have a dinner or event, I'll have*

*my clothes shipped to the hotel. I had a black-tie event recently and went to Prada and they shipped the clothes. Or I'll ship my clothes myself. I've learned you can get your clothes shipped wherever you are anywhere in the world.*

With this kind of creative, solution-oriented instinct, it is no surprise to see the Wilcox Group described as a consulting firm "specializing in crisis management and labour relations".

Clearly, the struggle to survive the hard realities of contemporary capitalism is not limited to users of food banks and the working poor. And, without question, the *Globe and Mail* can be counted on to continue this kind of balanced coverage of the diverse struggles being waged within the new economy. **R**

Kevin Skerrett is a trade union researcher and activist in Ottawa.



# IT'S TIME TO WISE UP, FELLOW WORKERS: The IWW in Canada

Len Wallace

*"when the factory whistle blows it does not call us to work as Irishmen, Germans, Americans, Russians, Greeks, Poles, Negroes or Mexicans. It calls us to work as wage workers, regardless of the country in which we were born or colour of our skins. Why not get together then ... as wage workers, just as we are compelled to do in the shop?"*

- Prince Rupert IWW member

One of the most vivid childhood memories I have is my mother pulling out her mandolin and an old frayed piece of paper with typewritten words. To the tune "Redwing" she sang the chorus of a song:

*"Shall we all be slaves and work for wages,  
It is outrageous, has been for ages.  
This Earth by right belongs to toilers  
and not to spoilers of liberty."*

Next came Solidarity Forever. I recall an evening in Toronto visiting with friends. She began an old hobo song and they all chimed in:

Hallelujah, I'm a bum  
Hallelujah, bum again  
Hallelujah, give us a handout  
to revive us again.

I didn't know then that these were songs of the IWW – the Industrial Workers of the World – the Wobblies. Written long ago, these songs were learned by my mother as a child and passed on to me in a long historico-cultural chain. Perhaps that is the most enduring legacy of the Wobblies, spreading a revolutionary message through a cultural link touching generations.

The political left has too often both romanticised and vilified the IWW in the same breath. Praised as idealistic it was condemned as impossibilist or utopianism. Praised as uncompromising it was condemned as intransigent. Its direct action tactics praised as creative and innovative while the organisation was condemned as anarchic and anarchist-dominated.

The IWW was founded in Chicago, 1905 to the resounding words that it would be a Continental Congress of Labour urged the abolition of the wage system, building the new world in the shell of the old through the organisational structure of the One Big Industrial Union. The IWW was more than an industrial union. It was a revolutionary movement.

Within one year of the founding convention the first IWW charter was issued in Canada to the Vancouver Industrial Mixed Union No. 322. Locals were organised amongst lumber workers and dockworkers. Just as the Wobblies in the U.S. organised Black workers, Vancouver IWWs recruited native/aboriginal workers employed on the docks known as "Bows and Arrows." The IWW organised those considered to be unorganisable.

Five years later the IWW claimed 10,000 Canadian members amongst loggers, miners, agricultural workers, longshoremen and textile workers. In 1912 the IWW was leading free speech fights in Vancouver. Strikes were organised amongst British Columbia's railway workers against the Canadian National Railway for better work conditions and higher wages. One of the strike actions became known as the "1,000 mile picket line" extending from employment offices in Vancouver through Seattle, Washington to San Francisco, California and Minneapolis, Minnesota, a true instance of international worker solidarity. The press railed against the IWW. The Vancouver Sun wrote of them as "despicable scum of humanity."

Three thousand construction workers on the Grand Trunk Pacific went on strike in BC and Alberta. IWW bard Joe Hill crossed the border to help and penned "**Where The Fraser River Flows**":

*Fellow Workers, pay attention to what I'm going to mention,  
For it is the clear contention of the workers of the world,  
That we should all be ready, true hearted, brave and steady,  
To rally 'round the standard when the Red Flag is unfurled.*

*Where the Fraser River flows, every fellow worker knows,  
They have bullied and oppressed us, but still our union grows.  
And we're going to find a way boys, for shorter hours and  
better pay, boys  
And we're going to win the day, boys, where the Fraser River  
flows.*

Like many of the IWW strikes, actions by workers were innovative. Railway companies would take the luggage of the strike breakers they hired and kept them as security so that the fare to the workplace would finally be repaid through the strike breaker's wages. IWW members would sign on pretending to be strike breakers and leave the railway company with suitcases stuffed full of heavy bricks while they deserted the train.

In following years IWW railway strikes spread through Alberta and into the USA. IWW members organised unemployed workers. In 1914, the IWW made the Edmonton city council agree to providing homeless workers with meal tickets and employment for 400 workers on public projects.

The First World War gave the Canadian State the excuse to suppress the IWW, other radical organisations, the labour movement and keep the working class divided and under its thumb. The IWW took a stand against the war as an imperialistic slaughter that workers had no business in. Unlike the AFL unions the

IWW would not accept the no-strike pledge. In 1918 the hammer came down in repression aimed directly at immigrant workers, the unemployed, radicals, revolutionaries. Simply put, working class men and women were intimidated by a system of organised state sponsored harassment and terror. RCMP would regularly come into towns and round up unemployed men, throw them against a wall, send every third or fourth to prison, drive them out of town or deport them from the country.

Canadian governmental officials deliberately slandered the IWW tainting it with the lie that it was nothing but a front for Bolsheviks, a haven for “undesirable” aliens, lazy, shiftless workers, “outside agitators,” saboteurs, enemy spies, traitors and harbingers of destruction and violence. Union halls and halls of radical organisations were searched, ransacked and closed down. Censorship prevailed, working class newspapers closed. September, 1914, a federal government order in council declared fourteen organisations unlawful. Anyone who belonged or joined the IWW could be thrown in jail for five years.



Worker's meetings were banned. So-called “enemy” languages were not allowed to be used in public meetings including Ukrainian, Finnish, Russian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, German, Turkish. Religious services in such languages were exempt from the ban as religious authorities in those communities joined the assault on radical worker organisations.

Despite the repression IWW organising continued. Members set up halls in northern Ontario's mining and lumbering towns – Sudbury, Cobalt, Timmins, South Porcupine, Sault Ste. Marie, Port

Arthur, especially amongst Finns, Ukrainians, Russians, Croatian workers. In 1919 locals were established in Toronto and Kitchener. Agricultural workers were being recruited in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Into the 1920s and 30s the IWW was still organising in British Columbia, its ideas influencing autoworkers in the Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan areas. IWW agitation continued well into the late 1930s. As late as 1949 there were six organised branches in Canada.

Much of the current literature from liberal and left sources (except for those explicitly pro-IWW) would leave one with the impression that the IWW was nothing more than an “American based syndicalist union” that presaged the more organisationally successful CIO. Perhaps it is the reluctance in academic circles to understand or acknowledge the existence of the IWW. In their eyes a revolutionary, mass working class movement was simply not supposed to happen here. For the left perhaps a dogmatic reluctance to recognise a movement that did not fit into officially preconceived notions.

The Leninist and social democratic left has been remiss in analysing the IWW beyond a rather vulgar formulaic that insists the IWW was nothing but an anarcho-syndicalist and “anti-political” vehicle of backward worker aspirations. For the most part, they just don't know how to categorise it and therefore have ignored it for failing to correspond to dogmatic formulas. Here was a genuinely revolutionary mass movement, without vanguard, without party.

While the IWW was not a political “party” in the sense of being a parliamentary party, or one seeking office, it was indeed a working class political “party” in the broad and positive sense of raising class issues uncompromisingly and raised working class self-awareness and empowerment. Far from being an “anti-political” movement, one can make the argument that, more than any other self-described “Marxist” organisation, the IWW was a living Marxism in action and principle.

To the IWW mistrust of politics and politicians was a revolutionary and practical consideration. Politics meant vote catching, compromise and usually with members of another social class. It meant putting one's trust in professional politicians rather than in the working class itself. Besides, what was the use of voting when so many workers were disenfranchised in the first place? Women were denied the right to vote, so were foreign workers, workers without fixed addresses, those without property, migratory workers, agricultural labourers – the very heart of the industrial working class.

Politicians themselves were part and parcel of a power structure which was Anglo-centred, for those with higher incomes and from other classes. Non-Anglo-Saxon workers were confronted by a WASP power hierarchy and old boy network that blocked participation for any effective change. Government officials, bureaucrats, school officials, managers, teachers, civil servants, police, military – the whole gamut of officialdom and authority – were part of the WASP power structure. Not only was participation discouraged within the political system, it was minimal within bourgeois political parties and even parties of the left.

Furthermore, the experience in the U.S. also showed that political forces on the Marxist left could divide workers. Not only did the Socialist Party and the Socialist Labor Party wage war →



on each other, they either waged war on the IWW or tried to control it. The same held in Canada when the Communist Party tried to draw the IWW membership into its ranks, demanded it accept the Third International, follow changing party line.

Contrary to its detractors, the IWW did not disdain theory and philosophy. Unlike political parties of the left, the IWW consistently maintained a revolutionary commitment to abolishing the wage system in contradistinction to advocating for a system of planned production or to the reform of the capitalist system which unfortunately came to be identified as "Socialism." And it maintained its belief that the job could only be done by the working class itself, not by politicians, professional revolutionaries and vanguards. Unlike other parties it carried these principles through in practice.

IWW publications were not the theoretical mouthpieces of a central committee. They were a venue for internal debate. Workers wrote the articles. The cultural aspect of working class solidarity was not one manufactured by official party agit-prop. Revolution was not only about engaging in the realm of ideas and theory, but as actual practice at the cultural level. Humour, songs,

cartoons, art, stories, poetry were written by workers for workers always driving the message home that there was a war between the classes, that the working class should "wise up" and "demand the whole pie." Culture and a working class counter-culture was just as much a revolutionary weapon as any pamphlet written by a Central Committee.

The mere fact that this was an actual mass revolutionary movement affecting so many thousands of workers, organising the supposedly unorganisable against extremely disfavoured odds, for practical gains now and for the abolition of wage slavery now and not some distant future, stirred by the dynamic of the ultimate importance of class using all economic, political and cultural materials at hand means there is something here worth examining. For those wishing to go beyond the old muck of the Old, New and fragmented left, who want to go beyond Capital and not simply recreate it in another form, the IWW's legacy is rich in meaning. **R**

Len Wallace is a Windsor-based troubadour and activist.

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# Venezuelan Solidarity Wins New Ground in Toronto

Suzanne Weiss

The presidential campaign in Venezuela, which led to a smashing 63% victory by the Bolivarian forces on December 3, was accompanied by a series of solidarity activities in Toronto. The wide range of organizations involved reflects the growing influence of Venezuela's revolution in Toronto.

- On **November 2**, the recently formed Latin American Solidarity Committee (LASC) held a discussion of the present stage of Venezuela's revolution.
- On **November 13**, the Manuelita Saenz Bolivarian Circle heard a report from Caracas by Nicolas López.
- On **December 3**, election day, the Hands Off Venezuela Committee held a solidarity picket at the Venezuelan consulate.
- On **December 5**, more than 120 Bolivarian supporters jammed into an election victory celebration at the Concord Café. Initiated by the Venezuela We Are With You Coalition, the event was cosponsored by the four other Toronto organizations with a Venezuela solidarity focus: Hands Off Ven-

ezuela, LASC, and the Manuelita Saenz and Louis Riel Bolivarian Circles.

• On **December 12**, the Venezuelan consulate invited a number of solidarity activists to attend its own intimate victory celebration. In addition to the five Venezuela solidarity organizations, the Stop the War Coalition, the Canadian Arab Federation, the Committee Against Israeli Apartheid, and the Cuban consulate were represented.

The December 5 event showed again the strength and attractiveness of the Venezuela solidarity organizations when they act together. And attendance reflected the wide range of political currents that stand in solidarity with Venezuela. The gathering was addressed by Maria Paez Victor of the Louis Riel Circle, Khaled Mouammar, president of the Canadian Arab Federation, Suzanne Weiss of the Toronto Haiti Action Committee, a representative of the Chilean-Mapuche peoples' solidarity group, and some left-political organizations.

The Venezuelan consulate was strongly represented. The entire consulate

staff stood together at the front in their red berets while the Consul made a fighting speech. The staff are young people, fresh from the struggle in Venezuela and with no hint of stuffy diplomatic routine. Half way through their presentation, the Cuban Consul General arrived, and the Venezuelans joyously invited him to join them and speak.

Following the election, Hugo Chávez took initiatives to build the authority of community base committees and form a new party "at the service of the Revolution and socialism." It will be a big job for activists in Toronto to keep pace with these events. The Venezuela We Are With You coalition plans an initial discussion on these developments on January 14 (write [cvec-tor@yahoogroups.com](mailto:cvec-tor@yahoogroups.com)). The coalition mailing list also reports on activities of all Venezuela solidarity activities. **R**

Suzanne Weiss is a member of the Venezuela We Are With You Coalition steering committee.



# The 'I Am Fed Up' Vote: A Quick Look at the Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> Elections

Bill Fletcher Jr.

This election clearly represented both a repudiation of Bush but also very intense anger with the environment that has been building in the USA over the last several years. Looking at some of the polling results points to the fact that 36% of the voters saw themselves as explicitly voting against Bush. 41% indicated that corruption was “extremely important” in their voting decisions. 56% of those polled indicated that the USA should withdraw some or all of its forces from Iraq. In that sense, this vote seems to represent the ‘I am fed up’ vote.

Second, the Democrats still do not have a coherent message. While the vote may have largely been inspired by anti-war sentiment (which took some time to percolate) this does not mean that the Democrats have a clear and unified message as to what their program will be vis-à-vis Iraq, U.S. foreign policy, or much else.

Third, the nightmare is not over. It was reported that some European parliamentarians declared that the ‘six year nightmare’ is at end. This is very hopeful. We must keep in mind that certainly with regard to foreign policy, Bush still has his finger on the trigger. This should be understood both literally and figuratively. The Bush administration military threats towards Iran and North Korea are not ending just because of this election. At the same time, this election was certainly a shock to the system, and the Bush administration must assume that it will be under a good deal of scrutiny in both branches of Congress. The resignation/firing of Rumsfeld may be the tip of the iceberg in terms of shaking things up.

The nightmare is not over, as well, because the nightmare is not simply a partisan nightmare. The world is suffering not only because of the arrogance of the Bush administration but due to the neo-liberal economic (and environmental) policies that the USA has been articulating since mid-way through the Carter administration in the late 1970s. While it is clear that the Bush administration represents one wing of the ruling elite that has a heavy-handed view toward world affairs, let’s just keep in mind that Clinton’s international policies were not ones that strengthened a democratic international environment (think about the Balkans war, or the near military engagement with North Korea only resolved through the intervention of former President Jimmy Carter).

Fourth, the Republican game of using Black faces to advance their agendas is not over. In Maryland, the Michael Steele candidacy was very effective in playing into discontent with the Maryland Democratic Party and the desire for Black representation even though the Black vote still went overwhelmingly to Democrat Ben Cardin. We should anticipate that the Republicans will use this



black faced destabilizing tactic in the future.

Fifth, ballot initiatives were a mixed bag. While South Dakota voters rejected the draconian anti-abortion initiative, voters in eight states voted to ban gay marriage, though Arizona turned this measure down. In Michigan, an anti-affirmative action measure was passed by the electorate. Clearly so-called wedge issues remain an important factor and one should not assume that the rejection of Bush, et. al., represents a rejection of their total program.

Sixth, and last (for now) the elections point to the absolute need for an independent progressive force that can operate both inside and outside the Democratic Party. People turned to the Democrats out of disgust for the Republicans. This will not be enough to hold them. It will also not be enough to advance a progressive movement (even if the Democrats wanted to do that). Instead, there is a need for a political motion that rebuilds a grassroots organization and program with its eyes set on the transformation of the U.S. political scene. If we do not use this time to build it, we will witness the furtherance of despair and cynicism, rather than hope and defiance. **R**

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a long-time labor and international activist and writer. He is the past president of TransAfrica Forum. This article first appeared in the November 9<sup>th</sup> issue of *The Black Commentator*.

# The 2006 U. S. Congressional Election: *Hold the Champagne*



Simon Enoch

In a sweeping victory, Democrats have successfully captured the House of Representatives and squeaked out control of the U.S. Senate. Many liberal commentators can barely contain their glee as they speak of the 'Blue wave' that will reinvigorate progressive politics in the United States. Far be it for me to rain on the liberals' parade, but the election results may actually presage an even bleaker period for liberal-left politics than the previous twelve years. Thus, while many on the liberal-left will deem this a victory for progressive politics, it may in fact turn out to be a monumental set-back for the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and those who seek to transform the party into a vehicle for a more substantial left politics.

Since the defeat of the John Kerry presidential bid, there has been an ongoing conflict over the future direction of the Democratic Party between the so-called "centrist" wing and the (albeit tepid) "liberal" wing. The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the voice of the responsible neoliberal "New Democrats," has been near hysterical in its alarm over the purported hijacking of the party by such radical stalwarts as Howard Dean, Moveon.org, and other "liberal fundamentalists."

## THE 'NEW' DEMOCRATIC PARTY: WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

The DLC, which was created in response to the defeat of Walter Mondale in 1984 on a purported "progressive" economic platform, has been ideologically disposed to neoliberal economic policy and intent on severing the Party's traditional labour and minority ties in favour of aligning with affluent, white-collar professionals. The DLC argues that Democrats cannot hope to achieve electoral success by mobilizing their traditional base alone, but needs to recapture swing voters who had been supposedly alienated by the liberalism of the Party's past. By moving to court these strata of society, the Democratic Party has abandoned any pretense of economic progressivism by championing free trade, deregulation, privatization, welfare "reform," and so on. Indeed, the Rev. Jesse Jackson has characterized the DLC as "Democrats for the Leisure Class."

Unfortunately, the results of the 2006 elections will only bolster the claims of the DLC and its ilk that true progressive candidates are unelectable. In their quest to retake the House, Democrats have fielded many high-profile candidates with decidedly

conservative views on issues of social policy. Heath Schuler, winner of the North Carolina House race, presents himself as an evangelical Christian who is ‘pro-business and anti-abortion.’ In Indiana, victor Brad Ellsworth brags about the ‘A’ rating he has received from the National Rifle Association. Bob Casey, who successfully unseated uber-conservative Rick Santorum in the Pennsylvania senate race, opposes abortion even in cases of rape and incest and favours outlawing contraception for married couples. The success of these candidates and others in a number of key races, coupled with the defeat of the mildly progressive Ned Lamont by Joe Neo-Lieberman will reinforce the position of the DLC to abjure progressive candidates in favour of “moderates” or “centrists.” That the above views are considered ‘moderate’ is frightening enough, but it seems to be preferable to any real radical economic program. Ellen Tauscher, co-chairwoman of the DLC-led “New Democrat Coalition,” sums this up when in praising the slate of conservative Democrat candidates she opined that, “there’s tremendous agreement and awareness that getting the majority and running over the left cliff is what our Republican opponents would dearly love,” adding that the inclination to move to the left is “something we have to fight.”

Despite some populist rhetoric decrying the injustice of free trade, most of these conservative Democrats have already been courted by both the DLC and the Blue Dog coalition, a caucus of socially conservative members formed in 1994. Furthermore, 27 of the top 40 House challengers have pledged to become members of the aforementioned New Democrat Coalition which promotes work-based welfare reform, charter schools, and market incentives for environmental protection. I think it is safe to assume that any lingering doubts over the fairness and equity of free trade will quickly be dispelled once these newly minted Representatives are fully brought into the fold of these neoliberal organizations and taught the ‘radical’ nature of their prior beliefs. The fate of similar populist economic rhetoric after the Republican “Contract with America” landslide in 1994 is illustrative in this regard.

### THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN POLITICS: CLASS POLITICS WITHOUT EXPRESSION

While the DLC and its attendant commentators will declare the 2006 election results as a popular mandate for centrist candidates and their brand of neoliberal economic policy, this only demonstrates the real lack of choice Americans have in this arena (Bernie Sanders of Vermont excepted). Media rhetoric about the centrism of the American public notwithstanding, Americans have consistently demonstrated decidedly left-wing values on key issues of economic policy. As Justin Lewis has documented, the American public tends to be to the right of elite opinion on social policy, while it tends to be significantly to the left of elite opinion on economic policy, endorsing many programs emblematic of the Keynesian welfare state. Indeed this duality can be witnessed in the overwhelming success of minimum wage ballot initiatives and anti-gay marriage proposals in the November elections.

It appears that rather than propose a truly progressive eco-

nomie policy, the Democrats may have decided to try and beat the Republicans at their own game, enlisting socially conservative candidates while neglecting any real discussion of the inequities of the American economic system. In effect, the recent elections could augur the creation of *two* parties of social reaction with no genuine outlet for working class interests.

As Thomas Frank has shown, the Republicans have already perfected this strategy of substituting fictive cultural grievances for real class grievances by offering up a litany of convenient scapegoats as the true source of the growing economic precariousness and insecurity of working Americans. All while championing economic policies that are at best inimical to the interests of the American working class. If the 2006 election results foretell a similar strategy by the Democrats – and certainly the stoking of racist fears by some Democrats during the immigration debate gives credence to this tendency – then we might expect the next few years to be especially ugly for the most vulnerable in American society.

While it is true that the current group of conservative Democrats are a minority and will not be in a position to exercise real leadership in the Party, their success will no doubt be emphasized by groups like the DLC and beltway pundits during the next round of elections in 2008 as the key to the party’s electoral strategy. Should the Democrats succumb to such counsel – and a survey of the mainstream media would suggest it is fast becoming holy writ – it will only compound the already immense difficulties progressives have in winning Democratic electoral nominations. Thus, rather than the ‘Blue wave’ auguring a return to progressive politics, it may in fact wash progressives and liberals back to the margins. **R**

Simon Enoch is a former resident of California and doctoral student at Ryerson University who understands the difficulty of defining ‘left’ politics in the United States. He has published in *State of Nature*, *Cultural Logic* and *Foucault Studies*.





# Continuing Gains in the Struggle Against Israeli Apartheid

Zac Smith



The Royal York Hotel was the scene of protest November 19 as members of Not In Our Name (NION), a Jewish anti-Zionist organization, and the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid (CAIA), staged an information picket outside a fundraising gala for Israel's Haifa University.

On hand for the event, which saw each of the evening's 750 guests make tax-deductible donations of \$500-\$25,000, were some of Canada's most prominent supporters of Israeli apartheid. Among them Irwin Colter, the former Justice Minister who contributed to the shift of Canadian policy toward open rejection of Palestinian rights at the United Nations; Gerry Schwartz, CEO of Onex, whose subsidiary CMC produces military components used in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); and Frank Dimant of B'nai Brith. Denouncing the event as one that "will reinforce an already unequal education system," organizers were quick to point out the barriers put in front of Palestinian education and of the apartheid context in which Israeli academic institutions exist, operate and contribute.

As Palestinian academics and students pointed out in a recent letter supporting an Irish initiative for an academic boycott:

"Israeli academic institutions have close links with the state, and the vast majority of Israeli intellectuals and academics either contribute directly to the Israeli occupation through research that justifies or improves the mechanisms of Israeli apartheid, or are complicit through their silence about it."

The silence is deafening. A 2005 report on "Barriers to Education" produced by the Right to Education Campaign at Birzeit University, in the West Bank, speaks to the reality of Palestinian education. The report documents the closing of 1289 schools due to Israeli military operations and curfew since September 2000, 48 of which have been turned outright into military bases. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, meanwhile, notes how 80 per cent of the population report "difficulty in going about their daily routine, including getting to school or university" as they attempt to navigate between hundreds of military checkpoints, curfew, and the rapid construction of Israel's "security barrier" which continues to carve up large swaths of Palestinian land. The Israeli army's most recent contribution to Palestinian education was in October, as they banned Palestinian students from study in Israel itself, citing security concerns.

As an organizer noted in an article in the local press addressing criticism of the picket, "fundraising for this program occurs in a larger context," that being the functioning of a university "grounded in an apartheid system."

## ISRAELI APARTHEID: MORE THAN RHETORIC

The characterization of Israel as an apartheid state stems not only from Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza, but more importantly from the way in which Israel's efforts to maintain a Jewish demographic majority and other earmarks of a "Jewish state" have manifested themselves upon various sections of the Palestinian population. Included in this analysis are the millions of Palestinian refugees displaced from their homes and illegally denied their right to return (these now constitute the largest refugee population in the world); those Palestinians living under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza; as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel who managed to stay within the pre-1967 de facto borders of the Israeli state and constitute around 20% of the Israeli population.

Having achieved a situation whereby most of the indigenous population had been expelled, the newly formed state took almost immediate steps to ensure a Jewish demographic majority. Key to this process was the early introduction of two laws that would define the apartheid nature of the Israeli state. The first, the Absentee Property Law, stripped Palestinians expelled in 1948 of citizenship rights in Israel, and also of their right to recover their land and property. The second law, the Law of Return, recognized the right of anyone of Jewish descent from around the world to settle in Israel-Palestine, even as the indigenous inhabitants of this land were denied their inalienable right of return (as stipulated in UN resolution 194).

In the West Bank and Gaza, the apartheid policies of the Israeli state are most visible. Palestinian population centers, populated by many refugees from "Israel proper," have been relegated to isolated Bantustans. The occupation divides people from their homes and livelihoods, as an elaborate system of military checkpoints, Jewish only by-pass roads and illegal Israeli settlements carve up the Palestinian landscape. Palestinians live under a separate legal system, governed by Israeli military law while Jewish

settlers in illegal settlements are governed by civilian law. Under this regime, approximately 10,000 Palestinian political prisoners now fill Israeli jails.

Yet as was mentioned earlier, it is not only the denial of Palestinians their right of return or Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza that contribute to the characterization of Israel as an apartheid state. Central to this understanding, and of the growth of an international movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) that has arisen to confront it, is the discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Apartheid in Israel is regulated through a series of laws that determine land use. As Israeli academic Uri Davis noted, these laws see to it that 93 per cent of Israel [regulated by the Israel Lands Authority (ILA) and the Jewish National Fund (JNF)] will be “designated...for cultivation, development and settlement by, of and for Jews only.” Of the 1.5 million Palestinian Arabs who now live in Israel – the descendants of those who remained after 1948 – close to a quarter, or 250,000 people are internally displaced. Classified as “present absentees,” they remain internally placed refugees in their own land, unable to return to their homes and properties lost in 1948. Another aspect of the reality for Palestinian citizens of Israel is the classification of the ‘unrecognized villages,’ residents of which now number over 100,000. “Existing for hundreds of years,” a report from the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid notes, “these villages are denied basic services such as running water, electricity, proper education and health services, and access roads” – in a deliberate process of the “ghettoization of Palestinian areas.”

### **THE MOVEMENT FOR BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT AND SANCTIONS (BDS): TAKING THE FIGHT HOME**

As a response to this, the summer of 2005 saw a historic call from Palestinian civil society for international participation in a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israeli apartheid. Signed by over 170 Palestinian unions and other grassroots organizations, the campaign works toward ending Israel’s policies of occupation, colonization and construction of the Apartheid Wall; recognition of the fundamental rights of indigenous Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and the promotion of the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194. To this end, organizations from around the world have made considerable strides in promoting BDS, to which Canada is no exception.

At their annual conference in May 2006, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario – a body that represents 200,000 public sector workers – adopted the now famous Resolution 50. Committing itself in support of the BDS campaign until “Israeli meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination,” the resolution also called for the development of an educational campaign that would educate members on “the apartheid nature of the Israeli state and the political and economic support of Canada for these practices.” The victory in Canada’s largest union gave fresh impetus to the Palestine solidarity movement across the country and set in motion a series of important next steps that served to both broaden the understanding of Israel as an apartheid state within the wider public, and to increase the effective coordination, nationally, of

organizations committed to the BDS campaign.

The most important of these “next steps” was the highly successful conference, “The Struggle Continues: Boycotting Israeli Apartheid,” that took place in Toronto in October 2006. Attracting over 600 participants from across Canada and parts of the United States, the conference explored the connections and similarities between Israeli apartheid and the South African experience; the struggles of indigenous nations within Canada itself; and attempted to work towards the development of concrete measures that would enable the campaign to move forward. A key step in this regard was the development of various committees (research, labour, media, community, campus, lobbying, faith, arts and culture) that would work towards implementing the decisions taken at the conference and expand the opportunities for a diverse array of individuals and organizations to become involved in the campaign.

An outgrowth of this new organizational structure was the launch of a boycott campaign in late December against Indigo/Chapters. Indigo/Chapters is controlled by Heather Reisman and Gerry Schwartz, longtime supporters of Israeli apartheid with ties to the governing Conservative Party. The boycott was launched because Reisman and Schwartz initiated and fund the program Heseg, or the “Lone Soldier Fund.” Set up in 2006, this fund aims to distribute \$3 million a year in academic scholarships to soldiers “who have mostly volunteered from abroad, and who enlist without having the kind of domestic supports that homegrown IDF soldiers rely upon to ease their army duty,” according to the Canadian Jewish News. As the Jerusalem Post further explains, after demobilization “when ex-Israeli soldiers move on to university, many lone soldiers must pack up and go home or are unemployed, because they lack the financial resources to postpone work for education.” What the “Lone Soldier Fund” entails then, is a direct Canadian subsidy for a program associated with the Israeli military. The board of the Lone Soldier Fund is filled with high-ranking Israeli military personnel, including Doron Almog. Almog was unable to leave his plane when it landed in Britain last year because of an arrest warrant for war crimes issued against him in Britain. The demand of the boycott campaign against Indigo/Chapters is clear: don’t buy products from these stores until the owners publicly announce that they have cut all ties with programs associated with the Israeli military.

Examples such as the “Lone Soldier Fund” serve as a constant reminder that the Israeli apartheid regime could not have maintained itself were it not for the significant support it receives from international contributors. That being said, the major challenge ahead of the anti-apartheid movement today is to work towards the severing of ties between Canadian and Israeli institutions where they now exist, and of the political, economic, cultural and academic isolation of the Israeli state until the demands outlined in the July 2005 call from Palestine are met. This is a campaign that is gaining tremendous momentum, nationally and internationally. It is a campaign that we can be confident of winning. **R**

Zac Smith is an activist with the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid (CAIA) and the Palestine Solidarity Committee (York University). For more information: see [www.caiaweb.org](http://www.caiaweb.org).

# Far from being the Last Arab-Israeli War

Hassan Hussein

Saeed Rahnema's recent essay on the latest Israel-Lebanon war ("Can This Be The Last Arab-Israeli War?" *Relay*, September/October 2006) has several virtues, especially his probing analysis of the role played by various regional and international actors before, during and after the end of hostilities. Nevertheless, the characterization of the war itself, the portrayal of Hizbullah, and finally, the views on the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict merit further discussion.

## LEGITIMATE RESISTANCE OR AN IRANIAN-SYRIAN PROXY WAR

The two main explanations for the latest Israel-Lebanon war are: it was a Syrian-Iranian war by proxy unleashed to divert attention from Iran's nuclear file and Syria's alleged involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister of Lebanon-billionaire, Rafik Hariri; or that it was pre-planned by Israel and the U.S. against, not only Hizbullah or Lebanon, but against any resistance to foreign occupation and the "New Middle-East" whose "birth pangs" were announced by Condi Rice during the war itself.

While at the beginning of his article, Professor Rahnema acknowledges that Israel's war was "part of its strategy of bringing regime changes in the region", much of his later focus is placed on viewing the war as falling within the agenda of Syria and Iran to "create problems for Israel and the USA" using Hizbullah to "fight a proxy war." Rahnema mentions Iran (and Syria) in this context no less than 5 times in order to drive home this point. One must certainly not gloss over Iranian and Syrian strategic interests in Lebanon, but it would be a mistake to blame these regimes for instigating the war or credit them for the victory of the Lebanese resistance over the Israeli military machine and its backers in Western capitals and "friendly" Arab regimes. In so doing we deny the agency of the Lebanese resistance and people as a whole.

Whereas most Arab and Muslim governments were silent when Israel was pounding Lebanon, in places such as Egypt, Jordan and others, entire working class districts and universities were completely cordoned off by government security forces in order to prevent demonstrations in solidarity with the Lebanese people. The level of support for Hizbullah and the resistance across the Arab and Muslim streets remains very high even inside the conservative Gulf States, as I witnessed in a recent trip to the Middle-East.

Certainly the region was further destabilized after this latest round of hostilities but one must question whether this was due to Israel's inability to reach its "short-term military goal of defeating Hezbollah," and imposing a ceasefire of convenience, as Rahnema argues, or because Israel unleashed an illegal and brutal war to eliminate a legitimate resistance movement and assist in the birthing of the "New Middle-East."

## LEBANON, ISRAEL AND HIZBULLAH

While regional and international pressures and influences have a major bearing on the conflict between Lebanon and Israel, there are outstanding issues between the two countries that need to be dealt with promptly and justly. These include: swapping of prisoners; handing over maps for land mines planted by Israel in South Lebanon during its occupation; ending violations of territorial borders (since its "withdrawal" from Lebanon in 2000, Israel has violated Lebanese territory more than 10,000 times compared to 100 times by the Lebanese resistance); and returning the occupied Shaba'a farms to Lebanon. Some of these issues may be dealt with between the two governments, but the ultimate solution can only become permanent through a comprehensive and *just peace* that involves all the key players, in particular Syria and the Palestinians.

Categorizing Hizbullah as an Islamic radical organization "seeking an Iranian-style Islamic theocratic regime" in Lebanon may have been accurate in the 1980s but it is no longer a valid assessment. Hizbullah's current popularity in Lebanon has little to do with its Islamist politics. Over the last 20 years, it has become an organization preoccupied with resisting Israeli occupation in South Lebanon and defending the social, political and economic interests of its impoverished Shia constituents, who have historically been neglected by the Lebanese state.

In the process, Hizbullah has become an integral part of a Lebanon that cannot be governed by any one sect or confession alone. A survey of recent speeches, party communiqués, and documents, in addition to an analysis of its social and political engagement (electoral and otherwise), show the extent to which Hizbullah has become integrated into the Lebanese political landscape leaving behind its calls for an Islamic state. Hizbullah has been able to maintain its Islamist identity while working within the confines of the non-Islamic Lebanese state based on a multi-confessional polity. Accordingly, Hizbullah's broad support would drop radically if it tried to impose a regime such as the Iranian one.



## THE PALESTINE-ISRAEL CONUNDRUM: WHAT SORT OF PEACE?

In his discussion of the Palestinian question, which we all agree is at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Rahnema did not address the colonial-settler nature of the Israeli state and its racist, Zionist ideology which has created an apartheid system within the occupied territories as well as inside Israel itself. Rahnema writes that “despite past failures of the whole array of peace negotiations, (...) there are components of these negotiations and memoranda that can be used for a permanent peaceful solution”



Photo: Mohammed Shublaq



Photo: Mohammed Shublaq

on the basis of the two-state model.

Proponents of the two-state solution have not taken into consideration existing “facts on the ground”. These facts which were either created or cemented by the state of Israel over the life of the “peace process” include: Israel’s refusal to accept the Palestinian refugees’ right to return; Israel’s near complete hegemony over 1967-occupied territories (settlement grids, settlers-only roads, control over resources, etc.); the status of Jerusalem; the apartheid wall; institutionalized racial discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel; and the lack of economic resources in a contiguous territory necessary for the creation of a sovereign and independent Palestinian entity. Rhetorically, even Israel and the U.S. are ready to accept a Palestinian state, but without fundamentally altering these facts on the ground, the Palestinians will simply end up with a collection of Bantustans.

The late Edward Said wrote in 1999 that “Palestinian self-determination in a separate Palestinian state is unworkable ... [and there is] no other way than to begin now to speak about sharing the land ... in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for all citizens.” Today, a growing number of Palestinian, Israeli and international activists, academics and intellectuals are questioning the viability of the land-for-peace formula, the corner stone of the envisioned two-state solution, and have called for an alternative that will lead to a permanent and *just* peace in Palestine/Israel. It is incumbent on all of us who are active in the international solidarity movement with the Palestinian people to assist in formulating this new alternative which can start with supporting an international campaign to end not only the occupation, but the Apartheid system in Israel and the creation of a democratic, secular state in its place. Here we must be clear that, as in the case of South Africa, calling for the “destruction” of the apartheid state and for its replacement with something that is more in line with international laws and values of equality and pluralism is not the same thing as calling for the destruction of a people. **R**

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# Echoes of the 1930s:

Today's Hotel Workers Lead the Struggle to 'Upgrade' the Service Economy

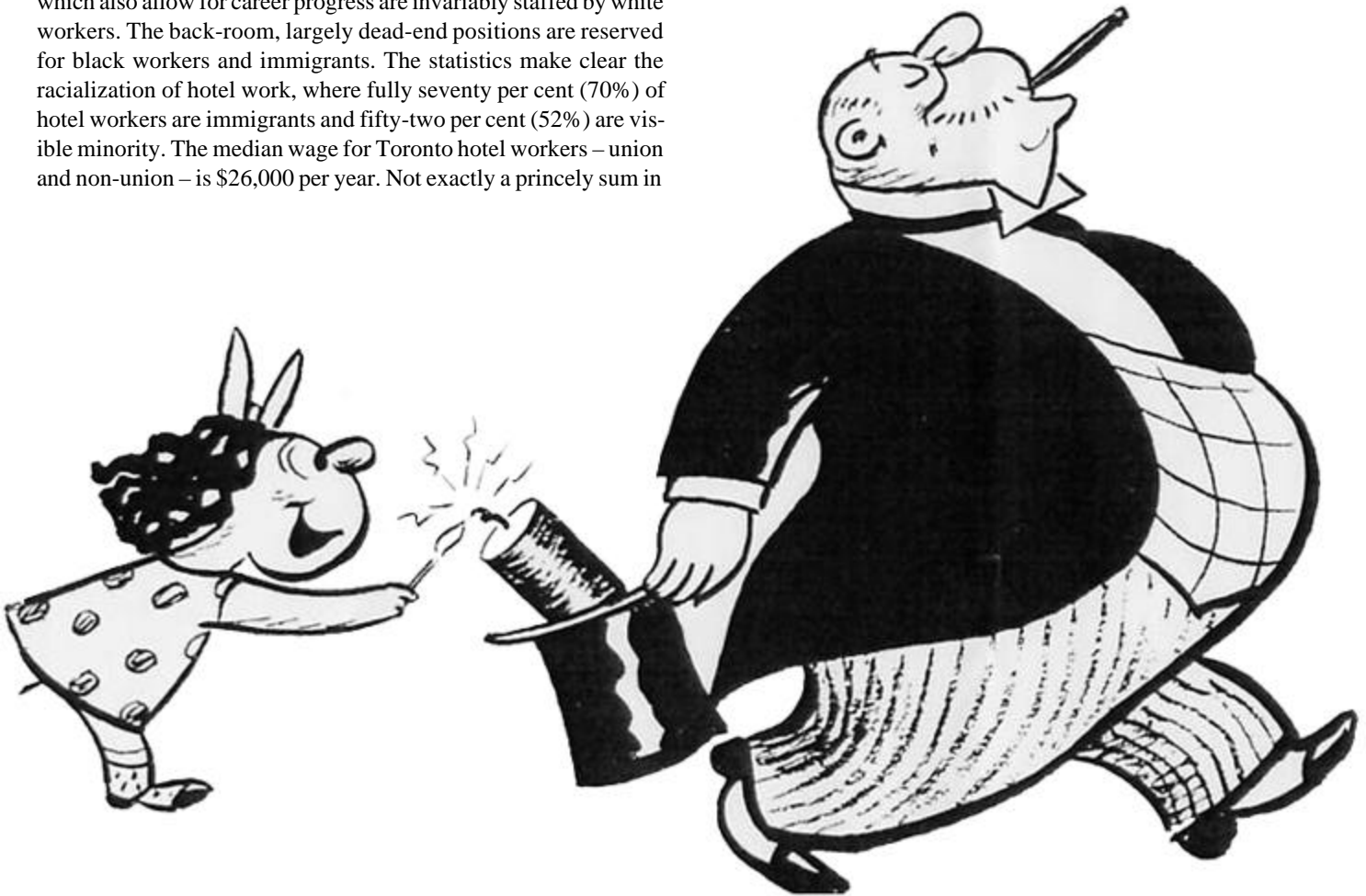
Sedef Arat-Koc, Aparna Sundar and Bryan Evans

The organizing struggles of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s and 1940s contributed significantly to transforming work and life for industrial workers and their communities by creating the means to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Now, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, North American hotel workers can honourably make a claim to being the legitimate heirs of this history as they struggle to transform the quality of work and life in the service economy.

The hotel workers are represented by UNITE-HERE which launched the 'Hotel Workers Rising' campaign in December 2005 with the active and very public support of actor Danny Glover who linked the necessity for supporting the struggles of low wage workers. And it is more than low wages at the centre of this struggle. The intersection of race and class in the hotel industry is anything but ambiguous. The higher-end front-line positions which also allow for career progress are invariably staffed by white workers. The back-room, largely dead-end positions are reserved for black workers and immigrants. The statistics make clear the racialization of hotel work, where fully seventy per cent (70%) of hotel workers are immigrants and fifty-two per cent (52%) are visible minority. The median wage for Toronto hotel workers – union and non-union – is \$26,000 per year. Not exactly a princely sum in

one of Canada's most expensive cities. Median hourly wages run from \$10.48 to \$11.22, depending on the type of job. The union factor is significant as unionized workers average \$14/hour – a differential approaching 40 per cent! Working conditions are a 21<sup>st</sup> century Dickens tale characterized by intensification of work, a lack of job control and consequently, soaring injury rates. Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSD's) are amongst the highest in any industrial sector as a result of the volume of heavy lifting required, especially among hotel housekeepers. One massive study of 40,000 hotel employees found that injury rates were increasing as hotels added heavier beds and room amenities such as treadmills.

The Hotel Workers Rising campaign is creative and enthusiastic. Its actions and events are heavily attended by not only hotel workers, but their families and community allies. It isn't so much



## **It isn't so much a campaign as a social movement that looks and feels like it's not only central but on the winning side of change.**

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a campaign as a social movement that looks and feels like it's not only central but on the winning side of change. And it is! This success is no doubt in part the result of the campaign vision and strategy to link these industry issues to larger questions of what kind of quality of life, what kind of society and economy, do we want to have in Canada and in North America? Hotel Workers Rising explicitly links their efforts to the Toronto Labour Council's *Million Reasons to Take Action* campaign which seeks to mobilize around the damning fact that one million workers in the greater Toronto area earn less than \$30,000/ year. Again, the racialized dimension in these numbers cannot be lost as many of these underpaid and undervalued workers are people of colour and new Canadians. The Labour Council's campaign asks, as does Hotel Workers Rising: Are we willing to leave these people behind and if so what kind of society will we have built? The lesson of these campaigns is honest and true; when workers and their families can lift themselves out of poverty, then they and their communities become better places to live.

The battle Hotel Workers Rising has chosen to fight is nothing less than a direct and open challenge to the practices of neoliberal restructuring and the logic of global hyper-competition. In the hotel sector, the forces of globalization have forced a rationalization within the hotel industry which is increasingly populated by a handful of multinational chains – Hilton, Starwood (Sheraton, Four Points, Westin, and Le Meridian), Marriott, Fairmont (Delta), Intercontinental (Crown Plaza, Holiday Inns) to name the more prominent ones. The hotel sector, as with the service sector generally, confronted by the issue of productivity. It requires human labour and skill. Technology can do little to extract more profit in this sector. Instead, profit can only be increased the old fashioned way – through extreme exploitation of labour. And hence, the macro political problem the hotel workers and UNITE-HERE have chosen to take on. How to better distribute that profit. It's not an abstract problem. We are in serious trouble as a society as the numbers demonstrate.

Between 1981 and 2001 the poverty rate for immigrants in Toronto increased by 125%. So much for a rising tide lifting all boats! The 1990s were a decade of decline and stagnation for most Canadians – the worst since the Great Depression. In that bitter decade incomes of two-parent families dropped 13% in real dollars. The plight of single-parent families was, of course, worse. Their incomes dropped 18%. As of 2005, 35.1% of Toronto's children lived in poverty, a disgusting fact given that the economy has never been more robust in creating wealth. In 2004, corporate

profits reached an all-time, historic high composing 14% of the Canadian GDP. And all this while our modest welfare state continues to shrink and restrict benefits. For example only 26% of Toronto's jobless are even eligible for Employment Insurance. Again, this speaks volumes as to the importance of the hotel workers campaign to lift living standards throughout the service economy.

To advance the 'high road' vision of the campaign, over the past months UNITE-HERE has taken 14 strike votes in Toronto area hotels and ballots have given an astonishing 98% for strike authorization. The strategy has been to set in motion co-ordinated sector-based bargaining. Victories have been achieved at the downtown and airport Hilton and at the Sheraton Centre. The Delta Chelsea Hotel however is attempting to break the pattern being set by the union and have drawn a line. In particular, Delta Chelsea management is actively courting owners of some 25 new hotel projects now in the planning stage for Toronto to stop the union's progress at the bargaining table. Other unions which frequently do business with the Delta Chelsea – notably the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and the Power Workers Union (Ontario hydro) are currently boycotting the Delta and have cancelled a number of contracts with that hotel.

At a political level, the mayors of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Toronto and have come out in support of the campaign. They understand that raising the living standards of service sector workers is a good thing for their cities, their economies and their communities. They understand there is no alternative. Toronto Mayor David Miller recently said "The prospect of better jobs, training and career advancement in the hotel sector holds out hope, not only to our hotel workers, but to our youth who are seeking meaningful employment." There can be no argument with this agenda. It is the minimum we can ask for. Our future depends on their success. **R**

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# Challenging Wal-Mart

Herman Rosenfeld

For socialists, Wal-Mart is more than just a series of big retail stores that threaten our communities, bringing an orgy of consumerism and traffic jams. The discount retailer represents, in the words of American social scientist/historian Nelson Lichtenstein, “the template business, setting the standards for a new stage in the history of world capitalism... It stands for a new set of technological advances, organizational structures and social relationships.”

How do a series of retail stores play the kind of role in today’s society that Microsoft, General Motors, U.S. Steel and the railroad monopolies played in earlier epochs?

Wal-Mart is huge. In 2004, its yearly revenues represented 2.3% of the total economic activity of the United States. It also did 20% of the retail toy business and 14% of all grocery sales in that country. Its yearly revenues are larger than those of Switzerland. If Wal-Mart was an independent country, its economy would rank 30th in the world, right behind Saudi Arabia.

It is the largest profit-making enterprise in the world. It has sales of over 300 billion dollars a year and it is predicted that Wal-Mart’s annual sales will soon reach a trillion dollars. A study by a leading U.S. corporate consultant firm in 2002 argued that one quarter of American productivity gains from 1995-1999 were due to Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is the world’s largest retailer. By 2003, it had also become the world’s largest grocer.

In Canada, Wal-Mart entered the market in 1994, purchasing 122 stores previously owned by Woolco. Wal-Mart is now the largest retailer here.

Wal-Mart’s size means that it shapes the retail market in the US and many other countries and since the hollowing out of the manufacturing sector, it plays an inordinately influential role in the economy.

## DISCOUNT RETAIL MODEL

Discount retailing is based upon a simple set of principles. Goods are sold at the lowest possible price, with very low mark-ups over the actual cost of production and with an extremely fast rate of turnover. This places enormous pressure to lower costs at every stage: in production, distribution and in the process of retailing. Wal-Mart has perfected these principles.

Retailing had always been cost sensitive, but discount retailers were particularly driven by cost reduction. The discounters emerged after World War 2, offering large selections of cheaper

goods, with stores accessible by car, located off suburban highways. In contrast with the older department stores, located in city centres, the discounters used non-skilled, non-union labour, with shopping done on a self-serve basis.

There were huge numbers of discounters during this period and by the 1980s recession many of these companies had folded. Wal-Mart originated in the Ozark mountains of Arkansas – a very conservative, small town atmosphere in the 1960s. Rather than attempt a rapid expansion, Wal-Mart perfected its model in the friendly confines of that part of the U.S. and developed a plan for growth across the whole country.

In 1987, Wal-Mart was a successful regional retailer. Five years later, it had become the industry leader. Its dominance came from its adoption and application of information technology to the handling of goods and people; its control over suppliers; its strategic approach to growth; its global reach; ruthless labour practices and its ability to benefit from the wave of neoliberal regulatory and cultural changes that occurred during its growth period.

## GLOBALIZATION, SUPPLY-CHAIN DOMINANCE AND SWEATSHOP LABOUR

A key component of Wal-Mart’s strength is its dominance over suppliers. This reverses the historical dependence of retailers upon manufacturers.

Wal-Mart is a monopsony in relation to the supply chain – that is, it is the overwhelmingly dominant market for the manufacturers’ products (for many, it is the only retail outlet). It shapes the structure and location of manufacturers, forcing them into the same low-wage, low-cost system as the retailer. It dominates supplier production and logistics. The sweatshop empires of Nike and some of the clothing companies are miniscule compared to Wal-Mart.

Manufacturers have become dependent upon Wal-Mart’s ability to market their goods – and must respond to Wal-Mart’s requirements. Wal-Mart stores are the biggest marketing channels for consumer products in the world and the 20 million customers who shop there on an average day represent a bigger market than could be reached by traditional mass media advertising.

Wal-Mart demands low prices, a “pull” (production of goods in response to a closely monitored system that predicts the likely customer demand) and “just-in-time” delivery of goods. Suppliers must make their production and delivery system “transparent” (which Wal-Mart is able to force on them through the use of

electronic forms of data and inventory control). Wal-Mart sets up its own distribution apparatus as well, replacing wholesalers.

Wal-Mart tells suppliers how and where to produce their goods. They are forced to locate overseas, seeking sweatshop labour to meet Wal-Mart's cost and delivery requirements. This, in turn, also creates new logistics and transportation systems. It's no accident that today Wal-Mart imports more goods from China than either the United Kingdom or Russia.

This has both contributed to and resulted from a new spatial division of labour: 'developed' countries lose manufacturing, but the role of low-wage retailing and distribution increases. Wal-Mart increases 'de-industrialisation' and precarious work. 'Developing' countries have sweated manufacturing, exporting to retailers in U.S. and Europe.

Wal-Mart would never have been able to develop this way without the corresponding advent of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism. The ability to move production across borders at will in response to cost signals makes this possible, as does the destruction of the socialist-oriented balanced developmental models that used to exist in China, Vietnam and partially in India.

### WORKING AT WAL-MART

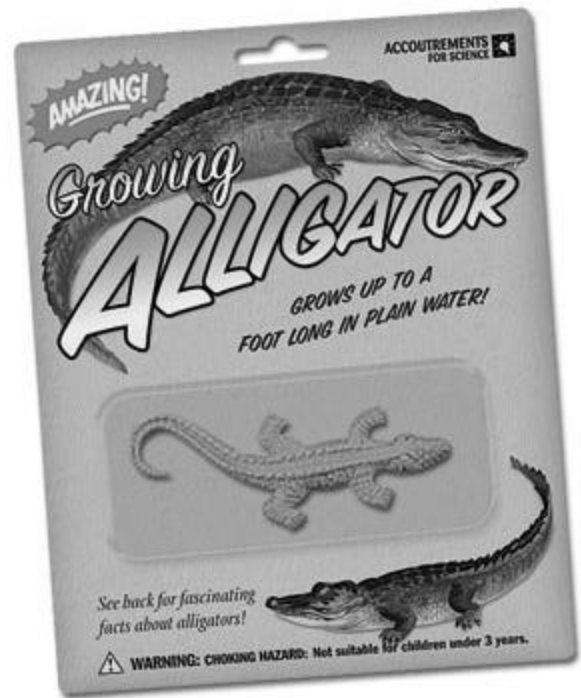
At the centre of the Wal-Mart's commitment to "everyday low prices" are low wages and a system of labour control. This involves an intrusive hiring process, wage scales that are lower than other big box stores (individually assigned in secret from other workers), arbitrary hours of work (where "full-time" can mean as few as 20 hours), forcing people to work "off the clock" (not paying workers for hours worked), a precarious workforce, intense surveillance in the workplace, rampant gender discrimination and a centrally-controlled anti-union policy.

Managers formulate labour budgets that must be approved from Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville. They always run with too few resources, so that there is always pressure to cut labour costs. (Managers are told that Sam Walton always carried around a "beat yesterday" book that kept track of cost cutting improvements on a regular basis).

There are many facets to Wal-Mart's anti-unionism. There is the company culture which seeks to create a "family type" atmosphere with the paternalistic Sam Walton making sure that workers' well-being is being looked after; workers are called 'associates'; an "open door" policy promises a sympathetic hearing of individual concerns; profit sharing, for those above a certain wage scale; daily meetings where cheers are recited and successful products are touted. There is anti-union propaganda in videos and DVD's, portraying workers' organizations as parasites that are jealous of Wal-Mart's success. Finally, there is the repression of potential union drives by management. This, too, takes a number of forms such as close surveillance of the social interactions between workers, swift action by central authorities in Bentonville when there is any danger of union drives, and co-ordinated efforts to

smash unionization drives once they are started. In 2005 Wal-Mart closed its Jonquiere, Quebec store, rather than bargain a first North American collective agreement.

Wal-Mart's size and domination of retail markets help it to influence wages and working conditions and rates of unionization of society in general, as well as the sector. The very threat of Wal-Mart's entry into grocery retailing has given unionized employers a weapon to use against workers. The largely unsuccessful California grocery workers strike, where 70,000 workers went out for 140 days, was waged against efforts by unionized employers to match Wal-Mart's labour costs and practises.



### WAL-MART'S VISION

Wal-Mart helps usher in (and reflects) a particular social and political model: low consumer prices serve a low-wage economy. As Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott claims, "*Low prices give people a raise every time they shop with us*").

This model portrays the giant capitalist as a champion of the "little person", reinforcing people's identity as consumers (shoppers) and cancelling out people's class identity. It claims to cater to the particular needs of women as caregivers and as the main shopper in the family (over 1/2 of which are single parent families in the USA), all the while reinforcing the crassest forms of sexism and paternalism.

Wal-Mart can't be explained without the neoliberal economic and political reforms of the 1970s and 80s. The pool of low-wage workers (many of whom are women) and the extra responsibilities facing women made Wal-Mart possible →

place low prices at the apex of society's values.

Should we consider breaking it up through anti-trust action? This was a solution considered in a recently published article in the U.S.-monthly *Harpers*. An American-type solution, it doesn't make sense when applied to a retailing giant. After all, it would only increase the competitive pressures on a series of smaller, discount retailers. On the other hand, it might be a way of addressing Wal-Mart's monopoly power in relation to its suppliers.

A particularly radical approach would argue for nationalizing it and running it as a series of co-operatives. While this would preserve the economies of scale and the application of technology to lower costs, it is certainly utopian in the current context. Such an approach might only work if we were involved in a larger social movement challenging capitalism and its logic.

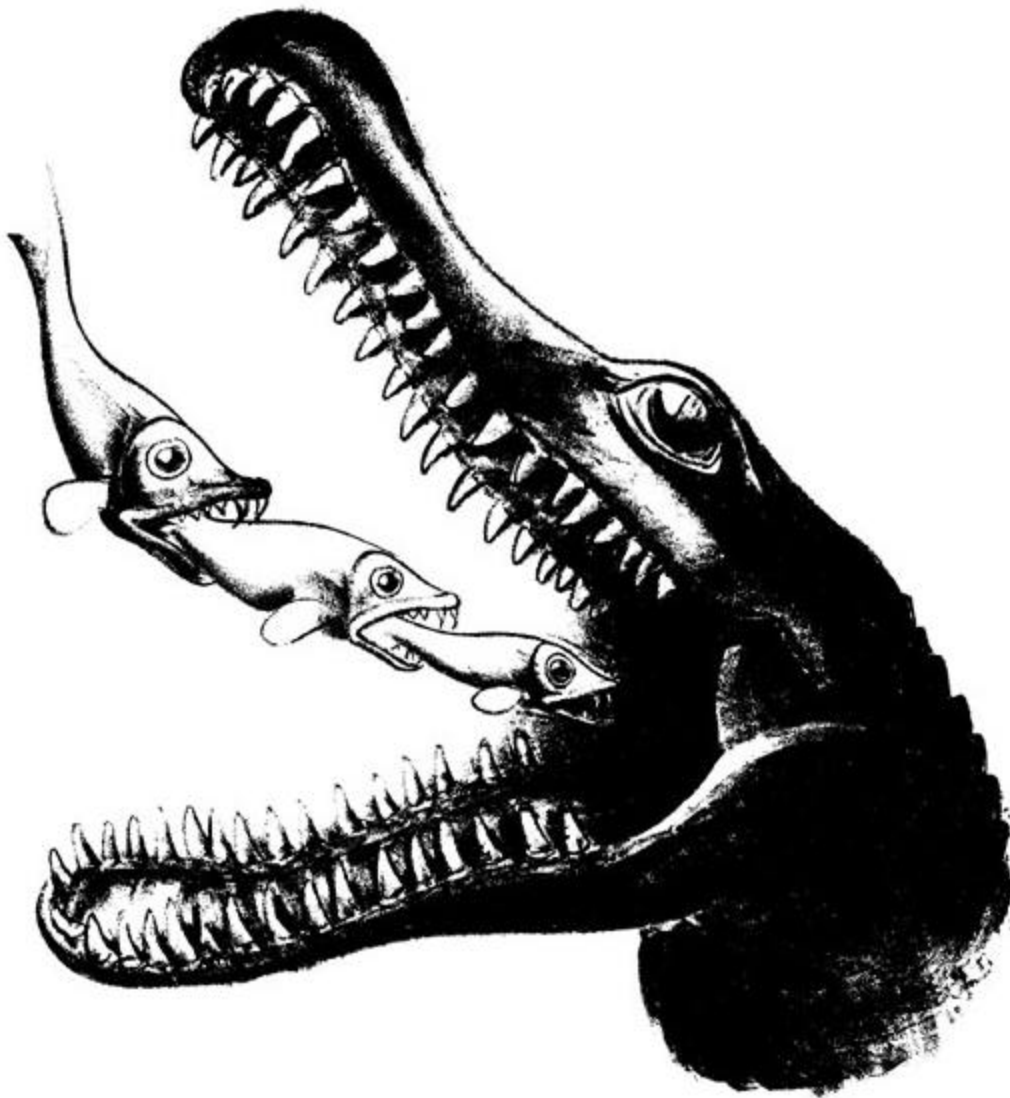
That leaves us with modifying the Wal-Mart model, accepting the existence of discount, mass retailing, but changing it in a way that radically improves

the conditions in supplier and Wal-Mart workplaces, provides for unionization, forces them to source locally and stop the destruction of local communities and environments.

Can Wal-Mart afford it? Just looking at fair wages and benefits, they certainly could. If Wal-Mart spent \$3.50 p/h more for wages and benefits for full timers, it would cost \$6.5 billion per year – less than 3% of sales. Wal-Mart claims it would wipe out profit or its "price advantage" over competitors. As a recent Wal-Mart ad crowed, "We'd betray our commitment to tens of millions of customers, many of whom struggle to make ends meet." (Costco pays \$16.00 p/h – 65% more than W-M average and 33% more than Sam's Club. Costco also covers 82% of its U.S. workers with health insurance, while W-M covers only 48% of its workers.)

#### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS TO FORCE WAL-MART TO CHANGE?**

Most important is unionizing them. But current attempts are hardly adequate. It's not that there isn't a potential base for orga-



and attractive. Government deregulation of labour markets and the loss of high wage manufacturing jobs contributed as well, while the rise of consumer culture and Christian conservative values in the U.S. also played a role.

#### **HOW DO WE CHALLENGE WAL-MART?**

The first question to ask is, what should be our goals in challenging the retail giant and what outcomes do we want? Second, we should ask, what are the most effective ways of accomplishing them?

Should we consider trying to close them down? Aside from being totally unrealizable, this option ignores the very real need that ordinary working people have for reasonably-priced consumer goods, available in conveniently-located stores. Wal-Mart has withdrawn from South Korea and Germany, but this isn't because the people there demanded that they be kept out. They left because, in the German case at least, they couldn't tolerate the demands of the unionized workers and a larger culture that didn't



nizing the retailer. In the last few years there have been some near successful drives, and just recently there was a mass walkout in a Florida store over hours of work.

Wal-Mart will never be unionized by scattered efforts to organize individual stores. Organizing Wal-Mart requires the same kind of strategic approach that the CIO used to organize the key manufacturing sectors during the 1930s and 1940s. Then, the nascent industrial union movement, inspired by radical social and political movements and legitimized by important legislative reforms, succeeded in unionizing much of the unskilled workforce. Unions worked in a coordinated manner, using a variety of elements: mass, direct action; targeting key areas in each industry; salting and working from the outside; community mobilization.

Today, unions in both the United States and Canada need to put aside their narrow institutional interests and make the unionization of Wal-Mart a number one collective priority. Needless to say, in order to pressure Bentonville, such a campaign would require a fundamental change in the deferential approach that most unions take towards both employers and neoliberal governments. They also would have to work with a number of mass movements that are affected by Wal-Mart, such as the women's movement, environmentalists, former Wal-Mart workers, health care activists, anti-globalization and anti-sweatshop organizations and movements for local community democracy. The consequences of not developing such an approach can be seen by the pathetic response of the union movement to the closure of the Jonquiere store. Wal-Mart got the message, loud and clear.

There is also the proposed Wal-Mart Worker Association model of non-majority unions, proposed by veteran American organizer Wade Rathke. He argues that current conditions don't allow Wal-Mart unions to become sole bargainners for workers now.



Instead, we must build towards that goal, organizing those workers who wish to affiliate to the union movement as part of a bigger series of campaigns, including struggles over workplace rights.

Unions also need to show low-wage workers like those at Wal-Mart that they are the most appropriate tools for increasing their living standards and bettering their working conditions. They must challenge two-tier wage models increasingly imposed in the organized retail sector and show why they can provide an alternative to the culture of paternalism that rules places like Wal-Mart.

## POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IS KEY

Currently, there are a series of local campaigns to force Wal-Mart to accept certain terms and conditions in order to gain entry to these communities. Local laws affect store size, zoning and location, minimum wages and working conditions, provisions for an impact assessment study, local sourcing and protection of small merchants. Some have successfully limited Wal-Mart, others have kept Wal-Mart out and still others were defeated by Wal-Mart inspired counter campaigns. Hopefully, these campaigns can become part of what clearly needs to be a bigger, multifaceted challenge to Wal-Mart.

As a key leader and beneficiary of both neoliberalism and capitalist globalization it only stands to reason that the giant retailer can only be tamed or reformed as part of a movement against key elements of the latest stage of capitalism. Without a political movement that seeks to limit the mobility of capital, fight free trade and support struggles in developing countries like China for worker rights and alternative development models, it is hard to see how we can succeed in reforming Wal-Mart. In a similar way, the battle against Wal-Mart needs to proceed alongside efforts to establish living wage levels, strengthen labour standards and regulate labour markets here at home. **R**

Herman Rosenfeld is a CAW activist.



## *Cuban Transitions:*

### The Future of the Cuban Revolution

Since the revolution in 1959, Cuba has taken a unique path of development from the rest of Latin America, and, indeed, the rest of the world. Shortly after the revolution, Fidel Castro and the Cuban leadership announced that Cuba would take a socialist path to development. In practice, this meant a state-led command economy with collectivist systems of property, centralized political leadership, limited liberal freedoms and particular forms of popular power at the political base. From the beginning, the Cuban revolution was under siege from the imperialist powers, particularly the USA, cutting Cuba almost completely off from its traditional trade linkages, isolating it from technological developments, and placing it under constant military threat. By any measure, Cuba's progress since the revolution in terms of human development has been striking: in terms of life expectancy, literacy and educational levels, health provision, and basic universal nutrition, Cuba is near at the top of all the Latin American countries. Cuba also has a quite remarkable record of international solidarity from supporting liberation efforts in Africa, to strategic and resource support to the Latin American left, to a pivotal role in the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela.

This has all been accomplished even though Cuban per capita income levels remain much lower than the Latin American average. Economic development has been, however, much more disappointing. Indeed, the Cuban economy has gone through several crucial phases: the intensification of sugar production in the 1960s proved a major strategic miscalculation; the shift of policy toward the Soviet Union in the 1970s led to almost 70 percent of all Cuban trade occurring between the two with only limited success in economic

diversification; the collapse of the East Bloc and the Soviet Union leading to decline in GDP of some 35 percent between 1989 and 1993; and followed by the so-called "Special Period" in which Cuba inserted itself more strongly into international circuits of capital, re-organized state enterprises to allow increased functional autonomy and extended a parallel "dollar economy."

Over the last year it has become clear that Cuba is entering a new stage in the revolution and its development. The illness of Fidel Castro that has forced a shift in the collective leadership has been the most visible sign. The leadership transition, of course, raises a whole set of important questions related to Cuban institutional development, democratization, and international alignments. Political developments in Latin America, and in particular Venezuela and Bolivia, are ending the long period of economic and political isolation of Cuba and potentially shifting the balance of forces against American imperialism in the region. The relationship with Venezuela, as well as positive internal developments in the Cuban economy in terms of the agriculture, biotechnology, mining and oil sectors, has also decisively ended the "Special Period" and has allowed Cuba to record quite remarkable levels of growth over the last few years.

Cuba has long been central to the politics of the left, in terms of its potentials and limits, and the politics of solidarity. Cuba has both demanded and supported for the right of states to pursue independent development paths unrestrained by the imperialist powers. *Relay* here presents essays assessing aspects of Cuban solidarity work and prospects for the Cuban revolution and development in the coming period. **R**



# Cuba: The Trials & Tribulations of Socialism

Carlos Torres & Carolyn Watson

The island of Cuba has been the object of desire for different colonizing peoples since Christopher Columbus stumbled upon it in 1492 in search of India. From that point on Spain, Britain and the United States of North America have, for various periods of time, colonized Cuba in their pursuits of economic expansion and political domination of the Caribbean Basin.

After purchasing Florida from the Spanish in the early 19th century various U.S. politicians have argued that Cuba was really a natural extension of Florida and therefore should be U.S. territory. Annexation campaigns and filibustering in the mid 19th century failed to turn Cuba over to the USA, but opportunistic intervention in 1898 at the end of Cuba's war for independence from Spain ensured U.S. domination of the island for the next sixty years. Cuba's political, economic and cultural destinies were decided by the United States through the Platt Amendment, which stipulated that the U.S. could intervene in Cuban political and economic affairs at will, and militarily if necessary. In the thirty years following the establishment of an independent Cuban Republic the U.S. military intervened three times. Practical control of the island, however, was achieved economically through the control of sugar, Cuba's major export, and other types of infrastructure, such as the railway and telephone that served U.S. interests in the island. An understanding of this complex relationship between Cuba and imperial powers is important because Cuba has constantly viewed this colonization, invasion, and intervention as attacks on its sovereignty and independence. The revolutionary process begun in 1959 by the July 26th Movement, and led by Fidel Castro, has continued to face aggression and hostilities from the United States for insisting on its sovereignty and autonomy through independent, socialist means.

## COLONIAL LEGACY

Building on and breathing new life into the ideas of Cuban intellectuals like José Martí, Cubans have realized that not only politics and the economy but the defense and protection of the island rest in their hands. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Revolutionary Armed Forces were cut back by 80% due to a lack of special parts, fuel or new weapons. The military reorganized, established civilian militias, and has maintained a strategy of deterrence based on the resources it has. Defense is now the greatest part of the national budget – imagine where Cuba would be without such a burden. In spite of this precedence given to the military, the Revolutionary Armed Forces have never opened fire on Cuban citizens during the few riots in the island, rushing of foreign embassies, or, most recently, when Fidel Castro handed

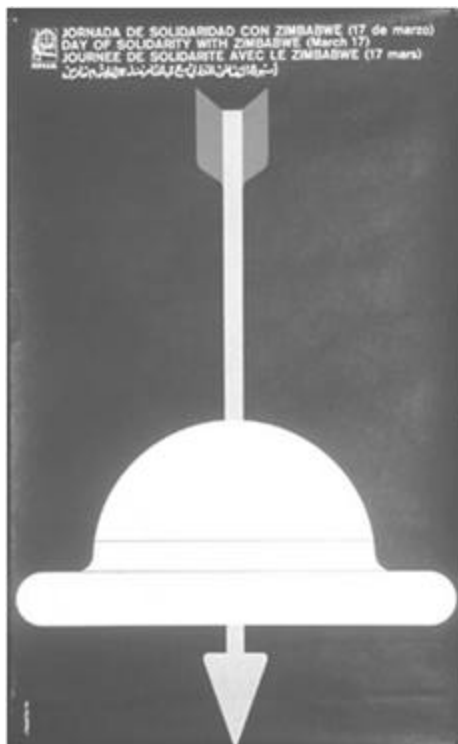
power over to the government led by his brother Raul in July 2006. Cuba remains united in spite of polarizations based on such social constructions as race and class. This recognition of unity has helped to create a strong sense of nationhood and pride that is difficult to understand or label as chauvinism or shameless nationalism.

The debate about whether or not Cuba is a socialist and therefore democratic country must be outlined in this very particular and historical context that created the framework within which the Cuban revolution developed. While the Cuban revolutionary process cannot be either a model to follow nor to imitate, the example Cuba sets is nevertheless related to its ability to resist imperial and capitalist politics, even in the wake of the neoliberal counterrevolution that forced the generalized retreat of progressive movements in western capitalist countries, as well as the struggle for workers' rights and gains. Even during the Special Period of the 1990s, as the national economy dipped sharply, social expenditures increased, maintaining societal improvements and even developing, in its particular context, benefits that the majority of workers in dependant capitalist countries of the periphery lost and no longer even dream about.

## DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM?

Western capitalist political theories dictate that Cuba is neither a democracy nor socialist. The first bias is based on the belief that democratic countries hold periodic elections in which their citizens vote for their leader and local and regional representatives. The second bias argues that socialism cannot exist in one country unless the whole world adopts socialism. This particular analysis follows orthodox visions associated with the existence of traditional political parties, European style, which will not concede recognition of Cuba as a socialist country because a third world island does not comply with the "correct" historical conditions to make it socialist. Both debates, although important, are being harbored almost exclusively by bright intellectual minds. Conversely, in most of the third world countries Cuba is seen as an example of resilience, determination and a champion of anti-imperialism.

But let's return to the first bias regarding Cuba's democratic deficit. In almost half a century of existence the Cuban revolution has managed to socially, economically and culturally outpace all countries south of the USA. Since primitive forms of accumulation (among which slavery is included) and the pillage of the third world cannot be emulated by non-colonizing, non-imperial →



Cuban International solidarity posters

countries, Cuba has had two significant tasks – to simultaneously develop an economic base using its own resources, while constructing a democratic system capable of defending the gains of the revolution under constant imperialist threat. Where other countries enjoy the freedom to build democracy according to their needs, Cuba has had to build democracy according to its possibilities.

Breaking free of decades of U.S. economic and political domination and then surviving the collapse of the Soviet Union did little to endear the Cuban revolution to the empire to the north. It will be useful perhaps as an intellectual exercise to assess which democratic system could have survived permanent aggression from the most brutal and powerful economic war machine of the current time. Would Canada and Canadians be able to endure almost half a century of blockades? Certainly not.

## ECONOMY AND PRODUCTION

We often ask Cubans for more than they can realistically achieve, hoping that they can do what we ourselves are unable to do – which is to build a democratic socialist society 90 miles from the U.S. based on our particular vision and desire of what democracy is all about, as if democracy were a word with a single meaning. This is not to say that third world Caribbean socialism is perfect, that it should be emulated, that we should not expect improvements, and that we cannot ask Cubans to do better. Cubans themselves want to do better both for themselves and because socialism is the best vision and hope for saving humanity from capitalist destruction and barbarism.

Economically, Cuba has managed to increase and diversify its economy since the most difficult years of the Special Period.

Cuba does not count on international aid or soft credit from financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, which would restrict its economic reforms to the dictates of the IMF. Moreover, when Cuba is able to acquire credit from international banks it has to pay prime interests rates due to the Helms-Burton law enacted by the U.S. in violation of all international treaties, including WTO policies. None of these obstacles, however, have prevented the Cuban economy from growing exponentially in recent years. A report released in December 2006 by the Cuban Ministry of Economy and Planning, and accepted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), says that the Cuban economy grew by 12.5% that year. According to ECLAC, economic growth in the rest of the region was only 5.3%. When economic growth for 2005 was measured at 11.8%, by the same Cuban ministry, cynical U.S. organizations like the Economist Intelligence Unit and the CIA argued that the Cubans inflated their figures by 3-4%, still a remarkable rate for a country whose industry, agriculture and transportation all but collapsed economically only thirteen years ago.

Regarding the economy, Cuba follows its own needs and principles, some of which Che Guevara affirmed as early as 1965 when he argued that, “We should not aim for maximum development but rather optimal development as our guiding principle.” Cuba’s current trade production and services with the Caricom and the ALBA economic pacts are based on complementarities, reciprocity and solidarity. In addition, the country has an extended network of cultural, economic, sports, professional and technical relationships with countries all around the world.

Perhaps one of the most impressive challenges taken on by the Cuban government is the “Energetic Revolution,” which aims

to renew and expand Cuba's ability to generate clean energy and to reduce individual consumption of available energy through the use of high efficiency appliances.

### SOLIDARITY AND INTERNATIONALISM

Cuba is not exclusively committed to making changes and improvements in Cuba. In Latin American and African countries thousands of medical teams and educators work in remote areas providing professional attention to millions of people per year in places like Bolivia, Guatemala and Haiti. Thousands of young people from the Third World, including poor regions and neighborhoods of the U.S., are attending university free of charge in Cuba. South Africans still remember that their liberation and the defeat of apartheid were also achieved with Cuba's support. Operation Miracle (Operación Milagro) in alliance with Venezuela has restored vision to 300,000 Latin Americans and Caribbeans.

With its limited resources Cuba continues to demonstrate that solidarity and internationalism are priceless, an example we do not see in any other country of the world. Cuba shares what it can with others; without offering charity through leftovers or waste, illustrating that revolution is not only about changing the economy and politics but about changing profoundly how people see the world.

### CUBA'S PROSPECTS WITH OR WITHOUT FIDEL

When President Fidel Castro transferred power to his brother Raul on July 31, 2006 many outside of Cuba were convinced that it was the beginning of the end. Cubans in Miami took to the streets convinced that Fidel was already dead and began making plans to return to Cuba to reclaim what they had abandoned decades ago. Again, as when the Soviet Union collapsed, it seems that they were damned wrong. In Cuba things were very different. Cubans went about their business as usual and, if asked, expressed their concern for Fidel's health. There was no mass revolt to topple the Cuban revolution and welcome the U.S. or Cubans from Miami. The expected upheaval never came and there are several very good reasons for this lack of interest in overthrowing the revolution, with or without Fidel.

As speculation about Fidel's illness increased the Cuban government created a collective body to deal with the country's affairs in crucial sectors of the economy, state administration, defense, and foreign affairs. Obsession with Fidel's departure once again blinded analyses and interpretations of what was to become of Cuba. It seems that a fasci-

nation with regime change has permeated even lucid minds, which cannot conceive of a revolutionary Cuba without its charismatic leader. The paths chosen by Cubans are always peculiar and they have historically defeated the undefeatable – the Spaniards, the U.S., Batista, the blockade and the demise of the Soviet Union. Moreover, they have managed to defeat their own odds.

The U.S. is currently unable to play its traditional destabilization and interventionist role in Cuba. The disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are keeping the Empire far away from a shifting Latin America, including Cuba. Additionally, recent elections in the U.S. returned both the House and the Senate to the Democrats, a party that in general is not interested in using force to make changes in Cuba.

Cubans, for their part, remain united in their desire for independence, sovereignty and autonomy. There is a fear that any show of instability would be a signal for the U.S. to intervene once again in Cuban domestic affairs and while there is no U.S. intervention there is peace. If there is to be reform it will be through a government under Cuban control and according to their needs and not to either foreign interests or transnational capital. When the U.S. had a presence in Cuba (or in other countries, for that matter) the U.S. embassy always determined the head of the government, regardless for whom Cubans voted. The U.S. making decisions for Cuba consistently de-legitimated Cuban goals and Cubans are not prepared to return to a capitalist past. They – and we should praise them for it – stood alone supported only by peoples' solidarity from around the world after the demise of the Soviet Union. The resurgence of socialism in Latin American political discourse is closely connected to Cuba's stand in defense of socialism.



Cuba still has a long way to go to become self-reliant and fully independent, while continuing to be a viable form of socialism for today's world. Perhaps it will also need to further its democratic system to enhance peoples' participation in the decision-making processes and strengthen the collective role of its social movements and organizations.

However, the limits set by geopolitical considerations and U.S. hostilities will not end soon, condemning the Cuban revolution to a socialism that cannot develop its full capacity and creativity. But it could not be otherwise; the U.S. Empire is not interested in giving a free ride to a socialist paradigm that would put an end to its dominance just 90 miles away from its shores, even if Fidel is not around. **R**

Carolyn Watson is a PhD candidate in Latin American History at the University of Mexico. Carlos Torres is a Toronto-based activist.

# Cuba's Revolution Marks its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

## Still confident and creative in defiance of imperialism

John Riddell

Thousands of international guests joined 300,000 Cubans in Havana December 2 celebrating the 50th anniversary of the birth of Cuba's revolutionary army in struggle against the Batista dictatorship as well as Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. Among them were three notable leaders from abroad: Bolivian president Evo Morales, Nicaraguan president-elect Daniel Ortega, and Haitian president René Preval – all recently elected against the will of U.S. imperialism.

Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, whose government is Cuba's closest ally, stayed home to prepare for presidential elections the following day. When the results came in, he dedicated his victory to revolutionary Cuba and Fidel Castro.

The presidents' tributes, in a time of rising popular struggles across Latin America, symbolized a turn in the road for Cuba: the embattled island no longer stands alone.

Speaking on December 2, Acting President Raúl Castro underlined his government's continued intransigence. Despite Washington's "brazen inference," he said, "popular and revolutionary movements are getting stronger" across Latin America. The U.S. attempt to "economically annex Latin America by way of the FTAA [Free Trade Agreement of the Americas] was thwarted," Raúl said. Meanwhile, ALBA, the framework for fraternal economic collaboration backed by Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia, "is taking its place ... to benefit the dispossessed masses."

The ailing Fidel Castro sent greetings but did not attend the celebration. Still, the spirit of this event, and everything that has happened since Fidel withdrew from governmental posts, shows that the transition to a new leadership team has not weakened the revolution.



I Am Cuba

### INTERNATIONALISM

For 50 years, the Cuban revolution has seen its fate as tied to the world struggle against imperialism and for human solidarity. It has committed its slender resources to support these movements. Today, the gains of popular movements in Latin America are opening new prospects for Cuba. And tens of thousands of Cuban working people are taking part in humanitarian aid abroad, including in Venezuela, Bolivia, Haiti, East Timor, Pakistan, and Africa. Meanwhile, as Raúl noted, the U.S.-led "so-called 'crusade on terrorism' is heading down the path to inevitable and humiliating defeat." In Latin America, according to Ricardo Alarcón, President of Cuba's national assembly, "the current situation is better than that which the Bolsheviks encountered," referring to the revolutionary crisis that swept Russia in 1917. (*La Jornada*, Nov. 16). Conversely, Cuba has helped inspire and shape the Latin American upsurge.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

Cuba's achievements and creativity in health care, education, sports, and cultural activities, and biotechnology – unique in the Third World – are widely acknowledged. Less known is the success of the Cuban tourist industry in building the domestic economy by supplying two-thirds of visitors' needs from within the island, compared to a norm of 10%-25% elsewhere in the Caribbean. Cuba has also created the world's most successful model of non-intrusive humanitarian aid, which promotes rather than obstructs autonomous, endogenous development of Third World nations. The Cubans have carried out major economic retrenchments, as in the sugar industry, by discussing through proposed adjustments with affected workers while guaranteeing them a continued livelihood and fully supported educational opportunities.

Cuba has been lauded by David Suzuki, among others, as the world leader in sustainable and ecologically sound food production, based on assuring to producers security of land tenure. The World Wildlife Foundation, which compiles the world's most authoritative comparison of national environmental conditions, has acknowledged, as Castro noted on December 2, that Cuba is "the only country on Earth to meet the minimum requirements for sustainable development."

Cuba's progress in such fields has continued in the teeth of 15 years of bitter economic deprivation brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasingly aggressive U.S. blockade – which placed the revolution's survival in question.

## WORKERS' AND FARMERS' POWER

The Cuban revolution's resilience rests on underlying strengths:

- It has won and maintained independence in an area that U.S. imperialism regarded and still regards as its exclusive subject domain.
- It has broken the economic grip of Cuban and foreign capitalists, so that priority could go to the people's welfare, not private profit.
- It has built an army – backed by a massive people's militia – that is loyal to Cuba's working people and has a proud record of anti-imperialist combat abroad.
- It has engaged the working population in the exercise of political power, through a process that Alarcón calls "the parliamentarization of society." (For a full discussion of Cuba's political order, see "*Cuba: A Revolution in Motion*," reviewed in *Socialist Voice* #15.)
- It has remained loyal to the revolution's commitment to internationalism, to the world-wide struggle against imperialist domination and capitalist exploitation.
- Above all, for half a century it has maintained a state based on Cuba's workers and farmers, one whose policies are shaped to defend their interests and to hold open the perspective of advancing toward socialism.

## 50 YEARS OF DEFIANCE

Despite this, many Marxists and radicals are sharply critical of Cuba. Their analysis focuses not on Cuba's achievements, but on the features it shares with capitalist society. Many Marxists also fault Cuba for deviating from the blueprint of workers democracy said to have been realized in the Russian revolution, a standard to which – if truth be told – even the early Soviet republic did not measure up.

There is some validity to such criticisms. Cuba suffers from exploitation by capitalist investors and is under enormous pressure from world market forces. Characteristic capitalist evils such as social inequality and prejudice against Blacks or women, greatly reduced since the revolution, still survive in Cuba. They even regained some ground under the pressures of its economic crisis in the 1990s.

Moreover, the unrelenting U.S.-led campaign to forcibly overthrow Cuba's government and social order distorts Cuba's attempt to build a popular democracy, demanding of Cuba that it maintain a posture of full national unity in face of the external foe. The Cuban government justifiably believes the country would be imperiled if it gave free rein to "human rights organizations" or "NGOs" that are in fact inspired, sponsored, and financed by a U.S. government dedicated to subjugating the island.

But in the final analysis, the critics are missing the point. Cuba

cannot achieve socialism within the confines of a small and underdeveloped island. It makes no sense to condemn Cuba for not achieving the impossible. What Cuba has done, with unparalleled success, is to end the political rule of the capitalist class, resist capitalist economic pressures, win as much ground as possible for socialist principles of human solidarity and production for human need rather than profit – and help open the door for other countries in the region to take the same path.

This has been acknowledged by Noam Chomsky, himself one of Cuba's critics. "Cuba has become a symbol of courageous resistance to attack," he says. Under the most severe conditions [Cubans] are doing things that others can't do." He cites "Cuba's role in the liberation of Africa. It's an astonishing achievement."

This record is all the more astonishing given that despite errors, false starts, and setbacks, Cuba has persisted in defying imperialism and resisting capitalist pressure for 50 years. No other revolution in world history has preserved its vitality and creativity over such a span of time. In this respect the Cuban achievement outshines that of the Bolsheviks, who were so quickly divided and undone by a counterrevolutionary bureaucracy.

## THE SPECIAL PERIOD

Still, the last 15 years of hard times have left their mark on Cuba. In 1993, the low point of what the Cubans call their "Special Period in Time of Peace," the island lost 30%-50% of its production and 80% of its ability to purchase needed inputs abroad. Recovery was steady but painfully slow.

The worst is over now. The daily calorie intake of Cuban citizens, which fell dangerously low in the worst moments, has been restored; power blackouts are much less frequent; travel to work is easier. The economy as a whole is in full recovery. Moreover, the crisis was overcome largely through the Cuban people's own ingenuity and initiative, and without impairing the country's independence – good reason for pride.

But for Cuba to survive alone in the 1990s, without allies and despite the blockade, it had to grant significant concessions to capitalist investors from abroad and to small-scale entrepreneurs within Cuba. The gates were not opened wide – private capital and foreign trade remained subject to strict government control – but the result was a marked growth in social inequality, particularly between those who had access to dollars and those who did not.

Even in the worst days, Cuba was able to provide subsidized food and housing, free health care and education, to all citizens – a subsistence minimum. But beyond that, workers and their families had to rely on their own wits to get by.

The resulting pressures have been analyzed unsparingly by Cuban government leaders. In November 2005, Castro stated bluntly that "this country can self-destruct ... and it would be our fault." He stressed the priors of "thievery [of state property], diversion of materials, and money draining away towards the new rich." Francisco Soberón Valdés, head of Cuba's national bank, explained the following month that for a worker today, "the money he earns ... is not enough to buy products that are also necessary but are sold at market [i.e. unsubsidized] prices." →



During the same National Assembly discussion, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque described how these conditions undercut the socialist principle that “each receives according to their labour,” stimulating tendencies “to individualism, to saving your own skin.” Under these conditions, said Pérez Roque, “to some degree, historical memory has been lost; a comparative understanding of what is happening in the world has been lost.” Some Cubans “have illusions about capitalism” – a comment that applies particularly to youth who know only the Special Period.

### **ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

For Cuba there is no escape from the pressure of capitalist market forces. Cuba needs its flourishing world of family-based enterprise – farmers, tradesmen, restaurant operators, and the like. Indeed the Cuban workers’ state provides uniquely favourable soil for such initiatives, free of exploitation by capitalist banks, franchisers, and suppliers.

Moreover, to speed its economic recovery, Cuba urgently needs investment capital. Its economic partnership with Venezuela provides an inspiring example of non-exploitative solidarity, but as things stand, most of the potential outside investment is capitalist in nature.

Capitalist investors in Cuba are locked into joint ventures that grant them little freedom of action. Even so, their activity encourages some local managers, technocrats, and Cubans with substantial savings to see their own and their country’s future in terms of capitalist, not socialist development. To debate and counter this trend, the Cuban people will need to energetically utilize their popular organizations and democratic institutions.

### **THREE PRINCIPLES FOR RESISTANCE**

In his December 2005 address, Pérez Roque proposed three

principles to guide these struggles for the revolution’s survival:

1. Leaders must continue to practice “an austere style of life.” Their families “must live in a manner no different from the people.”
2. The people’s support must be maintained “on the basis not of material consumption but of ideas and convictions.”
3. “Ultimately the decisive question is who receives the income. The majority, the people? Or the oligarchical minority, the transnationals, the pro-Yankees? Who owns the property: the people, the majority? Or the corrupt minority that serves the interests of the only policeman in the world who can guarantee their privileges in Cuba – Yankee imperialism?”

To this must be added Fidel’s promise a month earlier: “This nation will have every one of her citizens living fundamentally on their work and their pensions and retirement income,” without having to rely on sideline activities. This is a worthy goal, beyond what even wealthy Canada offers.

Meanwhile, Cuba must confront a U.S. government convinced that given Fidel’s illness, the time is ripe to unleash its plans for destabilization, regime change, and conquest.

Given the revolution’s evident strength, there are many calls in the U.S. for Washington to shift to a more flexible course. But in past decades, every such effort has shattered against the U.S. rulers’ united resolve to overthrow the Cuban government.

Washington has built a massive bureaucracy for this purpose. It has even named its Cuban proconsul-in-waiting: “transition coordinator” Caleb McCarry. A CIA “special advisor” on Cuba and Venezuela reports directly to the president – a distinction otherwise accorded only to Iran and North Korea. Five interagency groups coordinate the Cuban subversion campaign.

This formidable apparatus is now challenged to prove its worth by unleashing provocations against the Cuban government and people that can feed an orchestrated media outcry about “human rights.”

### **CUBA STANDS FIRM**

In the face of these threats, Raúl Castro’s December 2 address celebrated the unity of the Cuban people, their Revolutionary Armed Forces, and the Cuban Communist Party. This unity, he said, is “our main strategic weapon, which has made it possible for this small island to resist and overcome so many aggressions from imperialism and its allies. This unity provides a basis for the internationalist work of the Cuban people and is the reason for the heroic deeds of its children in other countries around the world, following Martí’s maxim that ‘Homeland is Humanity.’”

The message from Havana is clear: Cuba stands firm. Tens of millions of working people around the world find inspiration in this country that, despite all obstacles, has shown that “another world is possible.” **R**

John Riddell is a frequent writer for Socialist Voice, which has many articles pertaining to Cuba. See: [www.socialistvoice.com](http://www.socialistvoice.com)

# The British Left and the Anti-imperialist Struggle

Ernie Tate discusses the task of building solidarity

With the war in Iraq and the rise of new radical governments in Latin America, such as in Venezuela, Bolivia and now Ecuador, the age-old discussion among socialist activists in the advanced capitalist countries about what attitude they should have towards such governments and struggles assumes a new importance. Last June, Ernest Tate, a member of the Socialist Project, participated in a day-school in Britain about Latin America solidarity work organized by supporters of the Fourth International group, Socialist Resistance. Chris Brooks, one of the group's leaders, took the opportunity to talk to him about his experiences in Britain in the Sixties when Tate was active in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. This interview first appeared in the British quarterly *Socialist Outlook* (Summer, 2006). Tate also takes up the question of what attitude socialists should have towards Cuba. We publish it as a contribution to that discussion in Canada.

Ernie Tate joined the Canadian section of the Fourth International in the 1950s. In the mid-1960s he was assigned by the International to help build the movement here. He was recently in London. Chris Brooks talked to him about our solidarity work.

Q: Britain's Trotskyist organisations are now long-lived, but have yet to overcome some of their sectarianism. When you came to Britain in the 1960s, a correct approach to the colonial revolution seemed to be an acid test for revolutionaries.

A: It's similar today. It's an old problem. You shouldn't be surprised to see that in Britain. Any time there's an upsurge in the colonial revolution, you'll find that there's difficulties in trying to relate to it. Pierre Frank [A central leader of the Fourth International in the four decades after world war two] used to say it is part of the legacy of living in a major imperialist country which had a mighty empire: inevitably the working class expresses the ideas of their ruling class.

Q: How would you relate that to some of the discussions on the British left today? For example, when the journal of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) hosted a day-school on Latin America, our comrades emphasised the need for the left to support solidarity campaigns in Latin America. The SWP comrades scolded us. They thought the primary duty of the British left is to help the Latin American left to clarify their political thinking about the need for an organisation such as the SWP in those countries.

A: Yes, Chris Harman [an SWP leader] explained their approach in *International Socialism* (#104, Autumn, 2004), where he surveyed the global justice movement internationally. From Venezuela, to Bolivia, to Ecuador, he seemed to make the question of organization a doctrinal one, saying the main problem in those countries is that they don't have an SWP there to lead them to success. The same I think is true of Mike Gonzalez [another SWP leader] who has an interesting, but in my opinion problematic article on Venezuela in the same issue; a lot of his views are based on a

schema of how he thinks the revolution will develop, a priori, all around the slogan of "socialism from below," which is turned into a kind of formula. Incidentally, he manages to avoid the now close ties between Venezuela and Cuba.

Let me go back to the time in 1966 when we were organizing the International Marxist Group [IMG - the name taken by the British section of the Fourth International in 1967] and responding to the call by the Fourth International for all sections and supporters to make Vietnam a priority. Our comrades here led the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) and often when we met the International Socialists [IS - the forerunner of the SWP] we would talk to them about Vietnam. But they never showed much interest.

But when the VSC began to grow, very quickly I.S.'s interest perked up. We had several discussions with them and eventually they became part of a broader coalition for organizing the mass mobilizations against the war. We had the impression they regarded the solidarity work as a bit of a waste of time and a bit of diversion from the "real" class struggle. And they weren't alone in this: these views were common on the left.

Q: Even today, the comrades of the SWP will emphasise how a success in an anti-privatisation struggle here would be a beacon for the workers in Latin America, and would be therefore a more substantial contribution than solidarity movements.

A: They've also argued - and some of our own comrades would do the same - that the real reason we are involved in such struggles is to help us win recruits. Of course, there's an element of truth in this, but we should answer: "No; solidarity in defence of the struggles for national independence in the Third World is a valid end in itself." It doesn't require anything else. We don't set pre-conditions. We have to see it as a critical part of the international class struggle, even though we as socialists place special emphasis on those struggles that have the possibility of going beyond capitalism. →





IMG member Tariq Ali at a Vietnam Solidarity Campaign protest



John Lennon with a placard for Red Mole, the IMG's paper

Q: SWP comrades chide us for being moralistic, but we point out the labour and socialist movement have a miserably inconsistent record of solidarity. Perhaps we might be raising it in the wrong way if we say it's a moral imperative?

A: I would argue it's a political imperative that arises out of our internationalism. The Fourth International, and the revolutionary communist movement going back to Marx and Engels, has had this attitude: the absolutely critical nature of the struggle against imperialism in the Third World and the absolute centrality of helping that struggle achieve victory. It's not about passive solidarity, or only about passing resolutions in trade union conventions, but of doing concrete things to frustrate our own oppressor's policies in the third world and thereby striking a blow against them.

Two big events influenced my generation – and of course shaped the politics of the entire Fourth International at the time: the Cuban and Algerian Revolutions. They deepened our understanding of the entire anti-imperialist struggle immensely and brought to the fore the need for a united front tactic. These revolutions developed in a very radical direction. In Algeria in 1962, prior to independence, the now famous Tripoli programme was adopted by the FLN, and opened up the possibility of a socialist republic. We characterized Ben Bella's regime as a workers' and farmers' government.

It was our French comrades who led the way in carrying out practical solidarity work during that struggle against French colonialism. They helped the resistance materially. I remember Pierre

Frank telling me that our comrades suffered severe repression because of this. Many were jailed and victimized.

The Cuban Revolution is a case where imperialism was defeated. But I must admit, as it unfolded in the early sixties, it presented our comrades in North America with some theoretical difficulties. We, like many in the North American left, had certain formulaic ideas about how the colonial revolution would unfold and if you look at our press at the time, you can see expressions of this. We had a very mechanical interpretation of Permanent Revolution [Leon Trotsky's theory that, in underdeveloped countries democratic tasks could only be accomplished by socialist revolution led by the working class at the head of the peasantry]. How could you have a revolution without a revolutionary Marxist party, without the programme of Lenin and Trotsky, we asked? We had these kinds of questions but our strength was in our ability to look at the actual empirical data coming out of Cuba. Leading comrades visited the island. We finally did not decide the issue in an ideological way (even though we give great weight to the power of our traditions and what we have learnt) the decisive question was what was happening in the class struggle. In North America, the American Socialist Workers Party led the way on this, especially Joe Hansen.

As the Cuban revolution unfolded, it became obvious to us that this was a revolution like no other in the recent past: no Stalinist party at the helm; the mobilisation of the landless and unemployed, of the working class and the peasants; a very rapid radicalisation of the revolution; the smashing of the old state and

the coming into existence of a new revolutionary leadership like we'd never seen before and which laid the basis for a new kind of society.

The British SWP's theory of state capitalism prevents them from grasping the true significance of what happened 1959. [The theory of state capitalism argues Cuba is a capitalist state in which Castro leads a capitalist class]. For example, they were unable to explain the hostility of imperialism towards the USSR, or even to this day the hostility of the United States to the Cuban revolution, in a substantive, theoretical way, in terms of Marxism, or why Cuba would establish solidarity and non-exploitive trading relations with Venezuela and with the government of Bolivia. In *International Socialism* #104 you can see the problems they're having coming to an understanding of the Bolivarian Revolution. Mike Gonzalez's article on Venezuela amazingly says nothing about Cuba's relationship to Venezuela and is much more interested in telling us what's wrong with Hugo Chavez than anything else. The only conclusion I draw from his article is that they are for the over-throw of Chavez.

I think it's worthwhile to go back and look at the Cuban revolution again, to see how it developed: not only in terms of its history, but how it expresses itself today. What are the conquests of that revolution?

But we should appreciate that revolutionary leaderships in all under-developed countries on coming to power, confront a legacy of low productive capacity. Where do they get capital to expand the economy and solve the immense social problems they have inherited? The power of the state cannot be reduced because they face a ferocious imperialist enemy and class privilege

cannot be totally eliminated.

I'm not suggesting we be blind to problems in Cuba. The bureaucracy is a constant problem. I think many Cubans understand this, including the leadership of the Communist Party and there is no evidence it has been corrupted by privilege. Moreover, there are many democratic features in Cuba – the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR's), for instance and the arming of the masses — that compare favourably to our so called democracy in the advanced capitalist countries, but it's not an ideal proletarian democracy by any means; anyone who says so, is mistaken. I see it as a revolutionary dictatorship. There are deformations. I'm always a little frustrated when I'm in Cuba about obtaining information about what's going on in the world. Even though you get CNN and the various international TV cable channels in your hotel room, it is virtually impossible to buy foreign newspapers. Granma (official organ of the government) can be found here and there, but even that takes some effort.

There's no right to strike, which I think is a mistaken policy. This is essentially a political problem, a question of class consciousness, but the officials and workers I've met explain that the Cuban Communist Party and the workers through their unions participate in the preparation of the national budget and the allocation of resources. They say that if you allowed such freedoms in its planned economy, it's possible the more strategically placed sectors of the working class would enrich themselves at the expense of the working people as a whole.

It's a transitional society between socialism and capitalism. SWP theory makes no room for that possibility. They should first look at what the revolution has achieved. It pushed back imperialism and achieved national independence. It has gone a long way in solving the huge problems of racism and the oppression of women. On a whole series of indices, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the severe economic difficulties they've faced, they're way ahead of the rest of Latin America.

That's what we should discuss with the SWP comrades: what's the nature of this revolution. We should be confronting their sectarian positions; in the process we'll help educate ourselves and the entire left, and we might even help change the line of the SWP. The Cubans are in bitter struggle with the U.S., which has been trying to overthrow their government for almost 50 years, with bombings, an invasion, systematic violent sabotage campaigns against their economy and hundreds of assassinations attempts against their leadership. The not-so-Cold War didn't end for Cuba, yet the SWP is calling for the overthrow of the Cuban leadership. It's astonishing it could be so backward on this!

The SWP's leadership of the anti-war movement in Britain and Canada suggests they can move considerably from previous sectarian positions; maybe you'll change their line on Cuba. **R**



# 'Neoliberalism and Canada's Ruling Class'

Greg Albo

Jamie Brownlee

*Ruling Canada: Corporate Cohesion and Democracy*  
Halifax: Fernwood Books, 2005, 168 pp.

For a discipline explicitly engaged in the study of power, particularly as exercised in liberal democracies, it is striking how little Canadian political science has actually examined the concentration of private economic power, the political organization of the business classes and the extension of that power into the political realm. Indeed, Canadian political science has been principally pre-occupied with power insofar as it pertains to the constitutional distribution of power and the relative access to political power of the multinational and multicultural constituent groups comprising Canada. The enormous concentration of economic power – the top 25 firms accounting for over 40 percent of business assets and the monopolies with over \$100 million in revenue accounting for 80 percent of business assets – has largely been occluded from serious scrutiny. The mythologies of a pluralist Canadian democracy are better preserved in the absence of conceptual and empirical debate about the economic foundations of political power.

This has been a poor conceptual foundation from which to examine the development and consolidation of neoliberalism in Canada over the last two decades. Neoliberalism began as a set of policy propositions in the late 1970s in opposition to the post-war social-democratic welfare state; it then blossomed into the 'new right' political movement from the 1980s on, in Canada led by the Reform and then Alliance parties, but also gaining an important position in both the Progressive Conservative and Liberal parties; and neoliberalism consolidated as the matrix of governmental policy, whatever the political party in power and level of government, from the 1990s on, with the free trade agreements with the U.S. being the critical mechanism for the comprehensive reordering of state administration and policy agendas. Canadian political science, however, has largely focused on neoliberalism as a project of the political right or particular policies meeting normatively determined implementation criteria. Even critical writing has mainly argued for a shift in specific policies, such as a greater emphasis on social policies of inclusion or childcare or more competitive interest and exchange rates, in an effort to modify some of the more egregious of neoliberalism's distributional and accumulation dynamics. These 'alternate' policies are seen as necessary social foundations for Canadian competitiveness that 'pure' neoliberalism breaches at its own peril. Little is said about neoliberalism as a particular form of social rule, enduring across changes in the political regime, or its relationship to the economic dimensions of power.

Jamie Brownlee's study, *Ruling Canada: Corporate Cohesion and Democracy*, takes a quite different approach to the study



*sion and Democracy*, takes a quite different approach to the study of power and its exercise in a period of neoliberalism. He begins with the questions: to what extent do Canadian economic elites constitute a unified group and what mechanisms facilitate the unity of this group? In other words: "does Canada have a ruling class? If so, how does it rule?" These questions are, in turn, directed at querying the influence economic elites have had in promoting neoliberalism in Canada. To answer these questions, Brownlee surveys a range of recent studies and data on corporate concentration and interlocking directorships of dominant capitalist groups; the policy advocacy and philanthropy organizations supported principally by business interests, such as the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, the Fraser Institute, the Conference Board of Canada, the RBC Foundation, and so forth; and the financial and social linkages between political parties and business.

In taking this tack, Brownlee follows upon older studies of the composition of Canadian ruling elites, such as those by Frank Park and Libby Park, John Porter, Wallace Clement and Denis Olsen, as well as the more recent popular writings of leading anti-corporate campaigners such as Maude Barlow, Tony Clarke and Murray Dobbin. In particular, he follows on the path-breaking scholarly studies of William Carroll and his book *Corporate Power in a Globalizing World* (2004). Carroll demonstrates how Canadian capital has reorganized and internationalized, with financial capital, particularly Canadian banks, at the centre of dominant industrial-financial groups. He argues that this domestically owned form of 'finance capital' has come to dominate the Canadian ruling bloc and is the critical underpinning of the hegemony of neoliberal policies in Canada. Brownlee's departure is to highlight the particular 'coherence' of ruling elites in Canada, in terms of corporate structures and economic interest, and the mechanisms by which the neoliberal political agenda has been pushed.

Brownlee advances two central theoretical claims and makes several key empirical points. Against pluralist views that political resources are spread equally amongst citizens and that market

processes block elite unity, Brownlee claims that economic resources are highly concentrated, elite cohesion increasingly characterizes corporate actors, and this cohesion allows effective control of the political sphere. Additionally, corporations consciously build policy organizations to help form elite cohesion and advance policy agendas. The main empirical findings are that: corporate concentration and diversification in Canada has been led by financial capital; extensive corporate interlocks amongst nationally-based capital provides the economic foundation for elite cohesion; intersectoral business organizations, business supported policy organizations and free-enterprise foundations play key roles in Canadian elite networks and cohesion; and elite cohesion in Canada has underpinned the advocacy of neoliberalism in Canada.

A few points from Brownlee's account deserve further debate. The first relates to the theoretical emphasis on elite cohesion, as produced by interlocking corporate structures and social ties amongst ruling elites. Integration and monopolisation do not abolish competition between individual units of capital, even within integrated firms. This means that it is not possible to abolish the 'economic-corporate' interests of different fractions of capital and dominant classes. Indeed, in more advanced stages of capitalism where state intervention is fundamental to secure the political and economic conditions necessary for accumulation, the political and policy organization of business groups – and their rivalry – can be expected to increase. Given the specific institutional autonomy of the state, it necessarily becomes the terrain in which compromises are worked out between different interests, policy agendas advanced and capitalist political hegemony over the 'national-popular' constructed. What has been particular about this stage of neoliberalism is how parallel business networks have crosscut the formal organization of the state and played a decisive role in reorganizing state-society relations. Neoliberalism in Canada has been a particularly vivid example of the way rivalry between capitals, both in regional and sectoral terms, has been played out inside, and not apart, from the state.



A second point that requires more careful assessment is the characterization of ruling class alliances. Brownlee examines corporate concentration and corporate interlocks to demonstrate the potential for nationally-based economic structures for elite cohesion. But such a vantage tells us little about the dynamics of ac-

cumulation and the nature of ruling class alliances – and how these have changed with neoliberalism. The postwar period in Canada was anchored in an alliance of industrial and commodity capital, supported by financial capital. Foreign capital largely acted as compradors in providing loans and capital goods for branch plants producing for the domestic market. This ruling alliance served as a “national bourgeoisie.” Under neoliberalism, the Canadian ruling bloc has undergone several critical transformations: the massive financialization of the economy has seen the re-emergence of finance capital, with financial monopolies gaining ownership leverage over industrial enterprises; new sectors of export-oriented industrial and commodity capital have grown; and foreign capital has been incorporated as a key element of the ruling bloc as part of international production and financial networks. This ruling alliance entails an “interior bourgeoisie” still located in a national economy, but increasingly dependent upon extending accumulation internationally and transnational linkages via fora such as OECD, the Davos Forum, the WTO and NAFTA. The shift in the dynamics of accumulation needs to be conceptualized and cannot be read off from indices of economic cohesion.

Brownlee's analysis, then, clearly falls into the anti-corporate power politics that has animated the global social justice movement. Hence he sees new political actors emerging in places like the World Social Forum, the Council of Canadians, and other civil society organizations protesting corporate agendas. He notes simply that “a diverse range of community and citizen-based groups have challenged the elite consensus.” Here, and this is a third point for further debate, the text's focus on the organization of corporate power is not matched by the same seriousness of analysis of the organization and power of oppositional forces. As economic elites were reorganizing in corporate form and policy agendas, the political forces on the left have been ‘disorganizing’: in terms of the policy realignment of social democracy and the NDP toward embracing markets, the relative decline of union power and political activism, and the all-but disappearance of wider social coalitions opposing corporate power. The turn toward ‘civil society’ organization, or the looser networks of the ‘multitude’ that animated the anti-globalization movement of Seattle and Quebec City, have not proven capable of either sustaining themselves or challenging neoliberalism. Here more serious questions of power and organization, the collective logics of oppositional forces, alternative policy visions and party building need to be taken up.

Such lack of understanding in addressing the organizational foundations for a project for democratization is hardly Brownlee's fault alone. Canadian political science as currently practiced is all but silent on the rupture between existing Canadian political and economic institutions and the democratic aspirations of the majority of the Canadian people. Brownlee at least demonstrates the massive weight of corporate power that goes into sustaining the profoundly anti-democratic political order that is present day Canada. **R**

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# The Orientalist Technique and the Western Media

Nishant Upadhyay

Although the formal period of territorial colonization has come to an end, the ideology of Euro-American-centrism – the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing Western (generally North American and West European) concerns, culture and values at the centre of global importance while ignoring or disavowing the importance of other cultures and their active struggles – persists. The “best that is thought and written” is assumed to be European and increasingly, American. History, philosophy, sciences, literature all stress and focus on the ideology of triumphant Western capitalist modernity. So common is the spread of Euro-American-centric language, media, religion and culture in day to day life that it often goes unobserved and is taken for granted as “common sense.” Euro-American-centrism is “the constellar paradigm of Euro-capitalism, in its rich confusion of allied, conjunctural elements made up of capitalism, patriarchy, misanthropy, racism, colonialism, anthropocentrism, and recharged Christian ideology – or modernism, in a word.”

The West’s capitalist media system plays a big role in upholding and circulating such Euro-American-capitalist ideologies; it shapes peoples consciousness of the world and defines what is “good or bad, positive and negative, moral or evil.” The media contributes to the creation of “dominant system of norms, values, practices and institutions.” Media bias describes a real or perceived bias of journalist and media organizations, in their selection and reportage of events. Many news organizations reflect or portray a viewpoint of the primary geographic, ethnic and national population they serve. Since the neo-colonial West monopolizes the means of international representation, it is no surprise that the West’s capitalist media system often reflects how Anglo-American nation-states and their ruling classes imagine the world and their dominant place within it. Indeed, the West’s monopoly on the international media is inflected with a Euro-American-centric media bias, especially when it comes to representing non-Western others, events, and geographies. This Euro-American-centric media bias is expressed in a number of different ways.

The age-old colonial practice of Orientalism continues as an implicit ideological bias of the Western capitalist media. For the late Edward Said, Orientalism comprised of the institutions, practices, and ideological discourses that describe, study, name, attempt to “speak the truth” about non-Western others. The Western media has inherited this legacy of Orientalist technique. Mediated Orientalism sanitizes the violence of colonial history and the neo-colonial present; it mis-represents non-Western others by producing disparaging and humiliating stereotypes of them. Post-colonial states and populations are regularly depicted as backward, outdated and ancient, anti-modern relics. Orientalist mediations of post-colonial states and peoples tend to be negative, condescending, and unsympathetic to their struggles. Post-colonial states have no future, but a future already decided by the West. Such mediated Orientalism, in turn, results in the depic-

tion of Western states as humane, progressive, kind, superior, and advanced.

The Western media defines reality by monopolizing meanings and privileging some meanings over others. Take the meaning and the coverage of “terrorism.” The Bush administration’s “War against terrorism” is always presented by the media as a Western “problem” that comes from the developing world and that the Western states must solve. Terrorist violence in the West is seriously reported while terrorist violence in post-colonial states is regularly ignored, as though only the West suffers the so-called contemporary terrorist threat. Terrorist attacks in the West always are presented as being of utmost significance to the world while violence in developing countries is rendered insignificant, a trivial facet of everyday life among “savages.” As result, the West’s loss of life, property, and well-being on a few isolated occasions take ideological precedence over daily suffering and violence in post-colonial states.

When not depicting developing countries as the source from which international terrorist violence springs, the Western media tends to focus on Third World catastrophes. Disasters like floods in Bangladesh, famine in Sub-Saharan Africa, train disasters in India and tsunamis in Indonesia seem more interesting and profitable than stories dealing with actual hopes, struggles, and goals of millions of non-Westerners. Media stories that induce the spectacle of panic and horror are a sure sell; they are geared for the maximum emotional impact. Such stories reinforce Western fantasies about non-Western geographies as being chaotic, out-of-control, and primitive while simultaneously cementing the West’s ideological belief in the order, control, and modernity of itself. In other instances, the coverage of catastrophe presents an opportunity for the West to imagine itself as bearing a “white man’s burden.” Take the spectacular media coverage of the tsunamis that hit South Asia and other parts of the Indian Ocean in December 2004. Such coverage – which called for water, food and other supplies to the victims – again and again portrayed Americans as “kindhearted and generous.” While humanitarian relief is certainly necessary in some situations, by only focusing on catastrophe and benevolent Westerners coming to the rescue of helpless non-Westerners, the media obscures the efforts of non-Westerners to organize, relieve, and save themselves.

An Orientalist Euro-American-centric media bias still persists; and it should be challenged. Marshall McLuhan once probed: “We don’t know who discovered water, but we are pretty sure it wasn’t a fish.” Like the fish needs to get out of water to discover the water, Western audiences need to get out of their ideology to take a hard look at the neo-colonialist media system drowning them. **R**

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# Pinochet is Gone but Neoliberalism Remains

Carlos Torres

The ailing ex-dictator finally passed away leaving behind a country divided and reopening wounds that had never healed. While the ruling elites united at a well-orchestrated funeral for the criminal and corrupt General, the people took to the streets to celebrate, although with mixed emotions, the death of the tyrant. In the midst of all of this commotion, the current democratic government sent the police to contain and disperse the peoples' celebration.

Today Chile represents the most advanced neoliberal country; but the political, social and economic divisions are detectable. The electoral system represents a political arrangement that fits the needs of neoliberals, hard-liners and moderates, but neoliberals nonetheless. The state Constitution, reformed during the military regime, was crafted to make overturning policies enacted during the dictatorship impossible unless more than two thirds of the elected senate approves it. The educational system grants access to universities and colleges to only about 10% of the public-municipal school students. The healthcare system was also privatized and turned into a for-profit business, denying proper health services to most of the working people.

## THE WORKING CLASS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

After more than seventeen years of so-called democratic transition workers continue to earn less than they did in 1973, before the coup d'état. Union organizing is practically impossible because the labour code implanted by the military was designed to render the unions weak and powerless. International and national corporations still violate workers' basic rights and are protected by very limited safety principles. Companies can fire workers at will, based on market needs.

The environment represents another social casualty of the current model since it not only affects nature, but people's daily life as well. Extraction activities, such as mining, gas, fishing, and logging are

emptying oceans and forests. In the meantime the four consecutive post-dictatorship governments, including the current 'socialist' government led by Michelle Bachelet, have stated that the environmental issues will not alter Chile's path to development.

## THE FIRST NATIONS

The Mapuche first nation has been subjugated and jailed for mobilizing to recover their lands. Many first nations' people are serving life sentences while the "Chilean" landowners enjoy lands that belong to first nations. Moreover, the Mapuche people continue to confront the same judiciary system enacted by the dictatorship that imprisoned the left under charges of subversion and terrorism, and now serves to confine first nations to reserves in Chilean territory far from their ancestors and traditions. Approximately two years ago the UN Special Envoy declared that, "the Chilean State was responsible for grave violations of first nations." Indigenous people continue to press for reforms related to land and the upholding of their economic, social and cultural rights. Further incidents between Mapuche indigenous people and the *carabineros* (uniformed police) in the context of land tenure and the commercial exploitation of timber in the south of the country followed. In the report of his visit to Chile in July, the UN Special Rapporteur on indigenous people, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, underlined the economic and social marginalization of indigenous communities, as well as the criminalization of indigenous social protest movements through the use of "anti-terrorism" legislation. Stavenhagen recommended a judicial review in the case of two Mapuche community leaders currently serving prison sentences.

## ECONOMY AND POVERTY

A few weeks ago after paying a visit to southern Chile, land of the Mapuche, Noam Chomsky declared that "It was

shameful the way the Chilean state was dealing with Mapuche issues" using jail and repression to work out a political conflict.

The process of neoliberal transformation begun during the dictatorship continued into the 1990s. As Cathy Schneider conveys, "Poverty and income inequality, which grew by colossal proportions during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship, have scarcely been addressed by the new democratic regime." In other words, once neoliberals managed to implant their agenda neoliberalism became entrenched culturally, economically and institutionally. Neoliberal policies forcedly implemented privatization, deregulation and marketization policies that removed state controls in such key areas of the economy as oil, fuel, communication, and the common good; water, electricity and even social services.

Economically, the social debt is still unpaid and far from being dealt with, as evident in the falsified unemployment stats that declared Chile's jobless rate to be in single digits while informal, part-time and on-call workers represent a growing rate of unemployment. The UN reports that poverty levels are higher today than in 1973 during Allende's government and the gap continues to grow. The Chilean "miracle," as stated by Walden Bello, is one in which the "free market policies subjected the country to two major depressions twice in one decade, first in 1974-75, when the GDP fell by 12 per cent, then again in 1982-83, when it dropped by 15 per cent. Contrary to ideological expectations about free markets and robust growth, average GDP growth in the period 1974-89 – the radical Jacobin phase of the Friedman-Pinochet revolution – was only 2.6 per cent, compared to over 4 per cent a year in the period 1951-71, when the state played a much greater role in the economy". Today more than 30% of Chileans live in abject poverty.

It should be acknowledged that human rights violations were the cornerstone

• *Continues on page 37*

# Epitaph to the death of Death

You certainly provoked hostile and contradictory reactions.  
Your time spent here left a mark on our dignified land,  
The land that now denies, refutes and expels you.  
You cannot share sacred spaces with human beings,  
General of bloody, corrupt gangs.

On this day so many come together in my memory;  
Maria, Bautista, Marta, Juan, and Miguel, Arcadia, Rosa, Pepe,  
Diana, Sergio, Lumi, Patricio, Loreto, Miguel, Eduardo, and Aracely.  
Faces and flags, days and nights, births and exhausted inertia;  
Iron bars, cells, electric cords, shots, screams, blows, pain;  
Years and months, roads and mountains, airports and cemeteries;  
Marches and funerals, songs and poems, walls and beehives;  
Volcanoes and bodies, oceans and abysses, bullet bursts and floodgates;  
Reservoirs and vestibules, voices and anguish, love and hate.

The celebrations will be inaudible but "to the people what belongs to the people."  
When justice reached out its furtive talons for you, death saved you.  
You went with impunity, escaping as you have so many times, coward.  
By fluke you freed yourself from justice and a well-earned imprisonment.  
Some helped you avoid the inspired arm of justice:  
Military chaplains and hierarchies, businessmen, corrupt politicians and generals.  
The opportunistic career politicians did the same.  
The self-righteous in overstuffed armchairs who yesterday cursed you,  
Saved you from the well-deserved gallows but not from mass repudiation.

Nevertheless you will be remembered, we cannot deny it,  
In the sewers and cesspools, trenches and open drains;  
In the rotting plagues and sediment of putrefaction;  
As well as in the hidden entrances to tombs and swamps;  
In the garbage cans, in porcine slaughterhouses and savage beasts.  
Certainly the social climbing ass kissers will not forget you,  
Nor will the uniformed officers weighed down by their shiny trinkets.  
The desert rats and the infernal School of the Americas will also remember you.

The bankers, swindlers and traffickers;  
Ali Baba and the mafia family that reveres you;  
The tabloids, toilet paper and talk shows.  
Yawning, they associate you with modernity,  
While others associate you with Milton Friedman, who waits for you  
In the infamous alley between crime and hate.  
He will also remember you.

In the same token you will be associated with urinals and pestilence,  
The smallest, flaccid and most pestilent floor mop,  
Like those bacteria that grow in the darkness far from the sun,  
In this way you escaped once more the denigration of the despised.  
You will be compared to the secretions of contaminated and oozing wounds,  
Biblical surges and pagan readings will attempt to redeem your abandonment,  
Among maggots, worms and ogres you will be honoured in the caves of the wealthy neighbourhoods.





And as you served the Empire and the White House and the Iron Bitch,  
They will lament your absence, although you did not warn them of your shameful exit.  
Even the Mossad will remember the good times of crime without punishment,  
In silence the corporations and traffickers of arms will also  
Drink to your dissipated health with bitter red wine laced with the blood of the working class.

You had the death of a frothing, hotheaded and roguish bully.  
You do not deserve anything, not last rites or pompous funerals;  
Nor military or state honours, you do not even deserve to be forgotten.  
The Cardinal who helped you in the past, now in prayer  
Wants to save you from purgatory, the hierarchy failing once again, in not serving the people.

And your relatives shut their mouths and retreat to their fishbowls.  
They count money to buy the indulgences of "Their Father."  
You betrayed friends and presidents, your servants and messengers;  
You stole from the state, those who donated their jewels to your "cause," and taxpayers;  
You killed enemies and colleagues in your burning hells, native and foreigner.  
There is no room for you in mausoleums or sacred ground, nor do you dare to call St. Peter;  
Neither Leviathan nor the Devil will lift your vile condemnations  
He does not want you in competition with the demon in his lair.  
There was impunity in your life, but you will not have it in death.

"The Butcher does not rest in peace because he will not have peace, even in Hell."

• Carlos Torres (In La Paz, Bolivia, 10 and 11 December 2006)

### ***Pinochet continued from page 35***

of the new neoliberal model, which relied on openly authoritarian practices in terms of state politics, economic transformation, human rights issues and cultural impacts. Michel Chossudovsky strongly contends that, "The violation of human rights supports a parallel process of *economic repression* which is characterized by a compression of real wages and by substantial changes in the distribution of income. The elimination of real trade unions, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the consolidation of traditional techniques of political repression constitute the necessary instruments for restructuring the underlying patterns of production and consumption.

These conditions explain and help us to understand the limited participation of the left, civil society and social movements in the post-dictatorship period. Moreover, the repression against the social and partisan left was a precondition to implementing neoliberalism. As Atilio Boron reminds us, "In a notorious interview given to the conservative Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* during the Pinochet years, Friedrich von Hayek asserted that, for a while, he was ready to sacrifice democracy and political rights in exchange for a governmental programme committed to the unfettered development of capitalism."

For the dictatorship, killing people represented the elimination of utopia. In Carol's Murillo words, many of the people killed during Pinochet's dictatorship were women and men who truly believed in either socialism or communism and, in following the example of the Cuban Revolution, devoted their lives to the poor and their redemption. But the dictatorship and its army endorsed death as a reference, marking the beginning and end of the present and of the future. However, they could not understand that even after their physical disappearance noble ideas continue to exist.

### **REMEMBERING SALVADOR ALLENDE**

Pinochet escaped this world in the midst of grotesque impunity, endorsed by the ruling elites and tolerated by the current Chilean government, for his crimes and the crimes of his team of thugs. His elaborate memorial service and farewell represents the unquestionable decay of the so-called Chilean democratic system, where anti-democratic enclaves controlled by neoliberal powers such as the mass media, the right wing political parties, the armed forces as well as the business community

– who all attended the pompous funeral of the ex-general en masse – continue to throw their weight around.

Today it might be relevant to remember the man who tried to build a new path for socialist transformation and the peaceful construction of a new society. It is also imperative not to forget that thousands of women and men put their lives on the line to resist and fight the dictatorship. Conversely, it is also important to understand that capitalism, in all its forms, is still brutal, violent and oppressive for which reasons we must overcome it. Allende, in his last words to Chileans affirmed, "Workers of Chile, I have faith in Chile and its destiny. Other men will go beyond this gray and bitter moment when treason tries to impose itself upon us. Continue to know that, much sooner than later, we will reopen the great Alameda promenades down which free men pass, to construct a better society. These are my last words and I have certainty that my sacrifice will not be in vain, I have certainty that, at the least, I will be a moral lesson to castigate felony, cowardice, and treason."

Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers! **R**

Carlos Torres is a Toronto-based activist.

# Is the Big Ship America Sinking?

## *Contradictions and Openings*

Sam Gindin



*There's something happening  
What it is ain't exactly clear*  
Buffalo Springfield, 1966

Are we in the midst of a momentous turn in world politics? Donald Rumsfeld has been shuffled out of the Pentagon. Daniel Ortega, Washington's nemesis from the Sandanista Revolution of the late 1970s, is back as President of Nicaragua. Hugo Chavez has been triumphantly re-elected, and Bolivia and Ecuador also have new left-populist presidents. U.S.-led neoliberalism is scrambling in Latin America; the U.S. state seems to be in the throes of a full retreat in Iraq; and, in its look ahead to the year 2007, *The Economist* is warning of the dangers of an 'authority deficit' at the level of nation states, international institutions, and the role of 'the superpower'. The U.S. economy is slowing down; Europe's economy is speeding up; and China, having quadrupled its output over the past 15 years, is becoming more confident and assertive internationally. The fall of the U.S. dollar has been imminent for some time, but now the talk is of its decline turning into a chaotic rout. And suddenly everyone is an environmentalist, with the Bush Administration being the main force against the Kyoto climate change protocols.

What next? With the Bush neo-conservatives on the defensive, will a new common sense emerge? Will the broad left regain its confidence and move to overturning three decades of increased inequality, erosion of social rights and corrosion of substantive democracy? Will this also extend to challenging corporate power?

Will Bush's humiliation in Iraq spill into Canadian debates over the war in Afghanistan and drag Harper down along with his imperial friend? Will the new reality in Iraq force the U.S. and Israel towards some substantive compromise with Palestinians? Will the turmoil within the American empire provide space for the populist experiments taking place in Latin America – experiments that might inspire a more radical activism in our own countries?

### AN UNRAVELING EMPIRE?

It is tempting to identify, in all of the above observations and questions, signs of the unraveling of the American empire. But to argue that the American economy may be on its last legs substitutes wishful thinking for sober analysis. The American economy retains a remarkable capacity to adjust to change (with great costs, of course to American workers). American military power has limits but it remains the greatest military power the world has ever seen, and its coercive potential and reach should not be underestimated. Shifts are occurring among the hierarchy of capitalist states and regions – the dramatic rise of Asia and the development of the European Union being the most obvious and important – but American leadership in the making of global capitalism continues.

There are other reasons for caution. Empires aren't toppled by falling exchange rates. The U.S. dollar fell by 44% relative to the G-10 countries between February 1985 and October 1987. Al-

though there was a recession in the early 1990s, this was followed by the great American 1990s economic boom. Empires do not collapse from particular defeats either. Vietnam defeated the U.S. in the 1970s, but a main priority of Vietnam today is to deepen its participation in American-led globalization. The American economy is clearly not focused on addressing popular needs, but that is not what matters to capital's successful survival. For American capital, the more important development is that US after-tax profits as a share of GDP are at their highest since 1929.

The U.S. is losing manufacturing *jobs* at an alarming rate: the number of manufacturing jobs in the U.S. is today below where it was fifty years ago and as a share of total jobs, manufacturing employment is today less than half of what it was then. Yet because of the high productivity of the remaining workers, manufacturing *production* is not disappearing: the volume of manufactured goods produced in the U.S. has increased six-fold since 1950. Remarkably, given the decline in manufacturing jobs, manufacturing production has maintained its share of the American economy's real (after adjustments for price inflation) output. The U.S. continues to generate half the research and development done amongst the G-7 leading capitalist economies. According to the U.S. National Science Foundation, the American share of the global production of high-tech goods, in spite of all the outsourcing and the imports, actually *increased* from 25% a quarter of a century ago to 42% in 2003. It is certainly true that high tech production in China and South Korea has increased much faster, but they started from a low base (about 1% in each country) and their global share has risen to what is still a fraction of the U.S. levels, at only 9% and 4% respectively.

Even if some U.S. multinational corporations have lost their former overwhelming dominance in certain sectors, others have maintained their strength, as with the aerospace industry, and new ones have flourished, particularly in such high tech sectors as computers, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, biotechnology, and others. The leadership role of the U.S. is confirmed even as European and Asian companies increase their drive to catch up, or at times even surpass, American manufacturing. In other sectors, the advice and skills they seek is that coming from those with the most experience and expertise in the making of global capitalism: which overwhelmingly means U.S. banks, investment houses, consulting agencies, and law and accounting firms still dominate the financial and services sectors.

### A COLLAPSING TRADE POSITION?

What about the American trade deficit (including a trade deficit even in high tech goods) and the loss of competitiveness this expresses? American exports have in fact been very competitive and increased very significantly. It is the remarkable level of imports that account for the trade deficit. In high tech, for example, American consumers are buying, and American businesses using, more such goods than anyone else does. The result is that the U.S. ends up both producing more *and* importing more. (It should also be noted that American multinationals now sell far

more abroad through their affiliates than through exports from the USA, so trade data does not give a meaningful measure of American corporate strength.)

The U.S. has been able, for over a quarter century now, to import more goods than it exports and pay for this through other countries accumulating American dollars (dollars which are now falling in value). If any other country tried to do the same, it would be disciplined by international financial markets as capitalists would pull out their capital until that country corrected its 'over-spending'. The U.S. can get away with this not just because the dollar is the dominant currency in the world: more important is that global finance is still relatively confident in the American dollar (the dollar remains the 'safe haven' in an uncertain world) and the resilience of the American economy. The net result has, essentially, been that a larger share of global labour has been working to supply the U.S. with its needs, and that the U.S. has also captured a disproportionate share of world savings. In this sense, the U.S. has been able to run consistent trade deficits for over a quarter of a century as a sign of relative strength rather than weakness in relationship to other advanced capitalist centers.

The U.S. economy may face a significant degree of instability and uncertainty in the coming period. But a global run on the U.S. dollar is most unlikely because of the way the rest of the world is now structurally interdependent with – and even directly integrated into – the American empire. The countries currently holding large dollar reserves, especially China and Japan, hold dollars to keep their own currencies from rising relative to the dollar and so maintain their advantage in exporting to the crucial U.S. market. If they did convert their dollars to another international currency such as the yen or euro, the Japanese and Europeans – panicking over a competitiveness-destroying rise in their currency – would immediately turn to buying up dollars, thereby neutralizing the net impact on overall holdings of dollars. More generally, the countries with large holdings of U.S. dollars have come to understand that, given their integration into global capitalism, a crisis for the dollar is a crisis for everyone. This general concern to support the dollar even as it falls, and avoid a collapse of the US economy, reflects the contradictions of success within the American empire, and that structural interdependency has become a significant foundation of the American empire.

### A MILITARY POWER IN RETREAT?

The U.S. military impasse – and potential full retreat – in Iraq raises the limits to the American empire. The *Los Angeles Times* (December 3, 2006) reports that the recent trip of top American officials to shore up their Middle East allies found "friends both old and new near a state of panic" fearing that "that the Bush administration may make things worse." But Iraq and the entire Middle East will still have to sell their oil on the world market, and the U.S. will keep receiving it (as it now does from Venezuela in spite of the Bush-Chavez conflict). American oil companies will continue to play a prominent and profitable role in the process (as they still do in Venezuela and Bolivia). Many of the new →

American military bases established in the Middle East and Central Asia in the course of the 'war on terrorism' are likely to remain in place. And an unintended consequence of a less unilateral American state forced into negotiations with Iran, may well lead Iran to become more 'responsible' and integrated within global capitalism, an outcome not necessarily negative for American interests.

There also other reasons for a more sober assessment of existing geopolitical alliances and balance of forces. The electoral rejection of neoliberalism in Latin America states, for example, is obviously a great electoral victory for the people in these particular countries and a rejection of neoliberal policies. But these neither yet represent a defeat of neoliberalism as a system of power and capitalist market relations or a fundamental challenge to existing global social relations. In Nicaragua, it is not clear that Ortega any longer represents a challenge to neoliberalism. Argentina has come back into the fold of global capitalism, and is actively negotiating the repayment of its defaulted debt. Bolivia and Ecuador face serious limits on how far radical policy agendas in such small countries can be implemented given their international integration and poverty. And even Chavez, for all he has accomplished in Venezuela has, to date, found it necessary to go slow in challenging private industry and finance. Brazil, with half of Latin America's population, is clearly critical to continental possibilities but Lula has not emerged as a threat to either the Brazilian or global capitalists, and, if anything, his government has served to contain the opposition from below. There is need for a careful calibration of the Latin American struggle against U.S. imperialism and political hegemony, and the forces that remain to be defeated.

China raises a different set of issues and cautions with respect to shifting geopolitical forces. Chinese growth, much at the great expense of Chinese peasants and ecology, has indeed been stunning. But China has a long way to go to match the U.S. Its total Gross Domestic Product remains about one-quarter that of the U.S. The top 500 companies in China are still only one-fifth the size of the top 500 U.S. companies. China has relied on foreign direct investment as no other capitalist development transition has ever done. Even as China becomes more technologically sophisticated, its dependence on global technologies, components and markets is not decreasing, but *increasing*. Between 1993 and 2003, the share of China's exports produced by foreign-funded enterprises (FFE's) increased from 35% to 79%. The FFE's share of exports of computer equipment rose from 74% to 92%, and of electronics and telecom from 45% to 74%. Between 1998 and 2002, FFE's even increased their share of China's domestic consump-



tion of high-tech goods from 32% to 45% (see the essay by Howard French at [www.howardfrench.com/archives/2005/08/07](http://www.howardfrench.com/archives/2005/08/07)).

A crucial question is whether Chinese dependence on foreign corporations is just a pragmatic economic strategy that can be modified as China develops, or whether it carries with it a *social* significance. For example, the foreign dependence affects the making of a Chinese capitalist class, intertwining it with ties to foreign markets and suppliers. That is, the Chinese capitalist class has a developing vested interest, like capitalists elsewhere, in the conditions of global capitalism, as well as the Chinese economic space. This can be partly seen in the major political and economic summit held in December between Chinese and American political and business leaders over the nature of Chinese-American economic ties and their relationship to the global economy. To the extent that such a Chinese capitalist class is in fact emerging, the main global 'contradiction' represented by China's growth may consequently not be found in its threat to the U.S., but rather in China's internal class and ecological relations.

There are also specific limits on China's emergence as global political rival in the immediate period. There are some serious potential problems with China's banking system and the unserviced debt that has been mounting; the inflow of speculative 'hot-money' and China's real estate bubble are becoming more difficult to contain with the Bank of China's main sterilization policy of building up U.S. dollar reserves; an aging population and weak social security structure that is putting pressure to shift resources from private accumulation to public services; an already-existing environmental crisis that will only get worse at present growth rates; and extremes of regional and class inequalities. There is, finally, the critical question of whether the Chinese state can contain the formation of popular forces, above all within the working class, and their growing expectations of work-place rights, material well-being and democracy.

## NEW OPENINGS?

Where then does this leave us? There may be a downturn, strains and uncertainties, even a degree of quite serious turmoil. Given that neoliberalism has, to some extent, been discredited as a pure policy framework, this may lead to some turn away from neoliberalism's harshest and most messianic policies. As *The Economist* (November 25, 2006) suggested after the fall 2006 American Congressional elections, rebuilding "America's social contract" may be "a prerequisite for shoring up support for globalization." As well, the Democratic Party most certainly will, in light of the delegitimation of Bush's international policies of unilateralism, be more cautious in its interventions abroad and more sensitive to multilateral incorporation of allies, as has already been evolving with respect to Middle East policies and North Korea. In the absence of sustained social pressures from within the U.S., however, the changes will be limited to a 'kinder' (and perhaps more acceptable) capitalist globalization and the more 'multilateral' (and perhaps more efficient) imperialism which the Europeans have sought from the USA.

American capitalism and the American empire continue to have staying power. This is because of the absence of pressure from below. Without effective social resistance, American capital can restructure at the expense of the middle and working classes. Without organized resistance, the 'competitiveness' of U.S. firms and the economy becomes the discursive and organizational framework for middle and working class discontent. The cracks in the neoliberal architecture of the empire in the military quagmire in Iraq, electoral revolts in Latin America, and the structural American trade deficit and dollar overhang, are not the bursting of historic 'contradictions' that lead to the crisis that will unravel American geopolitical hegemony. Rather, these are historic 'openings' that challenge us to create a new politics that can lead to radical new political alignments. The real issue is not whether 'the system' will fall apart, but whether a new kind of left can come together.

In Canada, it is significant that federal anti-scab legislation and a living wage are actually on the parliamentary agenda and that the new leader of the Liberal Party is an avowed 'environmentalist.' But these positive signs are more a reflection of the Liberals sensing a general and vague unease in the country, than any fear of a radicalized and mass left. The question is whether we can build on such openings. Might the present moment be that long-awaited chance to place *real* economic and social transformation – with all the difficult (and sometimes uncomfortable) questions of political capacities and organization this implies – on the agenda once again? **R**

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# Greek Democracy in the Post-Euro Era

Michalis Spourdalakis

For some thirty two years now Greece has enjoyed the benefits of stable democratic institutions. For the first time in the country's modern history, Greek politics and public life are characterized by political stability. As political conflicts of the past that led to civil wars, coup d'états, dictatorships and the general imposition of authoritarian regimes seem to be practices of the past. But what is the nature of this stability?

The on-going democratic stability and security inaugurated in 1974 after the fall of the Colonel's Dictatorship, however, does not by any means imply that there has been stagnation in the system of political and social representation. On the contrary, the development of the primary democratic institutions of political parties and trade unions has evolved, especially since the 1990s, in ways that not only differ radically from its immediate past but also display practices that contribute to the erosion of their representative function. This has impacted on the very nature of democracy as we know it. This development is common to both political parties and trade unions, and though different in intensity and form, has transformed the entire system of the political and social representation.

## **FROM PARTY DOMINATED DEMOCRACY TO POST-PARTY DEMOCRACY**

The period of the dictatorship was preceded by decades of weak democratic institutions. Thus, the challenge of the transition to democracy after 1974 was to be undertaken by a newly established party system. The newly founded political parties were: New Democracy, with a mixed ideological baggage somewhere between political liberalism and social conservatism but clearly at the right end of the political spectrum; the Panhellenic Socialist Movement-PASOK, with a social democratic orientation, whose initial radical rhetoric and organization located more to the left than the centre-left where it actually belonged; and parties of the traditional left either of a clearly typical communist orientation (Communist Party of Greece-KKE) or with a communist background (Synaspismos). These parties were the only institutional agents with the democratic legitimization necessary to undertake such a monumental task. The transition was successful and without much of turbulence a fully developed parliamentary democracy was established. A side effect of this process was the domination of the entirety of public life in Greece by political parties, as the latter left virtually no room for any spontaneity of political and civil society outside of their control.

The party domination of the young Greek democracy functioned as a liberal modernizing motive for the parties and party system itself. By the end of the 1980s, Greek parties had institutionalized themselves and displayed the same organizational and ideological trends as in the party systems of other advanced capitalist democracies. Greek political parties were, in addition, the sole contributors to the articulation between the societal field and the governing of state power. They engaged actively in societal conflicts and demands. The latter not only became the catalyst for their organizational modernization but also proved to be a key function for connecting state and society. This political function of parties was vital to the renewing of the political agendas after the initial phase of democratization, and expanding the limits of the political field and thus of democracy. This system of political representation had come into full bloom by the end of PASOK's second term in government.

A period of crisis from 1989 followed: a short-lived period of governmental co-operation between the Right and the Left (clearly a Greek version of the earlier Italian Historical Compromise that allowed Communists into government); followed by a five month all party government; then the rise of New Democracy into power; and its defeat by PASOK two and a half years later. These dramatic political shifts signalled radical changes in the party system and especially in its representative function.

The Greek entrance into the European Union in 1981, the Maastricht Agreement of 1992 establishing the single market and the Euro currency zone (which Greece adopted), provided a broadly accepted economic and social agenda throughout the 1990s for the realigned Greek party system. As well, the big bang (by Greek standards) in the world of mass media and state privatizations further re-oriented Greek democracy. The governing parties withdrew into the affairs of the state, and turned their back on society. All these factors contributed to the changing role of political parties in the country's system of representation. The evolving consensus on neoliberalism that continues to this day has mirrored the decline – or what some see as the normalization – of Greek democracy.

The basis of party competition no longer, or at least not primarily, revolves around social demands and how political parties might link these demands to their programmatic political vision. Rather than this basic vision of liberal democracy, it appears that governing parties now compete on the basis on which party is

more capable of best implementing state priorities and commitments, often as defined and determined within EU institutions or international agreements. This basic societal deficiency of the political system and its subsequent governmentalism (at the expense of political and civil society) has been expressed in a number of the ways: in the extremely low levels of citizen trust towards political parties; in a decreasing political interest of the population especially during electoral campaigns; and elections which, in contrast to the initial post-dictatorship elections of the 1970s and 1980s, have become affairs not of the mass party organizations and their members but of experts in advertising. Voter turnout has not suffered as much, but one has to take into consideration that voting in Greece is formally obligatory, and although there are no penalties applied for not voting, old habits die hard.

It was these characteristics that led to PASOK's defeat in 2004 by the populist New Democracy party led by Karamanlis, nephew of the old leader. Since then, the Greek socialists have tried to demarcate themselves from their "modernizing" strategy, which guided them while in power for more than eleven years (1993-96 under the leadership of Andreas Papandreou and 1996-2004 under Simitis). They elected George Papandreou, son of the party's founder and long time minister of foreign affairs, to the party's leadership. While in opposition, PASOK's effort to take a critical distance from its previous orientation and practice both as a government party and social actor, has not resulted in the crafting of a convincing new strategy. PASOK's discourse today is pluralist and often quite controversial for the left (as, for example, with the leadership's support for a constitutional amendment to allow the establishment of private universities), quite in line with 'third-way' social democracy. This, in combination with its inexperienced if not naïve leader, appears to be turning PASOK into a party for organizing the trendy 'lifestyle' politics of the middle classes with limited prospects of returning to power at any time in the near future.

On the (so-called traditional) left, the Communist Party (KKE) rallies under the banner of anti-EU policies, a simplistic rhetoric which equates the Socialists with the right wing government and strong nationalism. In fact the latter has led to some controversial and symbolic initiatives as a number of prominent nationalists are now listed in its ranks. The KKE refuses any kind of co-operation with other political forces not just at the national level, but even at the local or at the shop floor level. To date, this strategy had been far from harmful to the Party. The polls show a slight increase in its influence to approximately 7 percent. However, its political presence and influence is ineffective in everyday politics and its anachronistic and self-righteous attitude has turned the Greek communists from a party into a pressure group. The other party of the left, Synaspismos (the left alliance), is much less dogmatic, with an EU orientation and a new leader, Alavanos (a long time member of the European Parliament). It has been active in various movements for 'global social justice', such as the World Social Forum, the Network for Human and Social Rights, and so forth. It has also built an alliance with small if not sectarian leftist organizations. This has kept the party afloat and over the 3

percent threshold of the popular vote necessary to secure a presence to parliament. However, with its weakness in the social field and its reluctance to promote any systematic co-operation with PASOK, it has limited its impact and influence and made its future precarious.

## **TRADE UNIONS: FROM RADICAL STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY TO SOCIAL DIALOGUE**

The story of the Greek labour movement is a history of systematic attempts of state intervention and control over unions. With the rise of PASOK to power in the 1980s, this was transformed into the effort of the parties – beyond the state – to influence and scrutinize the direction and dynamic of trade union struggles. Due to the undemocratic practices of governing as well as within the unions during the post civil war period and characteristics of the Greek economy with 94 percent of the businesses employing from 1-9 employees and 5 percent from 10-49, the trade union movement is extremely fragmented. The General Confederation of Greek Labour (GSEE) has 2,264 rank and file locals, 82 Labour Centres and 69 Federations, with some 2.9 million organized wage earners in both the private and public sectors.

In the Greek context, the fragmented union structure was convenient for the state's efforts to control unions in the pre-democratic period as well as during the initial phase of democratization. It also made unions very inefficient in defending the interests of their membership in an autonomous fashion. A challenge to the state's grip over unions took place after 1981. It was achieved, as with everything else in Greece, through the political parties, in this case their labour sections. In the 1980s, the unions passed from the monopoly of state control to the more pluralist control of the political parties.

This lack of autonomy of unions and their historical financial dependency on the state had left Greek unions with a legacy of popular mistrust. Their radical mobilization to escape from the state's tight control during the 1980s, coupled with the lack of a formal legal recognition of free collective bargaining, further left the Greek union movement with little popular acceptance. The popular legitimization of unions as a key institution of democratic representation was very low. This image started to change in 1990 with the introduction of a new labour act which contained provisions for the process of free collective bargaining. It was soon put into action with the signing of the first National Collective Labour Agreement in 1992.

But just as in the case of the Greek party system, over the course of the 1990s, the unions began to change their discourse and practices. One aspect was the self-criticism of a good part of the union leadership concerning what now saw as ill-advised partisan practices. Another was the new theme that unions should bear "their responsibility for the economic and social challenges of the country." This formed the basis for union participation as a "social partner" in numerous committees of "social dialogue," and especially in the country's Economic and Social Council (OKE). Representatives of the GSEE participate in →



140 Committees and Councils under the authority of various ministries (primarily those of Labour, Health, Welfare and Education). It was these corporatist structures of social partnership in a period of developing neoliberal policies that, on the one hand, tamed the radical mobilization of unions for autonomy and bargaining rights, and, on the other, legitimized their social role as representative democratic institutions.

However, these developments in the strategies of Greek unions added a technocratic dimension to their profile and contributed to a disenchantment of the union membership. This has not led to a radical reduction in the rate of unionisation in the country, which remains relatively high compared to many other countries in the EU. According to 2002 data, 29.2 percent of Greek wage earners were unionized. This entails a great discrepancy between public unionization levels of 49.4 percent against private sector levels of 24 percent. As well, since the 1990s there has been a sharp reduction in strike mobilizations. Although many factors, have contributed to this such as unemployment, changes in the political discourse, and the social partnership agenda, it is worth noting that while in 1990 there were 1.4 million strikers involved in 200 strikes during which 20.4 million working hours were lost, in 1999 there were only 4,411 strikers involved in 15 strikes with only 45,642 working hours lost. Greek statistics stopped keeping

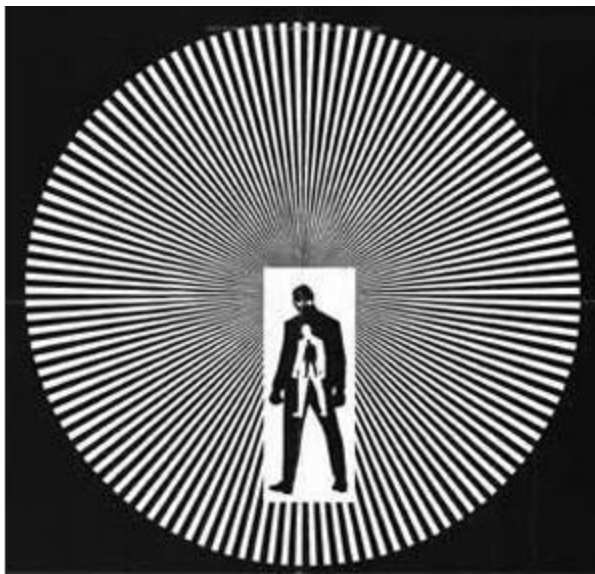
**Proposals from some quarters of the left which think of parties and unions as things of the past, and try to find political answers in the multitude of organizations of “national and international civil society,” are condemned to failure and contribute to the lack of accountability of public life.**

records of strikes at this time, but they would continue to record a decline in strike mobilization.

However, a striking exception to this trend was the mobilizations of 2001 against the attempt of the PASOK government at the time to change the workers’ pension and insurance plans. The new element of this mobilization was not just its effectiveness (which led to the retraction of the government’s plan), but also the consolidation of the cooperation of all trade unionists, regardless of their party affiliation. Indeed, with the exception of the Communist Party trade unionists, at least at the level of the Greek Federation of Labour, it seems that there is a fairly solid alliance between PASOK, New Democracy and Synaspismos activists. Although this has contributed to the popular acceptance and even popularity of trade unions, they have not proven as effective since 2001. In fact last year’s mobilizing initiatives of the Greek Federation of Labour over the budgetary and collective agreement issues had very little effect as very few workers came out, while various unions had great difficulty forcing management even to sign the collective agreements. Again a hopeful exception was the almost two month teachers’ strike in the fall of 2006, which despite unprecedented levels of militancy, was defeated. The KKE, however, has employed a completely different strategy, although its affiliated unionists participate in the Greek Federation of Labour. In a sectarian way, it is also trying to build an All Workers Front (PAME) on the basis of an anti-European and workerist agenda.

#### **DEMOCRACY, THE LEFT AND PARTY-BUILDING**

The Greek party system and trade unions have been the main institutions of political and social representation during the pro-



cesses of democratization since 1974. But since the beginning of the 1990s they have both been on a course of decline which is undermining their ties with their base. This creates a serious gulf, if not yet a crisis of representation, eroding democratic processes. This challenge cannot but be undertaken by the very institutions which are contributing to this crisis, that is parties and unions themselves, which have to restore their relations with their social base, taking into account the new conditions and the gains and failures of recent years. Proposals from some quarters of the left which think of parties and unions as things of the past, and try to find political answers in the multitude of organizations of “national and international civil society,” are condemned to failure and contribute to the lack of accountability of public life.

Given this situation, the Greek left is once again at a crossroads, after three years of an aggressive neoliberal right wing government, the traumatic experience of the “modernizing” PASOK, and the trade unions if not in retreat at least ineffective. The left has weakened its ties with its social base and its organizations are either in a shambles (PASOK) or dated (Synaspismos, KKE) in meeting today’s challenges. In the present Greek political climate, left-wing ideas are far from fashionable; reactionary institutions and influences are on the rise (in particular, nationalism, media attacks on collectivities of any kind, and the rising role of the Church); reformist politics have failed to make a lasting difference in people’s lives; and political controversy centres on the promised land of “civil society.” The Greek left must take stock in an open minded fashion and not compromise its goal of democratic socialism. It has to capitalize on the widespread disappointment and disenchantment within PASOK’s ranks, on the political energy and innovation of the social movements, on the militancy, the commitment and the discipline of old communists, who see the dead-end of the KKE’s sectarianism and build on the opportunities for international solidarity provided and/or imposed by “globalization” processes (in particularly by EU institutions and their dynamics). This is not an easy task.

The question of political organization is central to such an endeavour. Party building for the left, not just in Greece but ev-



erywhere, cannot be done within the obsolete political organization and practices of the existing parties. Organizational structures based on historical social divisions of labour that, if not long dead, have at least been marginalized and transformed into new social divisions and class structures. Such exclusive parties and unions are incapable of inspiring and becoming the vehicles for today’s challenges of the left. For the moment scepticism, prejudice and self-righteousness are the dominant trends among the left that have incapacitated in any attempt to move forward. Selfish, individualistic, sectarian preoccupations have undermined the dynamism of the Greek left. A hopeful exception to this was during the fall 2006 municipal elections across Greece, when in several cases left-wing candidates (mostly from the ranks of Synaspismos but not exclusively), under the pressure of accumulated problems, ran very successful campaigns along the above lines forming new alliances amongst the left. As the pressures from mounting problems become more intense, one cannot but be more hopeful. After all, history moves by necessity and not by individualistic scepticism, bias or voluntarism. **R**

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# Canada, Quebec and the Left: Outflanked Again?

Nathan Rao



The surprise Conservative motion recognizing that the “Québécois form a nation within a united Canada” and the unexpected selection of Chrétien protégé, technocrat and Clarity Act point man Stéphane Dion as Liberal leader have shown (yet again) just how important Quebec is to Canadian political life. And for at least the fifth time in the last quarter century, the Left has been caught off guard by developments shaped by Quebec’s weight in the federation and its enduring national aspirations. Still, the present context is fluid enough that the left can win a hearing for a very different approach to the “constitutional” file. We cannot and need not allow ourselves to be outflanked by the cynical maneuvering of the Conservatives or bamboozled by the Liberals into a “patriotic alliance” against virtually the entire spectrum of left-progressive opinion in Quebec.

If nothing else, the Conservative motion and the cliffhanger Liberal leadership race confirm that we are living through a period of tremendous volatility in elite-level politics, particularly electoral volatility, in this country. The present volatility is striking in several respects, not least that, save the honourable exception of the new left-wing Québec Solidaire party in Quebec, social-movement and activist-left politics in the country are at a very low ebb indeed. It is safe to say that the turbulence “above” has not been caused by upheaval from “below” – not in the immediate, massive country-wide marches in-the-street sense at any rate.

Of course, the paradox of social stability, and the elite and party consensus on neoliberal policies, alongside elite-level political volatility is hardly a new feature of Canadian politics. More so than that of many other places, Canada’s history is an extremely fragmented affair, driven by conquest, dirty tricks and repression of sporadic episodes of rebellion, followed by elite-level bickering and accommodation lorded over the country’s multi-ethnic working classes and dominated peoples – first and foremost Ab-

original peoples, but also the people of Quebec and French-speaking minorities in the rest of Canada.

Though difficult, it is necessary to chart a way out of the current mess from a left-progressive perspective: against the neoliberal, technocratic, authoritarian drift of mainstream political and institutional life, and toward a radical solution genuinely reflective of Canada’s complex multinational, multi-ethnic and regional realities.

With this in mind, this essay presents five arguments about the present situation in the country. First, while the Conservatives have more margin for maneuver in the present context, the most likely outcome is that neither they nor the Liberals will be able to form a majority government out of elections held any time soon.

Second, the Bloc Québécois’ (BQ) confused and ultimately supportive position on the Harper motion has highlighted the impasse of mainstream sovereignty as represented by the BQ and the Parti Québécois (PQ). Both parties are unable and unwilling to break free of the neoliberal policy straitjacket and institutional ground rules of the Canadian state.

Third, neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals can resolve what can be described as the longer-term crisis of legitimacy and representation of their parties and of the federal system itself, especially in Quebec. Quebec remains at the heart of the longer-term “crisis of representation” of the federal system, a crisis further exacerbated by the way neoliberalism has narrowed the social base of party-electoral-institutional politics in the country.

Fourth, after the relatively upbeat period stretching from the anti-globalization protests of 1999-2001 through to the 2004 and

2006 federal elections under NDP leader Jack Layton, the left finds itself in a tight spot once again. Social-movement inertia is combined with a threat to the modest electoral gains made in recent years.

Finally, the social and political left should see the current fluid context as a window of opportunity for advancing a radically different, multinational vision of the federation, as a central component of an anti-neoliberal project – in line with the Bolivarian project for the Americas taking root across Latin America.

### **A CRISIS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION**

There is currently a “crisis of political representation” in Canada. This has several aspects: the regional fragmentation of the party system in Canada; the lack of proportional representation and the marginalization of many political viewpoints from electoral representation; the under-representation of urban voters; and the failure of the federal system to accommodate the Aboriginal and Quebec peoples within Canada. The most recent expression of this crisis was the inability of any pan-Canadian party to form a majority government in either the June 2004 or the January 2006 federal elections.

This failure of the two main parties has its immediate origins in the organizational and electoral collapse of the federal Liberals in Quebec in the wake of the sponsorship scandal and the revelations of the Gomery Commission about this scandal. This collapse was in turn the result of the rot that had set in to the system of patronage and kickbacks the federal Liberals had relied on in Quebec to “rebuild” the party after Trudeau’s unilateral repatriation of the constitution in the early 1980s severely undermined the party’s historic foothold in the province and consigned the federal Liberal Party to the doghouse during the Mulroney years. The “rebuilding” was stepped up once the Liberals returned to power in Ottawa in 1993, under Trudeau’s constitutional comrade-in-arms Jean Chrétien, and were in short order confronted with a referendum on sovereignty in Quebec and the breathtakingly near victory of the pro-sovereignty forces.

The further collapse of the Liberal machine in Quebec created a big void in the party-electoral sphere of mainstream politics. It is no surprise that the Conservatives would seek to exploit this for tactical-electoral reasons. The unexpected Conservative mini-breakthrough in the 2006 elections, going from nothing to a 10-member Quebec caucus – on the basis of vague promises to address Quebec’s traditional fiscal concerns, overtures to the Liberal provincial government of former federal Tory leader Jean Charest, and an active pursuit of the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) hard-Right electorate in a handful of ridings in the Quebec City area – gave them further reason to pursue this tack. The Conservatives know as well as anyone that, given the country’s other divisions, the size of Quebec and the importance of Quebec representation for achieving political legitimacy, a sizeable Quebec caucus is vital for securing a stable majority.

In light of these shorter term electoral calculations, the Conservatives were starting to panic: far from building on its gains in the January elections, the party was dropping in the polls in Quebec. Opposition there is strongest to Harper’s hard-Right stance on the Afghanistan “mission”, the Kyoto Protocol, gay marriage and recent Israeli aggression in Lebanon and the occupied territories. Once the Liberals chose a new leader, it was also inevitable that they would recover somewhat from their 2006 electoral nadir in Quebec. This would, of course, improve the Liberal seat tally and/or split the “federalist” vote and hand seats back to the BQ. Harper made a quick but focused decision to “push the envelope” of the Quebec national question, offering symbolic recognition of Quebec’s distinctiveness in Canada, in an attempt to restore his party’s fortunes in the province and short-circuit the political gamesmanship of the other parties around this issue.

The Harper initiative also sought to exploit the wide margin for maneuver the Harper minority government appears to enjoy, at least for the time being. After the defection of the Quebec-sovereignist wing of the Mulroney alliance, followed by years of division between the traditional Tory party and the Western regionalist and ideological hard-Right Reform Party, Harper has emerged as the Conservative champion. He has no challengers in sight, the antics of a few Mulroney-era hucksters like Garth Turner notwithstanding. Bay Street has, moreover, effortlessly shifted its allegiances from Paul Martin to Harper and Finance minister Jim Flaherty and cut them a tremendous amount of slack, as the corporate world’s prompt acquiescence to the stunning volte-face on income trusts most recently proved. From such a position of strength, Harper can afford to rile some of his supporters in the rest of Canada in exchange for making inroads into Quebec and (he hopes) resurrecting the old Mulroney-era alliance with a section of Quebec nationalists.

This is made still easier by the fact that the Bloc Québécois has yet to recover from the shock it received in the 2006 elections – blindsided by the Conservatives’ ability to occupy some of the wide-open space created among federalist voters in Quebec by the Liberal collapse. With a relatively friendly federalist premier, Jean Charest, in office in Quebec City, the Harper Conservatives decided that this was as good a time as any to strike. It is also not at all clear that Charest will last another term; closer collaboration around the national question is deemed to be in the electoral interest of both the federal Conservatives and the Quebec Liberals.

The Harper “Québécois nation” motion and the selection of Stéphane Dion as Liberal leader partially fulfil each camp’s short-term objectives – increasing the party’s appeal in Quebec in the case of the Conservatives; overcoming internal division and presenting a united public face in the case of the Liberals. However, while it is by definition hazardous to forecast election results in such a volatile period, both parties’ gains appear both insufficient and mutually exclusive.

While it makes sense to describe the main political contest in Quebec as one between “federalists” (the Quebec Liberals) →

and “sovereignists” (the PQ), the term “federalist” does not quite apply to the position of the mainstream pan-Canadian parties on Quebec. “Centralist” would be a more accurate label. Whatever their differences about socio-economic policy or even about the rights and responsibilities of provinces, the pan-Canadian parties are unanimous in asserting the primacy of the central Canadian state over recognition and accommodation of Quebec’s national reality within the federation.

### THE IMPASSE OF THE BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS AND THE PARTI QUÉBÉCOIS

Within Quebec, on the other hand, the majority of “federalists” and all “sovereignists” take Quebec’s national status and demands as a starting point, the debate being about (among other things) how best to pursue the Quebec national project in relation to the Canadian state. This is why the two main Quebec parties rejected both the Trudeau constitutional deal of the early 1980s and the more recent Clarity Act. Both ran roughshod over the prevailing conception in Quebec that Quebec is (or should be) an equal partner in a bi-national (or multinational) federation. From the Confederation debates in the mid-19th century until the present day, this has remained the dominant conception in Quebec of its place in Canada. Outside Quebec, though, the emergence of the Canadian national project in the post-War period – and especially from the late 1960s onwards — has tended to negate the very idea of a federal pact between the “Canadian” (or “English-Canadian”) and “Quebec” (or “French-Canadian”) nations.

Though it has deep roots in Quebec history and its internal social and political struggles, the rise of the modern Quebec sovereignty movement has also been a response to the assertion of this one-nation nationalism from the demographically and economically dominant Canadian (or English-Canadian) nation. While talk of the death of the sovereignty movement is patently absurd, it is clear that it has been in an impasse for some years now. Currently, the BQ has no perspective beyond its current role in Ottawa, and the PQ has nothing to offer beyond administering a somewhat gentler form of neoliberalism than the Quebec Liberals.

Below the surface consensus around the leadership of Gilles Duceppe (BQ) and André Boisclair (PQ), pressures have been building to break out of this impasse in one way or another. Some of these tensions came out into the open in late 2005 and early 2006, which saw a PQ leadership race and the founding of the Québec Solidaire party.

In October 2005, former Mulroney cabinet minister, BQ founder and PQ premier Lucien Bouchard issued the *Pour un Québec lucide* (*For a clear-eyed vision of Quebec*) manifesto. This regressive document seeks to take the neoliberal transformation of the sovereignty movement even further. While its release was a major media and political event, it was not openly supported by a large number of mainstream sovereignist spokespeople. Former PQ leader and Quebec premier Bernard Landry, for example, found the manifesto represented too open a break with the sovereignty movement’s traditional social-demo-

cratic pretensions. PQ leadership candidate (and current leader) André Boisclair adopted a more conciliatory tone.

Within a few weeks, the sovereignist academic, party and social-movement Left responded to Bouchard’s initiative by issuing the *Manifeste pour un Québec solidaire* (*Manifesto for a Quebec based on solidarity*). In early February 2006, the Québec Solidaire party was launched by many of these same people, out of the merger of the Union des forces progressistes (UFP) and Option citoyenne. Neither initiative will break the sovereignty movement out of its impasse in the short term, but they provide some idea of future debates and battles.

The impasse of the sovereignty movement has further widened Harper’s margin for maneuver, allowing him to “recognize” Quebec on the cheap. The adopted motion is meaningless in con-



stitutional terms and illogically asserts that the “Québécois nation” only exists (!) within a “united Canada.” The motion reaffirms the stricture entrenched by the Clarity Act that Ottawa must be the ultimate arbiter when it comes to Quebec’s future relationship to the federation. It is also significant that the motion states in French and English that the “Québécois” form a nation, and not Quebec *tout court*. This further defuses any kind of constitutional implications, let alone more subversive political ones, by reducing the matter to a recognition of the “Québécois” — all those people defined (by whom?) individually as “Québécois”. This has little to do with the definition of the Quebec nation generally accepted in Quebec itself: the really existing collective, sociological and political entity of Quebec with its set of accumulated experiences and aspirations, not to mention institutions and borders.

Still, the motion cornered a fumbling BQ into accepting a conception that dovetails nicely with mainstream sovereignism’s *de facto* embrace of a far less troublesome brand of “French-Canadian” cultural nationalism in the *Bleu* tradition. The Conservatives will undoubtedly couple this gesture with a few token tax reforms in their next, pre-election budget as a response to Quebec’s demands around the “fiscal imbalance”. All this could be enough to stabilize or even increase Conservative support in Quebec in the coming elections.

## THE CRISIS OF FEDERALISM

It is difficult, however, to see how the Conservatives will resolve federalism's longer-term crisis of legitimacy and representation in Quebec. For the present volatility is not solely a matter of tactical maneuvering between the main parties. It can be traced to three inter-related sources. First is the now quarter-century old exclusion of Quebec from the constitutional dispensation entrenched by the Trudeau-led Liberals in the early 1980s. Second is the way in which neoliberalism has narrowed the base of party-electoral-institutional life and exacerbated the age-old centrifugal forces at play in this country. Third is Canada's integration into the American post-Cold War push for further economic integration, geopolitical cooperation and military expansion, rechristened the "War on Terror" in its post-911 period.



Generally speaking, the Conservatives are more hardline on the matter of deepening the neoliberal counter-revolution and aligning Canadian foreign policy with American imperialism; and the Liberals are more hardline in their rejection of any kind of accommodation with Quebec's national aspirations. But the parliamentary vote on the Harper "nation" motion, the strong showings in the Liberal leadership race of *empire-lite* candidate Michael Ignatieff and Israeli apologist and free-trade convert Bob Rae — and the prominent role both now play in the Dion-led party — show that the lines between the two parties on these important questions are blurred to say the least. Nor should we forget that the idea for the Clarity Act was first hatched by none other than Stephen Harper in his days as a Reform MP, and that this post-1995 referendum "get tough on Quebec" approach was shepherded into law a few years later by none other than Stéphane Dion during his tenure as Chrétien's minister of intergovernmental affairs.

Indeed, practically the only thing that today's Liberal Party retains of the Trudeau-era party is the hard line against Quebec. One needn't have a romantic view of Trudeau to see that his approach to social programs, the public sector, regional inequality, Canada-USA relations and world affairs would be at significant odds with the position of today's Liberals on these questions. It is almost amus-

ing to see the Trudeau-esque posturing of someone like "kingmaker" Gerard Kennedy — until recently a loyal cabinet minister in an Ontario Liberal government that has left much of the Mike Harris disaster untouched while aggressively pursuing a regionalism-of-the-rich agenda by demanding that more of Ontario's taxes stay in the province, and *de facto* in its wealthy southern zones. Kennedy's calls for "Canadian unity" are very selective indeed.

More broadly, the overall project of neoliberal counter-revolution in Canada and across the Americas (through the FTAA) was actually pushed much further under the Chrétien-Martin Liberals than it had been under the Mulroney Tories. Jean Chrétien's (evil?) "genius" was to take the Keynesian and vaguely national-populist party built up from the Depression onwards from Mackenzie King through to Pierre Trudeau and wed it utterly and irreversibly to this neoliberal agenda. This ran parallel to what Blair did to the Labour Party in Britain and what Clinton did to the Democratic Party in the US. In short, this was the Canadian variant of the Blairite "Third Way."

It was one thing for the old Trudeauite Liberal warhorse Chrétien to pull this off — and quite another to expect shipping magnate and party latecomer Paul Martin, Chrétien's hatchet-man in the Finance ministry, and the gang of hacks and careerists in Martin's entourage to sustain this enterprise for any length of time. This was all the more unlikely since two key conditions for Chrétien's success had been the other right-wing camp remaining divided and shut out in Quebec — a state of affairs that could not last eternally.

The first condition disappeared once ultra-neoliberal former National Citizens Coalition head Stephen Harper emerged as the unity figure for the alliance of hard-Right ideologues, social conservatives, Western regionalists and residual traditional Tories that make up the new Conservative Party. The second condition disappeared when the Liberal Party's fortunes in Quebec plummeted in the wake of the sponsorship scandal and the Gomery Commission's further revelations about the scandal.

There is no fundamental disagreement between the centre-Right Liberals and the hard-Right Conservatives around the three cornerstones of Canadian ruling-class politics today: "one Canadian nation" constitutional rigidity, embrace of the neoliberal agenda and support for U.S.-led imperialist expansionism. With such a platform, neither party can resolve the longer-term crisis of legitimacy and representation of the federal system, especially not in Quebec.

## THE LEFT IN A TIGHT SPOT

The left cannot avoid dealing with these "constitutional" questions — or afford to squander this opportunity to tackle them in the present relatively fluid context. We have a supportive ally in Quebec ready to respond to any and all overtures from sincere and principled forces in English-speaking Canada.

To be sure, this will be difficult to put into practice in the current defensive period. But unlike what we have tended to see since the famous "free trade" debates in the late 1980s, there is an →

undercurrent of goodwill towards Quebec among many left forces in the rest of the country. This can be found among younger people brought into politics by the anti-globalization protests at Seattle and the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 and the anti-war protests of 2003 to the present day; and among older leftists and progressives unimpressed by the stale patriotic rallying cries of a corrupt Liberal Party so totally committed to the corporate agenda.

Adopting a new approach on Quebec and the constitution is crucial not only a matter of principle, but also a strategic pre-condition for building a durable pan-Canadian alliance of the left, achieving true democratic reform and breaking out of the maddening “jurisdictional” dead-end around socio-economic questions at the municipal and provincial levels (healthcare, labour laws, child care, housing, public transit, and so forth). Such an alliance represents a far more viable and “winning” strategic orientation into the medium term than continuing down the path of the parliamentary horsetrading and zigzags on Quebec in which

the NDP has become entangled (especially since the 2004 elections).

This means pushing for a re-opening of the Constitution and preparing now for the day when it is re-opened, as it necessarily will be one day. Better to begin cobbling together a solution on our own terms now than to play catch-up in a

context of crisis. We do not want to find ourselves outflanked yet again by Liberal and Conservative elites, as was the case in relation to the Harper motion and, most recently before that, during the Meech Lake and Charlottetown episodes in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

While following through on the will of party members is often another matter. The position in favour of withdrawing Canadian forces from Afghanistan taken at the recent NDP federal convention shows that the party can take an independent position if pressed to do so. Nor should we forget that Jack Layton made tentative moves toward the sovereignist left after winning the leadership in early 2003. He took a strong position against the Clarity Act, met with UFP representatives and ran federal NDP candidates with connections to the UFP in the 2004 elections. By the end of the 2004 campaign, however, facing “patriotic” pressures from the national media and within the party, Layton had already reversed his position on the Clarity Act. And after running to the rescue of the Liberal minority government in 2005, prominent among his other justifiably harsh words for the Conservatives was that they

were in cahoots with “the separatists.”

In the latest twist, the NDP is trying to buy time before the next elections, which it rightfully dreads, by helping the Conservatives look good on the environment. While parliament is a mug’s game at the best of times and the NDP has been placed before some unenviable choices since the 2004 elections, it’s hard to escape the feeling that the party has painted itself into a corner by banking too much on high-stakes wheeling and dealing. The party’s zigzags on Quebec are a key component of this ultimately self-defeating strategy.

Though still fragile and tentative, Québec Solidaire provides the first opportunity in a generation to carry a different approach forward outside the marginal confines of the far-left, with an ally in Quebec that is open to such cooperation and has real weight and prospects for growth. With the Liberals now rebounding from their previous lows and the Greens threatening it in the polls, the NDP is entering a new period of crisis and introspection. It may be possible to push the party back towards the more Quebec-friendly positions taken in the early days of the Jack Layton leadership.

## TOWARD AN ANTI-NEOLIBERAL, MULTINATIONAL ALTERNATIVE

In Quebec, Québec Solidaire has advanced the idea of a “constituent assembly” as a way to engage and mobilize broad sectors of the population in fashioning the constitution of a sovereign Quebec, which would then be submitted for approval in a referendum. This is a radically democratic approach which the rest of Canada would do well to emulate – taking the whole matter of how we want to run the country out of the hands of the “constitutional experts”, media blowhards, bureaucrats and corporate lobbyists that monopolize debate and entrench division and deadlock.

We can promote such an approach in a way that places socio-economic questions front and centre. The current constitutional arrangement ties the hands of those looking to beat back privatization and raise standards across the country. Far from representing a line of last defence against capitalist globalization, the federal state and its provincial, territorial and municipal tributaries are active agents of the neoliberalization and commodification of every aspect of life and politics in this country. No alternative to neoliberalism is possible without a radical break from the current pan-Canadian institutional order.

The push for an anti-neoliberal, multinational alternative can build on the work done by the forces of the left-wing “no” against the Charlottetown Accord in 1992 – led by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women with its proposals for “asymmetrical federalism” – and by the critique developed by social-movement forces of Chrétien and Dion’s 1999 Social Union agreement with the provinces, to the exclusion of Quebec. This can be the contribution of Canada, Quebec and Aboriginal peoples to the Bolivarian project sweeping across *Nuestra América* – uniting the peoples of the hemisphere against neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism. **R**





# Québec Solidaire Adopts a Program for Government

New left party debates election platform in first policy convention

Richard Fidler

MONTREAL – Quebec’s new party of the left, Québec solidaire, held its first policy convention here on November 24-26. The 320 delegates – 48% of them women – debated, amended and adopted a draft platform for the next general election in Quebec, expected in 2007.

Québec solidaire has grown rapidly since its founding in February of this year. It now boasts 5,100 members in some 70 local associations organized on an electoral constituency basis, as well as student groups on the major college and university campuses. It is registering between 4% and 8% support in province-wide opinion polls, and in by-elections this year its candidates garnered up to 22% of the votes.

The February convention had adopted a declaration of principles identifying the party’s key “values” – social justice, equality between women and men, viable development, antiracism, pacifism, and international solidarity, as its statutes proclaim – but not a formal program. So this was the first opportunity for the members to begin spelling out what the party stands for. The adoption of a limited election platform was seen as the initial step in an ongoing process to develop a more comprehensive program for the party.

The overall theme chosen by the QS central leadership, the national coordinating committee, was addressed to what the party proposed to do in the “first 1,000 days of the Québec solidaire government.” While this might seem like an ambitious goal for a party that has yet to elect a single member to the National Assembly, it expressed a positive commitment to build a mass party that can fight for political power in Quebec City.

The convention laboured under severe time constraints. Many draft proposals could not be discussed and consequently were referred for further consideration and adoption to the party’s policy commission – over the objections of many delegates who argued that this unfinished business should be debated at a forthcoming National Committee meeting open to all interested members.

## SOCIAL POLICY REFORMS

Some of the major resolutions that were adopted, as amended, are summarized in the accompanying article. With the exception of the proposals related to the Quebec national question and ab-



original self-determination, they amount to a rather modest set of social policy reforms not substantially different from the kind of progressive reform agenda and Keynesian wealth-distribution concepts once advocated by the social-democratic NDP in the English-Canadian provinces.

The limited content of this platform may seem surprising in a party that has united cadres from various socialist and left nationalist currents with prominent feminists and community activists. The explanation for the platform’s limited nature may lie in part in the current political context.

Québec solidaire resulted from a fusion between the Union des forces progressistes (UFP) and Option citoyenne (OC). The UFP was a coalition of the political left that developed amidst the unitary dynamic of the “altermondialiste” global justice mobilizations of trade-unionists and youth that peaked in Quebec City in 2001 and the massive antiwar movement that mobilized up to a quarter million in a march against the Iraq war in February 2003. Option citoyenne was formed in 2004 by leaders and activists in antipoverty organizations and major popular mobilizations such as the March for Bread and Roses (1995) and the World March of Women.

However, while its founding components originated on the crest of mass mobilizations in the early years of this decade, Québec solidaire was born amidst a serious decline of mass actions by the broad social movements over the last two years, and in the wake of some major defeats of Quebec’s trade unions following massive strikes and demonstrations waged in opposition to the vicious right-wing offensive unleashed by the Charest Liberal government immediately after its election in 2003. Even the student movement, which waged the biggest student strike in Quebec history in early 2005, is today in a relative lull.

The women’s movement has been placed on the defensive by the Charest Liberal government’s moves to undermine childcare through increased privatization of services and huge cuts in funding. The antiwar movement is largely demobilized. Environmental activists are reeling from Charest’s moves to privatize Mount Orford parkland and corporate stratagems such as lawsuits designed to muzzle opponents of the proposed liquefied natural gas terminal near Quebec City. As for the trade unions, they are barely present on the political landscape. These setbacks appear to have negatively affected the new left party’s conception of what is possible in the current context. In any event, →



the platform also reflects a deliberate policy choice.

### **A MINIMUM PLATFORM, BUT LINKED TO A BROADER PERSPECTIVE?**

In a remarkably frank directive sent to the members in late spring, François Cyr, the chair of the policy commission, outlined the QS leadership's objectives in developing the election platform. "We are no longer a splinter group or an ideological pressure group but we are still very far from a party of government," he wrote. The task is to develop "a limited number of proposals . . . conceived in terms of a governmental project that is immediately realizable in the present framework – that is, provincial and neoliberal."

Aware that this restriction would not sit well with many party activists, Cyr offered a mollifying thought. "However, we should link each proposal for immediate realization with a broader perspective opening the door to profound structural changes." As an example, he suggested, "we may propose a large immediate increase in the minimum wage and paid vacations, but we should also commit to opening an extensive public debate on work, its remuneration, its increasing insecurity in our society including the notion of minimum wage, reconciliation of work and family responsibilities and a reduction in the work week." In the adopted platform, however, Cyr's example is reduced to the following trite phrase: "Québec solidaire will undertake a consultation on the various options to reduce poverty in a sustainable and respectful way, such as, for example, the citizenship income [*revenu de citoyenneté* – essentially a guaranteed annual wage]."

To begin the process, the QS National Committee appointed a dozen or so "theme commissions," each to develop policy on a particular program topic. All party members were invited to participate in the work of these commissions, which met through the summer. In mid-October, their discussion papers were published on the QS intranet; they totalled more than 100 pages!

In early November, the national leadership released a draft election platform that purported to synthesize the key ideas in the theme commission reports – a 38-page document including texts outlining the thinking behind each proposal. QS members in the local associations discussed this platform, adopted amend-

ments and elected delegates to the convention. The final compendium of proposals with literally hundreds of proposed amendments, an 88-page document, was handed to the delegates as they arrived at the convention.

### **ATTEMPTS TO STRENGTHEN PLATFORM**

Needless to say, it was impossible for the delegates to fully digest or process this mass of materials in two days of deliberations. However, the convention debates did indicate a clear desire by the membership to strengthen the final document by incorporating some key demands advanced by trade unions and the women's, student and other social movements – many of which had been expressed in the theme commission reports but ignored in the draft platform.

For example, while the draft said a QS government would "reduce" school fees and state subsidies to private schools, the delegates voted to "eliminate" fees at all levels of education and stop private school funding. The draft's proposal to create a new corporate entity, Éole-Québec, to develop wind-turbine power did not address the role of the privately owned companies, which are now busy signing contracts with the government – a much-disputed issue in Quebec. The convention voted in favour of nationalization of this sector of the power industry, a popular demand that is put forward by major trade unions.

On the other hand, some proposals to radicalize the platform failed, often by narrow margins, after debate. For example, many delegates wanted to nationalize the entire pharmaceutical industry, a major industry in Quebec; however, the adopted proposal to create a state-owned agency, Pharma-Québec, would limit its role to drug purchase, research and partial production of (generic) drugs while leaving intact the multinational drug companies. Proposals to implement a \$10 per hour minimum wage immediately, not gradually, and to extend access to free drug care to all low-income Quebecers, not just those on welfare, were defeated when party leaders argued it would be precipitous and "cost too much."

### **WHAT ABOUT AFGHANISTAN?**

There is a striking omission in the adopted platform: its lack of an international dimension.

The theme commission on international questions had proposed that a Québec solidaire government would support the antiwar movement, quit the imperialist military alliances NATO and NORAD, abolish the army and replace it with a "civil force of territorial surveillance to protect national sovereignty but not intervene abroad". It called for withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan, no participation in the "supposed war on terrorism alongside the United States", conversion of the war industry to civilian production, abolition of security certificates and opening Québec's doors to "refugees fleeing the war or objecting to participating in it" as well as to victims of sexual violence and sexist or homophobic persecution.

The commission, in a discussion of "the globalization we want", suggested that a QS government would, among other mea-

asures, “consolidate relations of cooperation with progressive governments” and create an international agency to promote endogenous development based on food self-sufficiency, fair trade, and economic development focused on co-operative principles and local production. It called for a government review of existing international trade and investment agreements such as NAFTA, although it did not call for their repeal.

This international dimension was missing from the draft platform. Because debate in the membership and the convention was confined to the draft, there were no amendments and no real discussion of these issues and demands at the convention. It seems that the determination to limit the platform to what is possible within a “provincial and neoliberal” framework is being interpreted quite narrowly.

That orientation by the QS leadership is surprising, however. International issues figured prominently in the last Quebec general election, in April 2003. Two months earlier, up to a quarter million Québécois had marched against the impending invasion of Iraq – the largest antiwar demonstration in the history of Canada. Antiwar sentiment was so strong that the leaders of all three capitalist parties sported white ribbons, the symbol of opposition to the Iraq war, on their lapels. The fledgling UFP made the war a central issue in its election campaign.

A major issue in Quebec politics today is the Canadian army occupation of Afghanistan. The majority antiwar sentiment in Canada is highest in Quebec. The Quebec-based Royal 22nd Regiment is now being sent to Afghanistan, and soon the caskets will be returning to Quebec towns and cities. Shouldn’t a Québec solidaire government have something to say about that?

### ... AND CAPITALIST GLOBALIZATION?

Also in the 2003 election, then Premier Bernard Landry of the Parti québécois made his party’s support for the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) a central plank in his campaign. The PQ has consistently supported NAFTA, the FTA and other neoliberal trade and investment deals in the belief that improved access to foreign markets and foreign investment would open up more elbow room for a sovereign Quebec. The UFP argued strongly to the contrary, noting that further subordination to the dictates of capital undermined democracy and na-

tional sovereignty.

One conceivable response to capitalist globalization was indicated in a recent issue of *Résistance*, a magazine published by the International Socialists. QS member Benoit Renaud suggested that Québec solidaire advocate in its platform Quebec’s participation in ALBA, the agreement for barter arrangements and low-price exchange of badly needed goods and services between the revolutionary governments in Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia. “We could send buses, trains, planes and inexpensive drugs to the other three countries in exchange for oil, natural gas, sugar, medical personnel . . . and thousands of Spanish teachers!”

The failure of the QS platform to address such issues seems inconsistent with the party’s goal to be a political voice for the grassroots organizations and mass movements from which it has emerged.

When some delegates sought to amend the draft platform to include opposition to imperialist military alliances and capitalist trade and investment deals, QS leader Françoise David opposed the motion as “premature”, saying the party needed more time to debate these questions. But the QS leadership has in fact addressed international questions – as it should – although not altogether coherently. For example, David and co-leader Amir Khadir, in an article published in *Le Devoir* March 18-19, criticized the “hijacking” of the Canadian army’s “mandate” in Afghanistan, but expressed Québec solidaire’s support for Canadian participation in “a genuine UN peace initiative . . . to counter the influence of the warlords”. After the federal NDP convention adopted a resolution calling for withdrawal of Canadian forces from Afghanistan, the QS National Council in late September echoed the NDP’s call for withdrawal. But the Council, in the same resolution, endorsed the David-Khadir call for Canadian participation in a military force under UN rather than NATO auspices. These contradictory positions have not been debated, let alone adopted, by the membership.

### FOR A CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

The platform’s position on the Quebec national question is another contentious item. Although the national question was addressed in only one of the five “themes” in the draft →



platform, it was a defining issue in the creation of Québec solidaire. The fusion of UFP and OC was programmatically based on the latter's evolution toward the UFP's pro-sovereignty position. As the declaration of principles adopted at Québec solidaire's founding convention stated:

"Quebec must have all the powers necessary to its full development socially, economically, culturally and politically. It is denied this within the federal framework. Our party is therefore in favour of sovereignty. Although it is not a guarantee, sovereignty is a means of providing Quebec with the tools it needs to implement its social agenda and to fully develop as a people." (An English translation of the declaration is posted on the QS website: <http://masl.to/?J6B723F4E>)

The election platform's position on the national question is centered on the proposal for a specially elected assembly to lead a vast public consultation and discussion on Quebec's political and constitutional status and draw up a proposed constitution for a sovereign Quebec. This draft constitution would then be submitted for adoption in a referendum. The initial draft of the platform, however, omitted any reference to sovereignty in its call for a constituent assembly, sovereignty being mentioned only as a defining "value" in the preamble to the platform as a whole. A sovereign Quebec was inserted as a specific goal on the eve of the congress, in response to numerous amendments to that effect from local associations.

There are in fact lingering differences among QS members over the role and importance of Quebec independence or sovereignty in the party's program. Some, possibly a majority, favour an independent Quebec and many would cast the party's entire program in the framework of a national liberation struggle. Others are more diffident or uncertain on the question and a few are opposed to Quebec sovereignty. In many ways, these differences reflect similar differences within the population as a whole and the fact that sovereignty as it has been predominantly defined by the Parti québécois is seen by many as little more than a change in constitutional status not clearly linked to meaningful improvement in the social conditions of most Québécois. To some degree the QS platform's focus on process – the constituent assembly – rather than the objective, sovereignty or independence, bridges these differences.

### **"BEYOND PROVINCIALISM"?**

That said, the concept of a constituent assembly is a powerful feature of the platform. It radically demarks Québec solidaire from the PQ's "étapisme", or stages strategy – first "sovereignty", then (maybe) later we define the new country – in which Quebecers are simply asked to vote yes or no to a constitutional formula, devoid of social content, "astutely" cooked up in government backrooms with little if any possibility of themselves influencing the content of the question.

Québec solidaire, in contrast, starts from a profoundly democratic perspective of what it terms "popular sovereignty," a process through which the masses of Québécois can themselves determine the kind of country they want to build. It has deep roots in Quebec history, going back to the demands of the Lower Canada

rebels in 1837 and reflected more recently in the popular Estates General organized by nationalist organizations in the late 1960s. As a number of speakers noted in the convention debate, compelling support for Quebec independence will be won only through a vast "pedagogic exercise" in which a strong majority of the population can begin to see the relevance of state independence to their own liberation from exploitation and oppression.

The QS approach has the potential to appeal to many sovereigntists frustrated by the PQ's inability to create "winning conditions" around that party's neoliberal program. Moreover, it points to the need to go beyond the "provincial and neoliberal" context. Even the modest reforms projected in the QS platform may not be "immediately realizable" without a major shift in the relationship of forces, both within Quebec and between Quebec and Canada.

Given the differing political dynamics between Quebec and the rest of Canada, it is clear that no program of fundamental social change, still less socialism, could be implemented in Quebec today without a radical change in Quebec's constitutional status – freeing it from the constraints of limited provincial jurisdiction, residual and largely unfettered federal spending power, and ultimately the federal courts, military and police authority. This reality is the driving force behind the quest for an independent Quebec among Québécois progressives. These issues were strongly addressed in the report of the theme commission on sovereignty, which advocated "going beyond provincialism" and spoke of "defining our proposed society in the framework of economic and social liberation".

### **BEYOND ELECTORALISM?**

Québec solidaire is attempting to fill a wide space that exists to the left of the three capitalist parties (Liberals, PQ and ADQ) that now dominate the Quebec political landscape. But will it be filled by a small party that offers little more than a kinder, gentler version of the neoliberal PQ and yet another, but smaller, pro-sovereignty alternative to the other capitalist parties?

Like its predecessor the UFP, Québec solidaire has sometimes defined itself as "a party of the streets and the ballot boxes". But it is the party's electoral aspirations that have prevailed since its founding. This convention confirmed the electoralist orientation. The exclusive focus on the general election is problematic, however.

For one thing, it is unlikely that any QS candidate can be elected in the forthcoming election, given the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system. The Charest government has yet to table its promised electoral reform bill, but the prevailing sentiment in the National Assembly is to limit any semblance of proportional representation to parties with at least 15% of the popular vote — far more than the opinion polls attribute to QS. And even this limited reform is not slated for implementation until the next decade.

If the party bases its entire activity on hopes for an electoral breakthrough within the next few years, it risks seriously disorienting and disappointing many of its members and supporters.

More fundamentally, if Québec solidaire confines its appeal,

electorally or otherwise, to the neoliberal and provincial context, it may undermine its potential to build a strong base among union militants, *néo-Québécois*, and young people looking for a fighting alternative to environmental destruction, capitalist repression, racism, and national and gender oppression, and offering a realistic perspective of “another world” free of oppression and exploitation.



### A WORK IN PROGRESS

At this point it is not easy to define the new party. To be sure, its values are feminist, ecologist and sovereigntist. But it is not clearly anticapitalist or even consistently anti-imperialist. There is a wide spectrum of views within the party, and an unresolved and still not clearly articulated tension within it between a social-democratic current, predominant in the leadership bodies, and a more militant and largely anticapitalist left.

This leadership, to give it its due, has immense authority and respect among the party’s membership. It has managed, through hard work and dedication, to merge two quite distinct “corporate cultures” – the remnants of an often fractious left with a feminist movement that privileges dialogue and consensus – into a new party in which the founding components no longer simply coexist but are united around a compelling vision of social solidarity. This is a major achievement, unprecedented in Quebec and Canadian history.

Québec solidaire is perhaps best viewed as a work in progress. It has assembled much of the “political left.” The party has attracted older militants from the Mao-Stalinist and Trotskyist parties and groups of the past. And it has made room for groups like *Gauche socialiste*, the International Socialists and the Quebec Communist Party to join as “collectives,” although these collectives are not given formal representation in the leading bodies. The collectives have not to this point functioned as overt political tendencies within the party. Nor have they projected a clear

alternative to the party’s present course that can help to transform the party into an effective vehicle for anticapitalist mobilization. However, many of the more progressive amendments to the draft platform were proposed by QS associations in which the radical collectives are well represented. These included Taschereau and Jean-Lesage ridings in Quebec City, Mercier in Montréal and Outaouais in Gatineau.

A truly remarkable feature of the party is the high proportion of the membership who are women. This was very evident at the convention. The prominent presence of women members in the debates and chairing the proceedings seemed to create an atmosphere of genuine dialogue and a lack of demagoguery that has been very uncommon in other left-wing organizations. This is an extremely positive feature of Québec solidaire.

Another promising feature is the participation of students and other young activists in the party. The younger delegates at the QS convention contributed an infectious enthusiasm to the proceedings and they were often the sponsors of the more progressive amendments.

However, the party has been less successful in winning wider layers of the “social left”. In particular, it has almost no presence in the trade unions in a province with the highest rate of union membership (almost 40%) in Canada. Among the delegates to the QS convention were Arthur Sandborn, president of the Montréal Central Council of the CSN; André Frappier, a leader of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (and a former federal NDP candidate); and Serge Roy, Québec solidaire candidate in Taschereau riding and former president of the Quebec civil servants’ union (SFPQ). But the party as a whole pays little attention to developments in the unions. And there is a small layer of union activists who have chosen instead to join SPQ-Libre, a left ginger group now a recognized “political club” within the Parti québécois — the party supported by most politically-minded union members and leaders.

Equally important, Québec solidaire does not yet appear to have much influence in Quebec’s minority ethnic and immigrant “cultural communities”. There were very few non-white faces at this convention, a glaring contrast to the multi-ethnic composition of Quebec today, particularly in Montréal where QS has its strongest presence.

To overcome these and other limitations, QS might be well advised to pay less attention to what is “immediately realizable” in a “provincial and neoliberal” context, and focus its attention more on becoming a tribune and mobilizer for all those social forces that are seeking a way to challenge and go beyond provincial status and neoliberalism.

Clearly, the members of Québec solidaire have only begun to tackle the difficult task of building a broad party of the left that can present a viable alternative, both “at the ballot boxes and in the streets”, to capitalist exploitation and national oppression. This convention, for all its limitations, marked an important initial step in this long march. Socialists in English Canada and elsewhere have every interest in following closely the development of this new party with concern, sympathy and solidarity. **R**

Richard Fidler is an Ottawa activist. His recent article, *A “Québécois Nation”? Harper Fuels an Important Debate*, is available in Socialist Project’s *The Bullet* ([www.socialistproject.ca](http://www.socialistproject.ca))



# COMING TO TERMS WITH NATURE

Editors: Leo Panitch and Colin Leys



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From the Preface:

This, the 43<sup>rd</sup> volume of the Socialist Register, has been one of the most challenging to put together, even though – or because – it deals with what may well prove to be the most important issue facing socialists in our life-time. This is not just a matter of the complex science and technology involved in understanding the looming environmental crisis, or the variety of problems involved. Over the past dozen or so years the Register has published some twenty essays pertaining to the environment, several of which have been widely cited. But when we decided to devote a whole volume exclusively to ‘coming to terms with nature’ the greatest challenge we faced was that the absence of a strong eco-socialist left is reflected in a corresponding lack of coherence in eco-socialist theory. We see this volume as contributing to the development of a better eco-socialist understanding of contemporary capitalism, and the kind of politics that could lead to an ecologically sustainable as well as a democratic socialism.