

# Defend Quebec's Right to Self-Determination! For Working Class Unity Across National Lines!

Quebec voters' narrow rejection of independence (by a margin of 50.6 to 49.4 percent) in the October 1995 referendum satisfied no one and settled nothing. Unlike the previous vote in 1980, where the 60/40 federalist victory relegated the question of separation to the back burner for over a decade, this result signals that momentum has shifted toward the camp of the *indépendantistes*. The *Toronto Star* (31 October 1995) concluded that, "A third time out, the forces of national unity will not win."

The narrow federalist victory came after a tumultuous few weeks in which they saw an early lead melt away. The apparent volatility of the voters is based on a longstanding three-way division in Quebec popular opinion on the question of independence. Roughly half of Quebec's francophones (between 30 and 40 percent of the total population) has consistently favored separation. A comparable percentage of Quebec's population (including anglophones, aboriginals and immigrant "allophones," who together total roughly 20 percent) are firmly opposed. The balance is composed of francophone Québécois, who primarily identify with Quebec rather than Canada, and who are profoundly dissatisfied with the status quo, but would prefer some kind of new confederal arrangement with English Canada to outright independence. If and when the majority of them are finally convinced that "renewed federalism" is not an option, they will likely join the *indépendantiste* camp.

Jacques Parizeau, a long time separatist and Parti Québécois (PQ) leader, resigned as Quebec premier the day after his side's narrow defeat. He was saluted for his "bracing cynicism" by the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (1 November 1995):

"We are elected by idiots,' he once said privately. 'In Quebec, 40 per cent are separatists and 40 per cent are federalists—and 20 percent don't know who is prime minister of Canada. And it is that 20 percent that makes and breaks governments.'"

Attempts to appeal to the undecided introduced an element of deliberate ambiguity in the pronouncements of both camps. The results were reflected in a Groupe Léger & Léger poll, conducted between 1 and 5 October 1995, that revealed:

"Almost 30 per cent of respondents intending to vote Yes said they believe a sovereign Quebec would continue to elect members to the [federal] House of Commons. Another 20 per cent of Yes supporters said they did not know whether a sovereign Quebec would continue to elect MPs...."

—*Globe and Mail*, 6 October 1995

The sovereignists asked for a mandate not for immediate separation, but for one last round of negotiation with English Canada to reach a new arrangement. Only if that failed would they declare independence. The federalists initially responded that there would be no negotiations following a Yes vote and that Quebec's economy would collapse. Early indications showed the federalists ahead. But as the campaign progressed this lead vanished. The unpopular Par-

izeau (still remembered as the architect of the PQ government's brutal attacks on public sector workers in the early 1980s) was replaced by Lucien Bouchard, a former Conservative cabinet minister and leader of the separatist Bloc Québécois (BQ) in the federal parliament, giving renewed momentum to the Yes campaign.

## Federalists Running Scared

When Bouchard took over, he tossed the PQ economic studies aside and instead appealed to the national pride of the Québécois and their anger at the long history of humiliation at the hands of English Canada. PQ ads picked up the threat of one federalist, Charles Garcia, to "crush" the separatists, and asked, "Do you want to be crushed or respected?" The result was a dramatic swing to the Yes side.

This was met by a last-minute outpouring of national-unity mongering from English Canada, culminating in a massive "spontaneous" federalist rally in Montreal a few days before the vote. Most of the participants in the demonstration (which was initiated by a member of the federal cabinet, and organized and paid for by English Canadian corporations) were Anglophones from outside Quebec. Billed as a demonstration of "love," this mobilization of Canada's patriotic petty bourgeoisie was little more than a veiled form of intimidation. Workers in shops and offices across Montreal were given the day off and encouraged to attend the No rally. Those who did not jump at the chance to wave the Canadian flag had their arms twisted by their bosses. Some employees were told that they should start looking for a new job if the Yes side won.

Canadian prime minister, Jean Chrétien, initially stayed out of the campaign, except to declare that he would refuse to recognize the legitimacy of a Yes vote. Chrétien is widely reviled in Quebec for his opposition to recognition of Quebec's national rights. To win the 1980 referendum, Pierre Trudeau, Chrétien's mentor, promised constitutional reforms and a new deal for Quebec. Two years later, when Chrétien and Trudeau repatriated the Canadian constitution from Britain, Quebec's traditional veto was eliminated.

In the last week before the vote Chrétien suddenly changed his tune and began pleading that those in Quebec who wanted change should vote No. In a major address in Montreal on 24 October, he pledged to recognize Quebec as "distinct" in its language, culture and institutions, to restore the veto to Quebec over constitutional matters, and to devolve various administrative functions from the federal government to Quebec. Chrétien's desperate reversal on these questions (in 1990 he had opposed similar measures proposed by the Conservative government as part of its Meech Lake Accord) appears to have been a major factor in swinging enough votes to produce the razor-thin "victory" for the No side.

## Two Wings of Anglo Chauvinism

Immediately after the vote, Chrétien said he would act

quickly on his promises, but within a matter of days he had begun to backpedal. A few weeks later, with pollsters reporting separatist support rising, Chrétien reversed course again and proposed to push a motion through the federal parliament recognizing Quebec's distinctiveness, and promising to veto any future constitutional changes that did not have the support of Quebec, the West, Ontario and the Maritimes. The BQ immediately pointed out that any such motion had no constitutional significance and could be overturned at any point in the future by a simple majority.

This is quite true, but it seems unlikely that Chrétien can deliver a more substantive package. The federalist camp is deeply divided between the reactionary Anglo chauvinists of the Reform Party (who are eager to decentralize federal power, but insist that Quebec is only a province like the others) and the Ontario-centered traditional bourgeoisie (represented by the Liberal Party) which is prepared to negotiate cosmetic constitutional alterations to retain Quebec. At this point the chance of any kind of consensus between the two wings of the federalists seems remote.

The Liberals combine their paper carrot with plenty of sticks. The *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest circulation liberal paper, exposed the ugly face of Maple Leaf chauvinism in its post-referendum editorial:

"Will this torment never cease? Canadians freely chose to accept separatist ballots in 1980 and 1995 as democratic expressions of opinion. But must we continue to tolerate these referenda whose sole aim is to destroy the country? Should 30 million Canadians offer themselves as perpetual hostages to some 2 million disaffected co-citizens? Or should such referenda in the future be treated as no more than non-binding popular consultations? Should breaking up Confederation even be possible without a *national* referendum, requiring the assent of a majority of Canadians and a very strong majority of the province concerned?"

—*Toronto Star*, 31 October 1995

Chrétien weighed in the next day at a Liberal Party fundraiser in Toronto with an ominous threat: "I will make sure that we have political stability in this land... That is my constitutional responsibility and I will deliver." He hinted that one way to "deliver" would be to prevent Quebec from having any more referenda: "We've been extremely generous in Canada... We Canadians have done it twice and we cannot carry it on forever" (*Globe and Mail*, 2 November 1995).

Behind all the federalist contingency plans lurks the threat of economic blackmail, or even military force. Lucien Bouchard, who took over as Quebec premier from Parizeau, has promised to give the federalists a chance to present a new proposal. Bouchard is confident that the outpouring of Anglo chauvinism that will accompany the squabbling in the federalist camp, as well as the negligible results of the exercise, will cement support for separation among an overwhelming majority of Quebec's francophones. Chrétien's threats to prevent a third Quebec vote are an admission that he does not expect to be able to cobble anything together that has a chance of satisfying Quebec's national demands.

### Proletarian Unity & Bolshevik Tactics

The International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT), while upholding Quebec's right to self-determination, did not advocate voting for separation in the 1995 referendum, as our 20 October statement (reprinted below) explains. This is con-

sistent with our advocacy of joint class struggle across national lines by English Canadian and Québécois workers, a position developed by the Trotskyist League of Canada (TL—affiliated with the Spartacist League/U.S.) twenty years ago. In the course of the recent referendum, the ex-Trotskyist TL announced that it was not only calling for a Yes vote this time, but also retroactively repudiating its historic position. According to the TL, proletarian unity between Québécois and English Canadian workers has not been possible for at least two decades—and those who think otherwise (as they did until a few months ago) are living in a "fantasy world."

On 19 October 1995, we had the rare opportunity to debate this question with the TL as co-participants (along with the Canadian-nationalist Communist Party) in a joint meeting in Toronto entitled "Quebec Referendum & the Left." Charles Galarneau, speaking for the TL, attacked our position:

"Maintain workers' unity—I mean, which planet do these people live on? I mean, the PSAC [Public Service Alliance of Canada] strike, okay, postal workers, these are like national unions, so of course you are going to see some sort of strike together, but this is not—I'm sorry, any transit strike in Quebec, nobody hears about it here, and vice versa. It's just, it's split and it's going to be split until the question is resolved."

Tom Riley replied for the IBT:

"The comrade says, 'oh well, the postal workers, you know, they're a national union, so of course they'll struggle together, won't they?' Well, no, *not 'of course,'* not necessarily—not if, in fact, as you claim, the relations are deeply poisoned, horribly polarized and they all hate each other: *no they won't.* They might even scab on each other's strikes, comrades. The fact is they haven't. In fact the Quebec workers have tended to lead. They've led the postal workers, the most militant section of the working class for decades. And most recently [the PSAC strike] in 1991, the last big strike we had in this country, was led by the Quebec workers (from Hull predominantly) and it went immediately across the river to the English Canadian workers...."

The TL sputters about how in the "real world" joint proletarian struggle has been impossible for at least 20 years, but they cannot produce any evidence to substantiate this claim. When this notion was first proposed in December 1994, John Masters, editor of the TL's newspaper, responded:

"Anglo chauvinism and concomitant nationalist reaction have not (yet) decisively undercut working-class unity. The last important test was the PSAC public sector workers strike of fall 1991. This Canada-wide strike occurred at a time when sovereignist sentiment among Quebec workers was actually stronger than today. Yet there was no scabbing or other evident national animosity, and Québécois and English Canadian workers regularly united in joint strike rallies. Among youth, too, hard-nationalist sentiment is weak. PQ leaders worry openly about their lack of active support in the younger generation. I recently sold the paper in Ottawa at a 15,000-strong anti-cutbacks student protest, which was thoroughly integrated (indeed majority Québécois), with speeches and chants all given in both languages and national animosity barely noticeable."

SL chairperson, James Robertson, who was busy "correcting" the TL on this question via fax, replied with dark hints that Masters and others who were slow to adjust their

perceptions to the new reality decreed from his California lair were perhaps being a touch “undialectical.” Masters took the hint and capitulated.

Well aware that its new position on the course of the class struggle over the last 20-odd years in Quebec cannot be substantiated by reference to the historical record, *Workers Vanguard* (3 November 1995) demagogically attacks our referendum statement for “nowhere mentioning—much less opposing—the national oppression of Quebec.” Even the cynics who churn out what pass for polemics in *WV* must be aware that the key element in opposing the national oppression of the Québécois is the defense of their national rights, particularly the right to self-determination. We invite people to read our statement (reprinted below) and draw their own conclusions.

The *WV* polemic also advances the brazen lie that our “statement calling for abstention [on the 1992 constitutional referendum] failed even to defend Quebec’s *right* to independence.” In fact our October 1992 statement (reprinted in *1917* No. 12) explicitly stated:

“The designation of Quebec as a ‘distinct society’ within Canada obscures the fact that it is a nation, and as such, has an unalienable and unconditional right to self-determination. If the Québécois decide to separate and form their own state (something that we do not advocate at present) we will support their right to do so. If the Canadian bourgeoisie attempts to forcibly retain Quebec, it would be the duty of class-conscious workers across English Canada to defend the Québécois with every means at their disposal, including protests, strikes and even military assistance.”

The *WV* smears are aimed at diverting attention from the political implications of the Robertsonians’ flirtation with the revisionist “two-stage” (first independence, then socialism) theory of social liberation. Their insistence that successful proletarian struggle can only take place *after* Quebec achieves independence, signals that, for them, the question of whether or not to advocate independence at a given moment (which Trotskyists have always viewed as a tactical question) has been raised to the level of a strategic one. This would explain why, in the weeks prior to the Quebec vote, Tlers were loudly proclaiming that, *regardless of the outcome*, they would continue to advocate independence.

This rejection of the group’s historic position on Quebec parallels the shift of position on the Irish national question (see *1917* No. 16). It is also of a piece with the TL’s earlier reversal of its initially correct refusal to take sides in the intra-bourgeois Free Trade dispute in 1988. This latter flip was never acknowledged, but is documented in *1917* No. 12. All of these changes represent shifts in the direction of more mainstream Trotskyoid centrism, and reflect an appetite to find potential “dynamics” to hitch a ride on.

The Robertsonians have, at least since 1992, repeatedly stated that, in the event of Quebec’s separation, they were “opposed to the disintegration of English Canada which at present could only strengthen the power of U.S. imperialism.” We have challenged them on this, and pointed to the reactionary implications of championing English-Canadian unity (see *1917* Nos. 12 & 16). Other leftists have also criticized this social-patriotic declaration. We therefore note with interest that the TL’s 1995 Quebec statement takes a confused half step back and admits that its former position was “potentially one-sided” and that Anglo-Canadian disintegration after Quebec separation “poses no particular question of principle.” Yet they claim that they remain “far from indifferent, however, if the principal aspect of such an

act would be to strengthen American imperialism.” No one in the Trotskyist League understands what any of this means—why they had the position in the first place, or why it was changed. Nor does Joseph Seymour, their tendency’s leading theoretician. Like many of the group’s other idiosyncratic positions, it was initially introduced and subsequently modified by James Robertson, who is a power unto himself.

### Quebec Nationalism On the Rise

Robertson is wrong about the possibilities of joint struggle between Québécois and English Canadian workers since the 1960s; however, nationalist sentiment in Quebec at this point is very volatile. The upsurge of support for the sovereignist side in the last two weeks of the campaign, despite the doom and gloom scenarios projected by big business and the federalists, signals a resurgence of nationalism among francophone Québécois. The result of the referendum, coming after two earlier failures to include formal recognition of Quebec as a “distinct society” in the constitution, has undoubtedly increased momentum toward separation, and inflamed national passions. Barring some dramatic new development, all sides expect that the PQ will get the mandate it was narrowly denied this time if there is another referendum in a couple of years.

An ugly polarization was evident on both sides during the campaign. Bouchard lifted the corner on the racism latent in Quebec nationalism with a remark about the tragedy of the low birth rate of the Québécois “white race.” Parizeau touched on the same theme with his condemnation of “money and ethnics” for the PQ’s loss. On the federalist side, the continuing threats, the chauvinist denial of Quebec’s national right to decide its own fate, point to a period of escalating nationalist antagonisms. This was pre-figured in Montreal the night of the vote, when a few hundred youths from headquarters of both Yes and No faced off with rocks and fists on the streets.

Tactics may change, but the strategic objective of Marxists is always to struggle for working-class unity across national lines. The evident inability of English Canadian politicians to offer anything to the Québécois who reject the status quo, but have as yet hesitated to opt for outright separation, suggests that the momentum for independence is likely to increase. If national tensions continue to mount, they will inevitably begin to pour into the workers’ movement, and could indeed poison relations, even in historically integrated sectors. In that case it would be necessary for class-conscious workers on both sides of the Ottawa River to go beyond defense of Quebec’s right to separate, and *advocate* immediate separation as a necessary step to take the national question off the agenda and help clear the decks for class struggle.

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*Reprinted below is our 20 October 1995 statement on the referendum:*

On 30 October Quebec votes on independence. For socialists the question of whether or not to advocate separation is a tactical, rather than a principled, one. What is a matter of principle is the recognition of Quebec as a nation with the right to self-determination, i.e., the right to independence. If the people of Quebec wish to establish their own state, the workers’ movement in English Canada must defend their right to do so.

The defense of Quebec’s national rights is not an abstract question. Twenty-five years ago, in October 1970, Pierre

Trudeau imposed the War Measures Act and sent the army in to occupy Montreal. Hundreds of unionists, leftists and nationalists were jailed, supposedly in an attempt to block an “apprehended insurrection” sparked by the tiny FLQ (*Front de Libération du Québec*). But there was no insurrection, as Trudeau, Chrétien and the rest of the cabinet well knew. The imposition of martial law was intended to intimidate Quebec and blunt the growth of the nationalist movement.

In 1978, as the Parti Québécois (PQ) was preparing its first referendum, Trudeau recalled his 1970 action and boasted that, “I’m not going to be shy about using the sword if something illegal is attempted in the province of Quebec.” Jean Chrétien echoed his old boss last month when he remarked that he was not necessarily going to recognize a majority “Yes” vote as a mandate for independence. Daniel Johnson, Quebec’s Liberal leader, who officially heads the “No” camp, promptly distanced himself from Chrétien’s threat.

Marxists unconditionally defend Quebec’s right to separate. But upholding the right of the people of Quebec to decide their own future does not imply *advocating* separation in every circumstance. Lenin compared the right of self-determination to the right of divorce—one can recognize that partners in a marriage have a right to leave if they choose without insisting on an immediate dissolution.

In recent decades nationalist sentiment in Quebec has fluctuated considerably. In the late 1960s and 1970s many Québécois feared that if they did not win independence, [they] would disappear as a people. This fear fueled an upsurge in nationalist sentiment and led to the passage of Quebec’s language laws which enshrined French as the dominant language. Twenty years later, the trend toward assimilation has been largely reversed and the survival of the French language in Quebec is no longer a major issue. This has tended to undercut support for separation.

Since the passage of the language laws, and the election of the first Parti Québécois government in 1976, much of the anglophone bourgeoisie has pulled up stakes and transferred assets out of Quebec. They have been replaced by an increasingly self-confident Québécois bourgeoisie. For the moment at least the new francophone elite is not throwing in its lot with the separatists.

For years the pollsters have reported that only a minority of Quebecers favor outright independence. This is why the PQ/BQ (Bloc Québécois) campaign has been light on nationalist rhetoric, but full of promises that after separation Quebecers can keep their Canadian citizenship and assurances that a sovereign Quebec would continue to use the Canadian dollar. Instead of simply asking for a yes or no on separation, the *indépendantistes* are asking:

“Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the Bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995? Yes or no.”

The business about “June 12” and a new “partnership” is aimed at those dissatisfied with the status quo but uncertain about independence. The majority of the Québécois are unhappy with Quebec’s status as a mere province. Yet many working people don’t trust the promises of Jacques Parizeau and Lucien Bouchard that an independent Quebec will somehow be able to provide better pensions, better social programs and more jobs. Many workers, particularly in the public sector, recall that when Parizeau was René Lévesque’s finance minister, his chief concern was holding

down wages and cutting social programs to impress Wall Street.

## IS Votes ‘Yes’

Most of the ostensibly revolutionary left in English Canada is calling for a “Yes” vote. This includes the International Socialists (IS), who are usually a pretty reliable weathervane of popular opinion among petty-bourgeois “progressives.” But the IS seems to have some trouble coming up with plausible arguments for their position. Some of their propaganda sounds like it’s been lifted directly from Parizeau & Co.:

“Quebec is the poorest province in the country. That is the real legacy of federalism. No wonder many have little loyalty to Ottawa.”

—*Socialist Worker*, 20 September

The widespread unemployment and poverty in Quebec is the result of the operation of *capitalism*—as hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers and poor people in the Maritimes and Ontario can attest. The workers of Quebec will not escape the ravages of “lean and mean” capitalist economic irrationality by creating a separate state. In fact, the first priority of an independent Quebec under Bouchard and Parizeau would likely be to impose a round of patriotic belt-tightening and attacks on the union movement aimed at projecting a “business-friendly” image to the international bankers and bond-raters.

The IS also points to the fact that “the most powerful government and business forces in the country” are calling for a “No.” This is the same approach the IS used to arrive at its embarrassing decision to back Mulroney on the 1992 Charlottetown accord: if Preston Manning and the reactionary right were voting “No,” the IS was going to vote “Yes.” Today many IS members are willing to admit this was a mistake.

The front page of the 20 September *Socialist Worker* (which announced the IS call for a “Yes”) featured a demonstration of 12,000 protesting the closure of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Montreal. The photo clearly shows banners in *English and French* and the caption reads: “French and English workers together can stop the cuts.” Quite right. But this is evidence that relations between francophone and anglophone workers in Quebec are *not* so embittered that separation is necessary to get the national question off the agenda and open the road to joint class struggle.

## TL Flip-Flop

The Trotskyist League (TL) has recently done an about-face on this question and signed on as unconditional advocates of separation. They have decided that they have been completely wrong about Quebec—a central question in Canadian politics—for the past 20 years. The TL now considers that advocacy of bi-national class struggle is a dead end, and that separation is “the only means of cutting through these hostilities and bringing the class struggle against capitalism to the fore” (*Spartacist Canada*, September-October). There is no explanation as to why they failed to recognize the “poisonous” national tensions that surrounded their organization from its inception. Nor do they provide any hint as to how exactly they suddenly came to this startling realization.

Despite repeated assertions that “mutual national suspicions and hatreds” preclude the possibility of united class

struggle, the article cites very little evidence to support this contention. It recalls how in 1972 federal NDP leader David Lewis denounced the Quebec general strike. But what else would you expect from a right-wing social democratic labor traitor, who made a career out of purging reds from the unions? Lewis was certainly an enemy of militants in the Québécois workers' movement. But he was equally hostile to leftists of any sort in the English-Canadian labor movement, as he demonstrated in 1972 when he purged the leftist/Canadian nationalist Waffle from the NDP.

The only other evidence the TL presents is a recent pair of attacks by Anglo bigots. In 1994 a Québécois tourist in "an upscale Vancouver neighborhood" was assaulted by some chauvinist thugs, and last summer in Owen Sound a Québécois family had their home "pelted with eggs and defaced with 'Frogs Go Home' written in excrement on the living room window."

The explosive 1991 PSAC strike in which tens of thousands of Québécois and Anglo workers bypassed their official leadership and united in a semi-spontaneous mass struggle against the government is dismissed as merely one of the "episodic examples of common class struggle." This is how bourgeois sociologists routinely treat any eruption of class struggle. For the TL massive, united strike action across national lines can be dismissed, while the true index of relations within the working class is found in the cowardly actions of a handful of bigots in Vancouver and Owen Sound.

The origins of the TL's abrupt reversal can't be traced to either Owen Sound or Vancouver, but rather to California where James Robertson, peerless leader of the "International Communist League" (to which the TL is affiliated) resides. One day late last year Robertson sent a letter to Toronto announcing that he had recently changed his mind on Quebec. This set off a flurry of activity as TL members strained to divine the meaning of his somewhat enigmatic communication. For the sake of appearances there was some pro-forma internal discussion, but it soon became clear that the Great Man had spoken and the line had to be changed.

Suddenly *Spartacist Canada* discovered that for decades the existence of two nations in a single Canadian state has "terribly undermined working class struggle" and proclaimed that:

"The recognition by the workers of each nation that their respective capitalist rulers—not each other—are the enemy *can only come* through an independent Quebec." [emphasis added]

The clear implication is that the working class cannot develop class consciousness until and unless Quebec separates. This pessimistic assessment is reiterated later in the text:

"In Canada and Quebec, the experience of at least the past two decades demonstrates clearly that successful proletarian struggle demands separation into two independent nation-states."

In fact the pattern of class struggle since the 1950s has largely been one of joint struggle, across national and linguistic lines, with workers in English Canada frequently following the initiatives of their more militant Québécois sisters and brothers, as they did during the 1991 PSAC strike.

If "proletarian struggle" cannot be "successful" until Quebec is independent, what does the TL plan to do if, on October 30, Quebec votes "No"—dissolve? Or will they

follow in the footsteps of the Quebec supporters of the United Secretariat, who elaborated a two-stage model of social revolution: first, Quebec independence; then, successful proletarian struggle. Seventeen years ago *Spartacist Canada* answered a Quebec pseudo-Trotskyist who advanced such a position:

"In your letter you state that the 'independence of the Quebec people is a necessary precondition for the coming to class consciousness, for any communist revolution.' Your position that the fight for socialist revolution cannot begin until the 'national liberation' struggle is complete is not a new one. Such a stagist theory has been the stock-in-trade of every stripe of revisionist from Kautsky to the Mensheviks to Stalin...."

—*Spartacist Canada*, October 1978

## For Bi-National Working Class Unity!

If national antagonisms were acute enough to prevent effective class unity then it would be necessary to advocate immediate separation. The question is always a concrete one that requires careful study of attitudes within the working class. In assessing relations between English-Canadian workers and those in Quebec over the past several decades it is instructive to look at the case of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. CUPW is a union with roots in both nations and a history as one of the most combative unions in the Canadian labor movement.

During the 1970s the capitalist press ranted and raved about the influence of Marxists and revolutionaries in the post office and CUPW's propensity for shutting down an "essential service" for the bourgeoisie. But the post office was not always a hotbed of militancy. For decades postal workers had been seen as timid civil servants without the right to strike. That changed in 1965 with what Joe Davidson, a former CUPW president, described as a "Post Office rebellion which changed the face of federal labour relations and shocked not only the government but most of the elected leaders of the postal employee associations."

In his memoir, Davidson recalled how, in the 1965 strike, "The initiative came, as has often been the case since, from Montreal." The national leaders of the postal workers had rejected demands from Montreal for an "illegal" strike. So the Montreal branch set its own deadline and launched its own strike. They were immediately joined by postal workers in Hamilton, Vancouver and Toronto. This was the first of a series of militant strikes that often began in Montreal and spread to English Canada. But they never spread to Seattle, Buffalo or Chicago.

The influence of the more militant Québécois working class was not confined to the post office. In 1975, when CLC head Joe Morris tried to implement an overtly class-collaborationist policy of business-labor-government "tripartism," resistance was spearheaded by the Quebec unions. And "tripartism" was buried. Much of the pressure that compelled the CLC brass to call the famous one-day general strike in October 1976 against Trudeau's wage controls came from Quebec. Despite the cynicism and passivity of the labor tops, who intended nothing more than a token protest to let off steam, the response from the ranks was a powerful demonstration of proletarian unity as hundreds of thousands of workers in Quebec and English Canada walked out together in the first (and so far the only) national general strike in North American history.

Labor has been on the defensive in recent years but thus far there is no serious evidence that relations between Eng-

lish Canadian and Québécois unionists have been poisoned. There have been no instances of workers of one nation scabbing on the strikes of the other. In fact there has been considerable desire for unity evident in recent protests against cuts to UIC, healthcare, education and other social programs. There is, consequently, no reason at this time for Marxists to advocate separation. Our advice therefore to Quebec workers is to vote “No” to Parizeau and Bouchard’s attempt to establish themselves as the political representatives of an independent Quebec bourgeoisie.

The working class of Quebec is the best organized and most militant in North America. For decades it has sparked class battles across Canada. In most pan-Canadian unions the Quebec component is the most combative and the natural base for opposition to the class collaborationism of the union brass. If Quebec were to become independent, many of the organizational connections, particularly in public-

sector unions, would likely be broken, and the militant struggles of the Québécois working class would have a great deal less impact in the English-speaking proletariat of North America than they do today. This would be a setback for the cause of labor across the continent. If national antagonisms become sharp enough however, it could be a lesser evil.

Certainly if the people of Quebec determine that they wish to establish their own state it is our duty to actively support their right to do so. But the whole course of class struggle in this country over the past few decades provides evidence, in life, that at least at this time, it is not necessary to advocate Quebec separation.

***Defend Quebec’s National Rights!  
For Working Class Unity—Not National Unity!***