

# Exchange with *l'Égalité* Marxism vs. Quebec Nationalism

Reprinted below is an exchange between Marc D., a supporter of the International Bolshevik Tendency, and Damien Elliott, the leading figure in the *JCR-Gauche Révolutionnaire*, the French affiliate of the Committee for a Workers' International. The first two items were originally published in French in the March 1994 issue of *l'Égalité* (No. 28).

## Mail: *l'Égalité* in favor of Quebec nationalism?

" (...) I noted the article on the Canadian elections and the photo of the *indépendantiste* demonstration in the last issue (No. 26—Editor's note) of *l'Égalité*. Does this signify support for Quebec nationalism? (...) The weight of nationalist sentiment in the workers' movement represents a burden, and not a catalyst or an 'objective dynamic' in the development of revolutionary class consciousness."—M.D.

## Debate on the National Question in Quebec For an Independent and Socialist Quebec!

by Damien Elliott

The article to which our reader refers gave some news on the breakthrough of Bloc Québécois nationalists in recent Canadian elections. To illustrate this, we chose—on purely "journalistic" grounds—a photo of an "*in-dépendantiste*" demonstration. The *JCR-Gauche Révolutionnaire* has not yet had the opportunity to address this question and to formulate its point of view. Nor has this debate been carried out with the editors of *Militant Labour*, a new Canadian newspaper, which we welcome in passing, sharing the views of this editorial board. *Militant Labour*, addressed to an anglophone public, has declared itself in support of "Quebec's right to self-determination." In the following article, Damien Elliott expresses his personal viewpoint, seeking to open a discussion indispensable for all who wish to build a revolutionary workers' party in Quebec.

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Having a correct position on the national question is indispensable for whomever claims to defend workers' interests. This is evidently the only means of winning a hearing in countries where national conflicts exist. This has nothing to do with support to "nationalism" in general for there are two nationalisms: that of the oppressors (reactionary) and that of the oppressed (progressive). The demand for national independence by proletarian revolutionaries doesn't imply support to bourgeois nationalist leaderships. On the contrary, raising the demand above all is intended to fight them by removing the major obstacle to rallying workers to the program of socialism and internationalism. If the unity of nations is desirable, it cannot be achieved otherwise than in terms of strict equality. In the case of an oppressed nation, separation with the oppressor nation is often the first necessary step toward future unification. But let us start by stating clearly that Quebec is an oppressed nation within the Canadian State.

## An Oppressed Nation

A publication of the LSO/LSA<sup>1</sup>, a revolutionary organization no longer in existence, gave this subject some valu-

able guidelines:

"The Québécois constitute a nation sharing a common national language, French; a culture and a history which date from the former North American colony of France; and a common territory more or less delimited by the present borders of the province of Quebec....The background of the oppression of the Quebec nation goes back to the British conquest of the French colony in 1760 and the defeat of the revolutionary national uprising of 1837, which was an attempt at bourgeois democratic revolution, similar to that launched by the American colonists more than 60 years earlier....The Quebec nation is deprived of its democratic right to political self-determination. The Canadian constitution nowhere recognizes the right of the Québécois or of any other nationality to decide their own fate, extending to and including the right to separate and to form their own State if they so desire.... Francophones—who constitute more than 80% of the population of Quebec (Editor's note)—are subject to linguistic discrimination, which renders them second class citizens. English, the language of the oppressor nation, holds a privileged position. Francophone workers, among whom one notes a much higher rate of unemployment than among anglophones, are a source of cheap labour for the capitalists. The Quebec economy is dominated by large Anglo-Canadian and American corporations. The main instrument of domination is the imperialist Canadian State."<sup>2</sup>

## Nationalism, Burden or Catalyst?

As long as the nationalist and "*indépendantiste*" movement obtains minority support among the members of an oppressed nation, defenders of workers' interests have to denounce this oppression and to recognize the right of the nation in question to self-determination. Such is the correct position with respect to Corsica or to the French Pays Basque. Things change the moment when the "*indépendantiste*" demand assists the development of the class struggle or if it shows signs of winning the support of the majority of the oppressed nation. In Quebec's case, support for the national movement has been on the rise since the early 1960's. One of its by-products has been the rise of the PQ (Parti Québécois) a bourgeois formation strongly rooted in all sectors of the population, including the industrial proletariat. But the national bourgeoisie, represented today by the Bloc Québécois, has shown itself to be incapable of consistently defending (Quebec's) national interests. The satisfaction of this demand however has an exceedingly progressive character as it directly challenges the central State, the heart of Canadian capitalism. As the LSO/LSA notes:

"Quebec nationalism is currently a major challenge to the governments of Ottawa and Washington, to Bay Street and to the rue Saint Jacques."

The national movement has allowed the Québécois to obtain a number of rights but the central state refuses to delegate further government prerogatives and to admit the idea of "asymmetric federalism," which would give more powers to Quebec than to the other nine provinces, because of its national distinctiveness. With the deepening of the

economic crisis, nationalist sentiment continues to grow and, given the serious threats of the federation's explosion, the national struggle is one of the most likely channels for the working class to take power. If a workers' government seized power in Quebec, an event this important would immediately have gigantic repercussions and would shake not only the rest of Canada but all of North America from top to bottom.

### An Objective Dynamic?

The struggle for Quebec's national liberation, like all similar processes, contains a certain dynamic which pushes toward its transformation into socialist revolution. On the other hand, it is obvious that this cannot be produced spontaneously, without the national movement passing at one moment or another under the leadership of a class party having a clear consciousness of its goals. This is even truer today, after the disappearance of the USSR and the "Soviet bloc." It is thus hardly a question of extending the least confidence in the Bloc Québécois, a priori hardly susceptible of winning Quebec's independence and certainly incapable of guaranteeing a real independence, that is to say a break with the Anglo-American trusts, NATO and international financial institutions. In Canada, the principal workers' party is the NDP, a Social Democratic organization which never succeeded in winning support in Quebec because of its refusal to support even self-determination. But a Canadian workers' organization which seriously wants to take power to introduce socialism will never achieve this by turning its back on the national aspirations of Quebec's working population. In this field, it would become the champion of national independence and would try to lead the national movement by placing it under the flag of socialism. In English Canada, it would work to counter the chauvinist prejudices of anglophone workers, explaining to them that their own emancipation depends in large measure on their capacity to support Quebec's right to self-determination.

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#### Notes

1. Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière/League for Socialist Action, Canadian section of the IVth International ("United Secretariat")
2. La question nationale au Québec, in *Pour un Québec indépendant et socialiste* (éditions d'Avant-Garde. Montréal. 1977)

1 March 1995

Montreal

### Reply to *l'Égalité*

Dear Comrades:

Damien Elliott, through taking issue with some views I expressed (see the reply to "a reader" in the March 1994 issue of *l'Égalité*—No. 28) opened a debate on the national question in Quebec. I welcome the opportunity to respond, as this raises many important questions for revolutionaries that are quite timely, given the recent election of a Parti Québécois government and the pending referendum on Quebec sovereignty.

Comrade Elliott's position stands in striking contrast to the social-democratic, laborite tradition of major components of the "Committee for a Workers' International," including the Canadian publishers of *Militant Labour*. *Militant Labour*, as noted in *l'Égalité's* introduction, claims to defend Quebec's right to self-determination, but has historically sought a niche among the Canadian-unity advocates

of the New Democratic Party. Unlike the editor of *l'Égalité* in Paris, the Canadian *Militant Labour* is certainly not raising a call for Quebec independence.

The issue is not whether revolutionaries, particularly those in English Canada, should vigorously defend Quebec's *right* to self-determination. This is the self-evident duty of all Marxists. The question posed is whether revolutionaries, particularly within Quebec, should raise the call for independence today. We say no.

I have not always held this position. In the past I was a vigorous defender of the views expounded by comrade Elliott. But my ideas evolved as a result of my political experience. As a former member of successive organizations of the United Secretariat in Quebec (the Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière [LSO], the Groupe Marxiste Révolutionnaire [GMR] and the unstable fusion between the two, the Ligue Ouvrière Révolutionnaire [LOR]), I accepted as axiomatic the notion that socialism and Quebec nationalism were integrally connected. From 1972 to 1974 I was a member of the editorial board of the LSO's publication *Libération*, which seems to have influenced Comrade Elliott's thinking so extensively. It is therefore somewhat ironic that the comrade based his reply to my original comments on the LSO's earlier publications.

As the JCR-GR originated from a split within the USec youth in France, the political continuity within the new organization is not surprising. Comrade Elliott's assertion that the struggle for national liberation in Quebec, "like all similar processes," contains a dynamic which leads toward socialist revolution, poses a question of method. Like many other leftists outside Quebec, the comrade tends to romanticize Quebec nationalism by equating it with the desire for national liberation by a Third World neo-colony.

The LSO, which comrade Elliott looks to as a model, asserted that the dynamics of consistent nationalism (at least in Quebec) would transcend simple nationalist goals and lead toward socialist objectives. The LSO sought to outflank bourgeois nationalists on the French unilingual terrain of the *Front commun pour la défense de la langue française* and found itself in a bloc with a variety of xenophobes and ultra-nationalists. This fixation on the national question came at the expense of any serious orientation to work in the unions, which were engaged in a series of massive class confrontations. This reached a peak in the 1972 general strike, which the LSO mistakenly viewed as a primarily nationalist, rather than class, conflict. The axis of their intervention was the call for Quebec independence. But the struggle was not about Quebec appropriating more power from the federal state. While the strike adopted a nationalist coloration, it was directed against the Quebec government, and the strikers were formulating economic demands calling for more power to Quebec workers.

The emergence of several sizable Maoist formations in Quebec, composed of radicalized students who rejected the bourgeois nationalism of the PQ, and which were able, for a time, to wield substantial influence in the most militant sections of the workers' movement, can largely be attributed to the absence of any organization capable of projecting the essential core of the Leninist-Trotskyist program. The LSO's opportunism on the national question in Quebec, which was matched by the loyalty of its English-Canadian affiliate to the Canadian-unity chauvinists of the social-democratic New Democratic Party, was the subject of a disingenuous and factionally motivated, but substantially accurate, critique by Ernest Mandel (see "In Defense of

Leninism” in the 1973 USec internal discussion bulletins).

### Progressive and Reactionary Peoples

Comrade Elliott posits the existence of progressive and reactionary nationalisms, corresponding, one must assume, to progressive and reactionary peoples. Quebec belongs to the former, along with Corsica, the Pays Basque, Catalonia, Ireland, etc. While the nationalism of the oppressor nations (e.g., Canada) is reactionary to the core, this does not mean that Quebec nationalism is inherently “progressive,” much less revolutionary. This was perhaps less obvious 25 years ago, when powerful left-wing nationalist tendencies existed in the Quebec labor movement. But today the anti-Mohawk demagoguery of the Parti Québécois and the Bloc Québécois (BQ—the PQ’s federal counterpart), which are tacitly approved, if not explicitly endorsed, by the union bureaucracy, makes it all rather obvious.

A paradox of the growth of the nationalist movement since the 1960s is that its legislative achievements on the cultural and linguistic front (Quebec’s repressive language laws) have largely undercut the cultural insecurity which fueled the drive for political sovereignty in the first place. Nationalist sentiment in Quebec has always been at its height when the survival of the nation appeared threatened, and today such sentiment is on the wane. The majority of Québécois are certainly not enamored with the constitutional status quo, which relegates Quebec to a mere province, thereby denying its rights as a nation, but only a minority favor outright independence. The sudden decline in support for sovereignty in Quebec in the past year is a frequent topic for discussion in the bourgeois media:

“The current leaders of the sovereignty movement have themselves deliberately drained their message of much of its emotional content, by concentrating on the presumed economic benefits to be derived from independence, and their insistence that Quebec nationalism is territorially, not ethnically motivated.

“No longer is independence projected as a matter of throwing off the chains of the rapacious anglo oppressor, but a yearning by Quebecers of all backgrounds to take full responsibility for their own affairs, as [BQ leader Lucien] Bouchard put it in an interview with *The Gazette* last week.”

“In doing so, they have abandoned or fudged the emotional argument that sustained the modern sovereignist movement from its infancy—that only an independent state created for and by French-Canadians can assure the survival of the French language in Quebec.”

—Hubert Bauch in *The [Montreal] Gazette*,  
22 October 1994

That same week *La Presse* columnist Marcel Adam observed that:

“because an ethnocentric sovereignist enterprise is philosophically indefensible, and destined to failure when it claims a territory with a heterogeneous population, today’s sovereignists have had to find another justification for their project.”

An ethnocentric sovereignist enterprise is viewed as “philosophically indefensible,” i.e., politically undesirable, by the mainstream bourgeois nationalists of the BQ/PQ. The PQ could attempt to pull off a referendum victory with a solid majority of francophone voters. Hard-core nationalists such as Pierre Bourgault actually advocate such a course. Parizeau prefers to court the soft ethnic vote, which

is perceived as wavering between affinity with Quebec and Canada. Ultra-nationalist demagogues such as Guy Bouthillier of the *Mouvement Québec français*, who sought PQ nominations in Quebec’s September 1994 election, did so against PQ leader Jacques Parizeau’s wishes. In some instances they displaced the official “ethnic” candidates, and thereby sabotaged the PQ’s efforts to win the non-francophone ethnic votes largely concentrated on the island of Montreal. Parizeau managed to win the general election despite heavy losses among immigrant voters, but in the forthcoming referendum on sovereignty such votes will be crucial.

The question of immigrants, many of them from impoverished Third-World countries, is becoming as hot an issue in Montreal as it is in Paris. At the beginning of the 1994 school year, 12-year old Emilie Ouimet was expelled from Montreal’s Louis Riel high school for wearing a hijab, a traditional Muslim headdress for women. Bourgeois nationalists, from *péquistes* to *Société St. Jean Baptiste* (SSJB) xenophobes, have been demagogically denouncing the “dangers” posed by the concentration of immigrant children in the French-language schools of Montreal.

“Seventeen years after the French Language Charter began channelling ethnic and immigrant children into the French school system in Quebec, a kind of panic has blown up around the very presence of these children in French schools.

“The island’s French schools have become overwhelmed with immigrants and can no longer even hope to integrate them into mainstream Quebec society, the Montreal Island School Council [*Conseil scolaire de l’Île de Montréal*] charged this spring.

“As francophone families leave the island for the lower taxes and bigger homes of off-island suburbs, fewer than half the students in Montreal’s French schools now have French as their first language.

“‘Integration is not just the ability to speak a language,’ said Jacques Mongeau, head of the Island School Council. ‘It’s also a shared value system, a shared culture.’”

—*Gazette*, 15 October 1994

Quebec nationalists condemn the children of immigrants, not for failing to learn French, but rather for failing to become perfect *Québécois de vieille souche* with the “shared value system” of the French Catholic *Mouvement Québec français* and the *Société St. Jean Baptiste*.

### Winning a Hearing

We do not seek to march at the head of the St. Jean Baptiste procession. We do not seek to lead the struggle for a French Quebec. We do not support Quebec’s language laws. Unlike comrade Elliott, we are not concerned about “winning a hearing” among the hard-core nationalists, and have no need to pander to their backward prejudices or to repeat what demagogues would have them believe. The duty of revolutionaries is to say that which needs to be said, irrespective of one’s prospects in popularity polls.

The adoption of the slogan of “independence and socialism” by the Quebec left in the 1960s was based on the assumption that the struggle for independence against the Canadian state would spill over into working-class revolution. The higher level of class struggle and leftist/nationalist political activity in Quebec appeared to verify this perspective. In 1970 Pierre Trudeau invoked the draconian “War Measures Act” and sent the Canadian Army in to occupy Montreal. Hundreds of leftists, nationalists and trade unionists were interned on the grounds that they were

all part of an “apprehended insurrection” led by the terrorist Front de Libération du Québec. Two years later the jailing of three labor leaders touched off a massive general strike, which for a few days put the unions in control of some towns.

The Canadian (and American) governments were deeply disturbed by such developments, and viewed the prospect of an independent Quebec headed by petty-bourgeois nationalists with alarm. While the péquistes (who originated as a split from the Liberal Party) held regularly scheduled talks with the U.S. State Department, in which they assured the Americans of their unshakable commitment to capitalism, their public declarations did occasionally ruffle a few imperialist feathers. I recall one public meeting in Hull in 1972 on the eve of the general strike, where Quebec’s current premier, Jacques Parizeau, advocated taking “Bolshevik economic measures” to promote Quebec’s political agenda. The radical mood of the day was so strong that even the péquistes felt they had to pay lip service to it.

Things have changed since then. The solidly pro-PQ union leadership, who were jailed in 1972 for defying bourgeois authority, have lately taken to peddling shares in the “*Fonds de Solidarité*” of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), raising capital for their bourgeois friends of Quebec Inc. According to the *Gazette* (8 November 1994) the FTQ’s *Fonds de Solidarité*:

“was conceived in 1983 by Quebec Federation of Labor leader Louis Laberge who convinced the PQ government of the time that such a financing vehicle would help both unionized workers and the public invest in Quebec companies and preserve jobs.”

Needless to say the Quebec corporations, gratuitously benefiting from the largesse of the Quebec labor movement, are all the while ruthlessly slashing wages and laying off workers in an attempt to become more competitive. Some Quebec corporations, such as Cascades (which owns a number of European plants), are biting the hand that feeds them through some vicious union-busting at the Trois Rivières plant. These are the fruits of class collaboration. There is no shortage of Quebec nationalism among Quebec’s union brass—indeed nationalism is the key to their abject class collaborationism. Life itself has refuted the LSO’s scenarios of a nationalist struggle somehow mutating into a Quebec *république de travailleurs*.

The fears once expressed by various imperialists about the dangers of a péquiste republic were always groundless, but today only the clericalist, ultra-conservative Berets blancs accuse Parizeau (who is referred to in the English-language bourgeois press as “a banker in banker’s clothes”) of being a “closet communist.” Even the reactionary anglo-chauvinist Reform Party does not attempt to red bait the PQ or the Bloc Québécois. They are accused not of fomenting social revolution but of seeking to break up the Canadian state. Parizeau, the former finance minister in René Lévesque’s government, is a tried and tested bourgeois politician. His “radicalism” is limited to proposing fiscal restraints and the reduction of social benefits. The American government, while not enthusiastic over the prospect of Quebec independence, expresses only the usual concerns over the security of capital and the capacity of debtors to make their payments.

### The de Bernonville Affair

The intersection between Quebec nationalism and left-wing activity in the unions and on the campuses has per-

haps tended to obscure the fact that traditionally Quebec nationalists were closely linked to the clerical-reactionary right in France. During World War II the nationalist elites of Quebec applauded the Vichy regime’s defense of the values of Catholic French culture against the “corrupting influence” of Jews, atheists and communists.

French fascists are well aware of this heritage. The xenophobic reaction to Third-World immigration presented them with an important opportunity to renew their connections with the nationalists. In September 1993 we took part in protests that aborted the initial attempt by Le Pen’s *Front national* to establish a toehold in Quebec. The FN is not indifferent to Quebec’s national aspirations—Le Pen did not send Le Gallou, his chief lieutenant, to Quebec to recruit the anglo-chauvinists of the Reform or the Equality Party!

Le Gallou is not the first arch-reactionary French xenophobe to cross the Atlantic in search of kindred spirits in the New World. His trail had been blazed earlier by Jacques de Bernonville, a leading French fascist who oversaw the police in Lyons, and worked close-ly with the infamous Klaus Barbie. In 1947 a French court sentenced him to death as a war criminal responsible for the murder of thousands and for the torture of French Resistance fighters. De Bernonville escaped from jail and was smuggled from France to Quebec. In 1948 he was spotted by a Resistance veteran in a chance encounter in Granby. Quebec’s leading nationalists of the day immediately launched a campaign to block attempts to deport him. Frédéric Dorion, later chief justice of the Quebec Superior Court, the federal member of parliament for Charlevoix-Saguenay rose in the House of Commons on 22 February 1949 to complain: “I am sure if it had been communist Jews who had come here instead of French Catholics, we would not have heard a word about them.”

De Bernonville’s defense was spearheaded by Robert Rumilly, the official historian and chief propagandist of the *Société St. Jean Baptiste*, who was closely aligned with Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis:

“An indication of the type of public campaign Rumilly waged is contained in *La Vérité sur la Résistance et l’Épuration en France* (The Truth about the Resistance and the Purges in France), a public speech he gave in 1949 to raise funds for the Bernonville campaign....After reviewing how individuals had been victimized by the postwar purge-trials in France, Rumilly said, ‘In Canada itself, it was enough that a shifty-eyed Jew, whose name is on the tip of my tongue, invented the most incredible calumnies about the noble commander de Bernonville...for our immigration service to use (the calumnies) as the basis of a legal case on which it desired and still desires to deport this legendary hero and send him to his execution.’”

—*Gazette*, 24 September 1994

Several members of the PQ government today were among those who rallied to defend de Bernonville:

“The pro-Bernonville campaign obtained the support of young Quebecers as well. Camille Laurin’s [the father of the PQ’s chauvinist language laws] name appears on a typewritten list of committee members in Rumilly’s papers....On April 19, 1950, *La Presse* published Laurin’s name in a list of 143 eminent Canadians who had sent a petition in defence of ‘Count’ de Bernonville to the federal minister of immigration, Walter Harris.

“On March 13, 1951, Denis Lazure, then president of the Université de Montréal student union and today a Parti Québécois MNA, personally approved and sent a student motion in favor of Bernonville to [Prime Minister] St. Laurent.”

—*Ibid.*

In August 1951 the Canadian federal government allowed de Bernonville to leave for Brazil to avoid deportation to France. In Brazil de Bernonville was assisted by the *Bruederschaft*, an organization which helped Nazis get out of Europe. De Bernonville is reported to have eventually met his fate at the hands of the *Bruederschaft*, and was:

“found strangled in his Rio de Janeiro apartment on April 27, 1972, with a gag in his mouth and his hands and feet bound. An autographed portrait of Marshall Pétain hung on the wall. Two weeks later, the *Diario Popular*, a Sao Paulo newspaper, suggested that Barbie was behind the murder since Bernonville threatened to reveal Nazi secrets.”

—*Ibid.*

De Bernonville’s friends in the Société St. Jean Baptiste and the Parti Québécois may have mourned his passing. We promise not to mourn theirs. In my days as a student activist at l’Université Laval in Quebec City *la Société St. Jean Baptiste* was jokingly referred to as “*la Société St. Jean Fasciste*.” The pro-fascist sentiments of *la Société* and the other xenophobes are generally ignored, denied or swept under the rug by pseudo-Trotskyist advocates of “consistent nationalism.”

Yet a look at the historic record demonstrates that the nationalists’ xenophobic attacks on immigrants (as well as the surviving remnants of the aboriginal peoples) are deeply rooted in the past. Robert Rumilly’s official history of the SSJB in Montreal, published in 1975, proudly pointed to the group’s role in a massive 1944 petition campaign in Quebec against wartime immigration, as having helped Québécois workers avoid “exploitation” by Jewish refugees! Today it is Asian immigrants, particularly Hong Kong Chinese, that are the targets, but the arguments against the presumed “enemies” of the “Old Stock” Québécois remain the same.

### The ‘Oppressed’ Can Do No Wrong

Pseudo-Trotskyist proponents of the supposed revolutionary character of Québécois nationalism naturally seek to buttress their position by making this dynamic historically retroactive. The LSO document quoted by Elliott mentions the defeat of a bourgeois democratic revolution in Quebec in 1837, but readers of *l’Égalité* might not be aware that this uprising was paralleled by a similar attempt in Ontario (Upper Canada). If the bourgeois revolutionaries of 1837 could unite in joint struggle against the British crown, why dismiss the possibility of joint class struggle between the Québécois and English-Canadian workers today?

The English-Canadian bourgeoisie, the inheritors of British colonial rule, have oppressed the Québécois nation for well over 200 years. Anti-Quebec chauvinism (today expressed as advocacy of “national unity”) has been a central pillar of bourgeois reaction since long before Confederation. Forging class unity across national lines in the Canadian state requires that the English-Canadian proletariat unconditionally uphold Quebec’s right to separation, and aggressively oppose every manifestation of discrimination against francophones.

For three decades there has been a very high level of common class struggle (usually sparked by the more militant Quebec workers). The bulk of Quebec workers in manufacturing and mining as well as government services belong to common unions with their English-Canadian counterparts. From the point of view of revolutionaries, this connection is a good thing. It is conceivable that at some

point in the future we may be obliged to concede that national antagonisms between workers in Quebec and English Canada require political separation in order to remove the constant tension and squabbling from the political agenda, as Lenin supported the separation of Norway from Sweden in 1905.

Whether or not Marxists advocate independence depends on how the struggle for international working-class unity can best be advanced—within one state or two. If relations become so poisoned that it is necessary to call for separation, we are perfectly prepared to do so, but any such development could only be viewed as a setback—not a revolutionary leap forward. Given the present lack of political class consciousness in the Quebec working class, and the deeply entrenched chauvinism in English Canada, the danger of a nationalist, as opposed to a *class*, solution is very real indeed.

Yet, for the moment, unless the *péquistes* gain assistance from the federalist camp in the form of an outpouring of chauvinist sentiment in English Canada, and/or renewed assaults by anglo-chauvinists on the meager gains acquired by francophones outside Quebec, it seems that the sovereignists will have difficulty winning a majority in their planned referendum on independence. At this time there is certainly no reason for Marxists to support the call for independence.

### Canadian Imperialism’s Left Defenders

Comrade Elliott’s advocacy of Quebec nationalism is not the only conceivable political deviation on the question. Some leftists in both Quebec and English Canada appear alarmed at the prospect that Quebec independence could result in the dismemberment of the remainder of the Canadian state. The Trotskyist League (TL), the Canadian branch of the Spartacist League/U.S., recently wrote that:

“Earlier in the summer Lucien Bouchard mused, in a private speech to the Chamber of Commerce in Ottawa that Western Canada could end up being annexed to the U.S. following Quebec secession from Confederation. Indeed, Quebec independence could well be a prelude to the dismemberment of the entire country. As working-class internationalists we of course have no interest in propping up the current artificial and oppressive Canadian capitalist state. But we recognize that the break-up of English Canada at this time could only strengthen the power of U.S. imperialism against the workers of North America and the world, and would oppose this as contrary to working-class interests.”

—*Spartacist Canada*, September/October 1994

We can agree that working-class internationalists “have no interest in propping up the current artificial and oppressive Canadian capitalist state” and moreover that they must support Quebec’s right to separate. But it hardly follows that in the event of Quebec separation Marxists should take up the banner of Canadian unity.

The TL argument recalls the classical centrist muddlings of the Austro-Marxists—lots of pseudo-radical phraseology, with a conclusion that negates the premise. In the mouth of Otto Bauer the argument might have run something like this:

“We of course—of course—have no interest in propping up the artificial and oppressive Austro-Hungarian empire. But we recognize that the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian empire could only strengthen the hand of rival, even more oppressive empires such as Czarist Russia or French or British colonialism, and jeop-

ardize the hard-won gains of the Austrian workers' movement. We therefore must oppose the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian empire as contrary to working-class interests."

We don't share the Robertsonites' anxiety over the prospect of Canada's breakup, nor, in the event of Quebec separation, will we be found in the camp of those attempting to prop up what's left of the imperialist Canadian state. At the same time we, needless to say, do not imagine some revolutionary dynamic unfolding from such a breakup.

### Knowing Friends From Enemies

Yet while there is no reason to champion the Anglo-Canadian junior imperialists against their vastly stronger American sibling, there is no basis for imagining that there is also some "revolutionary dynamic" inherent in Quebec nationalism. The Quebec bourgeoisie remains weaker than the English-Canadian capitalists, but this is a question of degree rather than quality. An independent Quebec would begin life as a minor imperialist power, a Norway, not a Mexico.

It is perhaps worth noting that the same revisionist "optimism" that sees an "objectively" revolutionary dynamic in Quebec's bourgeois nationalist movement also claimed to detect a "revolutionary" dynamic inherent in the reactionary destruction of the deformed and degenerated workers' states of the former Soviet bloc. The Soviet Union did not simply "disappear," as comrade Elliott so euphemistically put it. In August 1991 the "Committee for a Workers' International" joined Ernest Mandel's USec in heralding the triumph of Yeltsin and the imperialist-backed forces of counterrevolution arrayed behind the banner of "democracy" as a step forward. Yet the results have been disastrous—a resurgence of reactionary nationalism, precipitous falls in living standards, the collapse of production and social services and the immiseration of tens of millions of people.

The nationalism pushed by the Quebec labor bureaucracy has served to deflect class struggle. The struggle against the *république de banquiers* and toward the *république de travailleurs* must begin with a resolute struggle against nationalist illusions within the labor movement. The talk about conspiracies of Anglo-American capital is essentially a bogeyman with which to cow the Quebec labor movement by dredging up memories of past oppression, while obscuring present class oppression by Quebec capitalists under a torrent of nationalist demagoguery. It is quite evident who the major architects of Quebec independence are, and who the major beneficiaries of Parizeau's *république de banquiers* will be.

The relatively more combative Quebec workers can play a role of immense strategic importance in the North American revolution—but only if they are won to an internationalist perspective. An insurgent Québécois workers movement would not long retain power if the imperialists remained in the saddle in the rest of North America. The fate of the Quebec proletariat is ultimately dependent on the victory of socialist revolution across the North American continent. The future for the Québécois working class consequently lies in uniting with immigrant, Anglo-Canadian and American workers in struggle against their common capitalist oppressors, rather than identifying with their "own" rulers on linguistic and cultural grounds.

Comrade Elliott's desire to "try to lead the national movement by placing it under the flag of socialism" is not a short cut to social revolution, as he so fondly imagines, but, as the living experience of the Quebec labor movement for the past couple of decades demonstrates, the path to the subordination of the proletariat to the national bourgeoisie. The social emancipation of the Quebec proletariat begins with the recognition that the owners of Quebec Inc. are class enemies, not nationalist allies.

Marc D.  
for the IBT