

Trotskyist Bulletin No. 7:

# Marxism & the Quebec National Question

International Bolshevik Tendency

First published September 1999

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## Introduction

On 13 February 1999, the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) and the Trotskyist League, Canadian affiliate of the International Communist League (TL/ICL), held a public debate at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. We had for many years unsuccessfully sought to debate the Spartacist League (SL) and/or its affiliates. In the introduction to *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5, we commented:

“The SL/ICL leadership’s attitude toward us is profoundly contradictory. They have written more polemics against us than any other political tendency, yet we are the *only* leftist group that they refused to debate in public. They obviously feel that a full and free exchange might not be advantageous to them.”

The ICL leadership finally reversed its policy when the Brock Socialists, an unaffiliated campus group, offered to sponsor a public debate. The TL accepted, on condition that the topic be the issue of Quebec separation—a question which the TL had abruptly changed its long-held position on a few years earlier. We agreed to this condition, but at the debate many TL supporters tended to ignore Quebec and instead rattled off lists of unrelated accusations. This scatter-gun polemical technique is one that will be familiar to those acquainted with the contemporary Spartacist tendency.

This debate is likely to be of particular interest to people who believe (as we do) that the now thoroughly degenerate Spartacist League once represented an important link in the chain of revolutionary continuity after Trotsky. The issues raised are of critical importance to the development of a viable revolutionary movement in North America. Whatever one’s opinion on the history of the Spartacist tendency, the Quebec national question poses anew many of the problems Lenin and the Bolsheviks successfully addressed as part of their struggle to explode the Tsarist prisonhouse of nations.

The first item in this bulletin is a transcript of the debate at Brock, which has been posted on our website ([www.bolshevik.org](http://www.bolshevik.org)) since April. The second item is the ICL’s account of the debate, which appeared simultaneously in *Workers Vanguard* and *Spartacist Canada*. The third item is our own commentary (which initially appeared on our web page) on some of the issues posed. Finally, we have included a selection of articles on Quebec from *Spartacist Canada* and 1917.

—International Bolshevik Tendency, August 1999



# IBT–ICL Debate on the Quebec National Question

## Debate Transcript

*The following is a transcript of the 13 February debate at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, between the Trotskyist League (Canadian section of the International Communist League—TL/ICL) and the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT). We have reproduced the remarks of all speakers in the debate with only minor corrections for grammar and syntax.*

### Chair:

On behalf of the Brock Socialists I'd like to welcome you and thank you all for coming. The topic for tonight's debate is "The Quebec National Question and the Case for Socialism." The debate tonight will be conducted by speakers from the Trotskyist League and the International Bolshevik Tendency. From the TL we have Charles Galarneau and from the IBT we have Tom Riley....

### Tom Riley (IBT):

Thank you very much. It's been a long time, and we appreciate the fact that the Trotskyist League has agreed to debate with us.

When we set up the Trotskyist League in the mid-'70s (a few of us in this room were present and involved in that process) one of the first things that we had to develop was a Marxist analysis and a program on the question of Quebec. The existing Marxist groups had atrocious positions which pointed in different directions.

As Leninists, we began from the recognition that Quebec is a nation, and that all nations have the right to self-determination: that is, the right to separate and form their own state at any point when they determine that they wish to do so. As Lenin said, however, the right to self-determination is a bit like the right to divorce—you have a right to do it but it doesn't mean that you are required to do it; that is, to exercise that right at any given time. Nor are Marxists required to advocate the exercise of that right, whether it is getting divorced or setting up a separate nation-state.

For Leninists, what's important in determining our attitude on whether or not this right should be exercised (for Quebec or any other nation that is part of a multi-national state) is what will best advance the class struggle—that's the criterion we apply. So we are not opposed to independence for Quebec, any more than we are opposed to divorce for anyone in a marriage—but it's a question of what will accelerate the struggle for socialism. That's really the issue.

Certainly, at any time, if the people of Quebec indicate that they wish to establish their own nation-state, it is necessary for all Leninists to support that desire, and to defend the right of the Québécois to do that. And we certainly would.

The question that we are really debating tonight, and the

issue between us and the comrades of the TL, is whether or not Marxists should have consistently advocated that Quebec separate, and constitute a separate nation-state, since approximately the early 1960s. My understanding is that's when the comrades date it from—[a TL comrade] is shaking his head. Well, let's say from the time of the inception of the Trotskyist League, which would be the mid-1970s, I think I'm not mistaken there. I've found that the dates move around a bit in the documentation.

Now, in the 1960s and '70s, many Québécois feared that without independence they risked assimilation, that is, disappearance as a people. And this fear tended to fuel the desire for separation and for the establishment of a separate Quebec national entity. This sentiment has abated significantly, as is widely recognized, with the imposition in the late '70s of the Quebec language laws which have enshrined French as the dominant language and have significantly arrested the tendency toward assimilation and therefore tended to attenuate the fears of assimilation and remove it therefore as a pressing issue as it would otherwise have been.

So, as I say, the nub of the difference we are debating tonight is whether or not for the past 35 years, 25 years, or whatever it is, joint class struggle has been possible—or whether Quebec needs to separate before it is possible.

There is certainly no question that among the most militant sections of the Quebec working class nationalist sentiment is popular and has been popular during the period that we're talking about. But despite the fact that this nationalist sentiment has been popular, we have seen repeated instances of joint class struggle. I think this is extremely important.

The first article that *Spartacist Canada* ever wrote on Quebec appeared in December 1976, and in that article the observation was made that:

"Quebec workers notably spearheaded militant action by the *entire* Canadian proletariat against [Liberal prime minister Pierre] Trudeau's wage controls. Recent postal and railway strikes began on the initiative of Montreal locals of country-wide unions. With an independent Quebec, important links among workers of both North American nations such as international and cross-Canada unions might well be lost, thus retarding the struggle for proletarian power."

Now I think that was true in 1976, and I think that remains substantially true today. We should remember that when this was written, at the end of 1976, approximately a month earlier there had been a Canada-wide general strike that had been largely occasioned, largely initiated, from the pressure of the militant working class in Quebec and had spread to English Canada. There are a lot of people here who are too young to remember it, but it was a very important political event. It involved approximately a million people. It was much stronger in Quebec (where the working class is

more militant) than it was in English Canada, yet it was a very significant political action for the entire working class of this country. And participation tended to vary in different parts of English Canada depending on the level of consciousness.

But the significant thing is that there was this connection. This national struggle against wage controls, against the bourgeoisie's policy to attack the working class, began in Quebec and spread to English Canada. Now that's highly important. It was in fact the only national strike ever undertaken in North America—that is, the only national general strike. And it happened as a direct result of the influence of the Québécois workers on the English-Canadian working class. As a direct result.

Now, two decades later, the Trotskyist League comrades have decided that class unity along national lines, between English-Canadian workers and Québécois workers, is impossible, that it has been impossible and that it will be impossible until Quebec separates. How do they account for the 1976 general strike? They don't. They can't account for it. Perhaps Charles will, but so far they haven't in all their literature and all the discussions we've had on this question. All they can do is repeat over and over that unity among the workers of these two components of the working class is impossible.

And the 1976 national general strike was not an isolated episode. There's the pattern of class struggle in this country and, to a very considerable extent, the influence of the more militant Québécois workers accounts for why the level of unionization and the general level of working-class struggle is higher in English Canada than it is in the rest of English-speaking North America, that is, the United States.

The reason that there were "Days of Action" in response to [Ontario Tory premier Mike] Harris' attacks on the working class—one of which took place here in St. Catharines, one of which shut down the major financial center of Canada (Toronto), and [others] took place around Ontario—had a lot to do with the fact that there was this national general strike in 1976. The reality and the possibility of that kind of action was known and understood by English-Canadian workers—by workers in Ontario—because they had personally participated in a similar action 20 years earlier. That's highly important. And that action, as I say, came as a result of the initiative of the Québécois working class.

These demonstrations, these [Ontario] "Days of Action," limited as they are, partial as they are, are very significant actions by the working class, judged against the standard of the current level of struggle of the North American working class. And they are directly as a result of the influence (of the militancy) of the Québécois working class in English Canada. That's a connection that you shouldn't want to lose, comrades.

What we're talking about in this debate therefore is very concrete. It is not an abstract question, it's a historical question.

The case of the postal workers (some people in this room have some considerable experience with that union—it's a union with roots in both nations in Canada, a history as the most combative union in the Canadian labor movement) illustrates the importance of the connection between English-Canadian workers and Québécois workers in terms of promoting the class struggle.

Until 1965 (when the postal workers staged a massive, illegal national strike) they were regarded as rather tame, rather passive, civil servants. There was a law that prohibited them from ever going on strike because they were an "essential service." What happened in that strike, as recalled by Joe Davidson, who was later the CUPW [Canadian Union of Postal Workers] president, in his memoirs—he recalled the 1965 strike, which was the decisive strike, where they

smashed the anti-labor legislation, won the right to strike—he recalled it like this, he said: "The initiative came, as has often been the case since, from Montreal."

And in fact that's what happened. The Montreal unit of the postal workers said to their passive, national, Anglo-dominated leadership: Hey, we can't stand this any more, we're going to go on strike. And the leadership as usual said: Oh you can't go on strike, don't you know? There's a law, that'd be illegal, we can't do that. And the Montreal local said: We don't care about the law, we've had it up to here—we're going to go on strike. And they set a date. And everybody watched—it was well known, well reported, heavily watched in the working class.

When the date came, Montreal walked. Postal services were shut down in Montreal. And everyone waited to see what would happen. And you know what happened? Toronto went out, Hamilton went out, Vancouver went out, Winnipeg went out. And before long, Chatham and Tiverton and Moose Jaw and everywhere else went out. And the government had a little more on their plate than they wanted to handle. So they changed the law. They said: Oh, that was a mistake, from now on postal workers can go on strike.

The postal workers emerged, for the next several decades, as the vanguard of militant struggle throughout Canada, particularly in English Canada. They were a union that the Trotskyist League recruited from—a number of people here have experience—they were a union which the [Toronto] *Globe and Mail* regarded as being run by and controlled by Marxists. It was a little overblown, some of the hyperbole, but they had a reputation for militant struggle which was well-deserved. And the connection is extremely important.

Now, what's very important in this—I mean, this is a living example of the vanguard role played by the Québécois workers and the influence that it had in English Canada. And then, beyond that, the English-Canadian postal workers began to have an influence on other workers in their localities who observed that they had pretty vigorous picket lines, that they weren't afraid to shut the plant down, etc. And that contributed significantly to the rising levels of class struggle in the late '60s.

What's important to think about in this connection is that this initiative by the Montreal postal workers touched off solidarity actions throughout English Canada. But it never touched off solidarity actions among postal workers in Seattle, or in Buffalo, or in Chicago, or in New York. And there's a reason for that—and the reason is the border. Because it was a separate state, because they weren't in the same union, because they didn't have the same employer, it didn't have a significant effect. And that connection is important.

In 1972 Quebec public sector workers launched a general strike that came as close to a mass insurrection as anything that has ever happened to date in North America. A very important episode in the class struggle. And yet there was no article in [the Spartacist League's] *Workers Vanguard*. Why not? Not because *Workers Vanguard* was indifferent to class struggle; not because *Workers Vanguard* was prejudiced against Québécois workers; not because *Workers Vanguard* was Anglo-chauvinist, or anything else. It's because it was taking place on the other side of the border, it didn't have a lot of impact in a different country—it wasn't on the national news, it was difficult to find out about. The *New York Times* was able to keep the coverage out.

They could not ignore it in Toronto though. The *Globe and Mail* had to cover it. They covered it in the Vancouver papers and the Regina papers, and every Canadian left group knew about it and paid attention to it and had an opinion on it one way or the other. Once again, there is a certain reality to being in a common state which gives struggles in one part of



that state an impact in other parts that they would not have otherwise.

The influence of the more militant Québécois workers on English-Canadian workers has not been confined to the post office either. In 1975 the head of the CLC [Canadian Labour Congress] came up with a plan called “tri-partism” where the government, the employers and the unions all sit down and work out things for their mutual benefit. It’s kind of organized class-collaborationism. And a lot of bureaucrats thought that sort of sounded good. Trudeau was certainly willing to fool around with it. But the Quebec labor movement smelled a rat immediately. They immediately objected to it and made a lot of telling points about why this wasn’t a good idea and why anyone who got in on this was a sucker, and very soon the more militant sectors of the English-Canadian working class began to mobilize around that. Their leaders then started to get cold feet, and “tri-partism” effectively fell through. And that was quite directly as a result of the influence that the Québécois workers had.

In the rail unions there is also a history of common struggle between English-Canadian and Quebec workers. The rail unions went on strike in 1950—they were legislated back to work. Again in 1966 they were legislated back to work. In 1973 they went out again and the first article that *Workers Vanguard* ever wrote about Canada, which appeared in the 14 September 1973 issue, reported how “French-Canadian” workers had been among the leading elements in the strike. And on the front page of *Workers Vanguard* they had a picture of workers storming Parliament Hill, one of whom is carrying a sign in French, (actually a sign advertising the NDP [Canada’s social-democratic New Democratic Party] as it happened—he would be an unusual element).

But this was a very important political strike. There was considerable debate within the labor movement as to whether or not they should defy the government. And again, the Quebec section of the labor movement was in favor of defying the government. It was a strike that took place across Canada, was supported enthusiastically and participated in by workers of both nations. Very important. And it was, as I say, one of a series. There wasn’t a split in the ranks of those workers along national lines, just as there weren’t splits along national lines among the postal workers of any significance.

The railworkers’ strike was stabbed in the back by the labor bureaucrats, it was stabbed in the back by the NDP who supported the legislation at a critical stage, but it was not crippled by nationalist poison. It wasn’t crippled by divisions between Anglo-Canadian and Québécois workers.

In 1995, just a few years ago, there was another national rail strike. There was another [piece of] government legislation brought down to smash that strike and send those workers back to work and again there was no split along national lines. Again the trade union bureaucracy played a perfidious role, and again the NDP voted to stab the strike in the back. But there was not a significant division between Québécois and English-Canadian workers in that national strike either.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the general level of class struggle has been lower, but the pattern has remained. The pattern, that is, of unity across the national divide in the working class, in the important struggles. In 1981, the year that [Quebec premier] René Lévesque won his second mandate for the PQ [Quebec separatist Parti Québécois], the year that Trudeau repatriated the constitution without Quebec’s consent, mortgage rates started to hit 22 percent, a lot of people started to lose their houses. And Trudeau said: Oh I know, we can fix this—we’ll bring in wage controls again. And a lot of the unions, including this time some of the Anglo-Canadian dominated unions like CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees], said: If you do that we’re going to have a general

strike and this time it is going to be a real one.

Well, of course that was sort of huff and puff, but there was a lot of pressure at the base of the labor movement against wage controls. It made the government think twice and, on the part of the bureaucracy, they were kind of worried what was going to happen to all this restiveness. And again, as usual, the Québécois workers were about twice as involved and twice as militant. But this was a bi-national event. So the labor bureaucracy called a big demonstration in Ottawa for November 21st and 100,000 workers turned out, the biggest demonstration ever in Ottawa—an important index of the desire to struggle and the willingness to struggle, should the workers be attacked by wage controls again. And the workers there carried banners in English and in French, chanted and sang in English and in French. It was a powerful mobilization from both sides of the national divide. And this, at a point where there was significant tension: as I said, the year that the constitution (so-called) was forced on Quebec.

Ten years after this, in 1991, [Tory prime minister Brian] Mulroney decided he was going to whack the tame civil servants’ union—PSAC [Public Service Alliance of Canada] and he got a huge surprise when 10,000s of PSAC members (sparked, as usual, by the more militant Québécois sector) mobilized, exploded in anger, punched through the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] lines, ran up and besieged parliament. It was a completely unprecedented and unanticipated response to what Mulroney thought would just be a bit of routine union-bashing.

At the time *Spartacist Canada* [Winter 1992–3] reported that:

“The thousands of PSAC unionists, English-Canadian, Québécois and immigrant alike, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder on mass pickets in Ottawa/Hull during last year’s government workers strike showed the way toward common struggle against a common enemy.”

Indeed they did. *Spartacist Canada* had it exactly right again. This strike, we should remember too, took place one year after the Meech Lake [formal recognition of Quebec as a “distinct society”] rejection. It took place at the point, certainly one of the points, of the highest level of national polarization. And yet it was supported by both components of the working class. It was not crippled, it was not divided by national antagonism, it was not doomed by the poison of national hostility. It was doomed by the betrayal of the bureaucracy, they were stabbed in the back.

Today *Spartacist Canada* refers to the PSAC strike as an “episodic” event—an “episode”: there have been “episodes” where there is joint class struggle. I’m saying they weren’t “episodes”—it’s characteristic. Bourgeois sociologists dismiss any upsurge of working class struggle as an “episode.” But, let’s hear, what are the “episodes” on the other side? I’ll be anxious to hear what the evidence is. I don’t think there is any.

Those connections that exist, that have been forged over years, through many struggles, between the workers of English Canada and the Québécois working class—they’re worth something. At many union conventions the Quebec delegates constitute an automatic bloc of votes in favor of things like sending aid to Chiapas, or to Cuba, or in favor of abortion rights, or in favor of equality for gays and lesbians. And this has inevitably exerted considerable influence on the attitudes of sections of the English-Canadian working class, and it goes a long way to explaining why Canadian labor bureaucrats find it necessary to strike a more left-wing pose than American labor bureaucrats.

There is a difference, and the difference—more than anything else—is the connection with the Québécois workers. The TL simply can’t provide any serious account of the les-

sons of the social struggles of the past 30 years and instead what we hear is a mantra, over and over, that separation is necessary as a first step before there is any possibility of successful class struggle.

In the *Spartacist* No. 52 [reprinted from *Spartacist Canada* September/October 1995]: “successful proletarian struggle demands separation into two independent nation-states.” You can’t have “successful proletarian struggle” before you have separation. In the same article they say:

“The recognition by the workers of each nation that their respective capitalist rulers—not each other—are the enemy can come only through an independent Quebec.”

It can “only” come—the workers can “only” see that their boss is their enemy—after Quebec’s independent. That’s what the comrades are telling us.

Another example is: “the only road to bringing to the fore the real social contradictions” in Canada is through Quebec separation. That’s also a quote from *Spartacist Canada* [September/October 1995].

In the Winter 1997/98 issue of *Spartacist Canada* we read that independence is:

“the means to cut through the barrier which sets worker against worker along national lines, thereby laying a basis for bringing the decisive class questions to the fore.”

“Laying a basis”—there’s no “basis” to bring the decisive class questions to the fore until we have separation. The “basis” doesn’t exist, according to the *Spartacist Canada*. Wrong! Wrong, comrades. You can’t explain how there has been as much class struggle as there has been if there is no “basis” for it—if the “basis” doesn’t exist. The basis does exist.

Was there a “basis” in 1978 when CUPW defied the government for five days, until they were stabbed in the back by the CLC? What about Harris’ Ontario—is there a “basis” for class struggle? Contrary to what the comrades of the TL tell us, there is, and there has been, a basis for successful class struggle in Canada for the past historic period.

The problem, comrades, is not that we haven’t had Quebec separation; the problem is the character of the leadership of the workers’ movement. The problem is the crisis of proletarian leadership. It may very well be that the day will come, and it may come next week, that separation is necessary to push forward class struggle. But to assert that through the 1960s, the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s there has been no basis for joint struggle—it just flies in the face of the entire history of this country.

To claim also that proletarian struggle cannot be successful until Quebec is independent implies a kind of two-stage model of social revolution: first we get Quebec independence, then we can have successful proletarian struggle. This two-stage model is characteristic of every kind of revisionist, from Mensheviks to Stalinists. And the logic (if you were to take it to its logical extent) of this position is that you really should want to vote for the PQ because the PQ is going to bring independence if anyone—that’s the logic of it, that’s a logical corollary. I’m not saying the Trotskyist League is advocating that, I know they’re not, but that’s the logic of this stageist argument which you are making in your newspaper repeatedly.

Another thing you might think about is, what are the implications of this kind of model if we look at other societies? Like in the United States, for instance—the division between white workers and black workers is at least as serious as the division between anglo- and francophone workers here. What’s the conclusion to be drawn there? Is class struggle impossible? Or does it only become possible after black workers are somehow separated from white workers? No, it’s very pessimistic, it’s very objectivist and it’s a very false model that

you comrades have developed.

It struck me in reading the Trotskyist League literature on this question that they’re a little vague when exactly it was necessary to call for separation. Maybe we will get a little clarity on that, but at different points it seems to me that they suggest 1960, 1965, 1970, 1975. I think that reason that they lack precision is because their position is not derived from the concrete analysis of the developments in the workers movement, but rather from a sudden change of mind by their leader who is resident in California and doesn’t actually know very much about the question at all, as is quite evident from his contributions to the bulletin that these comrades have done us the favor of publishing.

You don’t have to take my word for it—the TL has published a bulletin of their deliberations [“On the Quebec National Question”]. Anyone can read it and draw their own conclusions. But I think that it is quite a revealing document about the way their organization works, and I think that anyone with a modicum of political sophistication, who is able to read between the lines, will see pretty clearly how things work in the ICL [International Communist League, formerly the international Spartacist tendency] these days.

It’s rather depressing reading in many ways, or amusing, depending on how important you consider the Trotskyist League to be. Comrade Oliver Stephens, in the March 1996 issue of *Spartacist Canada*, made a contribution that was considered valuable enough to be reprinted without comment or criticism. He talked about the national question and his article ends (part one of his article ends) with a rather peculiar quote. I think to understand it you have to appreciate that while Oliver does not have a Scottish background, Comrade Robertson [founder/leader of the Spartacist tendency] does. Oliver’s quote is this:

“So the concept of a nation, as we know it in the latter 20th century, is historically a recent development. This of course has not prevented various nationalists from inventing a glorious ‘history’ for their own particular nation. Most of this is nonsense, but the Scots may be an exception to the rule. In 1320 the Scottish lords petitioned the Pope—in writing, quite a novelty at the time!—for succor against the predations of the English king. In their ‘Declaration of Arbroath’ they noted that:

“...we find that among other famous nations our own, the Scots, has been graced with widespread renown. They journeyed from Greater Scythia by way of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Pillars of Hercules, and dwelt for a long course of time in Spain among the most savage tribes, but nowhere could they be subdued by any race, however barbarous. Thence they came, twelve hundred years after the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, to their home in the west where they still live today....In their kingdom there have reigned one hundred and thirteen kings of their own royal stock, the line unbroken by a single foreigner.”

Now, some of you may not know that the house of Robertson was indeed one of the royal houses of Scotland. I personally think that has something to do with the fact that was considered to be significant and important and included in the document. I don’t want to embarrass or put the comrades on the spot, but I would be interested in having them explain exactly what that was supposed to have meant in their newspaper.

I think that the comrades of the Trotskyist League have renounced the position which was one of the very important founding positions of our organization in this country. I think that their reversal on Quebec is a part of a larger revisionist pattern that at bottom reflects a loss of confidence in the power of the Trotskyist program, and even the feasibility of

forging socialist consciousness in the working class and they increasingly exhibit an appetite to look to what they take to be more “real” forces—from Stalinist bureaucrats like Yuri Andropov, or [Gregor] Gysi [head of the ruling Stalinist party during the liquidation of the East German workers’ state in 1990] or whoever, to the forces of Québécois nationalism.

We launched [the forerunner to] the International Bolshevik Tendency 16 years ago to preserve and advance the historic program of Trotskyism which the Spartacist tendency and James Robertson, its historic leader, had long championed. We remain committed to that struggle and, as a part of that struggle, to defend the position on Quebec developed by the TL over 20 years ago, against the pessimistic, impressionistic and revisionist policy which they have recently embraced.

### Charles Galarneau (TL/ICL):

Before addressing the question of Quebec, I have one opening remark. The only reason we have agreed to engage in tonight’s debate is because it was requested by a third party, the Brock Socialists, who have expressed an interest in Trotskyist politics. Otherwise, we would have no interest in debating the Bolshevik Tendency.

One can judge most organizations on the left pretty accurately by what they say in their press and in interventions, but this is not entirely the case with the IBT. It was founded by people who individually quit our organization almost 20 years ago, and spent the next decade and more pursuing a hostile obsession with us. They are a peculiar and dubious outfit. While at times they present a counterfeit version of our positions, they simultaneously insinuate themselves in places and among forces which are aimed at doing us harm.

About a decade ago, these embittered ex-members went and found the most revolting anti-Spartacist on the face of the earth to be their supreme leader. The leader of the International Bolshevik Tendency, Bill Logan, is a vicious sociopath who was expelled from our organization twenty years ago for gross crimes against communist morality and elementary human decency. This is an individual who finds personal gratification in the overtly sadistic exercise of power over others, especially women—and like attracts like.

Two weeks ago, a former leading member and longtime supporter of the IBT, Ian Donovan, staged a vicious physical attack on an Irish woman comrade of ours at a London demonstration commemorating the Bloody Sunday massacre in Northern Ireland. So, okay, Donovan recently broke with the IBT, but he’s straight out of their culture medium. Several left organizations in Britain immediately protested this vicious assault: but not Ian Donovan’s friends in the IBT.

But given that the Brock Socialists have asked us to debate the BT, the question of Quebec independence is an appropriate topic.

First of all, it is central to revolutionary struggle in this country, and second, the BT’s overtly Anglo-chauvinist line exposes their opportunist positions and social-democratic appetites—in other words, it exemplifies why the BT has nothing to do with the struggle for a Leninist party acting as a tribune for all the oppressed.

We in the Trotskyist League call for Quebec independence to help clear the way for united struggle by the working class against capitalism. Chauvinism and nationalism have deeply poisoned the class struggle in both English Canada and Quebec, binding English-speaking and French-speaking workers to their capitalist enemies. This is caused by the continued existence of two separate and increasingly divergent nations, one oppressing the other, within the same bourgeois state structure.

Just look at the Ottawa parliament. In the last two elections, the opposition benches have been filled by the ultra Anglo-chauvinist Reform Party on the one side, and the indépendantiste Bloc Québécois on the other. Large sections of the English-Canadian working class fell for Preston Manning’s unvarnished chauvinism as the alternative to the discredited pro-capitalist NDP, which itself pushes anti-Quebec bigotry, notably in the West. And this chauvinism gives the Quebec nationalists all the ammunition they need to keep the Québécois workers attached to their coat-tails.

First and foremost, we fight against Maple Leaf chauvinism in the English-Canadian working class. We believe with Lenin that, “a proletariat that tolerates the slightest coercion of other nations by its ‘own’ nation, cannot be a socialist proletariat.” At the same time, calling for independence helps combat nationalism in Quebec, giving us a hearing to win Quebec workers away from their pro-PQ misleaders.

But the Bolshevik Tendency opposes Quebec independence. They called on Quebec workers to vote “No” in the 1995 sovereignty referendum. Aside from the notoriously Canadian-nationalist Communist Party, they were the only left group to join the “No” campaign against Quebec independence. The BT was in a direct bloc with the English-Canadian ruling class and their agents in the workers’ movement, the NDP.

And the big-time Anglo-chauvinists knew they’d found a soul-mate. They invited the Bolshevik Tendency to their big federalist, national unity parade in Montreal just before the referendum. The BT’s call to vote “No” was a gross capitulation to the Anglo rulers—the federalists knew it, and the BT’s only Quebec member quit over it. Here is what he told his comrades at the time:

“I believe the ‘no’ perspective advocated by the IBT was a misguided, politically damaging and unfortunate position for a revolutionary organization to defend, placing you in a de facto bloc with the Canadian bourgeoisie.”

In truth, the BT has never been any sort of revolutionary organization. Their founding members quit our party some two decades ago under the pressure of Cold War anti-Sovietism. At a time when the imperialist rulers sharply escalated their war drive against the Soviet Union, the future BTers fled from our sharp-edged defense of the deformed and degenerated workers’ states.

The Russian Revolution has long been the dividing line between revolutionaries and all kinds of reformists and other petit-bourgeois dilettantes. All those who have gone over on this question reflect the pressures of their own imperialist rulers, and thus actively capitulate to the bourgeoisie on the home front as well.

The BT’s chauvinist line on Quebec obeys this logic. So it is at the same time slimy, false, and irresponsible for them to cite us as the authors of their disgusting position. They claim that their “No” vote and the false arguments they use to justify this, were just upholding the historic position of the Trotskyist League. This is laughable. Our so-called historic position was always for the right of Quebec to self-determination, which absolutely excluded any bloc with the Anglo bourgeoisie to keep Quebec down.

But the real point is that we fought for defense of Quebec’s national rights. *Spartacist Canada* has had dozens of articles on this subject, much before 1976, at least a year before that. We have intervened within the English-Canadian workers’ movement and the trade unions against the Anglo-chauvinism of the labor tops and the NDP. In Quebec, we distributed propaganda in both languages which sought to break the hold of Québécois nationalism within the proletariat.

So now I’ll give you a basic Marxist proposition: you

know the world only to the extent that you intervene to change it. On the streets, in the factories—not in some library or in your head. So, we intervened and we learned. And when the question came to a head once again before the ‘95 referendum, based on all these years of work, we stopped and we thought. We reassessed our position in the fashion of Leninists, and we realized we had been wrong. We figured out—a little late, but in time—that had we not gone over to the advocacy of Quebec independence, it would have called into question our existence as a revolutionary organization in this country. I encourage everyone here to read our bulletin, “On the National Question in Quebec,” which details not only how we came to change our line to advocacy of Quebec independence, but how a truly Leninist organization arrives at a correct political line.

But what about the BT? Did they intervene? No, not for years. In the first ten years of their existence in this country from 1982 to 1992, these guys wrote exactly one sentence on Quebec—and man, did we have to look for it. When the BT finally did put out a piece of propaganda on Quebec, it was a common statement on the 1992 Charlottetown referendum with Maoist groups. It didn’t so much as mention Quebec’s right to self-determination. So much for upholding our historic position.

Instead we see here the abyss between revolutionary Marxism on the national question and the views of the BT. In 1992 to make their cosy coalition with the Maoists, the BT dropped the right of self-determination. But in 1995, in the referendum, they just opposed independence outright. In their pre-referendum leaflet [1917 No. 17], they say:

“Our advice 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.”

So the BT worries about an independent Quebec bourgeoisie. But what about the already well established political representatives of the Anglo-Canadian bourgeoisie, whose federal state is maintained by the forcible subjugation of Quebec? Here, the Bolshevik Tendency openly fights for the status quo. And they justify this with arguments exactly parallel to those of the Anglo-chauvinist labor bureaucracy.

The BT claims it’s not necessary to call for independence because the workers of Quebec and English Canada are not decisively divided. Solidarity Forever—blah, blah, blah. They sound like a CLC press release.

The BT say in their occasional journal that, “the pattern of class struggle since the 1950s has largely been one of joint struggle.” And Tom said so much tonight. In the same vein, they state that, “The working class of Quebec is the best organized and most militant in North America.” Notice that the BT puts this in the present tense. This used to be the case, but not any more. And you want to know why? Because the militancy of Quebec labor was channelled into support for bourgeois nationalism. And this was in direct reaction to the virulent chauvinism of the NDP and the CLC bureaucrats.

The once-militant Quebec proletariat was driven into the arms of their own nationalist exploiters, not least because of the tirades for Canadian unity coming out of the CLC and the NDP. This is what led to the first election of the Parti Québécois in 1976, and the subsequent sharp decline in the combativity of Quebec labor. But in the BT’s fantasy world, all this never happened. Because they’re infused with the same vicious Anglo-chauvinism pushed by the NDP and the labor bureaucrats.

I’ll give you a very important example of what I mean. The semi-insurrectionary Quebec general strike of 1972 was isolated and betrayed by the chauvinist CLC and NDP tops. At

the very height of the general strike, the CLC passed a resolution denouncing “those elements in any part of Canada which advocate the destruction of Confederation.” Then NDP leader David Lewis supported the jailing of Quebec labor leaders, yet the BT scoffs at any suggestion of Anglo-chauvinism on the part of the social democrats. In their only major article on Quebec in 1917 No. 17 they simply say that David 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.”

The BT puts an equals sign between the NDP’s betrayal of a near-insurrectionary general strike in Quebec and the expulsion of the left-reformist Waffle. And this is the only time they even mention the NDP in their article. To hear 1917 tell it, you would not know that the social-democrats foment anti-Quebec chauvinism at all. Well, anyone who watches the news knows that the likes of Bob Rae, Roy Romanow and Glen Clark [NDP provincial premiers] have been willing, aggressive point men for the “national unity” crusade—just as David Lewis was 25 years ago.

For our part, we fight to build a Leninist party of the proletariat, which means breaking the working class base from the NDP social-democrats. That means we expose and fight against these chauvinist misleaders. Now you can draw a straight line from the betrayal of the general strike to the rise of the bourgeois nationalist PQ. Since then, just about every union in Quebec has come out for sovereignty. Only one of its union federations (and there are three or four big ones) the FTQ [Quebec Federation of Labour—to which half the unionists in Quebec are affiliated], has any kind of links with English-Canadian labor, and even they almost walked out in a nationalist split in the early ‘90s.

Significantly, BT’s evidence for united class struggle starts in the 1960s with the rise of the postal union and goes up to 1976. That’s 23 years ago. After that, they cite only one example in the article, the 1991 federal civil servants strike. Okay, it is a good thing that there was some united struggle by English-Canadian and Quebec workers then, and we could cite another couple of examples of this happening. But for anyone who wants to see, it is clear that beginning in the mid-1970s, chauvinism and nationalism have deeply polarized this country, including the working class.

This was also the period when the rising Quebec bourgeoisie established its restrictive language laws underlining that there would be no assimilation into English Canada, but that they would build their own separate society. Now the BT even admits that, “labor has been on the defensive in recent years.” But what has conditioned this but the misleadership of the labor movement which ties the working class to the capitalist system? And a key mechanism for this is English-Canadian chauvinism, which has in turn pushed Quebec workers deeper into the arms of the bourgeois nationalists.

Now perhaps the most anti-Leninist and anti-Marxist argument that the BT raises against our call for independence is that it amounts to a two-stage theory of social liberation. They say, “the clear implication is that the working class cannot develop class consciousness until and unless Quebec separates.”

Well, Karl Marx said a long time ago that a nation which oppresses another cannot itself be free. Here’s what Marx wrote about the Irish national question,

“It is in the direct and absolute interest of the English working class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland....The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland.”

Perhaps the BT will now attack Marx as a proponent of

two-stage revolution. In fact, the position of the BT is a straight capitulation to national chauvinism. Our position, like Marx's, is premised on opening the road to proletarian revolution by breaking the hold of chauvinism on the working class.

On this score, it's worth noting that the BT's affiliates in England have spent the last several years calling for electoral support to a group known as the Socialist Party, which is notorious for supporting the occupation of Northern Ireland by British troops. Not once has the English BT polemicized against this thoroughly pro-imperialist stance of this outfit on Ireland.

In fact, on every national terrain where they exist, the BT is a walking capitulation to their "own" capitalist rulers. As in Canada over Quebec, and in England over Ireland, so too in the United States over the black question, the forcible suppression of the majority of the black population at the bottom of American society. Our organization has long emphasized that the fight for black freedom is central to the fight for socialist revolution in the U.S.

But from their very origins, the BT has sneered at our fight for the working class to actively champion black freedom. When we organized a 5,000-strong labor/black mobilization which stopped the Ku Klux Klan in Washington in 1982, the BT spat on this work. One of their members called it "ghetto work." The BT accused us of "abandoning trade union work." What can this mean, except that the BT sees the working class as separate from and counterposed to the black plebeian masses—exactly the view of the labor bureaucracy. In fact, our Washington mobilization brought together in microcosm the forces for American proletarian revolution—black and red. Labor, with its core centrality of black workers, bringing its power to bear in defense of the ghetto masses, who were also mobilized, all under communist leadership.

The BT's Anglo-chauvinist position on Quebec is perfectly consistent with their political origins in the early 1980s, in a series of cowardly flinches over the defense of the Soviet bureaucratically degenerated workers' state. In the Cold War 1980s, our organization put hard and up front our unconditional defense of the deformed and degenerated workers' states against counter-revolution, even as we continued to politically oppose the Stalinist bureaucracies and fight for proletarian political revolution.

For example, when the Soviet Army intervened against the CIA-backed Islamic cut-throats in Afghanistan in late 1979, we said, "Hail the Red Army in Afghanistan," calling to "Extend social gains of the October Revolution to the Afghan peoples." The social-democrats and pseudo-leftists, who are howling with the imperialist wolves against the Soviet Union, hated our slogan. At the time, we wrote that if the ET, (that's the External Tendency—the BT's precursors) were more honest, they would admit that they hated it too.

Well, it took them a few years, but they finally did admit that yes, they hated it, arguing that it meant we were putting faith in the Stalinists. No. First of all, we were simply expressing our unconditional defense of the Soviet degenerated workers' state against capitalism. And we also recognized that the deformed expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as represented by the Soviet Army, was the only force capable of bringing some measure of liberation, especially to women, in Afghanistan.

The BT is an organization which congealed in reaction to the heat of imperialist Cold War II. From this original capitulation to their own ruling classes, it was a short step down a slippery slope to embracing the chauvinism of the bourgeoisies from Canada to Britain and beyond. Far from a fight to build a revolutionary party, the BT at best reflects the views of the petit-bourgeois intellectual fringe milieus in which they live.

We in the TL however fight to build a revolutionary, proletarian and internationalist vanguard party. Quebec independence is necessary to further class consciousness among workers in this country. That is why this call lies at the heart of our struggle to build the vanguard party, which, in Lenin's words, will be a tribune of the people.

#### P. (IBT):

I think an important test to determine whether or not an organization can carry forward the ideas of social revolution, is its ability to tell the truth to the masses. This is an elementary concept and you will not get anywhere through petty deceptions, through all kinds of tricks in your literature. And unfortunately we're seeing a fairly grotesque display by the Trotskyist League tonight, where they think they can use these petty deceptions and petty lies in order to advance their political agenda. And I would submit to the people who are not familiar with the politics of both groups to investigate the literature of both groups in order to determine where the truth lies.

I would draw your attention to three issues especially raised by Charles tonight, and these were just taken at random. There were plenty of them but here are three that struck me as extremely outrageous.

First of all, he started off his presentation by saying that a "BT hanger-on," Ian Donovan, attacked a member of the Spartacist Group Britain in England.

a) He is not a BT hanger-on. He has left our tendency for more than a year. In fact he is also a former member of the Spartacist League/Britain, which Charles forgot to point out. And the fact is that we denounced the attack. We defend any leftist who is subjected to violence in the workers' movement and we would offer defense in the event of an attack. In fact, at the site, we denounced the attack, and indicated that to the Spartacist League/Britain. You can take my word, but it will be in print. But the fact is this is a tradition we've always upheld and I challenge anybody in this room to show otherwise.

b) On the question of "Hail Red Army": you would hardly know from listening to Charles' presentation that our position on Afghanistan was "Victory to the Soviet Army in Afghanistan." Our tendency believed it would have been to the advantage of the oppressed people in Afghanistan if the Soviet Army had won in Afghanistan. There was an important victory to be won against the *mujahedin* who wished to impose the veil and the bride price on women. And we think there was a side to be taken. But was that indicated at all in Charles' presentation? Not at all, it's just pure slander.

c) Do we spit on anti-fascist mobilizations? This is perhaps the most outrageous. There have been two major united-front demonstrations in Toronto to save the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal. We've been in a united-front committee with the comrades of the Trotskyist League to build demonstrations to defend Mumia's life. You wouldn't hear any of that from this group. But also we have in fact participated in anti-fascist actions organized by the PDC [Partisan Defense Committee—ICL's legal defense arm], demonstrations against Nazis, and they know that.

#### Ja. (TL/ICL):

Our position is actually quite straightforward. We advocate Quebec independence because the national divisions in this country where the Québécois are oppressed under an Anglo-dominated state have poisoned any perspective for anti-capitalist class struggle. This is a fact and anybody who seeks to make a revolutionary intervention into the labor movement knows this. But the BT does not know this. They

refuse to accept this and I note that all of the examples they provided end around 1976, precisely at the time when all the national divisions began to be intensified.

Since you brought it up, I just want to talk just a little bit about CUPW, which happens to be my union. Back in the 1960s it was indeed quite militant but if you look at CUPW today it's been paralyzed by internal faction fighting and divisions. And the national divisions have played a part in this. The position of the English-Canadian bureaucrats is to vote NDP, but the NDP has been leading the anti-Québécois bashing, especially in the West. And if you look at the Québécois workers, what they've been fighting for is for independence, and so they vote for the PQ and the BQ [Bloc Québécois—Quebec separatist party in federal parliament]. In the last couple of years the Quebec bureaucrats have been fighting for financial independence in the union. And just recently if you look at the web site you will see that in the French translation of CUPW the word “Canadian” has been dropped.

So what the real story is, is that by the mid-1970s national chauvinism had taken a decisive hold on Québécois workers. And this is thanks to the betrayals of the chauvinist English-Canadian labor bureaucrats in knifing the 1972 general strike. Back at the CLC Convention in 1972, there was a demand for the Congress and all its affiliates to oppose the elements who were against Confederation, and also any attempts to decrease the federal powers. At the same congress, [NDP leader] David Lewis was on the front podium cheering on the jailing of the Common Front leaders. Since the 1972 sellouts what we've seen is a clear line that can be drawn, where the rise of the national division has begun. But the BT has been denying this reality.

You've got to ask yourself—why are they doing this? It is all the better to capitulate. If you think about it, with their line, divide), if the workers were united in class struggle then you can be against independence and you can tell the workers to vote “No.” But what does this really mean? It means that you are in the camp of the Anglo chauvinists. It also means that you have such a right-wing political position that you get a personal invite to the unity rally called by Ottawa and Quebec big business. And this is not some sort of mistaken analysis, but a straight capitulation to the bourgeoisie.

## J. (IBT):

I thought it was interesting that comrade Charles used the word “reassessing” in describing what caused the TL to shift its position on independence for Quebec, into advocating it. Because there's a lot of ways that we can reassess something, and having recently joined the IBT one of the things that was very important for me to do was to go back and look at the history of revolutionary continuity. And to look at the differences that had emerged between the BT and the TL, to see who was actually historically standing by those original positions, and what I really thought of those original positions, and if I agreed with them.

Marx and Engels in a sense were “reassessing” the socialist movement that pre-existed in that day and that led them to develop and extend the theory that we know as Marxism today. Lenin was making a “reassessment” when he formed the Third International, based on the collapse of the Second International. But there's another way we can talk about something being a “reassessment,” and I think it becomes a codeword for something else, which is a capitulation or a degeneration. Because one could argue in the history of our movement, the Fourth International, that the Pabloists were reassessing the situation when, in the mid-1950s, they said

that we couldn't build a vanguard party at this time, that wasn't possible, and looked to the Stalinists, and looked to the social-democratic movement, and looked to liquidate themselves inside of that.

Cannon wrote something that I think is very telling about the situation in the American Communist Party at the time where he said, that:

“When you begin by giving a little principle here and there for the sake of expediency, you start a process that confronts you just a little later with a demand for a little more. This was particularly true in the early Communist Party when the sophisticated people began to realize the power was in Moscow, and that you couldn't function in a small, national party like ours if you were in conflict with Moscow.”

Now I'm suggesting in a certain sense that the Moscow of the TL is Jim Robertson and that what you've got is a change of policy that's talking place in that internal bulletin that you can purchase back there. I think everyone in this room should read where Jim all of a sudden changes his mind, and the whole party is expected to snap to it and change their mind. And you know, there's been a lot of reassessment going on by the ICL and the TL in the last decade. You look at the positions the RT, the Revolutionary Tendency [forerunner of the Spartacist League], split from the Socialist Workers Party over, and you can see capitulations all along that line by the TL today where they do not uphold those positions any more.

Would the founding cadre of the RT defend the Stalinists, apologize for them unconditionally in advance, and any crimes they might commit in the suppression of Solidarnosc? In 1974, the SL in Great Britain called to extend a general strike that was occurring there. Do they do the same in Canada today? Did they do the same in Paris a few years ago? Did they do the same in Italy a few years ago? The written record is there. The TL has preserved it in print. You can look at it and compare both sides and I urge everyone to do so and ask themselves who is really defending the orthodox Trotskyist positions?

## B. (TL/ICL):

I'm from the International Communist League. The refusal to fight against national oppression and special oppression of minorities and women is a hallmark of rotten chauvinist laborism. The BT labels our labor-black mobilizations as signs of the ICL abandoning the working class, sneeringly referring to these mobilizations as “community,” or “ghetto” work. What these mobilizations have done is provide, in exemplary fashion, the way that the integrated proletariat can, and must, be a tribune of all the oppressed.

This requires a fight against the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy, who oppose the fusion of red and black. The task of revolutionary Marxists is to bring socialist consciousness into the proletariat. It is the duty of the working class to defend black rights, to link the multi-racial working class with that of the ghetto and the barrios.

The Bolshevik Tendency also laughingly says that the Internationalist Communist League has abandoned its trade-union work. Recently the largest transit workers' union in North America, the Amalgamated Transit Union, at its national convention passed a resolution in defense of American death row class-war prisoner, Mumia Abu-Jamal. This is a result of class-struggle militants in that union working for over ten years to mobilize the labor movement in Mumia's defense.

At the November 21st 1998 Chicago labor-black rally in Jamal's defense, members of the ATU were front and center.

These are examples of communist trade-union work. The BT doesn't do trade-union work. What they do is scab on the 32-B-J strike in New York City of building workers, and then have the nerve to write an entire document defending the right of petty-bourgeois dilettantes to cross picket lines. That's what the BT does.

Briefly on the Andropov contingent at the November 22nd 1982 demonstration that stopped the Klan: it was a joke. We had a bus of people with a lot of ex-members (you know, Mensheviks), so we called it our Andropov brigade. But you know what? There was also something there called the "Ulysses S. Grant Bus," who was a U.S. president, all right? No howls of indignation.

### C. (IBT)

There was an "in memoriam" box though for Mr. Andropov in *Workers Vanguard* [No. 348, 17 February 1984], which you won't find for any of the other ones, which gave him a pretty good rating—a three out of four rating. The discussion that's gone on tonight on the question of Quebec, which is what the TL had wanted to have this debate over, is not one of principle but rather one of strategy. We both agree that Quebec has the right to self-determination. It is question of advocacy of that point. All this talk, trying to label us as Anglo-chauvinist, and chauvinists and all the rest of it—until James Robertson wrote his little memo (his ill-informed memo, I would say) in December of 1994, this was a position that the Trotskyist League had upheld until that time. A position that they had had since their inception.

Tonight we've had no clarity except making the blanket statement—and that's all we've heard from Charles and the other speakers on behalf of the Trotskyist League—the blanket statement that there cannot be class unity until independence for Quebec has been achieved. You state that, and you say the class struggle can't move forward. I would say that you are arguing basically two-stagism. What we have argued is that, in fact, the history of the class struggle in this country has shown otherwise.

And you just snuff that off, and make a blanket statement. That's not very precise, not very useful—there's no clarity there. When would you have advocated this independence for Quebec? Right from the get-go? From the Quiet Revolution [of the early 1960s], from 1974, 1976—you never state that, we didn't hear that from Charles tonight. Your document on it is completely muddled and befuddled and doesn't state it anywhere. When?

I would say to the Trotskyist League, that Marxist methodology is to be precise, that Marxism is a science—and just as on this question it goes back to some imprecise time in the past, so too on the Russian Question. In 1991, when the coup happened between Yaneyev & Yeltsin, and we said yes, you have to side with the coupists against Yeltsin—this is the decisive moment. When Yeltsin won this represented the triumph of the counterrevolution in the Soviet Union.

The Spartacist League said no, and they waited until they handed out their leaflet and found they didn't get a response to it and then, I guess, it did [happen]. They didn't take a side in the major historic dispute in 1991. It shows there's a lack of historical precision: when quantity becomes quality, when things happen—it's just some amorphous time for them and likewise on the question of Quebec.

I would just say also that to tell the truth is one of the most important things for a revolutionary group. And this piece of drivel, this piece of crap that they have in their newspaper [on Ian Donovan] here, has the audacity to state: "one account of a survivor of Logan's organization, Phil Ferguson, notes..."

Well, I will inform you: Phil Ferguson has never even met Bill Logan.

### P. (TL/ICL)

First, this isn't about analysis, and this is not about tactics. This is about principle, all right? When you blocked with the Anglo bourgeoisie you crossed the line. You broke with everything that has anything to do with revolutionary struggle in this country. When you said "Vote No" you voted with everybody: Reform, and, most importantly, you voted with the union bureaucracy, and you voted with the NDP, like centrists like you always do.

Lenin made it very clear that opportunism is always nationally-based, okay? The little guys like you, you don't capitulate straight to the bourgeoisie—you capitulate to the social democrats, who feed the poison of chauvinism and racism and everything else into the working class. That's how you guys do it.

If anybody was paying any attention to what Tom said tonight, you will notice that he said nothing about the NDP traitors and their chauvinism against Quebec. Not one word. Not one word about the chauvinism of the labor bureaucracy. Not one word about the Quebec labor tops and their nationalism. Nothing. Why? Because that's the direction they capitulate in. And it's not just here.

In Britain, they capitulate along the same lines, along the same lines of special oppression and national oppression, refusing to criticize the Socialist Party for troops in Ireland. The little joke we get here about the Declaration of Arbroath: Tom thinks it's funny? Let me tell you, their organization do not think that the Scots are an oppressed nation. And Tom laughs.

That's the kind of militant indifference that this organization has towards questions of national and other forms of special oppression. Their organization in New Zealand almost never writes a word about the grinding oppression of the black Maori population in that country. And U.S. black people—you've got yourself a nerve! They started out—you should read this—the very first and only statement on the black question in their newspaper for many years is in their first issue. It is a disgusting, cop-baiting diatribe against a supporter of the MOVE organization. Why attack the MOVE organization? Because it's a stick to beat the Spartacists.

You want re-evaluation? Yes, the Bolshevik Tendency has recently, very recently, decided to become involved in the Jamal work, after many years. That's not a bad thing, but I'd say that's a re-evaluation in terms of which way the wind is blowing in the petty-bourgeois milieu they like to circulate in.

The only time Tom raised the black question tonight was to make a joke. To make a joke! At our expense. Do we think that the struggle can't go forward in the United States unless blacks are separate? Very funny Tom, very goddamn funny.

### J.

I'm from the Brock Socialists. I'm interested in socialism and I realize it's an important issue on what side of the boundary you line up on when you're fighting for socialism. It always seems to me, from what I've learned about Marxism and consciousness and how racism and sexism and chauvinism get manifested and is reflected in our lives, is that it's a result of the underlying relations and structures, which in our case is capitalist social relations. It's capitalism to me which seems to be the enemy.

I want to fight for socialism, but I don't want to fight to lash some oppressed group to their own national bourgeoisie.

I don't want to fight to install a bourgeois country in Quebec. I want to fight for socialism, and to try and figure out the best way to get there. I don't think the relations are that poisoned. Compared to what's going on in the Balkans and whatnot, I don't see how the working class nationally is that divided in this country. And I think the task of any revolutionary socialist group, would be to call for an independent socialist state in Quebec, not necessarily an independent Quebec. I haven't heard that lined up, and because I haven't heard that, I tend to agree that this sounds like some form of two-stagism. And that's all I have to say.

### M. (IBT)

I'm a supporter of the Bolshevik Tendency. First I'd like to thank the Brock Socialists who invited us, and I think that it's great to have a discussion among different socialist organizations. That way we can exchange opinions and develop further politically, so I hope that we can have more of these kinds of discussions in the future.

I would like to make a couple of comments. The first point on Quebec. Tom mentioned very clearly that the BT and SL both agree that we defend Quebec's right to self-determination, but we differ on the question of when Marxists should call for separation, when Marxists should advocate separation. As a principle, Marxists oppose any kind of nationalism, sexism, racism which divide the working class and make workers think that their enemy is not the bourgeoisie, but their fellow workers: blacks, Asians or women and people on welfare.

As Marxists we oppose nationalism, and there is nothing wrong with that. But Marxists also acknowledge that they have to advocate separation when nationalism poisons the relationship between Quebec and English workers to the point that there is no possibility of having any joint struggle. The SL thinks yes, that has been and is the case in Quebec, and we think that was not the case and is not the case. Of course in the foreseeable future, if things change, if nationalism is so deep that we have to change our assessment, we might have to call for separation. But Tom provided many examples—has that been the case? What about the joint struggles? Just name-calling ("Anglo chauvinists," "you capitulated," etc.) does not explain anything—it does not clarify minds.

I was going to talk about Lebanon, because Charles mentioned that under the pressure of imperialism, the BT capitulated to imperialism. I think that Lebanon proves that is not the case and in fact that label applies to the SL. I will elaborate on that on another round, or after the discussion is over.

### An. (TL/ICL)

It takes a lot of nerve for a group that stood with the Canadian bourgeoisie in the 1995 Quebec referendum to call us social-patriots, which is exactly where [M. an IBT comrade] was going with that. The BT continually recycles this lie that we supported the Marines in Lebanon in 1983. We said, "U.S. troops out," just as we oppose all imperialist interventions.

When the U.S. imperialists wage war on a bourgeois-nationalist movement, or a semi-colonial country, we side militarily with the latter against imperialism, even as we fight for proletarian class independence. This was our position in Grenada when the U.S. invaded that country the same week. We said, "Get out now, dead or alive." But in Lebanon none of the contending religious forces were fighting imperialism. And while we said, "U.S. Out," we didn't vicariously cheer for a bomb set by unknown forces. This is not revolutionary politics, it's idiot bloodthirstiness—and of course from a safe

distance too.

So what about the BT's own record? What about the far more important events of 1990, when the U.S. and Canadian imperialists were preparing war on Iraq? We said, "Defeat U.S.-Canadian imperialism! Defend Iraq!" Here's what the BT said in 1917 [No. 10] in a reprint from *Militant Printer*. Here it is—you can get it for yourself, it's on the back table there. They said, "It is our sons and daughters who will die in Saudi Arabia—No to Bush's war for Big Oil."

"Our sons and daughters?"—what about the hundreds and thousands of Iraqis that were being prepared for the kill? Not a word. The BT statement did not even hint at the need to defend Iraq. They did not so much as call for defeating imperialism. It's social patriotism through and through.

And the BT's record on Quebec is no better. This was shown with crystal clarity in 1995 in the Quebec referendum. Your call for a "No" vote directly aligns you with the bourgeoisie. It was so bad that their only member in Quebec quit. We printed excerpts of his letter in *Spartacist Canada*, which I also have here. Among other things he recounted how his boss was pressuring him to line up with the "No" rallies—the federalist rallies. The BT was also pressuring him to do this. He was unable to stomach this disgusting bile, at their capitulation to Anglo chauvinism, and he quit. So the real question is here—who capitulated to their own bourgeoisie, who are the real social-patriots?

### M.

Most of you know me. I was one of the founders of the Trotskyist League. I was one of the original formulators of the Trotskyist League's position on Quebec. I shouldn't really say that, because the original position of the Trotskyist League on Quebec was formulated in New York City. That's fine—it was a position I was won to and helped to further refine.

The position that I was won to was that revolutionaries in Canada, the working-class movement in Canada, had a responsibility to defend unconditionally the right of Quebec to self-determination. I was also won to the position that we had to oppose petty-bourgeois Quebec nationalism—we had to oppose, for example, the campaign for a unilingual French Quebec.

That took some doing on my part because I had been won previously to the position of the League for Socialist Action, and later of the GMR (the Groupe Marxiste Révolutionnaire of Quebec), led at that time by Mike Mill—Michel Mill, that the task of socialists in Canada was to support a unilingual, independent, socialist Quebec. In the GMR's case it called for a Quebec workers' republic.

I supported that position for several years. I supported it in the chauvinist West. I was one of the main organizers of a demonstration to oppose the War Measures Act imposition in 1970. Within two days of the imposition of the War Measures Act I had—practically single-handedly comrades, I had very little help, very few other comrades with me at this time—I had mobilized 600 people at a demonstration at the Manitoba Legislature. I was the main organizer of that event.

When I went over to the Spartacist position on the Quebec national question, people like the RMG leadership denounced me for being an Anglo chauvinist. What fucking nerve!

I was really angry about it, I'm still angry about it after all these years, and I'm still pissed off as hell when I hear people on the left throwing around accusations of chauvinism against their opponents, indiscriminately, without any scintilla of evidence. You haven't provided any evidence. There is no documentation of this at all. I'll tell you one thing—when



Tom tried in his presentation to criticize your positions he at least had the decency to quote from *Spartacist Canada*. How many times have you comrades quoted from 1917?

[interjection: “About 12 in the presentation.”]

No, not at all.

[interjection: “Well, add it up.”]

#### D. (IBT)

I am a political supporter of the International Bolshevik Tendency. First of all I would like to say that this debate is very eye-opening to me, seeing as the consistent theme running through the remarks of the Trotskyist League is not a political analysis—it’s a string of lies and slanders and falsifications of positions, instead of really debating the questions, instead of really addressing the questions we are raising about their analysis of Québécois nationalism, and what position we should take on this question as revolutionary Marxists.

They can’t point to what specifically they are saying has poisoned the relationship between the Québécois workers and the Anglo-Canadian workers. What decisively has changed since the original TL position was formulated in 1976, that you had to go back 30 years and say, you know, our position has historically been wrong—we should have been advocating independence all along. Instead of answering these questions that we have raised with the TL they bring up these lies—baiting us as a “dubious” organization, baiting us as “scabs,” baiting us for a former member of the International Communist League—the Canadian affiliate being the TL (and also a former member of the [International] Bolshevik Tendency) having attacked a member of the Spartacist League/Britain: an action that we condemned on the spot, on location, in Britain when it happened.

I would just encourage any independents here who have any questions about the relationship between the two organizations to read a number of specific documents that you can get on our literature table back here, the Bolshevik Tendency’s literature table, two in particular. The “ICL vs. IBT” reprints one of the documents published by the ICL against the International Bolshevik Tendency and challenges all their lies and slanders point for point. I would also encourage anyone who is interested to buy the “Road to Jimstown” which would considerably enlighten any independents as to the way the TL functions, why they act the way they do in the debate today, why they are unable to address the questions that we are posing to them. So, if you get a chance, I would encourage you to check out our literature table.

#### Ad. (TL)

I’m speaking for the Trotskyist League. Well, the professor objects to the term “chauvinism” being thrown around, however, if the shoe fits—

Now, I want to draw a link between the Quebec question and the BT’s approach to Northern Ireland. We have a long history of opposing British imperialism, without giving an iota of political support to Irish nationalism. As we have laid out in our “Theses on Ireland” this is an example of “interpenetrated peoples,” that is, there can be no democratic resolution of this question this side of a socialist revolution.

Our starting point has always been for the unconditional withdrawal of British troops, and our fight against British imperialism has always been tied to our opposition to the chauvinist, pro-capitalist Labour Party.

Now contrast this with the Bolshevik Tendency. In their only major article in 1917 [No. 16] on Ireland, of some seven and a half pages, the only mention they have of the Labour Party (which sent troops in to Northern Ireland in 1969) is to

say that they did so in response to “a wave of pogroms against Catholic working class ghettos.” This is nothing but backhanded support for the lie that British troops can be some sort of neutral arbitrator in Northern Ireland.

And then you take a look at their English newsletter, something called *Marxist Bulletin*, and we read again and again the BT calling for votes to this organization called the Socialist Party, for alliances with the Socialist Party, etc. What you won’t read in the BT’s propaganda over these past several years is that the Socialist Party supports British troops in Northern Ireland, and are notorious publicity agents for Billy Hutchison, the leader of a violently anti-Catholic death squad.

In fact it is only in the past month that the BT wrote anything about the SP’s position and what did they say? Well, basically the Spartacists have been hounding us about this for years and yes, sure, we are for troops out, and yes the Socialist Party’s position is really quite scandalous. Oh, but we shouldn’t let the Socialist Party’s support for British imperialism impinge on our efforts to unite with them, or giving them electoral support—god forbid!

[interjection: “Is that a direct quote?”]

No, I have it right here. Excuse me, can I continue? Now while being oh, so solicitous towards these social-chauvinists, who does the BT direct their political fire against? Us! For saying that any imperialist deal will necessarily be at the expense of the oppressed Catholic minority. Oh no, says the BT. No?

#### R.:

Yeah, first of all in response to what that gentleman over there was saying—if you are for Quebec independence it is two-stageism. That shows how anti-Marxist these guys are getting, because then when can you advocate independence? Every time you advocate independence you are automatically a two-stageist? The Trotskyist League stood for the independence of Eelam [a separate Tamil state] in Sri Lanka for a long time. Are you objecting to that? Is that two-stageism in Sri Lanka? Why isn’t it—just because there is some killing in the streets all of a sudden you can have two stages—first you have to have the independent Eelam and then you have the socialist revolution? It has nothing to do with it. Think Marxism.

Now then, you talk about there’s never been a case of a strike being broken by national chauvinism, it’s always been the NDP that’s been stabbing it in the back. Well, in a sense that’s true—there’s never been francophones beating up on the Anglos on the picket lines. But what is the NDP? Before the formation of the [right-wing Quebec-bashing] Reform Party, the NDP was the most virulently Anglo-chauvinist party in this country, and everybody knew it. Why was it that the NDP was [inaudible] in Quebec and nobody wanted to vote for it and every labor bureaucrat in Anglo Canada supported it. Guess what!

The thing about continuing on the TL line on Quebec: I didn’t see the Trotskyist League voting, or advocating a “No” vote in the last referendum around 1980—unless you are reading different historical documents than I am.

Also this thing that Tom said: Oh, any time that the Quebec people want to separate we will honour that. Well how much indication do you need from the Québécois people? Here you have the very unique situation that an oppressed nation banned the language of the oppressor in many forms in its own provinces. What is that indicating? The Quebec population has shown over and over again that they are for independence, and it is only the blackmail of total economic sanctions and oblivion that’s pushing them back from actually voting so in the referendum. Other than that the polls have all indicated that more than 60 percent have always

been in support of it.

The other thing that I found very sinister is this thing about if you are for the independence of Quebec from Canada therefore you should for a separate nation for blacks in United States. First of all, besides the fact that the Québécois have a separate language, are isolated in a separate region geographically, have a separate religion, and a separate history they have been conquered by the English forces. Tom knows this—so this is a real sinister show of his distaste for the black work we do, his equating what we say on Quebec and what we say on the black question.

### S. (IBT):

I'd like to present you with two different pictures of two different major historical situations happened in the last 20 years. One is Poland in 1981. We think Poland, and the Trotskyist League would agree with us, was a deformed workers' state up until 1991—when Walesa assumed power with Solidarnosc. So in Poland in 1981 Lech Walesa's Solidarnosc movement led an anti-communist union against the Polish workers' state. Behind Walesa, was the Catholic Church, the Pope—he made a special trip to Poland—Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan. Just about every piece of reactionary garbage on the entire face of the earth was in favour of Solidarnosc, to bring “democracy” to Poland. And the Trotskyist League, correctly, opposed Solidarnosc and said “Stop Solidarnosc counterrevolution.”

The Bolshevik Tendency upholds that historic position. We think the Trotskyist League was right in that situation. Now, ten years after that, in 1991, when the Soviet degenerated workers' state was in peril, what did we have? We had George Bush, Reagan's vice president, (Reagan who opposed Solidarnosc), even the Ayatollah Khomeini, every reactionary force on the earth in August 1991 opposing the Russian workers' state. Yeltsin, Bush, everybody—the Catholic Church, I'm sure, probably didn't like it either. But what was the position then? The fake left, everybody, CNN, the bourgeoisie, hated it.

But the Bolshevik Tendency said, “Stop this counterrevolution!” There was a counterrevolution in August 1991. What was happening? We upheld the correct position. The exact same thing that happened in Poland in 1981. We uphold that. What did the Trotskyist League do? They didn't have a position. There were the battle lines—the battle lines were set, okay? The Russian workers' state was in peril. Everybody was up against the Russian workers' state, it was on the line, this was the major historical test.

What is key here is the Trotskyist position on the Soviet bureaucracy. We see the bureaucracy as having a dual character. The Soviet bureaucracy: their position is that they didn't support either side of the bureaucracy in 1991. They said both sides were equally committed to capitalist restoration. That is an anti-Trotskyist position. That's a Shachtmanite position. If the Soviet bureaucracy, all wings of it, the coup leaders and the Yeltsinites were both equally committed to capitalist restoration—you are arguing on the wrong plane. It's a Shachtmanite position. You should admit it and then argue it on that level.

### N. (TL/ICL):

I want to deal with the BT's claim to be staunch defenders of the Soviet Union. They say the ICL was neutral in August 1991 in Moscow. This is a flat lie. This is what we said: our headline was “Defeat Yeltsin/Bush Counterrevolution.” We distributed this by the tens of thousands, in Russian, to workers in the former USSR. We made it clear that in August we were for workers to mobilize to stop Yeltsin. We said this

could have been the start of a political revolution in Russia. And we said, if the coup leaders moved to stop Yeltsin a military bloc against counterrevolution would have been posed. But they didn't, because they too were committed to capitalism.

So the BT's call to support the coup, issued over a month later and certainly not in Russian, was empty posturing and nothing more. In fact, it was a convenient cover for the BT to prematurely write off the Soviet Union. In the following months we issued propaganda saying only a massive proletarian mobilization could stop Yeltsin consolidating a capitalist state. After a period, when it became clear the workers would not resist, we drew the conclusion that the workers' state had been destroyed. Meanwhile the BT sat smugly on their hands, saying it is all over.

It was not a question of academic analysis, it was not a question of naming dates but of communist intervention to try and change reality.

Similarly in Germany, when we intervened heavily to try to lead a workers' political revolution after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the BT said it's all hopeless. When we initiated a quarter million strong anti-fascist protest in East Berlin they denounced us for failing to invite the hardened pro-capitalist West German social democrats. This was a straight capitulation to anti-communism.

They recently did it again over North Korea. The ICL defends this deformed workers' state against counterrevolution, while fighting for political revolution against the Stalinists. But the main recent BT article on Korea in 1917 does not once call for defense of North Korea, even as it screams to “dislodge the crumbling dictatorship in the North.”

Then their recent entry into the British Socialist Labour Party which is lead by Arthur Scargill, a left-reformist union leader, known for his opposition to anti-Sovietism, notably Solidarnosc in Poland. Inside the SLP the BT formed a common electoral slate with open anti-communists.

### M.:

Thank you very much—I get up and somebody goes [inaudible]. This is really typical of tonight's debate, lots of sneering.

I was an initiator of Brock Socialists and obviously this debate as well. I've a number of young comrades who are present tonight who are in Brock Socialists and I was hoping they would have the opportunity to sort out the differences between the Trotskyist League and Bolshevik Tendency. I think that some of those differences have become clear.

I think that perhaps the most important lesson they can learn from tonight's debate is the importance of telling the truth. Of finding out what the true positions of different groups on the left are before they commit themselves to joining any organization.

I would like to reiterate the importance of that lesson to all these young comrades. Don't take anybody's word for it. As Lenin once said, if you only read one sides point of view in a particular debate and accept that at face value, then you are a fool. You have to read both sides. And just because the International Communist League has a more frequent publication, a much more frequent publication I admit—*Workers Vanguard*, which comes out every two weeks and the BT admittedly only has an occasional publication—that doesn't necessarily mean that the ICL is correct.

There is a famous cartoon from the 1930s which was published in *Daily Worker* (I believe that was the name of the Communist Party paper at that time) which showed a speaker who is labelled a Trotskyist raising the slogan “Down with Stalin!” and it showed also another person, a fascist on the podium, or a capitalist politician calling “Down with Stalin!”

And that is the Stalinist argument by amalgam. I think we have to be very careful here too to avoid those kind of arguments.

Because the BT took the position, whether correctly or not, to oppose a call for a vote for independence of Quebec in 1995, doesn't mean that they were blocking with the Anglo-chauvinist bourgeoisie, any more than the TL was blocking with Parti Québécois and the petty-bourgeois nationalists of Quebec by calling for a "Yes" vote.

[interjection: "What is your position?"]

My position is the historic position of the TL. I haven't changed it in all these years. And, after having read the documentation from the Trotskyist League, which I read over very carefully, I wasn't persuaded that the line change was necessary. In fact I was quite surprised to learn that there was a retroactive line change which suggests that you were wrong all those years. I was won to the wrong position, I guess.

### P. (IBT):

When I first spoke it was about keeping the truth in mind when trying to build a revolutionary organization and arguing your politics. Unfortunately, I have to make the same presentation because the TL in their subsequent presentations have added to my list of lies that they have stated this evening. [As for] this outrageous claim that we were in a bloc with Anglo chauvinism—well, let me submit to you then that on the [1992] Charlottetown Accord referendum that the TL was in a bloc with the Reform Party and all the other reactionary elements who wanted to see that thing sunk.

I mean you cannot simply claim that somebody is in a bloc with somebody because they happen to vote the same way in a certain referendum. You have to analyze what is to be gained, what is to be lost for the working class in any particular battle and take your position accordingly and I invite people to read our analysis. Unfortunately, [a TL comrade] doesn't think it's about analysis. You think it's about whatever—I don't know. But if working class action isn't based on analysis then it's nothing. Without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary practice—and that's Lenin.

Listening to [a TL comrade], you wouldn't think that we raised the slogan "Defend Iraq." I invite anybody to read our literature on the Iraq war. The headline of every article includes the words "Defend Iraq!" I mean, [interjection: "Not that one!"]

the extent of lies—well, unfortunately I didn't see any trade union resolutions raised by the Trotskyist League or the Spartacist League during the Gulf War. I invite them to present them today regarding the Gulf war conflict. To my knowledge, there are none.

Certain Trotskyist League/Spartacist League members here have alluded to the fact that we have polemicized against the Spartacist League about their withdrawal from trade-union work. The fact of the matter is that there has been a substantial and marked withdrawal from organized trade union opposition both in Canada and United States.

Twenty years ago there was something called the Militant Action Caucus in the Communications Workers of America. It was organized by the Spartacist League. They opposed the leadership in the union—they did it in a number of other unions in the United States. In fact, it required [U.S. President Jimmy] Carter's secret police to drag a delegate off the floor of the conference.

We think this was exemplary trade-union work, which we would like to base our future trade work on. The fact of the matter is that today you won't see an iota of this trade union work because there was a conscious move to withdraw from

that. But I invite people here to read our literature on this question.

[inaudible comment from the floor]

Oh, congratulations, you are members of unions. Where are your caucuses? I would love to read about it.

### Jo. (TL/ICL):

The truth. Fact. Yes—read both sides of the story. I quote from the BT's "ICL vs IBT," right after we polemicized around their opposition to these labor-black mobilizations: "Today the SL has no trade union work at all." Judge for yourselves whether that's true.

Or maybe the BT considers that trying to mobilize the unions on Jamal's behalf, which is one of the things that our non-existent trade union supporters have done, is not trade union work. Maybe that doesn't count. Maybe it doesn't count that we brought out a hard core of 200 black transit workers for a demo to defend Mumia in Chicago last month. It's a lie by the BT's standards. It couldn't have existed, because we do no trade union work. I could multiply the examples if you like.

So, truth—truth. Did the Bolshevik Tendency, or did the Bolshevik Tendency not, vote "No" in 1995? Was not the situation in 1995 one of a huge chauvinist campaign against Quebec's democratic right to independence? True or false? Their only Quebec member quit. He said—it's not us, I'm quoting him—he said that the position of the Bolshevik Tendency was a "defacto bloc with the chauvinist Anglo-Canadian bourgeoisie." Their ex-member, not ours, not our politics otherwise at all this guy. He nailed them. He was on the spot. He was right. Truth or lie?

Truth or lie? Their position was perceived by the powers that be to be as so bad that they were even invited to participate in that chauvinist national unity rally in Montreal on the eve of the vote. Truth or lie?

None of this was answered. Now the excuse given for this is that all is well, all is rosy. The workers are really united in struggle. Yeah, maybe there is not as much struggle going on, but that doesn't have anything to do with the chauvinist and nationalist divide in the proletariat—it is just some abstraction called the trade union bureaucracy. Except that the mechanism for dividing the working class is precisely through the trade union bureaucracy. Play the tapes (that's a favourite phrase of theirs) listen to the number of times the NDP was mentioned in their presentation: once, and even then it was not in the context of how they promote chauvinism within the working class.

Read 1917—read that long seven page article in 1917 number 17. See how many times the NDP is mentioned there, once, and even there—truth!—the mention of the NDP is to scoff at the fact that David Lewis' opposition to the 1972 general strike in Quebec had anything to do with chauvinism. Oh, it was just like his expulsion of the Waffle [left-nationalist wing of the NDP in the early 1970s] in English Canada. The truth is that beginning of the mid-1970s, precisely as a reaction of the betrayal of the chauvinist union bureaucracy, the national divide has hardened and that's why it is necessary to call for independence.

### Chair:

At this point then we will go to the final summaries.

### Charles Galarneau (TL/ICL):

Well, fundamentally, I mean the BT hasn't answered this and they will not because they can not (unless they had a different position) is why is nationalism so pervasive within the

Quebec working class? And why are all Quebec union federations essentially separate from the Canadian federations? And why do workers vote for the Parti Québécois? And why, in their majority, did francophones and francophone workers vote “Yes” in the 1995 referendum? Why in their majority did they vote “No” to the 1992 Charlottetown deal to strengthen Canada? But they can’t answer that. We have answered that. And that is fundamental. It points to the fundamental importance of the national question from the Quebec standpoint.

The main thing when you are in English Canada is to fight chauvinism. But the BT, and those who echo their line, don’t get that. It’s all equal. Part of that thing they signed with the Maoists in 1992 says:

“Since its inception Canada has been the arena of multifaceted social and national oppression within which the Quebec and English-Canadian ruling classes have been engaged in unequal...” (And that’s a typo—“unequal struggle”—they really mean “in an unequal struggle”) “over the division of powers.”

So there’s these two ruling classes that are in this one country, and they’re pretty much equal: they fight for power. The Québécois, there are fewer of them, so maybe that’s where the inequality is.

That’s a lie! The BT fundamentally denies there is national oppression. They deny it over Scotland—yes! I like that one. And they deny it essentially over Quebec. They defend the right of self-determination, because otherwise then they couldn’t pretend to be Marxists, but fundamentally they don’t care.

So I want to come back to the question, where does the BT’s chauvinist line on Quebec come from? They started out as an organization capable of churning out paper positions that tried to sound like us. And sometimes getting caught in it—like in this case. By the way, I responded to this in my presentation, our historic position precluded voting “No”—for the Anglo-bourgeoisie, that is, voting against Quebec national rights.

So they try to sound like us, while at the same time they try to pursue a hostile obsession with us, ready to play footsy with forces to their right. This last part has become especially true after Bill Logan took over. They usually try to have a good rapport with anti-Soviet social democrats and other forces. Those forces which hate us and sometimes find it useful to have people like the BT around. People who call us a cult. People who slander us. People who call us violent (essentially) in their public press. So it’s useful for these people to their right to have these slanders against us to protect their milieus against the communist influence of the International Communist League. This is what the BT is about.

For instance, 1992, the Charlottetown referendum, I mentioned the Quebec Maoists—who are these people? The main group in that coalition is Action Socialiste and they were obviously virulently anti-Soviet back when there was a Soviet Union—as all Maoists are. And like the earlier Maoists of the ‘70s they had a position for a united Canada and they opposed Quebec’s right to independence. This group acts as a cheerleader for Shining Path in Peru. I never heard the BT call these people a cult, violent or any such thing! Shining Path!

Their slanders against us: the very first issue of 1917, after denouncing the Healy organization’s violence against political opponents, this is what the BT says, (and I quote):

“This is something which the SL is not guilty of to our knowledge. We do note however that inside that organization intimations of such appetites are increasingly common.”

End quote. This is the language of witchhunters. The BT tells the world we are violent crazies ready to lash out. And

who cares if there is not a shred of evidence?

[My comrade] already mentioned their unity-mongering with the pro-British imperialist SP. Well, they had the same solicitous attitude to hard anti-communists when the BT was inside the Socialist Labour Party in Britain. They had a common slate with people who were infamous for their earlier support for counter-revolution in Eastern Europe, like Solidarnosc, even people who support pro-Hitler Ukrainian nationalists—I mean fascists! That’s the sort of people the BT aligns with.

The BT finds the greatest difficulty criticizing the anti-communist, chauvinist, social-democrats and indeed are always happy to unite with them. But when it comes to us they go full steam. This is all documented. Your bloc partners in the SLP were these right-wing, anti-communist, social democrats and you knew this.

Another example, in December 1997, there took place a so-called international conference in South Africa where various reformist groups got together under the so-called base document which enthusiastically greeted the destruction of the Soviet Union, which didn’t say anything about the defense of the remaining workers states and which denounced the very idea of an international Leninist party—saying international parties run the risk of establishing predatory relationships with unaffiliated revolutionary groups. We were invited to this conference, and we declined for obvious reasons, given our fundamental differences with this “base document.” Instead, we fought independently for our views around the conference. But not so the BT. Not only were they all too happy to attend, they praised the document as a “broadly anti-capitalist” document! So insofar as they are about politics, this is what the BT does.

I’ve mentioned how we’ve made our internal discussion on Quebec available. We also make available in our “Hate Trotskyism” series many documents written against us by political opponents, notably including the BT. This is hardly what a bureaucratic organization would do. Our own history is well documented in the bound volumes of many hundreds of copies of *Workers Vanguard* and elsewhere. With our organization, what you see is what you get. We are still doing what we set out to do from the beginning—to forge a revolutionary, internationalist, proletarian party to lead the working class to power. To this end we have, on several occasions, had to re-evaluate our positions, not only on Quebec, but for instance also on the [1948] Arab-Israeli War among other questions.

In contrast, the BT is a genuinely strange outfit who have focussed their scant forces on destroying our organization. Their own internal life is truly strange as shown by the communist criticism/internal torture sessions orchestrated by William Logan. Or for example the internal bulletin published with this internal stuff after they had a split in this group (the CWG [Communist Workers Group]) which highlights a discussion—I guess a faction fight—inside the BT, the highlight of which was a fist fight in the streets of Oakland, California. Very edifying.

Many issues of interest to the proletariat they don’t even comment on. They don’t care. If they do it’s more often than not after the fact. For example, on the Quebec question, we have written extensively about the rights of native people of the north, also in opposition to the chauvinist partitionists in Montreal. We don’t know what the BT has to say about these vital questions because they haven’t written a word about them.

Indeed, what defines them as an international tendency is mainly hatred of the ICL. Otherwise their individual sections, such as they are, purely reflect the national variants of a social-democratic embrace of the values of their own ruling class. As

I've said we're debating them only because the Brock Socialists asked us to.

So to conclude, let me reiterate why calling for Quebec independence is decisive if you want to build a proletarian revolutionary party. It's the only way to break the workers of English Canada from chauvinism and to shatter the grip of nationalism in Quebec. So I want to say to any members of the Brock Socialists, and others who really want to dedicate their life and fight for proletarian revolution, that their place is among the ranks of the International Communist League—the party which uniquely has the programme and perspective to achieve world socialist revolution.

### Tom Riley (IBT):

Well, we wanted to have a debate with the TL. We wanted to have a debate with them for a number of years—for 16 years, roughly. We've repeatedly challenged them and they've repeatedly turned us down. We're very glad the Brock Socialists have finally smoked them out.

I think it's a little bit obvious that the TL didn't want to have the debate. And I think it's obvious in the content and in their behavior. You wouldn't know that the TL specified that the debate had to be about Quebec. They didn't want to debate other subjects like, I suppose, the Russian question or Lebanon. And yet a good deal of their attention they seem to have devoted to these related questions. Which we're happy to follow up on—perhaps the Brock Socialists might want to have us back and we could really do justice to something like the Russian question, or the question of the Middle East, Iraq, and the Marines—whether we want to keep U.S. Marines “alive” when they are invading Lebanon or not. We had a little difference about that. Or there's lots of other questions. So there's a lot of territory that needs to be covered.

I think that there have been some useful things that have come out of the debate today. I didn't really expect that the TL comrades would be able to deal with the question of Quebec and why they changed their line. The TL comrades have reprinted a number of things, we've reprinted lots of things—polemics have passed between our groups for a long time. Those who are going to make a serious commitment, in terms of their lives, to continuing to struggle for socialism and is at all seriously interested in the groups that (purport anyway to) represent the tradition of Trotskyism really owe it to themselves to make a careful and serious study. You can waste a lot of time in politics if you get into the wrong group by mistake. So do read about it, and think about it.

I want to remind people that when I made my presentation (unfortunately I wasn't able to range quite as broadly as I might have liked) I really was trying to develop an argument and substantiate it and to talk about what the real politics in this country have been—what the real politics in the working class regarding Quebec have been. I went through a bunch of incidents: 1965, 1973, 1976, 1978, 1981, 1991, 1995—that's about all that I had time for. I don't know if others noticed, but I noticed several TL comrades getting up and saying that it was no accident my examples stopped in the mid-70s. Well, they didn't stop in the mid-70s, class struggle didn't stop in the mid-70s and united class struggle didn't stop in the mid-70s. And that—well, go play the tapes and you can hear it, but it's important for more than that, comrades. It's important because things didn't change in the mid-1970s and the historical record will bear that out.

Now, you drag in lots of stuff: “Well, what happened in New York?”; and “What happened here?”; and “It's no accident”; and “We wrote another article on—” and “You only mention the NDP once in this article—” etc., etc. It's not a particularly useful way of conducting politics to find how many times this question wasn't mentioned in that article. It's

better to take on the position that's actually articulated.

I think that the comrades do show a tendency to want to evade a lot of these questions. The only substantive argument you've made that's historically based regarding Quebec, to my mind, is the statement you made about the 1972 general strike. The fact is that the NDP and David Lewis did the best they could to oppose it and to scab on it, there's no question about that. But comrades, they opposed and scabbed on the railway strike in '73, on the postal strike in '78, on the railway strike in '95, etc., etc. This is what they are. They are the agency of the bourgeoisie within the working class. So it should come as no surprise that they also opposed the much larger, more dangerous, insurrectionary Quebec general strike. Of course they did. But that's not why the general strike was defeated in Quebec. You are misleading yourselves.

There was an excellent article published in 1983 in *Spartacist Canada*, of all things. And here's what *Spartacist Canada* said about that strike:

“But in the end it was not the Liberal government, its cops, courts and vigilante squads or fake back-to-work meetings that stemmed the tide of the 1972 general strike in Quebec. It was the return-to-work orders that came from the jailed Common Front leaders in Orsainville Prison on May 17th.”

That's the truth...

[interjection: “That's right!”]

Yeah, that's right. So what we've got there—the problem is the crisis of leadership, comrades, in the labor movement. David Lewis would have loved to have pulled the plug and stabbed and ruined and destroyed that strike. He wasn't able to. That was not what was going on in the '72 strike. That's not why it was defeated.

I'm not blaming Charles for not remembering, because he wasn't around—but if he goes back and reads *Spartacist Canada* Summer 1980, which was the original referendum, he will read:

“Therefore at this time the Trotskyist League does not advocate the independence of Quebec. In a clearly worded, democratic referendum we would today vote ‘no.’”

[interjection: “We were wrong.”]

I'm just reminding you of what the position was. So that was the position and some of you comrades seem to be confused about it. I'm just reminding you.

I also want to clarify the question of the black question which I brought up in my presentation (only once, it's true). What I was saying was this: if it is true that the national division in the pan-Canadian working class (English-Canadian and Québécois) is so deep and poisonous as to make united class struggle impossible (there is not a “basis” for it—all the things that I quoted from your newspaper) then what are we to make of other situations where there are equally deep, or deeper, divisions?

In fact we could find lots of strike situations that have been undermined and poisoned and where workers' struggles have been corrupted and perverted by the racist division that characterizes the American working class. That's what I was saying. It's very pessimistic. We know that they use racism and that they undermine workers' struggles with it, but it doesn't mean that there's no basis for class unity because there are those divisions. It doesn't automatically follow.

On the Scottish thing—I simply said that this is absurd leader-worship. That's the only explanation for how this gibberish about the Pillars of Hercules, Moses parting the Red Sea, 113 kings and how all the nations of the world make up horseshit about their own country, except Scotland!

If you haven't been in the Spartacist League this means nothing to you. But those of us who have—we know about

Scotland. We heard about Scotland and the royal house of Robertson. That's all it is. It's just bizarre horseshit. It doesn't belong, even in a centrist, pseudo-Marxist newspaper. It's indefensible. I note that the comrades pretend that what I'm saying is that Scotland's not a nation, or Scots don't have national rights—that's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying that this is bizarre horseshit and it shouldn't be in a newspaper purporting to be Marxist and it wouldn't be, unless the leader somehow fancied it and enjoyed reading that kind of material.

Finally, I want to say that there is an interesting situation that's developed in the line of the comrades regarding the national question in relation to Puerto Rico. Now, the Trotskyist League (and the Spartacist League) always had the view that Puerto Rico should be independent and always favored independence. Recently they've come to the view that they're not advocating independence at this time in an active sense because it is so unpopular in Puerto Rico.

This poses an interesting question in relation to Quebec, because the proposition that we've been hearing from the comrades is that the national question is central and it doesn't really matter what the percentage of popular support for [in-

dependence] is at this time or at that time. In 1983 [actually April 1985] *Spartacist Canada* reported that nationalist sentiment for sovereignty-association (which is vague and nobody really knows what it means) was 17 percent and that support for independence (everyone knows what that means) was four percent in Quebec. This is in *Spartacist Canada* [1985]—four percent wanted independence. And yet the Trotskyist League advocates independence: you must have independence in Quebec! Without independence you can do nothing! But in Puerto Rico, well, it's a matter of what the conjuncture is, how popular it is, what the workers want. Comrades: there is a considerable contradiction in your position here.

There are contradictions in your positions on many other questions and I really do hope we get an opportunity, for the benefit of course of the Brock Socialists, to go over the whole history of Trotskyism and the Russian question, which is a central question in our movement, at some future date. Thank you very much.

### Chair:

I'd like to thank everyone who spoke from the BT and the TL and anyone else who came tonight.

## Bolshevik Tendency: Still in the Camp of Anglo Chauvinism

*The following article was published simultaneously in Spartacist Canada, Spring 1999, and Workers Vanguard, 19 March 1999.*

For the whole of its existence, the clot of quitters, renegades and accidental elements called the Bolshevik Tendency (BT) have badgered us to debate them one-on-one. This oft-repeated "challenge" has generally provoked distaste in us, and indifference in others. But mostly it has prompted the question: What's to debate? The BT's founding members all individually quit our international organization. Their current international leader, Bill Logan, is a vicious sociopath who was expelled from our organization 20 years ago for gross crimes against communist morality and elementary human decency. The BT's occasional "journal," *1917*, has not appeared since 1997.

So it was only at the request of a third party, the Brock Socialist Group, that on February 13 the Trotskyist League debated the Bolshevik Tendency at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. The Brock Socialists are a student group which has been examining Marxism and sought the debate to further their understanding of Trotskyism. We proposed "The Quebec National Question and the Fight for Socialism" as an appropriate topic, as this is a central question in the fight for proletarian revolution in Canada.

Our advocacy of Quebec independence is key to the struggle to advance revolutionary class consciousness among the workers. As TL spokesman Charles Galarneau explained:

"Chauvinism and nationalism have deeply poisoned the class struggle in both English Canada and Quebec, binding English-speaking and French-speaking workers to their capitalist enemies. This is caused by the continued existence of two separate and increasingly divergent nations, one oppressing the other, within the same bourgeois state structure...."

First and foremost, we fight against Maple Leaf chauvinism in the English Canadian working class. We believe with Lenin that 'a proletariat that tolerates the slightest coercion of other nations by its "own" nation cannot be a socialist pro-

letariat.' At the same time, calling for independence helps combat nationalism in Quebec, giving us a hearing to win Quebec workers away from their pro-PQ misleaders."

In sharp contrast, the BT is notorious for *opposing* Quebec independence. Thus, our speaker noted, the choice of topic for the debate was doubly appropriate: "The BT's overtly Anglo-chauvinist line exposes their opportunist positions and social-democratic appetites—in other words, it exemplifies why the BT has *nothing* to do with the struggle for a Leninist party acting as a tribune for all the oppressed."

Characteristically, Bolshevik Tendency representative Tom Riley simply ignored the poisonous reality of national oppression and its impact on the consciousness of workers of both nations. Counting his presentation and summary, he spoke for 40 minutes without once acknowledging that Quebec is an oppressed nation, or making a single substantive reference to the existence of Anglo chauvinism. This silence was maintained by the BT through several rounds of discussion, despite repeated challenges by TL comrades.

Riley sought refuge in historical descriptions of militant actions by the Quebec labor movement, and in appeals for "joint class struggle." Denying or downplaying the crippling effects of chauvinism, racism, etc. on working-class consciousness, such facile unity-mongering is counterposed to any struggle against the many forms of special oppression engendered by capitalism. The BT directly echoes the social democrats and labor bureaucrats who present any struggle in defense of the oppressed as disruptive of the "solidarity" of the labor movement.

Of course, Riley claimed the BT upholds the right of self-determination for Quebec. So does most of the English Canadian labor bureaucracy today, on paper. But like the social democrats, in the real world the BT endorses the Anglo-dominated status quo. During the narrowly defeated 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty, for instance, the BT openly called for a No vote against Quebec independence. TL spokesman Galarneau remarked that "The BT's call to vote

No was a gross capitulation to the Anglo rulers.” Indeed, the BT’s loyalty to the cause of Canadian “national unity” did not go unremarked by the Anglo-chauvinist powers-that-be, who officially invited the BT to participate in the flag-waving rally orchestrated by the federal government in Montreal on the eve of the referendum. Comrade Galarneau also noted that the BT’s only Quebec member quit over this, publicly denouncing his former comrades for their “de facto bloc with the Canadian bourgeoisie.”

As our speaker emphasized, Quebec is not the first or only place that the BT has embraced the chauvinist status quo. In Britain, their co-thinkers deny that the Scots and Welsh are in any way oppressed, even as they pursue “joint work” with an outfit, the Socialist Party, which adamantly refuses to call for withdrawal of the murderous British army from Northern Ireland. In New Zealand, the BT scarcely mentions the brutal oppression of the indigenous black Maori population. “In fact,” said comrade Galarneau, “on every national terrain where they exist, the BT is a walking capitulation to their ‘own’ capitalist rulers.”

Our speaker located the source of the BT’s wilful blindness on questions of special oppression in the founding impulse of its first members:

“The BT’s Anglo-chauvinist position on Quebec is perfectly consistent with their political origins, in the early 1980s, in a series of cowardly flinches over the defense of the Soviet bureaucratically degenerated workers state....

“For example, when the Soviet army intervened against CIA-backed Islamic cutthroats in Afghanistan in late 1979, we said ‘Hail Red Army in Afghanistan,’ calling to ‘Extend social gains of the October Revolution to the Afghan peoples.’ The social democrats and pseudo-leftists, who were howling with the imperialist wolves against the Soviet Union, hated our slogan. At the time, we wrote that if the ET (that’s the External Tendency, the BT’s precursors) were more honest, they would admit that they hated it, too. Well, it took them a few years, but they finally did admit that, yes, they hated it, arguing that it meant we were putting faith in the Stalinists.

“No. First of all, we were simply expressing our *unconditional* defense of the Soviet degenerated workers state against capitalism. And we also recognized that the deformed expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as represented by the Soviet army, was the only force capable of bringing some measure of liberation, especially to women, in Afghanistan.

“The BT is an organization which congealed in reaction to the heat of imperialist Cold War II. From this original capitulation to their own ruling classes, it was a short step down a slippery slope to embracing the chauvinism of the bourgeoisie from Canada to Britain and beyond.”

## BT vs. Lenin on Revolutionary Class Consciousness

In his remarks, comrade Galarneau extensively motivated our call for Quebec independence as key to the struggle to remove the barriers to *revolutionary class consciousness* among workers on both sides of the national divide. This perspective derives from the basic Leninist proposition that without the leadership of a revolutionary party, the working people must remain in thrall to one form or another of *bourgeois consciousness*, such as national chauvinism. For communists, advocacy of Quebec independence is the means to break the grip of national chauvinism. Unless that grip is broken, the working people cannot be won to a revolutionary socialist perspective.

Denigrating and dismissing the struggle for revolutionary consciousness, the BT substitutes “militant struggle.” In fact,

Riley’s whole presentation rested on a straight equation of class consciousness and simple trade-union militancy. His “argument” consisted of a list of binational strikes since the 1960s, many of which were sparked by the explosive Quebec labor movement of the time. On this basis, he denounced our contention that Quebec independence was necessary for the workers of each nation to see their own rulers as the enemy; he mocked our assertion that chauvinism and nationalism were the fundamental roadblock to revolutionary class consciousness, and therefore to successful working-class struggle.

The falsehood that socialist consciousness derives directly from militant struggles over economic demands is hardly new. Lenin called this view Economism and attacked it in his 1902 book *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin showed how the working class through its own struggles is unable to spontaneously develop a consciousness any higher than trade-union consciousness: the need to unite in economic struggle against the employers and government. But trade-union consciousness is itself a form of bourgeois consciousness: by itself it does not challenge the capitalist mode of production but only seeks to better the workers’ immediate conditions. Revolutionary class consciousness has to be brought into the working class *from the outside*, by a revolutionary party which understands the historic necessity of destroying capitalist exploitation and oppression. Integral to this is the fight for the proletariat to take up the cause of all those strata which suffer special oppression under capitalism.

In his thoroughly Economist presentation, Riley never once hinted that the militancy of the Québécois proletariat during the ‘60s and ‘70s was fueled by resentment of and opposition to national oppression. When that militancy ran into an Anglo-chauvinist wall of hostility erected by the New Democratic Party and the Canadian Labour Congress leadership, angry Quebec workers were corralled by their own nationalist mis-leaders into the arms of the bourgeois nationalists of the Parti Québécois. When the TL speaker described the chauvinist opposition to the semi-insurrectionary 1972 Quebec General Strike by the NDP and CLC brass, Riley leapt to defend the social-democratic traitors from any imputation of anti-Quebec bigotry. “The fact is that the NDP and [its leader] David Lewis did the best they could to oppose [the strike] and to scab on it, there’s no question about that,” Riley declared. “But comrades, they opposed and scabbed on the railway strike in ‘73, on the postal strike in ‘78, on the railway strike in ‘95, etc., etc.”

The Anglo-chauvinist social democrats certainly are strikebreakers. Their role is to insure the subordination of the working class to the national interests of the enemy class—and key to that in this country is the ideological glue of Anglo chauvinism. This in turn deepens and hardens the reactionary nationalism instilled by the Quebec labor tops. Yet according to the BT, national chauvinism is simply not a factor. As comrade Galarneau observed, to hear the BT tell it,

“You would not know that the social democrats foment anti-Quebec chauvinism at all. Well, anyone who watches the news knows that the likes of [NDP provincial premiers] Bob Rae, Roy Romanow and Glen Clark have been willing, aggressive point men for the ‘national unity’ crusade—just as David Lewis was 25 years ago.”

## A Sneering Indifference to Oppression

The BT’s snottily dismissive attitude to the national oppression of the Québécois signals and embodies their capitulation to the Anglo-Canadian bourgeoisie. Indeed, for Trotskyists it would be hard to imagine an attitude more repulsive or more distant from the Leninist ideal of a tribune of the people than their arrogant contempt for specially oppressed sectors of the

societies in which they find themselves. Comrade Galarneau's presentation described a notorious and typical example:

"When we organized a 5,000-strong labor/black mobilization which stopped the Ku Klux Klan in Washington in 1982, the BT *spat* on this work. One of their members called it 'ghetto work.' The BT accused us of 'abandoning trade-union work.' What can this mean, except that the BT sees the working class as separate from and counterposed to the black plebeian masses—exactly the view of the labor bureaucracy. In fact, our Washington mobilization brought together in microcosm the forces for American proletarian revolution—black and red. Labor, with its core centrality of black workers, bringing its power to bear in defense of the ghetto masses, who were also mobilized, all under communist leadership."

Riley showed the same kind of disdain in addressing what he called "the implications" of the TL's position on Quebec for the United States. Stating that "the division between white workers and black workers is at least as serious as the division between anglo- and francophone workers here," the BT spokesman asked demagogically: "What's the conclusion to be drawn there? Is class struggle impossible? Or does it only become possible after black workers are somehow separated from white workers?"

The national oppression of Quebec and the oppression of black people as a race-color caste within American society are very different questions. However, the racial divide in the U.S. has indeed severely undermined labor struggles against capital. No, that does not make trade-union struggles of black and white workers there "impossible," any more than national chauvinism precludes joint strikes of French- and English-speaking workers in Canada. However, until and unless the American working class becomes the active champion of the cause of black freedom, *there will be no revolutionary class consciousness and no socialist revolution in America.*

The BT's attitude toward the oppression of Northern Ireland Catholics is similarly steeped in militant indifference. The BT has denounced our simple statement that any imperialist "peace" deal over Ireland would "necessarily be at the expense of the oppressed Catholic minority. And it would not do any good for working-class Protestants either." But this is a simple statement *of fact*. The so-called "peace process" in Northern Ireland is premised on maintaining the British army presence, and it has unleashed huge Loyalist mobilizations and deepened the communal division among the workers.

In fact, the Irish national question exposes the BT's bogus claims to stand in the revolutionary traditions of Marxism. It was precisely over Ireland that Marx and Engels began to define the revolutionary proletarian attitude to national oppression. During the debate, BT spokesman Riley made the absurd charge that our advocacy of Quebec independence meant we had embraced the Stalinist theory of "revolution by stages": "To claim also that proletarian struggle cannot be successful until Quebec is independent implies a kind of two-stage model of social revolution. First we get Quebec independence, *then* we get a successful proletarian struggle." Comrade Galarneau replied:

"Karl Marx said a long time ago that a nation which oppresses another cannot itself be free. Here's what Marx wrote about the Irish national question: '... *it is in the direct and absolute interest of the English working class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland....* The English working class will *never accomplish anything* before it has got rid of Ireland.' Perhaps the BT will now attack Marx as a proponent of two-stage revolution. In fact, the position of the BT is a straight capitulation to national chauvinism. Our position, like Marx's, is premised on opening the road to proletarian revolution by breaking the hold of chauvinism

on the working class."

On paper, the BT is for withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland. Yet the reality is that the BT's co-thinkers in England have long courted the reformist Socialist Party, without ever mentioning the Socialist Party's despicable line on the British army presence, or its sponsorship of "former" Loyalist killer Billy Hutchinson. Only after years of exposure by our comrades of the Spartacist League/Britain did the English BT's *Marxist Bulletin* (January 1999) print the following justification:

"[The Spartacists] claim to find a great deal of significance in the fact we have not to date written an article criticising the Socialist Party's refusal to call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from the north of Ireland. This is indeed a scandalous position for a British left-wing organisation and is indicative of the fundamental problems in their left-reformist programme. But we do not regard this as a sufficient reason to avoid any common work with them on issues where there is agreement nor to consider giving them critical support in elections when appropriate."

Obviously, the BT's paper "principles" are disposable if they interfere with opportunist combinations with open supporters of the murderous British army and its fascistic Protestant assassins.

Comrade Galarneau noted how "the BT finds the greatest difficulty in criticizing the anti-Communist, chauvinist social democrats, and indeed are always happy to unite with them." He cited BT leader Logan's participation in a so-called "International Conference" in South Africa in 1997, one of a number of recent "regroupment" attempts among reformists and centrists internationally. The "base document" for the conference enthusiastically greeted the destruction of the Soviet Union, and denounced the very idea of an internationalist Leninist party, saying: "International parties run the risk of establishing predatory relationships with unaffiliated revolutionary groups." Comrade Galarneau explained our attitude:

"We were invited to this conference, and we declined for obvious reasons, given our fundamental differences with this 'base document.' Instead, we fought independently for our views around the conference."

In contrast, the BT rushed to accept delegate status, signing on to the "base document." As the TL spokesman noted: "Not only were they too happy to attend, they *praised* the document as a 'broadly anti-capitalist' document!"

## The Bolshevik Tendency: What Is It?

The BT cares nothing for the struggles of the oppressed, much less the fight for revolutionary consciousness, because it is not an organization which seeks proletarian revolution. In fact, it is a peculiar and dubious outfit with a history of insinuating itself in places and among forces which are aimed at doing us harm. Its perpetual slanders of our organization as a "bureaucratic cult" have even found their way into a premier mouthpiece of the U.S. imperialist ruling class. In the summer of 1995, the *Wall Street Journal* wielded the BT's smears to try to undermine the vitally important defense of black U.S. death row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Riley repeated the BT's favored anti-Communist "cult" theme during the debate, claiming that our change of line to advocate Quebec independence several years ago came from "leader-worship." In fact, as the TL spokesman pointed out:

"You know the world only to the extent that you intervene to change it. On the streets, in the factories—not in some library or in your head. So, we intervened and *we learned*. And when the question came to a head once again before the '95 referendum, based on all these years of work, we stopped and we thought, we reassessed our position in the



fashion of Leninists, and we realized we had been wrong. We figured out—a little late, but in time—that, had we not gone over to the advocacy of Quebec independence, it would have called into question our existence as a revolutionary organization in this country. I encourage everyone here to read our bulletin ‘On the National Question in Quebec,’ which details not only how we came to change our line to advocacy of Quebec independence, but how a truly Leninist organization arrives at a correct political line.”

Contrast this to the BT and their genuinely strange internal life under Bill Logan, an individual who finds personal gratification in the sadistic exercise of power over others, especially women. Logan delights in orchestrating internal torture sessions called “communist criticism.” This was exposed in a bulletin published by a BT split group, which we reprinted as No. 8 of our series *Hate Trotskyism, Hate the Spartacist League*. The bulletin describes an “internal struggle” inside the BT, of which a highlight was a fist fight between opposing BT factions in the streets of Oakland, California!

In his summary, TL spokesman Galarneau cited this *Hate Trotskyism* series, which makes available many documents

written against us by political opponents, including the BT. He noted:

“This is hardly what a bureaucratic organization would do. Our own history is well documented in the bound volumes of many hundreds of copies of *Workers Vanguard* and elsewhere. With our organization, what you see is what you get. We are still doing what we set out to do from the beginning—to forge a revolutionary, internationalist, proletarian party to lead the working class to power.”

Building such a party means struggling to clear away the obstacles to revolutionary consciousness created by the bourgeoisie and perpetuated by its reformist henchmen. As the TL speaker concluded:

“Let me reiterate why calling for Quebec independence is decisive if you want to build a proletarian revolutionary party. It’s the only way to break the workers of English Canada from chauvinism, and to shatter the grip of nationalism in Quebec. So I want to say to any members of the Brock Socialists and others who really want to dedicate their life and *fight* for proletarian revolution, that their place is among the ranks of the International Communist League—the party which uniquely has the program and perspective to achieve world socialist revolution.”

## A Few Additional Points...

*The following rejoinder to the Spartacist Canada/Workers Vanguard article on the debate was appended to the transcript on the IBT web page (www.bolshevik.org).*

We have already dealt with many of the accusations raised by the TL in our literature (see, in particular, our *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 5, “ICL vs. IBT” as well as “Socialists, Sectarians and ‘Scabs’”). We do not propose to cover the same territory again here, but there are a few additional points that need to be made.

To begin with, our comrades made a few factual errors during the debate that we wish to correct. Firstly, Charles was indeed correct that *Spartacist Canada* published several articles on Quebec prior to December 1976. Secondly, Ian Donovan (a former member of both the ICL and IBT) quit our organization in April 1998, which means that when he attacked a female Spartacist League member in London last January he had not yet been out of the IBT for a year (for our statement on the incident see: “IBT Statement on Ian Donovan’s Attack on SL/B Comrade”). Thirdly, in 1974 the SL did not call for extending an existing general strike, but rather for launching a “defensive general strike” in response to the Tory government’s attack on the miners. Finally, the poll referred to by Comrade Riley toward the end of his summary was reported in the April 1985 issue of *Spartacist Canada*, not in 1983.

### No SL Trade Union Work?

The last TL/ICL member to speak on the round disputed our assertion in “ICL vs. IBT” that “Today the SL has no trade union work at all,” and pointed to efforts by Spartacist League supporters in the Amalgamated Transit Union on behalf of Mumia Abu Jamal. That was indeed commendable. We are pleased that IBT comrades have also been able to play a modest role in obtaining union endorsements for Mumia.

However, when we used the term “trade union work” we meant something more than having a few supporters putting forward occasional solidarity motions. We meant it in the sense that it has traditionally been understood in our move-

ment, i.e., the creation of programmatically-based caucuses within the unions to act as:

“the nucleus of an alternative, revolutionary union leadership, uniting members of the vanguard with those union activists who agree with that section of the party program for the labor movement.”

—SL Trade Union Memorandum, 1972,  
*Marxist Bulletin* No. 9

Examples of such SL-supported caucuses in the 1970s were the Militant Action Caucus in the Communications Workers of America and the Militant Caucus in West Coast longshore. If indeed SL supporters are engaged today, or were engaged in 1995, in such work we stand corrected. But they are not, to our knowledge.

### Blocs, United Fronts and Conferences

Unlike the contemporary Spartacist tendency, we do not make a principle of refusing to participate in blocs or united fronts, or to attend conferences or to offer critical support to other leftists in elections simply on the basis that we may have substantial and important political differences. Like Lenin and Trotsky, we do not consider that reaching fundamental political agreement is a precondition for uniting in action for a common objective. Lenin’s military bloc with Kerensky against Kornilov, like Trotsky’s call for a united front between communists and social democrats against Hitler, should be models for revolutionaries today (see: “Building the Revolutionary Party and United Front Tactics”). Yet the ICL’s tactical approach often more closely resembles the stupidities of the Third Period Stalinists’ “united front from below.”

We accepted an invitation to attend a December 1997 conference of South African leftists, even though we did not endorse many of the particular positions of the sponsors and could not therefore sign the base document (see: “Report on South Africa”). At the conference we had the opportunity to discuss many of our differences, while the ICL members hung

around outside the hall and denounced us to whoever would listen. To each their own.

We have extended critical electoral support to the Socialist Party in Britain, despite its scandalous position on Northern Ireland (see: *Marxist Bulletin* Nos. 7, “Local elections and London referendum—No Vote to Labour!” and 8, “As Socialist Labour collapses... Is the Socialist Alliance a step forward?”), just as we gave critical support to an SL candidate in San Francisco in 1984, despite the SL’s scandalous call for saving the U.S. Marines in Lebanon the year before. In December 1974 the TL (then known as the Canadian Committee of the international Spartacist tendency) critically supported the candidates of the reformist League for Socialist Action in the Toronto municipal elections, despite the fact that the LSA and its parent, the U.S. Socialist Workers’ Party, was busy calling for Gerald Ford to send the U.S. Army to Boston to “protect” black schoolchildren from racist mobs. Perhaps the TL now thinks that too was a mistake.

The Spartacist League has also made much of the fact that in 1996 an IBT supporter within Arthur Scargill’s British Socialist Labour Party decided to bloc with some other leftists (some of whom were state capitalists who once belonged to Tony Cliff’s International Socialism tendency) to campaign inside the SLP for the party to include a call for expropriating the bourgeoisie in its formal program. Comrade Charles denounced the state capitalist members of this bloc as:

“infamous for their earlier support for counter-revolution in Eastern Europe, like Solidarnosc, even people who support pro-Hitler Ukrainian nationalists—I mean fascists! That’s the sort of people the BT aligns with.”

This is meant to sound very alarming, but all it boils down to is that we are willing to do joint work around particular issues with people who agree with Tony Cliff’s International Socialists (IS), or the United Secretariat (USec), despite the fact that they have indeed taken some very bad positions in the past. We recall that the Leninist Comintern in the early 1920s made a series of proposals for united fronts to the Second International, despite the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg in 1919, the betrayal of 4 August 1914, etc.

What makes Charles’ accusations particularly strange is that only a few months earlier (in November 1998) we and the TL were both “aligned” with similar pro-Solidarnosc elements in Toronto in a united front in sponsoring a demonstration in defense of Mumia Abu Jamal! In 1995 the TL participated, along with ourselves, the IS, the USec, and various social democrats, anarchists and others in a similar united front in Toronto. Apparently the ICL has decided not to participate in similar blocs in the future. So be it.

## Recycling a Lie

Charles’ presentation, which we can safely assume was carefully vetted by the ICL leadership prior to the event, reiterated the following deliberate lie: “In 1992 to make their cosy coalition with the Maoists, the BT dropped the right of self-determination [for Quebec].”

When the ICL first employed this particular slander (in the 3 November 1995 issue of *Workers Vanguard*) we responded as follows:

“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 inalienable 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.”

—1917 No. 17

No sane person reading that could conclude that we had “dropped the right of self-determination.” We are at a loss to explain why the TL would repeat such a brazen and easily refuted lie.

## Was James Robertson Covering for the IBT?

Charles’ script also contained the following oft-repeated lies:

“When we organized the 5,000-strong labor-black mobilization which stopped the Ku Klux Klan in Washington in 1982, the BT spat on this work. One of their members called it ‘ghetto work.’”

We never referred to this important mobilization as “ghetto work,” nor did we spit on it. In fact in a 12 December 1982 letter to the Spartacist League we saluted it:

“Congratulations on your victory on November 27th. Enclosed is a cheque for twenty-five dollars to help offset the cost for this successful labor/black mobilization that stopped the Klan. We sincerely hope the follow-up wins many new recruits to Trotskyism.”

This letter was personally acknowledged by James Robertson in a letter dated 10 January 1983 (but not actually posted until August that year):

“Thank you for your letter dated 13 December 1982 and for the endorsed check for \$25.00 toward our successful but inevitably expensive D.C. anti-Klan demonstration.”

Robertson’s letter concluded: “Sorry for the delay and do appreciate receiving your views and money.” Of course this was before the retroactive discovery was made that we had supposedly “spat on this work.” (The full text of both letters is reprinted in our *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 1.)

## A Few Comments About Ireland

Another allegation levelled by the TL during the discussion was the following:

“In their only major article in 1917 [No. 16] on Ireland of some seven and a half pages, the only mention they have of the Labour Party (which sent troops in to Northern Ireland in 1969) is to say that they did so in response to ‘a wave of pogroms against Catholic working class ghettos.’ This is nothing but back-handed support for the lie that British troops can be some sort of neutral arbitrator in Northern Ireland.”

This is another attempt to score points through deliberate misrepresentation. The actual passage in 1917 recalled that there had been:

“a wave of pogroms against Catholic working class ghettos, most notably the ‘Battle of the Bogside’ in 1969, in which police systematically attacked the main Catholic area of Derry, and its residents fought back with great courage. In response, the Labour government of Harold Wilson sent British troops onto the streets of Derry and Belfast to restore ‘order’ and put the lid firmly back on.”

Restoring “order” in response to determined Catholic resistance inevitably meant preserving the Protestant ascendancy.

In his presentation Charles also referred to Ireland in response to our criticism that the ICL was introducing a ‘two stage’ approach to the Quebec situation. In doing so, he suggested that Marx’s position that the “English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland” provided a precedent for the TL’s new position on Quebec. But this overlooks several important facts. Firstly,

Ireland was essentially a colony, and Quebec is not. Secondly, while there was a great deal of anti-Irish chauvinism and a history of brutal oppression at the hands of the English, there was little or no tradition of joint proletarian struggle between Irish and English workers. Marx, in his well-known April 1870 letter on the Irish question to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, remarked that one of the “most important” factors in determining his attitude was that:

“Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life....The Irishman pays him back with interest....”

Marx based his position on Ireland on political realities of his time, whereas the TL treats Quebec separation as a kind of categorical imperative entirely independent of the political conjuncture and the mutual relations within the workers’ movement. When and if relations between English-Canadian and Québécois workers become anything like as bitter as the relations between English and Irish workers were in Marx’s time we too will advocate immediate separation. But that day has not yet dawned.

In suggesting that the TL/ICL’s approach had an element of “two-stagism” we referred to the classically Menshevik/Stalinist “stages” theory. This is a kind of Trotskyist shorthand which may not be immediately obvious to people not familiar with our tradition. The classic example was the strategy of the “popular front” during the 1930s where the Stalinists advocated that workers had to unite with all anti-fascist forces (particularly the “progressive” wing of the capitalists) for an indefinite period of time and fight for some “more advanced” democratic (capitalist) political order before they could commence the struggle for their own proletarian class interests (socialism). In other words, the Stalinists claimed that there could be no “basis” for “successful proletarian struggle” until anti-fascist unity was achieved.

This advocacy of an anti-fascist “first stage” had nothing to do with the specific situation in a given country. Moscow laid down this policy for all the sections of the Comintern as the strategic line to be pursued for the indefinite future, regardless of the level of workers’ struggles, the strength of the fascists or any other factor. This insistence on pursuing the “first stage” of cross-class anti-fascist “unity” led to the destruction of the Spanish Revolution as the Stalinists struggled to crush any forces who transgressed the limits of bourgeois democracy.

While Trotskyists reject Stalinist “stagism” we are well aware that there are situations where the overwhelming immediate requirement is to defend bourgeois democracy by uniting all who can be united, including any anti-fascist elements that may exist among the bourgeoisie or petty-bourgeoisie, in a bloc to resist fascists or other anti-democratic forces. The classic case of such a bloc was that made between the Bolsheviks and Kerensky, the head of the capitalist Provisional Government, in September 1917 to abort an attempted rightist coup by General Kornilov who would have crushed all workers’ organizations and abolished all democratic rights. Another example was in Germany in the early 1930s when Trotsky suggested that the Communists should bloc with the pro-capitalist Social Democrats (as well as Catholics and anyone else willing to fight to protect bourgeois democratic freedoms) to smash the Nazi threat.

These examples could be seen as involving “two stages,” and in the common sense meaning of those words, they did. First the Bolsheviks united with Kerensky, and then, a few weeks later, rallied the workers to overturn Kerensky. But

what differentiates such proposals from Menshevik/Stalinist “two-stagism” is that they are conjunctural in character—i.e., tactical policies that are determined on the basis of the existing balance of forces and relations between different groupings in society at a particular point. They do not have the character of a rigid doctrine or categorical imperative.

Marxists do of course advocate separation in cases like Quebec if national tensions obstruct the possibility of workers’ unity. The advocacy of separation, in such situations, is designed to clear the deck for pursuing the class struggle. Examples abound but two current unambiguous cases are those of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Albanians in Kosovo. Like the question of forming a bloc against fascism, the advocacy of separation in such situations could be seen as proposing a “stage” in the struggle for social revolution—i.e., an acknowledgement that one must address the national question before it is possible to make qualitative progress towards socialist revolution. Marx made such a proposal as regards Ireland—based on an assessment of the concrete situation there.

But, as we argued in the debate, the ICL cannot provide evidence that Quebec separation has been necessary for the past 30 years as a precondition for “successful proletarian struggle” precisely because the record is one of bi-national workers’ struggles. This is why we suggested that the ICL’s new position has much in common with the discredited Menshevik/Stalinist theories which removed socialist revolution from the agenda in the name of completing a “first stage” of one sort or another.

## Québécois and Sri Lankan Tamils

During the discussion one participant drew a parallel between the situation of the Québécois and that of Sri Lanka’s Tamils:

“The Trotskyist League stood for the independence of Eelam [a separate Tamil state] in Sri Lanka for a long time. Are you objecting to that? Is that two-stagism in Sri Lanka? Why isn’t it—just because there is some killing in the streets all of a sudden you can have two stages—first you have to have the independent Eelam and then you have the socialist revolution?”

The comrade apparently does not fully appreciate the distinction between recognizing the right to self-determination and advocating that it be exercised at any given moment. When the short-lived Spartacist League of Sri Lanka was launched in 1981, it was reported that in the face of a campaign of “government terror against the Tamils” the SL’s “Lankan comrades were the only voices raised in the Sinhala community to oppose this murderous assault on the Tamils” *Spartacist* (No. 31–32, Summer 1981). This would seem to indicate deeply poisoned relations, yet the SL/L still hesitated to call for separation:

“At this time we do not advocate the establishment of a separate state, but urge the Tamil working masses to join in a common class struggle with the Sinhala workers and peasants.”

A few years later the SL did finally advocate the creation of a separate Tamil state:

“Now, however, in the wake of the mass killings of Tamils, the bitterness and hostility between the peoples of Ceylon has evidently become insurmountable at least in the short run.”

—*Spartacist* (No. 35, Autumn 1983)

The same comrade who raised the comparison with Sri Lanka asserted that in Quebec “there’s never been a case of a strike being broken by national chauvinism” and that “there’s never been francophones beating up on the Anglos on the picket lines.” This suggests that relations across the national

divide in Canada during the past 30 years has been rather different than those in Sri Lanka.

### ‘Not One Word About...’

During the debate a leading TLER remarked:

“If anybody was paying any attention to what Tom said tonight, you will notice that he said nothing about the NDP traitors and their chauvinism against Quebec. Not one word. Not one word about the chauvinism of the labor bureaucracy. Not one word about the Quebec labor tops and their nationalism. Nothing. Why? Because that’s the direction they capitulate in. And it’s not just here.”

In a similar vein, the TL’s account of the debate chastises our comrades for speaking:

“40 minutes without once acknowledging that Quebec is an oppressed nation, or making a single substantive reference to the existence of Anglo chauvinism. This silence was maintained by the BT through several rounds of discussion, despite repeated challenges by the TL.”

The TL did not in fact inquire whether we believed that Anglo chauvinism exists, or if Quebec is an oppressed nation, or if the NDP has a record of chauvinism, or if the Quebec labor tops are nationalists. These things are all well known. We saw the debate as a chance to seriously thrash out our outstanding differences—not to list things that practically every leftist in Canada already agrees on. If we wanted to play this stupid game we could come up with our own list of things the TL failed to mention—but why bother?

The technique of establishing guilt by omission has no doubt proved handy for the ICL leadership when it comes to manufacturing “evidence” to use against internal targets. But things that work well within the tightly controlled environment of the ICL do not always produce such good results in the big world outside. Sometimes ICL leaflets read as if the authors’ main objective was not to explain something, but rather to avoid leaving anything out. This results in propaganda that is full of slogans and jump-cuts but devoid of ideas—printed matter that teaches nothing and convinces no one.

### ‘Economism’

In an attempt to make something that reads like a political argument the *Spartacist Canada*/WV article charges comrade Riley with “Economism” for emphasizing the history of

united bi-national workers’ struggles. They claim that his “presentation rested on a straight equation of class consciousness and simple trade union militancy.” If this were true one might expect there to be some evidence. But there is no attempt to substantiate this claim, because there is nothing in Riley’s remarks with which to do so.

In fact we are only stating the obvious in observing that if relations were as hopelessly poisoned as the ICL claims then it would be evident in the course of working class struggles. Yet in major strikes involving workers of both nations since the 1960s there is a consistent pattern of solidarity across the national divide, with the more militant (and more class-conscious) Québécois workers tending to take the lead.

The link between the militant Québécois workers and the English-Canadian workers is strategically very important because of the latter’s relationship to the American working class. When autoworkers in the General Motors and Chrysler plants in Windsor, Ontario, spearheaded a one-day shutdown of that city in October 1997, autoworkers in Detroit, just across the river, paid very close attention. This kind of example can be highly contagious, and the connections between English-Canadian and U.S. proletarians could prove vital in determining the outcome of future class battles in North America.

### From the Pillars of Hercules to the House of Robertson

We have already addressed the ICL’s continuing smear campaign against comrade Bill Logan in “ICL vs. IBT.” We would only note that while thinking nothing of making ridiculous accusations about “internal torture sessions” in the IBT, the Robertsonians remain exquisitely sensitive to any suggestion that their own regime is less than a paragon of democratic rectitude. An example of this is the claim that comrade Riley’s suggestion that *Spartacist Canada*’s bizarre paean to Scottish national mysticism reflects “absurd leader-worship” is somehow “anti-Communist.”

Perhaps the ICL has good reason to treat the tall tales in the Declaration of Arbroath about the Pillars of Hercules, Greater Scythia, etc., more seriously than other nationalist “histories.” But we have yet to hear it, and until we do it will be hard to get rid of the nagging suspicion that the passage in question was somehow intended as a salute to the Royal House of Robertson.

# Quebec Nationalism & Class Struggle: Selected Readings

*Defend Quebec's Right to Self-Determination!*

## Not Bourgeois Nationalism, But Proletarian Internationalism!

*Reprinted from Spartacist Canada December 1976 (No. 11)*

Hatred and disgust for the corrupt Liberal Party regime in Quebec City, and particularly for Premier Robert Bourassa, led to the surprise victory of the bourgeois nationalist Parti Québécois (PQ) in the November 15 provincial elections. Although the longstanding Québécois nationalism of large sectors of the Quebec workers and middle class was no doubt inflamed by the English-chauvinist backlash against Trudeau's federal bilingualism policies, PQ Premier-elect René Lévesque took great care to play down separatism during the campaign and the PQ victory was not, in the main, a vote for independence.

The new government is committed to keeping Quebec within Confederation until a referendum on separatism is held in two years' time. But the elevation to power for the first time in Quebec's history of an explicitly pro-separatist party will engender an immediate confrontation over the national question with English-speaking Canada and the federalist Liberal government in Ottawa. Since the Québécois working class is the most militant on the entire continent, the intersection of the democratic questions of language and national rights in Quebec (which will be brought into sharper focus by the PQ victory) with the proletarian class struggle is of tremendous importance to the fight for socialist revolution throughout North America.

### The Language Question

As has often been the case in Quebec politics, the language question provoked more heat than any other issue in the election campaign. Immigrants and English speakers showed their dislike for the Liberal government's Bill 22 language legislation by deserting in droves for other parties, who promised to restore their right to freedom of choice in language instruction at Quebec schools. (Bill 22 had required demonstrated competency in English in order for children to enter the English-language school system.) Meanwhile more extreme elements among the Québécois nationalists continued their campaign for the abolition of the English schools altogether and the establishment of a unilingual French Quebec.

There is real linguistic discrimination against French speakers in Quebec, as well as in French-speaking enclaves in the rest of Canada. This is a consequence of the overwhelming dominance of English as the language of commerce in the North American political economy (including in Canada). Quebec is a highly integrated component of this political economy; whatever measures (short of total national independence) are taken to strengthen the French language in Quebec, this dominance of English will remain.

Marxists are completely opposed to all discrimination against the use of French in Quebec (and the rest of Can-

ada)—be it on the job or at school. We stand for full and equal language rights for all—including the Québécois—as part of our struggle against all national and linguistic privilege.

On the other hand, the Québécois nationalist demand for French unilingualism is itself profoundly discriminatory. This demand would create a ghettoized unilingual enclave on the banks of the St. Lawrence, one which is completely cut off from the rest of North American society. Such a step would be against the interests of the working class—not only the non-French-speakers, but also the French speakers, whose access to the mainstream of the North American political economy and cultural life would be forcibly curtailed. Even if Quebec were a separate state power, we would adamantly oppose the demand for unilingualism as undemocratic and chauvinist.

Opposition to national privilege means opposition to privileges for *any* language, and to any single language being the “official” one. It means the right of any nationality to receive instruction in the language of its choice. Capitalism in its period of decline provokes a resurgence of national and linguistic antagonisms; the only democratic solution to the language question in Quebec is for *equal language rights for all*.

### Independence and the Class Struggle

The presence of an avowedly separatist party on the government benches in Quebec City poses the question of independence for Quebec more sharply than ever before. Even though pre- and post-election opinion polls have claimed that only a small minority (less than 20 percent) of Québécois actually favor Quebec's secession from the rest of Canada, a strong nationalist (though not necessarily separatist) sentiment does exist throughout Quebec society. The November 15 vote may well lay the basis for a dramatic increase in support for independence.

As the PQ seeks greater autonomy for Quebec through an increase in provincial powers, the federal parliament will oppose handing over any significant powers. The inevitably sharp conflicts between the staunchly federalist Liberal Party regime in Ottawa and the PQ, combined with the upsurge of anti-French chauvinism in the Western provinces, could bring the situation to a boiling point. Trudeau's Liberals—or, for that matter, virtually any other Ottawa government—would adamantly oppose independence, because Quebec's secession would seriously threaten the very existence of Confederation.

Marxists by no means regard bourgeois Canadian Confederation as sacrosanct. The establishment of an independent Canadian state under the 1867 British North America Act

carved an artificial separate country out of the northern half of the continent. This both artificially divided the English-speaking North American nation and codified the oppressed minority status of the French-speaking Québécois (who were denied their right to independence). The plea for the “national unity” of Canada raised by Trudeau and Co. (and echoed by the NDP and the labor officialdom) in order to deny Quebec’s right to self-determination is undemocratic and reactionary to the core.

One of the most fundamental tasks of revolutionaries in English Canada is to fight for Quebec’s *unconditional* right to self-determination, i.e., its right to independence. Leninists must unalterably oppose any federal government move to prevent the exercise of this right—be it by citing constitutional barriers or the results of a fake Canada-wide referendum on separatism, or by militarily occupying Quebec (as it did in the wake of the October 1970 FLQ [Front de Libération du Québec] terrorist attacks).

As in the case of the language question, the Leninist position on the national question is based on opposition to all forms of inequality or privilege. For Leninists, upholding the democratic right to self-determination is a means of combatting the bourgeois ideology of nationalism. The struggle against unjust national privilege is aimed at eliminating national antagonisms, the objective basis of popular support for nationalism. Only the defense of the right to national self-determination can ensure that all-pervasive nationalist obstacles are removed so that the vital class questions may be brought to the fore.

In the case of colonies like pre-WW II India or Puerto Rico today, the right to self-determination can be realized only through immediate and unconditional independence. In multi-national states like Canada the question of political independence is placed on the agenda when national antagonisms decisively cut across the class struggle. At such a point Marxists go beyond upholding the *right* to self-determination and actively *advocate* independence.

For example, Lenin argued that it was necessary to support the call for the independence of Norway from Sweden early this century. National antagonisms between the Swedish and Norwegian working people had become so envenomed that breaking the oppressive tie of a common state power was the only way to lay the basis for genuine class unity.

Should conflicts over the language question, immigration policies, use of federal troops and other issues escalate national tensions in Canada to a similar point, then we would be obliged to demand independence for Quebec. However, given the high degree of integration of the North American economy and the potential leading role of the militant Québécois proletariat in the North American socialist revolution, the failure to achieve class unity within the framework of the present single state power in Canada would represent a setback for the working class. A large share of the blame for this defeat would rest on the shoulders of the chauvinist leadership of the English-speaking working class, which arrogantly refuses to recognize the national oppression of the Québécois.

Although the most combative sectors of the Quebec proletariat are undoubtedly sympathetic to the nationalist program, they have also played a key role in sparking many recent cross-Canada labor actions. Quebec workers notably spearheaded militant action by the *entire* Canadian proletariat against Trudeau’s wage controls. Recent postal and railway strikes began on the initiative of Montreal locals of country-wide unions. With an independent Quebec, important links among workers of both North American nations such as international and cross-Canada unions might well be lost, thus retarding the struggle for proletarian power. Despite the wishful thinking

of the left nationalists, the road to socialist revolution for the Québécois proletariat lies alongside, not apart from, its class brothers and sisters in English-speaking North America.

### Labor Fakers Front for Lévesque

In spite of their demonstrated militancy and class-consciousness, Quebec workers remain without an independent class party—thanks above all to the left-talking but class-collaborationist union bureaucrats. The leadership of all three labor centrals either openly or tacitly called for support to the PQ in the November 15 elections. Former Liberal cabinet minister Lévesque “reciprocated” by reaffirming the PQ’s refusal to accept financial donations from the labor movement, on the grounds that to do so would undercut its ability to deal “squarely” with the unions. Indeed, having the PQ in power is no victory for the working class—given the opportunity, Lévesque and Co. will be every bit as ruthless against the unions as Bourassa.

From the Quebec Federation of Labour’s (FTQ) Louis Laberge, to Norbert Rodrigue of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the Quebec Teachers Federation’s (CEQ) Yvan Charbonneau—all the labor tops affirm the necessity of a labor party “some day.” But for now, they all agree, the workers are not “ready”—so they should “prepare” by voting PQ!

The main oppositional current which has been campaigning in the unions for a labor party is the Regroupment of Union Militants (RMS), a formation which is uncritically supported by the ostensibly Trotskyist Groupe Socialiste des Travailleurs du Québec (GSTQ). The RMS has a reformist lowest-common-denominator program calling for the independence of the labor movement from the state, united labor action and a labor party. Its broader (but equally reformist) program for the labor party is supposedly based on “demands expressed by the workers themselves”—i.e., economist demands upheld by the bureaucrats.

The RMS is nothing more than a pressure group on the incumbent labor tops (especially the more “left” ones), which seeks to induce them to build a labor party on their own program. In the recent elections, the RMS went so far as to set up an electoral bloc with the tiny and discredited rump of the social-democratic Quebec NDP—on the latter’s program.

But Quebec workers do not need a party of small-change electoralist reformism like the one the RMS seeks to provide. Nor do they require a nationalist laborite “alternative” to the PQ: a separate Quebec workers’ party, a Quebec-separatist NDP combining the worst elements of social-democratic cretinism and petty-bourgeois nationalism. The political struggle of the working class must be directed against the existing state power; so long as Quebec remains a part of Canada, Québécois workers must fight in common with their English-speaking class fellows for a workers’ party which will achieve a workers’ government for the *entire* Canadian proletariat.

The achievement of state power by the working class—both English and French—in Canada and the United States will open the road to the further economic and cultural development which has been blocked by capitalist society in its death throes. The Marxist program is an *internationalist* one: for the gradual disappearance of nationalist ideology and the voluntary assimilation of nations. However the full and voluntary assimilation of nations is possible only under socialism; capitalism in the imperialist epoch can only exacerbate nationalist antagonisms and heighten national oppression, to the detriment of the proletarian class struggle. Only the most consistent defense of democratic national and language rights—based on the principle of the equality of nations—can lay the basis for welding the vitally necessary international proletarian unity against capitalism.

## Quebec Nationalism and the Class Struggle

Reprinted from Spartacist Canada January 1977 (No. 12)

The following memorandum on Quebec was adopted at the last Trotskyist League Central Committee plenum.

1. Leninism and nationalism are two fundamentally counterposed political viewpoints. Thus while we struggle against all forms of national oppression, we are also opposed to all forms of nationalist ideology. A socialist world economy will provide the foundation for the gradual disappearance of national antagonisms and the voluntary assimilation of nations. However capitalism in its period of decay intensifies national oppression and exacerbates reactionary nationalist conflicts. We stand on the principle of the equality of all nations, and support their unconditional right to self-determination. Only by upholding such a democratic guarantee against national oppression and privilege can we combat nationalist ideology and lay the basis for international proletarian unity against capitalism, unencumbered by overriding national antagonisms.

2. For colonies (e.g., Puerto Rico), the right to self-determination can only be expressed through immediate and unconditional independence. In oppressed nations within multi-national states the question of whether or not to *advocate* independence depends on the depth of national antagonisms between the working people of the different nations. If relations have become so poisoned as to make genuine class unity impossible within a single state power, we support independence as the only way to remove the national question from the agenda and bring the class issue to the fore. The Bolsheviks did not find it necessary to *advocate* independence for the oppressed minority nations in Tsarist Russia, yet Lenin did support the call for Norwegian independence from Sweden.

3. The Parti Québécois victory in the aftermath of growing national antagonisms over the language question in both Quebec and English-speaking Canada raises the question whether we should go from supporting the *right* to self-determination for Quebec to advocating its independence. The nationalist sentiment among many sections of the Quebec proletariat has not prevented Quebec workers from taking the lead in many Canada-wide labor actions, the most important being October 14, the first national general strike in the history of the North American labor movement. Except for the petty-bourgeois strata within the labor movement which are the traditional social base of nationalist movements (teachers and civil servants), there has been no discernible trend toward breakaways from the international industrial unions to Quebec nationalist unions. Pre-election polls which accurately reflected the electoral outcome found that only 18 percent of the Québécois actually desire independence. *At this time* we therefore continue our previous policy of advocating Quebec's right to self-determination while opposing independence. Were the question posed *now* in a referendum we would still insist on voting "no" to independence.

But we also recognize that the English-chauvinist reaction to bilingualism, combined with manifestations of French-language chauvinism among the Québécois (e.g., Bill 22, the air traffic controllers' strike), indicate that national antagonisms could very rapidly escalate to the point where common class unity could be torn asunder. Although the PQ victory was primarily an anti-Liberal backlash, nonetheless it has al-

ready led to growing confrontations between Quebec and Ottawa, confrontations which will probably serve to inflame the existing national antagonisms. Thus our opposition to advocating independence *now* by no means precludes advocating independence in the immediate future (e.g., by the time of the PQ-proposed referendum in two years). Whether the cause of common class unity is ultimately better served within a common state power or an independent Quebec has not yet been subjected to a decisive historic test and outcome.

4. Advocacy of independence would still have the goal of *combatting* nationalist ideology. Independence for Quebec would hopefully lay the basis for unity on a higher level among French-speaking proletarians and their class brothers on the rest of the continent. Unlike the left nationalists, we put no stock in the reactionary-utopian strategy of fighting for a "Quebec workers' republic" or an "independent socialist Quebec." The achievement of a "Quebec workers' republic" is no more conceivable than a "California workers' republic." The high degree of integration in the North American political economy ensures that proletarian power will only be consolidated on a continent-wide basis. Joint class struggle, not regional/national parochialism, is the road to socialist revolution in North America. The posing of a separatist road to power for the relatively advanced and militant proletariat of Quebec is particularly criminal, since the Québécois working class could play a leading role in the entire North American revolution.

5. The nationalists' demand for a unilingual French Quebec is inextricably linked to their call for independence. English is the dominant language of the North American political economy and thus is the primary language of commerce and culture in Canada. Whatever measures may be taken in an attempt to protect the existence of the French language in Quebec, nothing short of total independence can forestall the gradual erosion of the language, and thus of the national identity of the Québécois people. This is an iron law of social history. We oppose discrimination against French-speakers, discrimination which reinforces and inflames chauvinist and nationalist reaction in both the oppressor and oppressed nationalities. But as mankind develops toward a socialist world system, national distinctions erode away. The PQ's stated aim is for an independent Quebec which is heavily reliant on commercial and other dealings with English-speaking Canada and the United States. But an independent bourgeois Quebec which seriously sought to maintain the French language and culture would have to gravitate toward Paris, the economic and cultural capital of the French-speaking world.

6. We adamantly oppose the demand for unilingualism in Quebec—whether it is independent or not—as reactionary and chauvinist. While we recognize and seek to redress the historic discrimination against use of the French language, particularly on the job and at school, we do this by fighting for *equal language rights for all*, not for new discriminatory regulations. Multi-lingualism—the right of every citizen in a multi-lingual state to receive services in any spoken language—is a just and democratic solution to the language question. Unilingualism—"official" status for any single language—is a thoroughly reactionary national-chauvinist position which places the narrow interests of one nation above the legitimate democratic rights of national minorities. Unilingualism in Quebec would also provide a perfect excuse

for the denial of language rights to French-speaking minorities by English chauvinists in other provinces. It would be particularly discriminatory against the hundreds of thousands of non-French-speaking immigrants, who have come to Montreal from relatively impoverished Southern European countries. Proletarian unity can only be forged through recognition of equal and democratic language rights for all nationalities.

7. So long as Quebec remains part of Canada, we seek to build a single revolutionary party throughout the country, and oppose the demand for a separate Quebec party as nationalist and Bundist. The Leninist principle is “one state power, one party”—the proletariat’s struggle must be di-

rected against the existing government, and not diverted along regionalist lines. For the same reason, we raise the call for a Canada-wide workers’ party based on the unions and with a class-struggle program. This does not mean fighting for a Quebec wing of the NDP—an ultra-reformist, English-chauvinist social-democratic party with no historical roots or obvious prospects in Quebec. Rather, it means fighting for a workers’ party which will achieve a workers’ government across Canada, as part of the struggle for socialist revolution throughout North America. It is to this task that the Trotskyist League of Canada and international Spartacist tendency dedicate themselves.

*LCUC Militant’s Motion Demands:*

## ‘Defend Quebec’s Right to Self-Determination!’

*Reprinted from Spartacist Canada April 1977 (No. 15)*

The following motion was presented to a March 17 meeting of the Letter Carriers Union of Canada (LCUC) Local 1 by militant shop steward Bob McBurney. According to postal workers at the meeting (which was attended by about 70 union members) the motion was defeated by a count of approximately two to one. Its failure to pass demonstrates that, unfortunately, bourgeois and bureaucrat-inspired anti-Québécois chauvinism is prevalent throughout the English Canadian workers’ movement—even in unions, like the LCUC, which have a history of joint English Canadian/Québécois class struggle against the capitalist class.

As McBurney pointed out in a leaflet distributed at the meeting:

“The issue of the right of Quebec to self-determination takes on added importance as the capitalist press cries out ‘save confederation’ and labor leaders like the UAW’s Dennis McDermott join with capitalist politicians to promote meetings to reinforce ‘national unity’. Already McDermott has agreed to help build Bill Davis’s reactionary ‘One Canada Conference’. To deny the Québécois the right to determine their own future as a nation, is to ensure that chauvinism will prevent the urgently necessary class unity of the English-speaking workers and our Québécois brothers and sisters. This objectively strengthens the hand of the capitalists and weakens the worker’s movement in the face of our common enemy. We must denounce any labor leader who participates

in this type of confederation campaign.”

Faced with this important motion in defense of the Québécois’ national rights, local president Alex Power and his flunkies said nothing, and refused to vote for it. Trade unionists in English Canada must fight for their unions to adopt motions like the following, in order to combat national chauvinism and forge proletarian unity.

### Motion for March 17, LCUC Local 1 Meeting

*Whereas:* the Québécois workers have been in the forefront of struggles against the boss in our union and elsewhere in the labor movement;

*and Whereas:* the greatest possible *unity* of the working class against the capitalists and their government can only be achieved if *English-speaking workers defend the democratic and national rights of the Québécois*, including their right to separate if they so choose;

*be it resolved* that: LCUC Local 1 go on record to recognize the right of Quebec to self-determination and encourage the national office to do the same;

*and be it further resolved* that: LCUC Local 1 pledge to take action necessary to defend this right if the Canadian government makes any move to deny Quebec national and democratic rights;

*and be it finally resolved* that: Local 1 send this resolution to our sister locals in Quebec as a measure of solidarity.

## Lévesque’s Labor Lieutenants Push ‘Socialist’ Nationalism

*Reprinted from Spartacist Canada June 1978 (No. 27)*

When Rene Lévesque’s bourgeois Parti Québécois assumed power in Quebec in November 1976 it was widely touted by the trade union bureaucrats as a government that would prove to be a “friend of labor.” However in its one and a half years in office the PQ government has shown that it is just as anti-working class as any of its Union Nationale or Liberal predecessors.

Quebec’s labor tops initially hailed the PQ’s first piece of anti-labor legislation (Bill 45) as an “anti-scab” law. But the

use of the PQ’s legislation to break recent strikes by iron ore workers in Sept Isles and workers at Commonwealth Plywood in Ste-Thérèse has shown that it is just one more weapon in the bosses’ anti-labor arsenal. In both strikes the PQ’s so-called “anti-scab” legislation has been used to protect scabs who kept production rolling while the capitalist courts issued injunctions to restrict the number of picketers. In the Commonwealth strike PQ labor minister Pierre-Marc Johnson showed his “neutrality” by ratifying a counterfeit “con-



tract” signed by the bosses and the company union set up by the scabs after the strike began.

### The Parti Québécois and the Unions

Since World War II the Québécois working class has been the most combative sector of the North American proletariat and has played a leading role in cross-Canada labor actions—particularly the October 14, 1976 “day of protest.” This militancy forces Quebec labor bureaucrats to assume a more militant posture than their opposite numbers in English Canada in order to retain credibility with their ranks. The bureaucrats’ occasional verbal radicalism is combined with continued electoral support to the nationalists of the PQ. In the November 1976 election the leaderships of all three trade union federations gave open or tacit support to the PQ, claiming that it was (to quote the Quebec Federation of Labor) the party that “stands closest to the workers.”

When the PQ sat on the opposition benches in the National Assembly it used to occasionally criticize unpopular anti-labor measures implemented by the Liberals. Even in office the PQ makes some attempt to make its bourgeois program a little more palatable for trade unionists by using a bit of social-democratic/populist rhetoric here and there. But Lévesque and Co. are well aware that selling Wall Street on their vision of a stable independent capitalist Quebec depends on the PQ’s continuing ability to control Quebec’s volatile proletariat. Thus the PQ put forward the infamous Bill 45 and has generally been taking a hard line with labor.

As disenchantment with the PQ deepens in the unions the labor tops have begun to take some of their “socialist” demagoguery out of cold storage. The Quebec union bureaucrats are all pretty good at talking “left” when the occasion calls for it, and the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) leadership has a reputation for being the most “radical” of them all. Thus it is hardly surprising that at the 20th Convention of the Montreal Council of the CSN held in April the union tops put forward a resolution calling for an “independent and socialist Quebec.” The Central Council of the CSN adopted a position in favor of independence in 1972, but this year the bureaucrats thought it expedient to “up the ante” and add a call for “socialism.” The CSN resolution, entitled “The Labor Movement and the Issue of Quebec’s Independence,” declares that “a real national liberation struggle can only be a struggle for socialism.” The CSN leaders even went so far as to call for an “independent political organization” for Quebec workers at the Montreal convention.

While the leadership of the Montreal Central Council of the CSN has embellished its nationalist program with a few “socialist” touches it has not wavered in its support to the PQ. Their resolution advises Quebec workers to wait and “see whether all these positive aspects of [the PQ’s] program will be carried out” before proceeding further (quoted in the *Forge*, 14 April). Quebec workers must not be fooled by the “socialist” rhetoric of the bureaucrats who, while talking about creating a labor party tell the ranks to “wait and see” about the PQ. The PQ is a thoroughly bourgeois party which represents those Quebec bosses who want their own state so that they can monopolize the exploitation of Quebec workers—nobody has to wait to see that, it is amply evident in the PQ’s program and in its record in power.

### Leninism and Québécois Nationalism

As Leninists we unconditionally defend Quebec’s right to self-determination. Only through the defense of the democratic national and language rights of the Québécois can the basis be laid for unity between militant Quebec workers and

their English-speaking class brothers and sisters against their common capitalist exploiters. But the way forward for Quebec workers does not lie through nationalism—either that of Lévesque and Co. or the “independence and socialism” sham of the CSN tops. The present signs of disillusionment with the PQ provide an opening for revolutionaries to break the Québécois working class from their illusions in nationalism.

The fake-Trotskyists of the Ligue Ouvrière Révolutionnaire/Revolutionary Workers League (LOR/RWL) have seized upon the CSN resolution to promote their conception of “socialist” Québécois nationalism. Congratulating themselves for being in the “vanguard” of the trade union brass with their call for an “independent and socialist Quebec” the LOR/RWL heralds the CSN resolution as: “...the most significant development in the Quebec labor movement since [the PQ victory of] November 15, 1976. It is a giant step forward for the entire labor movement” (*Socialist Voice*, 22 May). The RWL gave very favorable coverage to delegates at the convention who condemned the PQ for not supporting independence and argued that “the labor movement has to take the leadership of the struggle for independence while giving it a socialist content” (*Socialist Voice*, 8 May). The super-nationalists of the LOR/RWL attack the PQ for having “retreated on the question of independence.”

The task of revolutionaries is to combat the influence of nationalism in the working class:

“Marxism cannot be reconciled with nationalism, be it even of the ‘most just’, ‘purest’, most refined and civilised brand. In place of all forms of nationalism Marxism advances internationalism....

“To throw off the feudal yoke, all national oppression, and all privileges enjoyed by any particular nation or language is the imperative duty of the proletariat as a democratic force....But to go *beyond* these strictly limited and definite historical limits in helping bourgeois nationalism means betraying the proletariat and siding with the bourgeoisie.”

—V. I. Lenin, “Critical Remarks on the National Question”

The LOR/RWL’s promotion of the chimera of an “independent and socialist” Quebec can only serve to deepen the divisions between the Québécois workers and their class allies in the rest of the continent. There is no separatist road to power for the Quebec proletariat. Quebec is highly integrated into the North American economy, the home of the most powerful imperialist country in the world. A proletarian uprising in Quebec will either be the prelude to North American working-class revolution or it will be crushed. In the event that national antagonisms become so exacerbated that they constitute an impediment to class unity Leninists would be obliged to advocate independence for Quebec. But we recognize that this would be a step *backward* for the proletarian revolution. We would raise the call for an independent Quebec only in order to be able to forge unity on a higher level in the future.

The LOR/RWL complains that the CSN resolution lacks any proposals for implementation, such as running candidates in the federal elections. But while these revisionists call for CSN candidates to campaign on a program of “independence and socialism” in Quebec, in English Canada they continue to build the English-Canadian chauvinist, pro-capitalist NDP.

Quebec workers must struggle together with the English-speaking working class for the creation of a workers’ party armed with a revolutionary program. Such a party can only be built in opposition to both the chauvinist labor misleaders in English Canada and the nationalist union bureaucrats in Quebec.

## Exchange on Quebec

# Leninism vs Nationalism

Reprinted from Spartacist Canada October 1978 (No. 30)

Montreal

12 June 1978

Comrades:

I am taking the opportunity of this first letter to deal with a subject which we were not able to get started on at our meeting on the tenth of this month: the national question in Quebec.

According to the Spartacist League: "Leninism and nationalism are two fundamentally counterposed political viewpoints. Thus while we struggle against all forms of national oppression, we are also opposed to all forms of nationalist ideology" (see "Quebec Nationalism and the Class Struggle," *Spartacist Canada*, January 1977). The official position which follows is support for the right of self-determination for Quebec, while opposing its independence. For all progressive Québécois this is clean and clear support for Canadian imperialism and a denial of the fundamental right of the Québécois to choose their political mode of existence.

Wasn't it Marx who said: "Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself as the nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word" (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*).

To be sure, as a communist I am opposed to the leadership of the Parti Québécois and its bourgeois independence. However, to the extent that the progressive forces have not regrouped and cannot present a valid alternative, the national question will remain the monopoly of the PQ and we must support it in the face of Ottawa, because the independence of the Quebec people is a necessary precondition for coming to class consciousness, for any communist revolution.

How can you think about presenting an international point of view to a nation which does not yet perceive itself as a nation?

When the hostilities between the internal French-speaking and English-speaking groups in Quebec cease the Québécois will be able to turn toward the outside and play the role which will put them back in the international march of the proletariat.

At the moment, the national question, so often confused with the language question, absorbs all energy, to the point that French-speaking workers view the English-speaking Québécois with suspicion and prefer to ally themselves with the French-speaking bourgeoisie (the PQ) rather than the English-Canadian proletariat. Given its importance, the national question must be resolved as fast as possible.

The Spartacist League (SL) maintains that a socialist republic of Quebec is impossible. "A 'Quebec workers' republic' is no more conceivable than a 'California workers' republic.'" This is, I believe, a very poor understanding of the socio-economic situation of Quebec. Most probably the Republic of Quebec will be established under the leadership of the PQ and it will be bourgeois, for sure. The Quebec bourgeoisie in power will find itself isolated in the face of a combative proletariat. It will not be able to hang on very long.

Since the SL maintains that unilingualism is a totally chauvinist and reactionary nationalist position, it is enough for me to reply that it is certainly a regrettable measure, but one that is essential for our survival, imposed by the objective conditions of our existence, and I allow myself one question: How

many official languages are there in France?

A few lines later you add, "Unilingualism in Quebec would also provide a perfect excuse for the denial of language rights to French-speaking minorities by English chauvinists in other provinces." To that I could reply that these rights have been refused for 121 years, even though at the time of Confederation the French-speaking population represented more than 45 percent of the total Canadian population. So surely they don't need the perfect excuse!

Your position resembles that of CCL(M-L) [Canadian Communist League (Marxist-Leninist)], see the *Forge* of 14–28 April 1978 or the review criticism of that article in *Lutte Ouvrière* of 17 May 1978, page 10....

My position is conditioned by the fact that I am a Québécois and perhaps am not sufficiently objective when faced with this question. I think, however, that my opinion takes into account the real conditions and struggle of the Québécois.

A sympathizer of the LOR who is not indifferent to the iSt,  
Richard Grignon

\* (1) It is enough to remember how Davis, the premier of Ontario, very quickly withdrew a private bill which had been accepted in the House at its second reading. This private bill guaranteed public services in their own language to French speakers in the province.

(2) Even before Law 101 went into effect, the premiers of the nine English-speaking provinces rejected the reciprocity agreements proposed by the Québécois at St. Andrews.

15 August 1978

Dear Richard:

Please excuse the delay in our reply to your letter of 12 June. A number of events, in particular our national conference, militated against an earlier response.

It is indeed unfortunate that the national question in Quebec was not taken up in our last discussion in Montreal. Although you profess agreement with many of our criticisms of the United Secretariat's capitulation to bourgeois ideology such as feminism, it is clear from your letter that you find yourself in agreement with the Ligue Ouvrière Révolutionnaire's capitulation to the bourgeois ideology of nationalism. Moreover, it appears that you have assimilated some of the standard LOR slanders and distortions of the iSt's [international Spartacist tendency] position on the national question.

This stands out most sharply in your statement that "for all progressive Québécois this [the iSt's position on Quebec] is clean and clear support for Canadian imperialism and a denial of the fundamental right of the Québécois to choose their political mode of existence." Yet in the sentence immediately preceding this you acknowledge that our "official position is support for the right to self-determination for Quebec, all the while opposing its independence." For Leninists the right to self-determination *can only mean* the right of the Québécois to choose "their political mode of existence" insofar as we are talking about the national question. The right to self-determination means the right of the Québécois to choose independence. This is hardly "clean and clear support for Canadian imperialism" which denies the Quebec nation this very right.

We are unconditionally opposed to the forcible retention of Quebec within the borders of Canada. If the people of Quebec actually choose to secede (e.g., in a democratic referendum) then we will call for the active defense of that choice, including strikes, refusal to handle military goods and other concrete actions of solidarity by the English-speaking labor movement (in the U.S. as well as Canada) against any attempt to forcibly prevent Quebec from separating.

Like Lenin, we distinguish between *defending* the right of an oppressed nation to independence and advocating at any particular time that an oppressed nation choose independence. To use Lenin's analogy, to advocate the right of divorce does not mean that we advocate under all conditions divorce. In his "Resolution on the National Question" written for the 1913 conference of the Central Committee of the RSDLP Lenin states:

"The right of nations to self-determination (i.e., the constitutional guarantee of an absolutely free and democratic method of deciding the question of secession) must under no circumstances be confused with the expediency of a given nation's secession. The Social Democratic Party must decide the latter question exclusively on its merits in each particular case in conformity with the interests of social development as a whole and with the interests of the proletarian class struggle for socialism."

In "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" Lenin draws a very clear distinction between the unconditional right of nations to self-determination and the demand for secession:

"The demand for a 'yes' or 'no' reply to the question of secession in the case of every nation may seem a very practical one. In reality it is absurd; it is metaphysical in theory, while in practice it leads to subordinating the proletariat to the bourgeoisie's policy. The bourgeoisie always places its national demands in the forefront, and does so in categorical fashion. With the proletariat, however, these demands are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle.... That is why the proletariat confines itself, so to speak, to the negative demand for the recognition of the *right* to self-determination without giving guarantees to any nation, and without undertaking to give *anything at the expense* of another nation."

—*Collected Works*, Vol. 20, emphasis added

Unlike the bourgeois nationalist PQ and petty-bourgeois "proletarian" nationalist LOR, we do not "put national demands in the forefront." Like Lenin, our position on the national question takes as primary what will advance the class struggle and promote the unity of the workers of both nations against their common class enemies. Hence, we address the historic national oppression of the Québécois in order to overcome national divisions within the workers' movement and lay the basis for working-class solidarity across national lines, not to promote nationalism.

To this end, our propaganda and activity are based on what Lenin called "a two-sided task: to combat nationalism of every kind...(and) to recognize...the right of nations to self-determination, to secession." In English Canada, the oppressor nation, the fundamental duty of revolutionaries is the unconditional defense of Quebec's democratic national and language rights. Against the English-Canadian chauvinism transmitted to the labor movement by the trade union bureaucrats and the right-wing social democrats of the NDP we fight for the *unconditional defense of Quebec's* right to self-determination. In Quebec, it is the task of Leninists to struggle against nationalist sentiments in the working class and to shatter any illusions of Québécois workers in the bourgeois nationalist PQ. Nationalism, whether it be of the oppressor or the oppressed nation, is a bourgeois ideology—a barrier to

the class struggle.

Today, while *firmly defending* the right of the Québécois to secede if they choose to do so, we do not call for the secession of Quebec. We do not hold that national antagonisms have become so intense as to separate Quebec workers from "the international march of the proletariat." However, if national oppression becomes so deeply felt by the workers of Quebec as to decisively undercut working-class unity then we would advocate independence.

To say that our position is a prop for the Canadian imperialist state is to say that Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who did not always *advocate* independence for the oppressed nations in Tsarist Russia, were Tsarist agents—supporters of this reactionary "prison house of peoples." For us, as for the Bolsheviks, the interests of the working class and the struggle for socialist revolution are always primary. However, in your attempt to reconcile Leninism and nationalism you stand Lenin on his head with the argument that the struggle for socialism is *subordinate* to the national struggle.

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 and is counterposed to Trotsky's Permanent Revolution. Hence, it is not surprising that you have opted for the nationalist interpretation of the often quoted passage you cite from the *Communist Manifesto*. Moreover, you have chosen to omit the two key introductory sentences in your citation.

In its entirety the passage you seek to use to bolster an argument for nationalism reads:

"*The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.* Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word." [emphasis added]

Within the workers' movement this passage has historically been a source of controversy between nationalist reformists and revolutionary internationalists. Heinrich Cunow, a leading German social-democratic theoretician, tried to derive a specific "proletarian nationalism" from the *Manifesto*. Roman Rosdolovsky in his "Workers and the Fatherland" (reprinted in the IMG's [International Marxist Group] theoretical organ, *International*, Winter 1977) points to the social patriotism and social chauvinism derived from a nationalist interpretation of this passage. Cunow used it to argue that the workers will "become the nation" through the parliamentary road to power; in its introduction to the *Communist Manifesto* the Austrian Communist Party used it to bolster the "anti-fascist front" and the workers' "national" defense of the fatherland; and you would use it to argue the case for Quebec independence and a "workers' republic of Quebec."

Against Cunow, Rosdolovsky argues for the internationalist interpretation which alone is compatible with the theoretical and practical life work of Marx and Engels:

"When the *Manifesto* says that the workers 'have no country,' this refers to the bourgeois national *state*, not to nationality in the ethnical sense. The workers 'have no country' because, according to Marx and Engels, they must regard the bourgeois national state as a machine for their oppression—and after they have achieved power they will likewise have 'no country' in the political sense, inasmuch as the separate socialist national states *will be only a transitional stage on the way to the classless and stateless society*

*of the future, since the construction of such a society is possible only on the international scale!*"

—emphasis in original

Communists approach the national question *not as nationalists*, but from the standpoint of what will advance the class struggle and in what way international proletarian unity can be forged as an essential condition for the victory of the world revolution and the international consolidation of socialism.

The LOR's position on the national question in Quebec to which you are obviously sympathetic is just the opposite. It approaches the national question as nationalists while attempting to differentiate itself from the PQ with its call for a "workers' republic of Quebec." In your letter you object to our characterization of this demand as utopian. Yet you seem to be convinced yourself that "most probably the Republic of Quebec will be established under the leadership of the PQ and it will be bourgeois for sure." You argue that the PQ would not be "able to hang on very long" in the face of the combative Quebec working class and that an independent capitalist Quebec would only be a transition to an "independent, socialist Quebec." But how long would the Quebec proletariat be "able to hang on" to state power if it remains isolated from its English-speaking class allies in the rest of North America faced with the most powerful imperialist country in the world?

You claim that our rejection of the demand for a "workers' republic of Quebec" shows "a very poor understanding of the socio-economic situation in Quebec." But, the high degree of integration of the North American political economy and the overwhelming economic, political and military predominance of the United States means that proletarian power will only be consolidated on a continent-wide basis. Proletarian revolution in any part of North America which fails to achieve state power in the U.S. is ultimately doomed.

The demand for a "workers' republic of Quebec" is not only utopian, it is reactionary. The Quebec proletariat is today the most militant and combative in North America and could play a leading role in the North American socialist revolution. Yet the LOR calls for militant Quebec workers to break away from the mainstream of the North American workers' movement and attempt to build its own workers' state. For Leninists, advocating the right to self-determination is aimed at forging international working-class unity, not at fostering nationalist divisions within the working class. In an article entitled "Corrupting the Workers with Refined Nationalism," Lenin wrote:

"The class-conscious workers fight hard against *every kind* of nationalism, both the crude, violent, Black-Hundred nationalism, and that most refined nationalism which preaches the equality of nations *together* with...the *splitting up* of the workers' cause, the workers' organizations and the working-class movement *according to* nationality."

—*Collected Works*, Vol. 20, emphasis and ellipsis in the original

The separatist road to power preached by the left nationalists of the LOR could only lead to the defeat of the Quebec working class—a defeat which would be a setback for the entire North American working class.

On the language question, in your letter you state that the PQ's Bill 101 "is certainly a regrettable measure but it is essential for our survival." The erosion of the French language in North America, where the language of commerce is English, is undeniable. But, while defending the democratic na-

tional and language rights of the oppressed, Leninists are no defenders of "national culture." Writing in 1913 Lenin polemicized against those "socialists" who would defend the "national culture" of minority nations in the Tsarist empire:

"The proletariat, however, far from undertaking to uphold the national development of every nation, on the contrary, warns the masses against such illusions, stands for the fullest freedom of capitalist intercourse and welcomes every kind of assimilation of nations, except that which is founded on force or privilege."

—"Critical Remarks on the National Question,"  
*Collected Works*, Vol. 20

For the bourgeois nationalists of the PQ the only way to prevent the erosion of the French language is to attack the language rights of others. You ask "how many official languages are there in France" and go on to point to the historical discrimination against the French-speaking population in the rest of Canada. Leninists are opposed to privileges for *any* language and to any single language being the "official" one. We are not indifferent to the real discrimination against French speakers in Quebec as well as in the rest of Canada. But to conclude that this discrimination can only be redressed through attacking the democratic language rights of the English-speaking and immigrant communities in Quebec is to argue as a bourgeois nationalist not a proletarian internationalist. In "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" Lenin states:

"We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone the strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation."

The only democratic solution to the language question in Quebec is for *full and equal language rights for all*.

In closing you remark that our position resembles that of the Canadian Communist League (Marxist-Leninist). This is a ludicrous amalgam. Our opposition to the call for Quebec independence derives from the interests of the working class and the class struggle; CCL(M-L)'s is based on the defense of the Canadian imperialist state from the two "superpowers." In the editorial to which you refer, CCL(M-L) is quite categorical in stating its political rationale for opposing independence:

"The separation of Quebec would make both English Canada and Quebec easier prey to these two greatest enemies of the world's people."

To preserve their credentials as "Marxist-Leninists" CCL(M-L) must of course prostitute Leninist orthodoxy on the national question to fit its social chauvinism. Hence we have found it necessary in explaining our position on the national question in Quebec to restate the Leninist position on the national question and its applicability to Quebec.

Unlike CCL(M-L) and the LOR, we fight not for "national unity" but for working class unity. The only way we can carry out this task is by fighting to unite the working class, not simply around democratic demands, but around a communist program—the only program that can overcome the national divisions within the working class. Our optimism about uniting the entire North American working class in the struggle for socialist revolution reflects our confidence in the Leninist program, just as the LOR's capitulation to nationalism reflects abandonment of it.

Comradely,  
Gary Taylor (for the Trotskyist League)

## Abolish the War Measures Act!

Reprinted from Spartacist Canada November 1978 (No. 31)

At 4:00 a.m., October 16, 1970 the Trudeau government imposed the War Measures Act on Quebec. Civil liberties were suspended and the army occupied Montreal while police rounded up over 450 labor leaders, Quebec nationalists and leftists. At the time Trudeau tried to justify the draconian measures by claiming they were necessary to prevent an “apprehended insurrection” in the wake of the kidnappings of a Quebec government official and a British diplomat by the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ).

Several federal cabinet ministers leaked details of the alleged “insurrection” to the press—the FLQ was supposedly aiming at deposing Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa’s Liberal government and installing an FLQ “Provisional Government” in its place. The prime minister of this imaginary “provisional government” was supposed to be none other than Claude Ryan, then editor-in-chief of *Le Devoir* and today the leader of the Quebec Liberals! When all the details of the absurd story were made public even Trudeau himself found it expedient to disclaim it and charge the press and the opposition with rumor mongering (R. Haggart and A.E. Golden, *Rumours of War* [1971]).

Trudeau’s fabricated “apprehended insurrection” should go down in history as one of the best examples of the technique of the “Big Lie” since Hitler accused the Communists of setting fire to the Reichstag. The whole purpose of this cynical invention was to provide a rationalization for the government’s attacks on the nationalists, the left and the labor movement.

As Lenin said in *State and Revolution*: “the state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another.” The War Measures Act is simply the legal codification of the bosses’ willingness to go to any lengths in defense of their “right” to oppress and exploit. In World War II the War Measures Act was used to outlaw the Trotskyists, the Communist Party and even the Jehovah’s Witnesses! It was also the legislation which was used for the racist evacuation and internment of 21,000 Japanese-Canadians from the coastal areas of British Columbia in the 1940’s.

In periods of relative social stability the “democratic” imperialists like to make a big show of their respect for the trappings of bourgeois legality—“the rule of law,” the “electoral process,” etc.—but as Trudeau demonstrated in October 1970 they are quite prepared to dispense with these niceties whenever they judge it appropriate. And today Canadian capitalism is showing signs of falling apart at the seams. The economy is in the worst slump since the 1930’s, the dollar seems to set a new all-time low every day, inflation and unem-

ployment are soaring and after three years of wage controls the labor movement is restless. Bay Street’s other big worry is that despite all of Rene Lévesque’s “moderation” and “gradualism” the Parti Québécois may end up taking Quebec out of Confederation. The federal government’s response to all this is to “get tough” with the labor movement, the Québécois and the oppressed minorities.

Just last month the RCMP raided the offices of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers while the government arrested union officials and threatened the entire membership with fines and mass firings. In December 1977 a police “morality squad” raided the offices of the *Body Politic*, a gay journal published in Toronto. Two months earlier the Montreal cops carried out mass arrests in gay bars. The government is also trying to take advantage of the current rightward political drift in North America to harass and disrupt the left. On September 29, 50 plainclothes police armed with high-power rifles surrounded a resort in Katevale, Quebec where a seminar involving members of In Struggle!, a New Left semi-Maoist organization, was taking place.

### Communists and Civil Libertarians

Operation Liberté (a coalition set up by the civil-libertarian Ligue des Droits de l’Homme—LDH) has called demonstrations and meetings across Canada on November 17 to protest mounting repression. These actions are to be built around two demands: “Repeal the War Measures Act” and “Against state repression of the workers’ movement and all those working for social change.” The Trotskyist League calls for the immediate abolition of the reactionary War Measures Act and for the unconditional defense of the right of the Québécois to self-determination. As the “tribunes of the people” Leninists irreconcilably oppose every attack on the rights of the oppressed by the capitalist state.

While the civil libertarians of the LDH appeal to abstract, “classless” democracy for the defense of the exploited and oppressed the Trotskyist League fights for a perspective of class defense of democratic rights as a weapon of working-class struggle. Unlike the phony socialists of the Revolutionary Workers League and In Struggle! who are content to hang on to the coattails of the civil libertarians, Trotskyists seek to win the advanced workers to a revolutionary perspective in the struggle for democratic rights. Only through the overthrow of the entire capitalist state apparatus and the establishment of a workers’ government—the dictatorship of the proletariat—can the repression of the bosses be ended.

## PQ Referendum

# Federalists Gloat—Lévesque Loses

Reprinted from *Spartacist Canada Summer 1980 (No. 43)*

“Vive le Canada,” “Quebec votes for Canada”: the English-language press had a field day when Rene Lévesque’s Parti Québécois (PQ) went down to defeat in Quebec’s May 20 referendum. By a margin of three to two Quebec voters rejected a “mandate to negotiate sovereignty-association” in favor of a “renewed federalism.” Anglophones celebrated in the streets of Montreal (drinking champagne in a 1926 Rolls Royce for the TV cameras) while Lévesque, practically sobbing, conceded defeat to 6,000 “oui” partisans at Paul Sauvé arena.

English Canada breathed a sigh of relief at Lévesque’s loss (while worrying that half of Quebec’s Francophones voted “yes”). A victory for the PQ could have initiated a process which might have led to the disintegration of the Canadian federal state. A few members of provincial parliaments in the West are already calling for amalgamation with the U.S., while the leaders of oil-glutted Alberta threaten to let Ontario “freeze in the dark” if they don’t get what they want from Ottawa.

There are two nations in North America, but the U.S./Canada border splits the English-speaking nation while locking the oppressed Québécois into “Confederation.” While the U.S. parades as the number one imperialist power, its Canadian junior partner plays the role of jackal: the Yankees rape, bomb and pillage, while their Maple Leaf lackeys follow behind, picking the carcasses clean. “See, no blood on our hands” is the favorite refrain of spokesmen for the Canadian bourgeoisie. But from the suppression of the Riel Rebellion in 1885 to the occupation of Quebec in 1970, the Canadian ruling class has always been willing to spill blood in the interests of “Canadian unity.”

## Why Revolutionaries Boycotted the PQ Referendum

For almost four years the Parti Québécois played politics with its referendum, defining and redefining “sovereignty-association,” shadow boxing with Liberal Prime Minister Trudeau at federal-provincial conferences, searching for the least offensive, least meaningful wording for the question. Despite the claims of Bay Street’s media that the referendum was just another step on Quebec’s road to independence, Lévesque was really only demanding a vote of confidence in his ability to wrest a few legislative powers and some more tax revenue from Ottawa. Even Trudeau had to admit that the referendum was not on separation.

The PQ refused to hold a straight vote for or against independence because it was evident that it would lose. Despite the growth of nationalist sentiment in Quebec in the last two decades, supporters of separation remain a definite minority—according to the polls, little more than a quarter of the French-speaking population.

Deliberately attempting to stifle any independent political intervention in the referendum campaign, the PQ required that all participants in the debate join one of two umbrella committees (headed either by the PQ or Claude Ryan’s provincial Liberals). The combative Quebec workers’ movement was thus denied the possibility of taking a stand independent of the bourgeois parties under the PQ’s rules. As we noted in *Spartacist Canada* last December:

“...the PQ’s referendum laws are an abrogation of even bourgeois democracy. Revolutionaries must denounce this

fraudulent referendum campaign. The only choice for Quebec workers is to boycott Lévesque’s referendum.”

The bourgeois-nationalist PQ has proven in more than three years of power that it is no “friend of labor.” Last fall it revoked provincial employees’ right to strike and imposed the worst contract in a decade. PQ finance minister Jacques Parizeau has repeatedly voiced his determination to hold down wages and cut social services to demonstrate his government’s fiscal “responsibility” to Wall Street and Bay Street. Yet the bureaucrats running both the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) (the two largest trade-union centrals in Quebec) advocated a “critical yes” vote in the referendum, arguing that a victory for the anti-labor PQ was a lesser evil than a victory for the anti-labor federalists.

This position was echoed by a variety of “leftist” organizations including the pro-Moscow Communist Party (CP). The CP explicitly stated that, while it had initially supported neither side, it “reconsidered” when the labor tops came out for a “yes” (*Pacific Tribune*, 2 May). Ross Dowson’s tiny Forward group in the NDP, the super-Stalinist, crackpot Bolshevik Union and the pro-Albanian Canadian Party of Labour also called for a vote of confidence in Lévesque. The only ostensible socialists to back Trudeau/Ryan were the Canadian nationalists of Hardial Bains’ Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist), official Canadian holders of the Albanian franchise.

## Defend Quebec’s Right to Self-Determination!

During the campaign the federalist forces generally hid the stick in favor of the carrot. While Ottawa and the provincial premiers repeatedly declared that sovereignty-association was “non-negotiable,” Trudeau promised to talk if only the Québécois voted no. While boxloads of pro-federalist “People-to-People” petitions from English Canada were dumped in Montreal’s Place Ville Marie, groups of English-Canadian businessmen rented airplanes to fly over the city with streamers proclaiming “love” for the people of Quebec and inviting them to vote “no.”

Claude Ryan, leader of the “no” forces, was less circumspect than many of his backers, accusing the PQ of using “fascist” tactics and “warning” about the possibility of violence from Cuban-trained terrorists! Lévesque responded with charges that “no” supporters had threatened to rape or kill various prominent PQ boosters. The real threat of violence comes from the federalist side, for behind the cynical appeals to friendship and reason is Trudeau’s threat to use “the sword” (as he did in 1970) to prevent Quebec from exercising its legitimate right to secede and form an independent state.

In the closing weeks of the campaign the federal House of Commons put on a rare display of unanimity as all three parties asked Britain to give Canada its own constitution, endorsed Trudeau’s attempts to make “O, Canada” the official national anthem and tried to rename the July 1 national holiday. This flag-waving patriotism must have turned the stomachs of many Québécois for they have experienced national oppression and blatant discrimination since Wolfe defeated Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham in 1759. The left, the labor movement and all partisans of democratic rights must

oppose any attempts to militarily subjugate Quebec. Defend Quebec's right to self-determination!

### Quebec Nationalism and the Class Struggle

The Canadian ruling class has historically kept Quebec a reservoir of low-wage labor concentrated in textiles, lumber and mining. The combination of national oppression and rapid industrialization since World War II created a militancy that led to a near-insurrectionary province-wide general strike in 1972. But the syndicalist labor bureaucracy, combining “anti-imperialist” nationalist rhetoric with political support to the bourgeois-nationalist PQ, has shackled the combative Quebec working class. Pseudo-Trotskyist organizations like the Groupe Socialiste des Travailleurs (GST) and the Ligue Ouvrière Révolutionnaire (LOR), instead of fighting to oust the traitorous labor misleaders, want to prod the nationalist bureaucrats into building their own independentist social-democratic labor party. But the creation of a Quebec-nationalist version of the English-chauvinist NDP is a dead end for Quebec workers.

The opportunists of the GST/LOR consciously ignore the *class* line which separates the bourgeois independentistes from the struggle of the proletariat for social liberation. Ex-boxer Reggie Chartrand's ultra-nationalist thugs in the “Chevaliers de l'indépendance” have no trouble understanding this point. Chartrand's goons reportedly attacked leftists distributing literature at several public meetings during the campaign and confronted leftist contingents in the Montreal May Day march with chants of “Long Live the Independence of Quebec” and “Death to Communism”!

As Leninists we adamantly defend the right of the

Québécois to self-determination—including their right to form a separate state. But we are not nationalists, and we do not advocate such a move unless national antagonisms have grown to such a point that the possibility of unity between English- and French-speaking workers is decisively blocked. The militant Québécois working class can and does play a leading role in united class struggles across the country, notably the 1976 one-day general strike and the bitter 1978 CUPW battle. Therefore at this time the Trotskyist League does not advocate the independence of Quebec. In a clearly worded, democratic referendum, we would today vote “no.”

Our position has nothing in common with the mealy-mouthed, paper defense of Quebec's right to self-determination voted by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The CLC's despicable betrayal of the CUPW strike weakened the entire labor movement and threatened to sabotage solidarity between workers of the two nations in the Canadian state. The labor movement desperately needs a leadership committed to both the active defense of Quebec's right to self-determination and to militant class struggle against the bosses and their government.

In order to unleash the tremendous militancy of the Quebec proletariat—which could play a strategic role in spearheading a North American revolutionary upsurge—it is necessary to destroy the nationalist illusions pushed by the labor tops and their “left” hangers-on. That can be accomplished only by a revolutionary workers' party which defends Quebec's right to self-determination in the context of fighting to uproot the entire system of capitalist wage slavery through the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a workers' government.

### *From the Barricades to the Parti Québécois*

## Lessons of the 1972 Quebec General Strike

*Reprinted from Spartacist Canada March 1983 (No. 57), slightly abridged*

“We must assume that what has been happening these past few days in Quebec is not representative of public feeling generally, for if it were a major part of Canada would be on the verge of revolution.”

—*Globe and Mail* [Toronto], 13 May 1972

For eleven days in May 1972 the ruling class and their media mouthpieces throughout North America quaked in their boots in the face of the near-insurrectionary general strike that rocked Quebec. Enraged at the imprisonment of the leaders of Quebec's three major union federations by the provincial Liberal government of Robert Bourassa, thousands of workers across Quebec downed their tools and staged spontaneous walkouts. As town after town fell to the control of striking workers a state of virtual dual power was created.

The Bourassa government was thrown into a state of desperate hysteria to preserve its rule, prime minister Pierre Trudeau screamed that Quebec union leaders were out to “destroy the country” and then-Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) head Donald McDonald chimed in, “they're not strikes, they're revolutions.” The 1972 general strike in Quebec did raise the question of political power. But in the absence of a revolutionary proletarian leadership the combativity dissipated. Hatred for the Liberal regimes both in Quebec and Ottawa (where Trudeau had imposed the War

Measures Act in 1970) combined with mounting resentment over the national oppression by arrogant and chauvinist English-speaking Canada was channeled, especially by the union leadership, into votes for the bourgeois-nationalist Parti Québécois (PQ).

In 1972 speaking from the opposition bench in the National Assembly PQ leader René Lévesque commented:

“Of course, if one is not to be narrow-minded, one must be sympathetic to the cause of the workers in our society, but...we must not forget that the PQ will perhaps find itself as the boss at the negotiating table....We must strike a balance between the demands of the workers and the possibility that the PQ might be in power during the next negotiations.”

—*Labor Challenge*, 8 May 1972

Today that is right where the PQ is, pushing a massive PATCO-style union-busting attack against the militant and combative Quebec labor movement.

From the opposite side of the bargaining table Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) president Louis Laberge has recently been mouthing off about calling all of Quebec labor out in a general strike against the PQ union-busters with the invocation, “Just remember what happened in 1972.” Indeed everyone from Laberge to Lévesque remembers all too well what happened then, and to a man—from the labor misleaders to the labor haters—all have been desperately trying

to avoid a repeat of this massive proletarian uprising, unprecedented in North American history.

### 'By Authority of the Workers of Quebec'

In late 1971 the FTQ, the Quebec Federation of Teachers (CEQ) and the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) formed the Common Front of Quebec's public sector workers to negotiate with the Bourassa government. On April 11, 1972 after months of government stonewalling and hardlining, Common Front workers walked out in an "unlimited general strike." But ten days later the union tops caved in to strikebreaking legislation and ordered the ranks—*who had voted to stay out*—back to work. This did not placate the government, which sentenced the three Common Front leaders—Laberge of the FTQ and CEQ president Yvon Charbonneau (both today in the same positions) as well as then-CSN president Marcel Pepin—to a year's imprisonment.

The powerful industrial proletariat was the first to respond to the jailings. On May 9 a motorcade of unionists taking Laberge, Charbonneau and Pepin to Quebec City to turn themselves in had barely left Montreal when thousands of International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) members from Montreal, Trois Rivières and Quebec City staged a spontaneous walkout.

The same night in Sept-Iles, a mining town in northern Quebec run by the Iron Ore Co. of Canada, a cop attack on a demonstration of angry unionists sparked massive meetings where workers voted overwhelmingly to strike. By the next day this town of 27,000 was being run by striking longshoremen, railway workers and miners—the roads were barricaded, the airport shut down and the occupied radio station broadcast union bulletins.

In the following days workers in other company towns across Quebec followed suit. Asbestos miners in Thetford Mines walked off the job followed by the town's public sector workers—together on May 11 they staged a 10,000-strong demonstration. In St-Jérôme 23 factories were shut down as well as hospitals, schools and other public services. At the request of the United Auto Workers union in the nearby town of Ste-Thérèse, strikers from St-Jérôme picketed the GM plant there. Over 2,000 auto workers who usually stayed in the plant for lunch poured out the gates, refusing to cross the St. Jérôme workers' picket when they returned. A GM executive who attempted to enter the plant was told "No one goes in. There's no work today." When he asked "By what authority?" he was told "By the authority of the workers of Quebec" (*Globe and Mail*, 13 May 1972).

In Chibougamau the walkout was sparked by angry wives, some of them teachers and hospital workers, who marched to one of the mines to pull their husbands off the job. By May 12, the fourth day of the strike, nine towns had been occupied by striking workers, over 80,000 construction workers were out across the province, teachers and hospital workers continued to walk out (occupying one Montreal hospital), transit mechanics and 8,000 municipal workers had struck in Montreal. And this was only the tip of the iceberg; the number of factories, hospitals, schools and towns shut down was impossible to keep track of as wave after wave of angry workers stormed out.

Several radio stations were taken over. From Sorel, Quebec came the following broadcast:

"This is CJSO, the voice of the workers. The next song we are going to play is called 'Adieu.' We dedicate it to all the workers who for the past two days have said 'adieu' to their bosses and the unjust policies of the government."

—*The Gazette*, 13 May 1972

Meantime the bourgeois press churned out article after article denouncing the "lawlessness" and "violence" being fo-

mented by a supposed "radical minority." But on May 12 the media's anti-labor diatribes were stopped for the day as workers from *Le Devoir* and *La Presse* walked off the job. Together with workers from Montreal's other two French-language papers they visited the *Gazette* and the *Star* "requesting" that they shut down production—a request that management couldn't refuse.

The next day the *Gazette* (13 May 1972) hysterically editorialized:

"We were forcibly closed by that minority of the labor movement which has been driving workers off the job in various other parts of the province, seizing radio stations, committing acts of vandalism and generally attempting to impose their will with violence and threats of violence."

But everyone from the Liberal regimes in Quebec and Ottawa to the capitalist media to the bosses' labor lieutenants in Quebec and English Canada knew that this was no action by some "lawless minority" but a largely spontaneous and well-disciplined working-class uprising that fundamentally challenged the capitalists' class rule. (The most violent incident throughout the strike happened in Sept-Iles when a Liberal Party organizer drove his car into a picket line killing one picketer.) For the most part the cops were unable to quell the walkouts and occupations as was pointed out in this account of the 1972 strike:

"...actions were so widespread that police adopted a policy of non-intervention. Their power was too thinly spread. If they provoked a confrontation in one area, they wouldn't be able to contain the snowballing effect. For once, the police were too weak to provoke violence."

—quoted in *Quebec: A Chronicle 1968—1972*

Coming to the desperate realization that it was quickly becoming the "minority" the Bourassa government increasingly tried to impose its "will with violence." Liberal president Lise Bacon sent out a secret telex ordering local party associations to recruit town thugs and hoodlums to vigilante squads (called "law-abiding citizens' committees") to attempt to break the strikes and occupations. A phony anti-strike meeting of a minority of construction workers (most of whom were in fact small-time contractors) was held under the leadership of at least two Liberal Party organizers in an arena rented by the Montreal Association of General Contractors.

But in the end it was not the Liberal government, its cops, courts and vigilante squads or fake back-to-work meetings that stemmed the tide of the 1972 general strike in Quebec. It was the return-to-work orders that came from the jailed Common Front leaders in Orsainville prison on May 17. They appealed for an end to the strike in the name of a "negotiated settlement" with the government. And what a settlement it was. Late in 1972 the Liberal government passed Bill 89 outlawing all public sector strikes as well as transport, maritime, rail or air strikes and then proceeded to jail, once again, the three Common Front leaders (who had been released on appeal in May).

### From the Barricades to the Parti Québécois

During the strike great play was given by the bourgeois press to a three-man split in the CSN executive. One of the three, Emile Dalpe, a former defeated Liberal candidate, charged that the unions were being taken over by "ideologists whose ideas can only lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat..." (quoted in *Labor Challenge*, 5 June 1972). But the ideas of the nationalist Quebec labor tops, for all their manifestos on "socialism," lead not to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" but to the rule of the nationalist union-busting PQ, who were swept to victory in 1976 and again in 1981 with a significant labor vote.

The flames of nationalism were only fueled by the role of



the English-chauvinist misleaders of labor in English-speaking Canada who went out of their way to isolate and denounce the 1972 general strike all the while virulently campaigning for “national unity.” At the height of the strike the executive issued the following report to the CLC convention:

“It is, therefore, essential that the Congress and its affiliated unions oppose those elements, in any part of Canada, which advocate the destruction of Confederation or a reduction of the federal powers as a means of pursuing selfish regional aims.”

—*Globe and Mail*, 15 May 1972

A token motion supporting the “bargaining alms” of the Common Front was passed unanimously but then CLC president Donald McDonald made perfectly clear the CLC’s opposition to the general strike: “...the CLC is not interested in and will not be party to any attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government” (*Globe and Mail*, 15 May 1972). Speaking from the CLC podium in 1972 former (now dead) federal NDP leader David Lewis solidarized with the jailing of the Common Front leaders. If the judge had given them 30 days instead of a year, he opined, the massive labor upsurge could have been avoided.

### **Fake-Trotskyists Push Nationalism— Canadian and Québécois**

If the CLC labor traitors used the 1972 general strike to wave the maple leaf and the Quebec labor tops the *fleur de lys*, the fake-Trotskyists of the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière (LSA/LSO—forerunner of the Revolutionary Workers League) did both. Throughout the course of the strike their paper, *Labor Challenge*, was filled with articles such as an interview with their leader Ross Dowson entitled “Will Trudeau fight U.S. domination?” (8 May 1972). As for Quebec the LSA/LSO’s minimal coverage was completely overshadowed by long-winded polemics against the “Canada firsters” of the Communist Party going under headings such as “In Defense of Québécois Nationalism” (24 April 1972).

The LSO’s consistent nationalism didn’t win them a whole lot of labor support but they did manage to attract the likes of one Reggie Chartrand. At the height of the general strike their youth press, *Young Socialist* (May—June 1972), ran an interview with Chartrand who said, “...I, along with members of the LJS and LSO organize demonstrations for the French language and the independence of Quebec.” In 1980 Chartrand along with his ultra-nationalist thugs in the “Chevaliers de l’indépendance” confronted leftist contingents in the May Day demonstration with chants of “Long Live the Independence of Quebec” and “Death to Communism”! So much for the progressive character of Québécois nationalism.

The LSA/LSO believed that their more-nationalist-than-the-PQ program would lead to overnight growth. It didn’t....

### **Not Bourgeois Nationalism but Proletarian Internationalism!**

The 1972 Quebec general strike was the most explosive political event in the history of the North American labor

movement. At the same time it was a dramatic example of what Trotsky called the crisis of proletarian leadership. Thousands of workers spontaneously take to the streets, occupy and run whole towns in a struggle that goes far beyond all craft and union divisions. For example the Quebec construction workers who walked out *en masse* were earlier deeply divided by the mutual raids of the CSN and FTQ; later they would be the target of the notorious Cliche Commission, a union-busting attack carried out in the name of fighting labor “corruption.”

In 1972 the determined militancy and combativity of the Québécois proletariat was pushed to the limit, to the point that what became brutally clear was the need for a proletarian internationalist program and leadership. At the time one couldn’t have found a more left-talking bureaucracy than the Quebec labor tops, who were busily turning out manifesto after manifesto calling to smash capitalism and build socialism. But for all their socialist rhetoric, 1972 proved that they were as loyal lieutenants of the capitalist class as their Meanyite counterparts in the leadership of North American labor. But where the nationalist Quebec labor bureaucrats used 1972 to build labor support for the bourgeois-nationalist PQ, the Maple Leaf jingoists heading up the English-Canadian labor movement attempted to keep the general strike from spilling over into their own ranks through orgies of chauvinism.

The dramatic rise of groups like the WCP and IS! in the aftermath of 1972 demonstrated that many workers, students and others looked to the left for a new leadership in opposition to Québécois nationalism. They didn’t find it in these groups whose anti-nationalism was forged in anti-Sovietism. Few turned to the LSO, who summed up the 1972 Quebec general strike with the comment: “Far from contradicting the radicalization of Quebec workers, this rise in support for the PQ, a bourgeois party, simply confirms what we have said about the nationalist character of the workers struggle” (*Labor Challenge*, 5 June 1972). Various centrists and syndicalists who wanted to strike a more left-wing pose seized upon the 1972 strike to promote their utopian nationalist strategy for an “independent and socialist Quebec.”

The Quebec labor tops channeled the labor battles of the early 1970s into votes for Lévesque’s PQ, which today is attempting to trash Quebec labor with strikebreaking attacks, in particular on government workers, which would do Ronald Reagan proud. In this crucial labor showdown Quebec workers must draw the lessons of 1972. What is desperately needed is a proletarian internationalist leadership that can win this militant and combative working class to the perspective of multinational revolutionary class unity in which it is destined to play a leading role. Alone on the left the Trotskyist League of Canada has fought for this perspective, unconditionally defending Quebec’s right to independence and at the same time fighting against Québécois nationalism. The road forward to the national and social liberation of the Quebec working masses lies in the united proletarian struggle for North American socialist revolution under the leadership of a Bolshevik Party.

*Exchange with l'Égalité*

## Marxism vs. Quebec Nationalism

Reprinted from 1917 No. 16, 1995

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 "*indépendantiste*" 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.

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 valuable 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 gi-

gantic 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.

<sup>1</sup> Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière/League for Socialist Action, Canadian section of the IVth International ("United Secretariat")

<sup>2</sup> La question nationale au Québec, in Pour un Québec indépendant et socialiste (éditions d'Avant-Garde. Montréal. 1977)

### Reply to *l'Égalité*

1 March 1995  
Montreal

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 ultranationalists. 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 heterogenous 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 perhaps 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 closely 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 immedi-

ately 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 jeopardize 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

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

*Reprinted from 1917 No. 17, 1996*

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 Parizeau (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 consistent 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 prefigured 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.

*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 pro-

grams 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 un-

ions? 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 leftish/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 English 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!***