Quebec's winter storm: the social issues

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The ice storm that struck a major portion of Quebec, southern Ontario and a section of the United States in January raised a number of important social questions.

The storm caused the deaths of twenty-two people across Quebec, not taking into account those individuals who fell from their roofs in an attempt to remove ice. One thousand electric pylons were toppled, as well as 24,000 utility poles; 120 transit lines suffered damage. The government mobilized 12,000 troops, the largest-ever such deployment during peacetime in Canadian history.

Tens of thousands of people were deprived of electricity for more than a month. 454 shelters were opened, often in wretched conditions, to receive hundreds of thousands of victims of the storm. Hospitals were flooded with patients, their doctors and nurses literally overwhelmed by the influx.

Thousands of people lost several weeks of work, producing a 250 percent increase in requests for unemployment insurance. The Quebec government offered those who had missed work a meager $10 (US$7) a day in compensation, and the federal government refused to waive the penalty for unemployment insurance requests, whereby the first two weeks out of work are not covered.

This was not the first time that an ice storm had caused a crisis: it happened in 1943 and again in 1961. Last year in the Anaudière region and in Labrador, two ice storms (with precipitation of 50 and 55 millimeters, respectively) caused extensive damage and deprived thousands of electricity. This year's storm lasted five days and produced between 50 and 90 millimeters of ice.

Was the crisis a purely natural phenomenon, an unforeseeable "act of god," against which science and modern technology were powerless, as the government and the management of Hydro-Québec claimed? Or did it involve, on the contrary, the combined effect of global pollution and the cutbacks carried out by all levels of government to slash budget deficits?

Government response to the crisis

The Parti Québecois (PQ) government of Lucien Bouchard responded to the crisis, as it habitually does, by throwing the blame on someone else, in this case—nature. As a general rule, according to Bouchard, the federal government is responsible, in one way or another, for each and every crisis. The socio-economic policy of the Quebec government—which does not differ in any respect from that pursued by the other provinces or Ottawa—is never the problem. What, however, does its policy consist of?

The PQ government has set about dismantling whatever remains of the welfare state. Health, education, public services, employment, all have been squeezed by budgetary constraints. At Hydro-Québec, the same policy of cuts and rationalization has been applied, in a context where the state-owned utility seeks to reposition itself in a new global economic reality.

The nationalization of electrical power was used by the French-speaking bourgeoisie in Quebec to reinforce its economic and political position in relation to its rivals in the rest of Canada and North America. During the 1970s, the Quebec government launched a vast program to replace home heating systems using oil with electric-run systems. The population's dependence on electricity assured Hydro-Québec a paying clientele which permitted it to offer electric power below cost to the large Quebec pulp and paper and aluminum companies.

This type of policy, based on the development of the national market, has been rendered obsolete by the globalization of markets and production. The world is dominated by financial markets and the hundreds of billions of dollars that shift each day from one region of the globe to another in search of the best return on investment. To make interest payments on their debts, controlled by international finance capital, governments must squeeze every penny out of their populations.

The drive to amass maximum profits leads to a policy of spending cuts, without regard to their impact on the public. According to Louis Champagne, president of the professional union of Hydro-Québec engineers, inadequate maintenance of the system was a central factor aggravating the crisis. Hydro has made numerous cuts in the last few years and money earmarked for maintenance has been channeled instead into the development of the export capability of the company. Jacques Ruelland, a social activist and professor at the University of Quebec in Montreal, asserts that Hydro-Québec's orientation changed a number of years ago: "From now on, Hydro is aiming at profitability. But does it exist to sell electricity to the

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Americans or to operate a reliable system?”

Profitability vs. social needs

The real problem does not lie in the conflict between reliability and export capacity. To satisfy a national market, as well as an international one, a reliable system is required. Hydro-Québec has to make its operations profitable to finance the Quebec provincial government deficit. This year half a billion dollars have been poured into government coffers to go toward servicing the debt.

The crisis caused by the ice storm will cost more than one billion dollars, but Quebec Finance Minister Bernard Landry has declared that the objective of reducing the deficit to zero will not be called into question. He announced that to reach that goal, taking into account the costs associated with the ice storm, new austerity measures would be necessary.

This is why the Bouchard government was so anxious to adopt as quickly as possible Hydro-Québec’s “emergency plan”—massive investments largely oriented toward export—while the ice storm crisis was still going on and thousands of people were still in the dark. André Caillé, a Hydro-Québec official, told Montreal’s *La Presse*: “Adopting the plan was the best response to give to the international financial markets. It was necessary to say to our partners that, despite the ice storm, we were going ahead. Uncertainty threatened to cost us millions of dollars.”

The Parti Québecois regime, using the damage to the system and the urgency of repairing it as an excuse, has adopted, in a series of decrees, the emergency plan prepared by Hydro-Québec management. This five-year plan includes $13 billion in investments by the year 2002. The PQ government bypassed the normal procedure of hearings before the BAPE (Office of Public Hearings on the Environment) and investigation by the Energy Department, and rebuffed the parliamentary commission on Energy, responsible for Hydro-Québec.

Beyond the reconstruction of all the facilities and equipment destroyed by the ice storm, the government decrees include plans for three interconnections with the American network and one with the Ontario network to increase its total sales of electricity by nearly 25 percent. Sales outside Quebec will grow by forty percent in five years.

Additional rivers will be rerouted, the Saint-Margueritte station will be put back to work and a program of thermal electricity implemented.

The utility intends to double its net profit to $1.8 billion in five years, increase the yield from its assets from 6 to 11.5 percent, and pay out more than $3.3 billion in dividends to the government.

In this entire program very little preparation is made for avoiding another crisis of the type produced by natural forces. There are no plans to bury power lines underground; in fact, the only changes are the installation of pylons designed to prevent a domino-like collapse of transit lines, and the construction of new lines around Montreal. The proposal to construct these lines was rejected by the BAPE several months ago, unless they were to be buried underground.

Technology and social organization

The “ice crisis,” in fact, was not purely a natural catastrophe. Scientists have established that the greenhouse effect, produced by the use of oil, coal and gas as sources of energy for capitalist industry, threatens the planet with major climatic changes. It is more than probable that the precipitation over the past several years is one of the consequences of these climatic disruptions.

Moreover, the planet is circled by scientific observation satellites which examine every movement of air current and variation in temperature. Granted that there is an element of unpredictability in natural phenomena, science and technology give society the possibility of preparing itself and minimizing the consequences of these natural developments.

The problem does not lie in inadequate science or technology, but in the capitalist organization of society, an anti-democratic regime entirely oriented, socially and politically, toward the production of profit for a tiny minority of people and corporations.

If there is a lesson to be drawn from this crisis it is the fact that the private interests of a minority of the population—bankers, managers of stock portfolios and large clients of Hydro-Québec, whom the government serves and wished to reassure by adopting the recent decrees—take precedence over the lives and safety of the great majority of the population.

The organization and use of public services—and this goes for the system of distribution and production of electricity as much as it does for the health care system—require the active and democratic participation of the population, as well as scientists and specialists in each field, focused on one common objective: the needs and well-being of the population as a whole.

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