

For working class unity against Chretien and Bouchard

Workers should oppose both federalist and separatist camps in Canada's constitutional dispute

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Four years after a majority of Quebecers narrowly rejected Quebec's secession from Canada, the federal Liberal government and Quebec's pro-secession provincial government are again crossing swords. Last month, Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien introduced a bill that prepares the political-legal terrain for Ottawa to refuse to entertain a secession demand endorsed by a majority referendum vote.

Chretien's Clarity Bill would empower Parliament to refuse to negotiate with Quebec, if it deemed either the referendum question or a majority vote to be "unclear." The bill would also make secession conditional on a re-negotiation of Quebec's borders, raising the threat that a seceding Quebec could be partitioned.

Quebec's Parti Québécois (PQ) provincial government has responded with a counter-bill which asserts that the Quebec legislature alone has the right to organize a referendum on Quebec's constitutional status and determine the referendum question. Bill 99 further stipulates that a majority in such a referendum is 50 percent of those voting plus one, and that Quebec's territorial boundaries cannot be altered without the consent of the Quebec government. The PQ bill contains an implicit threat that should Ottawa refuse to accept the PQ project for a reconfiguration of the state system in the northern half of North America, no matter the feebleness of the majority backing Quebec independence, or should the subsequent secession negotiations deadlock, the Quebec government will make a unilateral declaration of independence.

The Quebec separatists' fulminations notwithstanding, they are actually of two minds about Chretien's Clarity Bill, for they see it as providing a much needed means of rallying flagging popular support. By proclaiming themselves defenders of Quebec's "right to self determination," the PQ and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy hope to divert attention from the PQ's right-wing record and fan illusions that, because Quebec independence challenges the existing constitutional order and is opposed by the most powerful sections of Canadian capital, it is progressive, even radical.

The dispute between the federalists and the Quebec separatists is essentially a dispute between rival factions of big business and their supporters in the political and managerial elite. Although they wrangle over which government should have jurisdiction over social policy, the federalists and separatists agree that big business should play an ever-wider role in the provision of health care, education and other basic services and that social spending must be sharply curtailed so that the taxes on corporate profits and on the incomes of the well-to-do can be slashed.

The PQ represents sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie that calculate they could obtain a more lucrative deal with US

and international capital if they were freed from their traditional ties to Ottawa and the Bay Street (Toronto) banks. In bringing forward the Clarity Bill, the Chretien Liberal government is doing the bidding of the most powerful sections of big business, who believe the threat of Quebec secession has too long dominated the country's political agenda and scared off foreign investment. These sections of capital want the federal state strengthened, so it can more effectively support Canadian business in conquering overseas markets, and the energies of their political representatives focused on rolling back the social conquests of the working class.

Workers in Canada—French- and English-speaking and immigrant—should oppose both camps in this confrontation and counterpose to their rival appeals for "national unity" the struggle to develop a united offensive of working people against the big business assault on jobs, wages and public and social services.

This program of class unity is diametrically opposed to that being advanced by the organizations that historically have claimed to represent the interests of working people. The trade union-based New Democratic Party has pledged its support to the Liberal's Clarity Bill. Quebec's three labor federations—the Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of National Trade Unions and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec—have announced their readiness to form a *union sacrée* (holy alliance) with the PQ government in defence of "Quebec's rights." "The pro-sovereignty coalition, which has been dead for some time ... [is] beginning to take hold again," exulted CNTU President Marc Laviolette.

This line-up is fraught with dangers for the working class. Just as the labor bureaucrats have responded to the intensification of the corporate struggle for markets and profits by exhorting workers to ally with their bosses against workers in rival firms and plants, so in the constitutional crisis they are lining up with the big business camp to which they are most closely connected and seeking to split the working class.

The federalist Liberals and the separatist PQ are bitter rivals, but one has only to examine the records of the Chretien Liberal and the Bouchard PQ governments to see that they are pursuing the same right-wing political program. Whatever their differences over Quebec's place in Canada's federal state, they stand united against the working class.

The Liberals came to power in the fall of 1993 by appealing to popular discontent over Tory budget cuts and the imposition of the Goods and Service Tax (GST). However, they soon imposed massive cuts in social spending that went far beyond those imposed by the Tory government of Brian Mulroney. Indeed, Prime Minister Chretien and Finance Minister Paul Martin have repeatedly boasted that under the Liberals Canada has slashed government expenditure more radically than any of its G-7 rivals.

Especially significant were the cuts to unemployment insurance and the slashing by one-third of the annual transfer payments Ottawa makes to the provinces to fund health care and post-secondary education.

As a result, only a third of Canada's unemployed can now draw jobless benefits. Lengthy hospital waiting lists and crowded emergency rooms have become the norm in urban centers across the country and tuition fees have soared, putting a university education out of the reach of increasing numbers.

Responding to pressure from big business, federal Finance Minister Paul Martin recently announced Ottawa will put as much vigor into cutting corporate and income taxes as it did in eliminating the federal deficit. But the regressive GST tax is to remain untouched.

The PQ came to power in September 1994 by likewise appealing to popular resentment over deteriorating public services and high unemployment. It soon announced a program of hospital closures, but in the 1995 referendum claimed to be an opponent of the "right-wing wave" sweeping North America.

Predictably, the referendum over, the PQ dramatically shifted gears. Upon replacing Jacques Parizeau as PQ leader and Quebec premier, Lucien Bouchard proclaimed the elimination of Quebec's multibillion-dollar budget deficit to be the first condition for winning independence. With the support of the union bureaucracy, the PQ government has imposed massive cuts to public services, including a \$2 billion per year cut in health care spending and a \$1.9 billion per year cut in education. Under an early retirement scheme 20,000 health care, education and civil service jobs have been eliminated.

Last spring Bouchard rejected calls for his government to reinvest significant funds in social and public services, saying that the lion's share of Quebec's new budget surplus should be used to slash taxes, so that Quebec's tax regime could be made competitive with neighboring provinces and US states.

When 47,000 nurses struck last summer, the Bouchard government passed a strike-breaking bill and imposed onerous fines and other financial penalties to force compliance. Fearing that the nurses' militancy might spread, the government resorted to further repressive measures in the fall, using a court injunction to break a truckers' strike and mass arrests to quell protests by high school students.

The class character of the PQ and its separatist program has been repeatedly demonstrated over the course of the past three decades. Already in the early 1980s, the PQ government of René Lévesque turned viciously against the working class, passing a battery of antiunion laws, imposing wage cuts of up to 20 percent on public sector workers, and initiating the drive to slash social spending. In the 1995 referendum, the PQ made demagogic and contradictory statements to appeal to popular anger and anxiety over increasing poverty and economic insecurity. But in its sovereignty bill and numerous other statements, it made clear that the creation of a Quebec state would be the best means to make Quebec "internationally competitive," i.e., that separation is a program for big business.

Why then do the separatists continue to find a hearing in the working class?

First, they are able to feed off of the right-wing politics of their federalist opponents. Unable to offer any progressive solution to the problems of working people, Canada's elite has more and more openly resorted to reactionary appeals, whipping up Canadian nationalism and attacking immigrants and other minority groups.

The Reform Party, the Official Opposition in Canada's Parliament, calls for the scrapping of Canada's bilingual policy and frequently fans anti-Quebec sentiment. In the 1995 referendum, the "No Committee" was reduced to parading a group of right-wing politicians and businessmen before Quebecers to tell them separation would be an economic disaster. But with unemployment in Quebec well over 10 percent and poverty well

above 20 percent, many felt they were already victims of a disaster and any change could only be for the better. The federal government's response to its near loss in the 1995 referendum has been to embrace the call for Quebec's partition, which previously had been dismissed as a crackpot scheme of the ultra-right.

Separatism has also been boosted by the politics of the NDP and the Canadian Labor Congress. The labor bureaucrats outside Quebec promote reactionary Canadian nationalism, systemically stifle all initiatives aimed at broadening workers' resistance, whether across provincial or national boundaries, and have repeatedly rallied behind Canadian big business and the federal state to combat Quebec separatism.

Last, but not least, the Quebec trade union bureaucracy has enthusiastically promoted the PQ and Quebec separatism for the past three decades. The unions' alliance with the PQ has played a pivotal role in politically harnessing Quebec workers to capitalist politics and in splitting their struggles from those of workers elsewhere in Canada and internationally. Needless to say, in the fall of 1997 when 120,000 Ontario teachers struck against the Ontario Tory government, the same Quebec union bureaucrats who during the 1995 referendum campaign had joined Bouchard in decrying the politics of the Ontario Tories did nothing to support the teachers.

But it is Quebec workers themselves who have been the foremost victims of this alliance. Within months of the 1995 referendum, the union leaders were using the same nationalist rhetoric they had employed on the referendum campaign hustings to voice support for Bouchard's policy of making the elimination of the province's budget deficit the government's chief policy objective. "National solidarity" became the justification for accepting drastic social spending cuts.

This past summer, when the nurses' strike threatened to become the catalyst for a wider movement against the Bouchard government, the union bureaucracy engineered the strike's collapse.

Workers must ask themselves: is the unions' support for separatism and the PQ's campaign against the Clarity Bill at odds with their suppression of the class struggle, or is it in keeping with it?

The Quebec union leaders have seized on the Clarity Bill to try to rehabilitate the PQ and its separatist project in the eyes of the working class. In a full-page ad published last month in the *New York Times*, Quebec's three union federations accused the federal Liberal government of subverting democracy and plotting to partition Quebec on ethnic lines.

That the Clarity Bill is anti-democratic is undeniable. From a formal standpoint, it constitutes an admission by the federal state that it does not have confidence that it can maintain the allegiance of the majority of the citizenry in the country's second largest province. Politically, it reveals that the Canadian bourgeoisie is incapable of advancing a program that answers the grievances of working people in Quebec. It can only fight its separatist opponents by resorting to anti-democratic methods.

Especially reactionary is the federal Liberal government's embrace of the partition movement. In raising the prospect of partition, the Canadian ruling class is flirting with civil war.

Given the provisions of the Clarity Bill, the separatists' claim to uphold the democratic principle of majority-rule might at first glance appear to have some legitimacy. But closer examination reveals such claims to be fraudulent.

The PQ's referendum process is itself fundamentally undemocratic. Under Quebec's referendum law, it is illegal for working class parties and organizations to intervene independently of the Yes and No committees formed by the big business politicians in the Quebec legislature. The referendum rules thus promote the idea that the only conceivable options are the federalist status quo or separatism, seeking thereby to compel workers to associate with one or the other big business camp.

Moreover, for the PQ a referendum majority is merely a means of gaining leverage for a political power struggle. While they speak solemnly

about upholding Quebecers' right to decide their future, the separatist leaders are acutely conscious that were Quebec ever to secede, it would be as part of a political settlement worked out under the auspices of United States. In recent years they have invested no little effort in wooing Washington's and Wall Street's support, making repeated pledges that an independent Quebec would be a faithful ally.

Even more fundamentally, the entire Quebec separatist project is itself anti-democratic. It is a call for the division of Canada on national-ethnic lines. Indeed, one of the principal arguments for separation is that it will put Quebec's chauvinist language laws, which give French an exalted status, beyond the legislative reach of the Canadian government and the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court.

The creation of a capitalist Quebec nation-state cuts across the logic of economic development and would erect new obstacles to the unification of the North American working class. If its realization did not embroil Canada in civil war, a la Yugoslavia, at the very least it would serve to embitter relations between workers in Quebec and Canada and within the two rival states.

The socialist opposition to the program of Quebec separatism is inseparable from opposition to the existing state institutions of the Canadian bourgeoisie. Class unity can only be established from below, through the development of a working class counteroffensive against the assault on workers' rights and living standards.

Workers must not fall prey to those who want them to politically define themselves as Canadian or Québécois. Instead they should make their political compass the struggle to forge the international unity of the working class against globally-organized capital. To the existing federal state, the working class should counterpose—not a redistribution of power among existing governments or a reshuffling of state boundaries—but the unification of the struggles of Canadian, US and Mexican workers and the fight for the Socialist United States of North America.



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