

Montreal: Thousands protest Israeli war on Lebanon

Guy Charron
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Sixty-thousand people marched through the streets of Montreal last Sunday to protest against Israel's war on Lebanon. The demonstration was called by the main trade union federations in Québec, a large section of the Québec political elite, including the two *indépendantistes* parties (the Parti Québécois and the Bloc Québécois), and politicians associated with the federal Liberal Party, and by numerous antiwar, human-rights and Arab organizations.

A large number of Lebanese flags, as well as some Palestinian and Québec flags, floated above the crowd. Emotions ran high as the demonstrators expressed their revulsion at the barbarism of Israel's military assault, at the huge number of civilian deaths, and at the extent of the destruction inflicted upon Lebanon.

Although the march was opposed by some Christian Lebanese groups as too supportive of Hezbollah, about half of the demonstrators were Canadians of Lebanese origin. Among the Lebanese Canadians, Christian and Muslim alike, there was a deep sense of indignation at having been abandoned by the great powers.

Most of the placards were handmade. Numerous placards and banners displayed images of children killed by the bombings and a number of people had constructed mock children's coffins that they carried throughout the entire march. A recurring theme was the identification of the state of Israel with Nazism.

US President George W. Bush was denounced as a war criminal for his support for the Israeli aggression, while Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was harshly criticized for his unconditional support of Bush and Israel.

Harper and his Conservative government have repeated Israeli government claims that Hezbollah initiated the conflict and is responsible for any and all civilian casualties caused by Israeli bombs and have supported US efforts to prevent a ceasefire coming into force before Israel has succeeded in its military objectives. These include driving the Shia population of south Lebanon, from which Hezbollah emerged and derives much of its support, from their homes.

Moreover, Harper has repeatedly demonstrated his contempt for the victims of the war. Although Canada reportedly had more nationals in Lebanon than all other Western countries

combined, the Canadian government mounted a tardy and disorganized evacuation of its citizens. And when Israeli bombs have killed Canadians in Lebanon, whether it be a family visiting its ancestral home in south Lebanon or a member of the Canadian Armed Forces serving as a UN observer, Harper has rushed to declare Israel free of any blame.

The Montreal demonstrators chanted slogans such as "Solidarity with the Lebanese people," "Olmert murderer, Harper accomplice," "Israel terrorist," and "No justice, No peace." An American flag was burned by the demonstrators at the end of the march.

A group of Hassidic Jews opposed to Zionism carried a huge Lebanese flag together with Arabs and were warmly applauded both by the demonstrators and by spectators.

The Parti Québécois (PQ), Québec Solidaire, the New Democratic Party (both its Canadian and Québec sections) and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (Quebec Trade Union Federation) brought their banners to the march, but their delegations were small.

The demands advanced by the demonstration's organizers were predicated on an acceptance of the existing geopolitical and social order. They promoted the twin illusion that mass pressure could force so-called democratic governments—i.e., the major capitalist powers—to listen to pacifists rather than arms dealers and that the UN, which was created by and serves as a pliant tool of the major powers, could act as force for world peace.

Denouncing the "unilateral pro-Israel and pro-Bush position of the Harper government," the demonstration's organizers demanded "a stop to bombings and an immediate and unconditional ceasefire," "respect for international treaties and for *all* of the UN resolutions relating to the conflict" and "that the Harper government dissociate itself from the politics of the United States and instead promote justice and peace in the Near East."

Speaking from the rostrum, Parti Québécois leader André Boisclair appealed for an independent Québec "in which voices ... will rise for world peace," while saying not a word about Israel or the role of Washington, which is supporting Israel's aggression against Lebanon as a means of advancing its own plans to consolidate control over the oil resources of the Middle

East..

That the participation of the *indépendantiste* BQ and PQ in the antiwar movement is political posturing is above all demonstrated by the role the BQ is playing in keeping the Harper government, the most right-wing federal government since the Great Depression, in office. Following the wishes of Quebec's corporate elite, the BQ provided the Conservatives, who have only a minority of seats in the house of Commons, with the votes needed to pass their budget last spring and have given every indication that they will continue to prop up the Conservatives in the fall session of parliament in the hopes of gaining greater funding and autonomy for the Quebec government.

Although BQ leader Gilles Duceppe has criticized the Harper government for failing to taking a more "nuanced" or "balanced" stand on the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, his party has fully supported the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan as a necessary part of the "international war on terrorism" since Canadian troops were first deployed there in the fall of 2001.

As for an independent Quebec being a "proponent of peace," the PQ and BQ have repeatedly made clear the capitalist nation-state they advocate would be a loyal ally of the US and a full partner of NATO, NORAD and NAFTA

In an interview with *La Presse*, Hatem Hari, the former president of the Lebanese Islamic Centre of Montréal, expressed confidence the demonstration would persuade the Harper government to make an about-face: "This time it's for real. All demonstrations are important but this one is special: it truly resembles a wider world, and one of a higher caliber." Ehab Lotayef, one of the organizers of the event, said the demonstration "will sound the alarm. Mr. Harper can't forget that there are six million Québécois and a large number of Canadians that don't share his values."

But Harper's support for Israel and the Bush administration have won him strong support from what constitutes his real constituency—Canada's corporate elite.

Faced with the rise of unilateralism and militarism, particularly on the part of their closest ally and crucial economic partner, the United States, and the emergence of new economic rivals in Asia, the most powerful sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie believe that they best advance their predatory interests by ensuring Canada's full participation in a US-led Fortress North America and by decisively repudiating the notion that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are "peacekeepers" rather than an instrument of war.

Canada's corporate media has lauded the Harper government for announcing \$18 billion in new military procurements, for extending and expanding the CAF's colonial-style intervention in Afghanistan, and for unconditionally supporting the terrorism being carried out by the Israeli state against the people of Lebanon.

In February and March 2003 massive protests erupted in

Quebec, as across Canada, against the US war drive against Iraq. The BQ and PQ stood totally aside from these protests and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy played only a minor role.

Since then, the *indépendantistes* have been buffeted by a series of crises, including the PQ's fall from power in the April 2003 provincial election and the Conservative "resurgence" in Quebec in last January's federal election. As for the trade union bureaucracy, its authority has been further undermined by its suppression of the mass protests that erupted against the provincial Liberal government in 2003-04 and its abject surrender last December when the Liberals imposed a concessions-laden seven-year contract on a half million public sector workers by government-decree.

By associating themselves with the popular outrage against the US-backed Israeli assault on Lebanon, the PQ-BQ and the union bureaucracy are trying to refurbish their tattered "left" credentials and to put some rhetorical distance between themselves and the Conservatives, so as to obscure their role in keeping the Harper Conservatives in power.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) intervened in last Sunday's demonstration to advance an independent political perspective for the working class. They distributed hundreds of copies of a leaflet which concluded as follows:

"It is an illusion to believe that pressure on the Harper government to adopt a more 'neutral' position, or on Israel and the United States to submit to the rule of international law, can put an end to the barbarism of war in the Middle East and central Asia, no matter how large that public pressure might be. These governments enjoy the almost unanimous support of the corporate elite. At the most, such pressure will lead to a slight detour in the international politics of barbarism.

"The only social force with the power to stop and change the conditions behind these wars of aggression is the international working class. This is why we encourage all those who are sincerely opposed to Israel's criminal war in Lebanon and Gaza to join with us in the building of a new political movement of the working class, independent of the parties of big business and based on the perspective of an international unification of workers, including the Arab and Jewish workers of the Middle East, in a common struggle for the socialist transformation of society."

"That is the only alternative to barbarism."



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