

The Scottish referendum: Lessons from Quebec

Keith Jones
17 September 2014

There are striking parallels between the campaign for the September 18 Scottish referendum and events in Quebec two decades ago. These parallels underscore the urgency of working people in Scotland rejecting nationalism and instead joining forces with workers across Britain and throughout Europe in a common struggle against capitalist austerity and the European Union and for a workers' Europe.

In 1995, Quebec's big business Parti Québécois (PQ) provincial government called a referendum seeking a mandate to negotiate a "new partnership" with Canada under which Quebec would be recognized as a "sovereign" or independent state.

As has happened in Scotland, support for the pro-Quebec independence "Yes" campaign surged in the weeks immediately preceding the referendum. Two months prior to the Oct. 30, 1995 Quebec referendum, the "Yes" campaign appeared headed for a crushing 15 to 20 percentage-point defeat. But by the campaign's final days, the race was too close to call. Ultimately, the "No" prevailed, but by little more than 50,000 votes, capturing 50.58 percent of the vote to the "Yes"'s 49.42 percent.

Two factors weighed heavily in the surge in support for the "Yes" campaign in Quebec—the same two factors that have buoyed support for Scottish independence in the run-up to this Thursday's vote.

First, the official "No" campaign—led by the most powerful sections of Canada's political and business elite—was utterly incapable of making any positive appeal to the mass of working people.

One after another, right-wing politicians and corporate executives threatened and hectorated the population, employing the same rhetoric that they had been using for years to insist that there was no alternative to massive social spending cuts, layoffs, plant closures, and concession contracts.

A "Yes" vote, they warned, would result in an economic disaster, causing investors to flee and the province's credit-rating to soar. Moreover, the claims of the PQ and its allies notwithstanding, there was no way, they declared, that the rest of Canada would agree to an independent Quebec automatically joining the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or using the Canadian dollar as its currency.

The Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalists were able to manipulate the hostility of working people to the "No" leaders and their demand that the population bow to the greater wisdom of the markets by depicting it as a slight on the Quebec people by an English Canada that deemed Quebecers incapable of running their own affairs.

The second and even more important factor in the surge in support for the "Yes" campaign was the full-throated support given it by the trade unions and the pseudo-left. They went into overdrive to portray the creation of an independent capitalist Quebec as a "progressive,"

even "anti-imperialist," project, trumpeting the fraudulent official "Yes" campaign slogan that with independence "everything becomes possible."

No matter that the campaign for independence was being led by a section of the bourgeois establishment in their interests and that, with the aim of rallying greater big business support and currying the favor of Washington and Wall Street, they were advancing an unabashed right-wing program.

The law authorizing the referendum spelled out that an independent Quebec would seek membership in NATO, NORAD (the Canada-US air defence alliance) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It was based on an agreement signed by the leaders of the three parties with representation in the Quebec National Assembly, or Canada's federal parliament, who were supporting the bid for a "sovereign" Quebec—the PQ leader and Quebec Premier Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard of the Bloc Québécois, and Mario Dumont, the head of the right-wing populist Action Démocratique du Québec.

All three were inveterate opponents of the working class. Parizeau, who himself hails from one of Quebec's richest families, was finance minister in 1982-83 when the then PQ government slashed social spending, imposed contracts that cut wages and gutted working conditions of 400,000 public sector workers by government decree, and threatened teachers with mass firings when they rebelled.

Bouchard had been a high-profile minister in Brian Mulroney's Conservative government until he quit in 1990 to form the BQ with the support of Quebec's Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa.

Bouchard, who assumed leadership of the "Yes" campaign in its final weeks, appealed for support by claiming that an independent Quebec would be "a bulwark against the right-wing wave sweeping across North America." But when he, Parizeau, and other "Yes" leaders went before business audiences, they argued that the reorganization of the state that would accompany independence would provide a golden opportunity, in the name of eliminating "duplication," to cut social spending and lower taxes.

For years, the unions had sought to politically subordinate the working class to the big business PQ. The union bureaucracy had embraced the PQ, formed in 1968 as the result of a split-off from the Quebec Liberal Party, as a means of quarantining and taming the militant upsurge of the Quebec working class that convulsed Canada's only majority French-speaking province during the late 1960s and first half of the 1970s. When the PQ came to power in 1976, the bureaucracy worked with it to establish an extensive system of corporatist tripartite—business, state, and union—collaboration.

The petty-bourgeois left, or at least much of it, were ostensible

opponents of the PQ. But they all rallied behind the “Yes” campaign. They trotted out all manner of retrograde arguments to justify their harnessing of Quebec workers to the drive of a section of the bourgeoisie to advance its class interests by reshuffling the borders of the capitalist nation-state system in North America and their virulent opposition to any struggle to unite the working class across Canada against all factions of the bourgeoisie in the fight for workers’ governments in Quebec City and Ottawa and the Socialist United States of North America.

Quebec’s secession would, they claimed, be a body blow to the imperialist Canadian state. But imperialism can only be overthrown by socialist revolution, not by assisting one fraction of an imperialist ruling class to realize its ambitions. Quebec workers were extolled as more “left-wing” precisely so as to divide them from workers in the rest of Canada and internationally, incite them to politically identify themselves as Quebecois, and dragoon them behind a political project spearheaded by one of the principal ruling parties of the Quebec bourgeoisie and whose implementation would result in the erection of new obstacles—in the form of borders and rival national states—to the unification of the working class.

The leaders of the “Yes” campaign made no secret that one of their principal reasons for their push for an independent Quebec was to ensure that the Quebec ruling elite had the power to enact chauvinist laws restricting the use of other languages in the public sphere and ensuring francophone dominance of managerial positions. This was enthusiastically endorsed by the pseudo-left.

The “Yes” leaders were acutely conscious of the need to enlist the support of the unions and pseudo-left so as to rally support within the working class and among the youth. Under Parizeau’s leadership, the “Yes” campaign was presented as a “rainbow coalition” uniting right and left. *Gauche Socialiste*, the Quebec section of the phony Pabloite Fourth International, was an official partner in the “Yes” coalition.

As in Scotland today, so in Quebec in 1995, only the supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) advanced a socialist internationalist perspective, fighting for workers to oppose both bourgeois camps—the “Yes” and “No” campaign—and to vote “No” to an independent capitalist Quebec as part of the struggle to unite the working class against the entire Canadian bourgeoisie, its federalist and Quebec sovereignist parties, and its federal state.

Given the striking parallels between developments in Quebec in 1995 and Scotland today, it is also critical that workers in Scotland, Britain and Europe ponder what happened in the aftermath of the Quebec referendum.

Due to the role of the trade unions and the pseudo-left, the working class was completely politically disarmed when the PQ government announced almost immediately after its referendum defeat that the key to securing Quebec’s future independence would be to eliminate the province’s annual budget deficit. Acting on the demands of Wall Street and with the full support of the unions, which endorsed the PQ’s zero-deficit drive at two “national economic summits” in 1996, the PQ imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history. This included the elimination of tens of thousands of health care and education jobs. In 1999 when nurses struck in opposition to the cuts, the PQ government illegalized their strike and the unions isolated and suppressed it.

While Bouchard had postured as an opponent of the “right-wing wave,” within a matter of months he and his federalist adversaries—Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien and Ontario

Conservative Premier Mike Harris—were carrying out the same austerity offensive against the working class.

The other critical development following the 1995 referendum was the adoption by the dominant faction of the Canadian ruling class of a new hardline anti-secessionist strategy dubbed Plan B.

During the referendum campaign and the years of constitutional crisis that preceded it, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) warned that in so far as the working class did not resolutely oppose all factions of the bourgeoisie there were grave dangers that it would become embroiled in national-ethnic political mobilization and strife.

Even as they railed against the reputed “national oppression” of the Quebecois, the pseudo-left, parroting the PQ and BQ politicians claimed that in the event of a “Yes” vote there would be an “amicable divorce,” putting their faith in the disinterestedness and sense of “fair play” of the rival bourgeois factions.

One pseudo-left group, the Canadian branch of Spartacist, went so far as to accuse the Canadian supporters of the ICFI of acting like “Alberta Yahoos” for warning that the break-up of Canada could result in civil war. (Alberta has long been the stronghold of right-wing populist and neo-conservative politics in Canada).

Yet these warnings were more than validated. In the months following the referendum, the federal Liberal government openly patronized the “partition movement,” which developed in parts of western Quebec where there are large English-speaking and immigrant populations and advocated that in the event of separation Quebec be ethnically partitioned. Ottawa also announced that it would be favorable to requests from aboriginal groups to remain in Canada if Quebec were to secede. Subsequently, Canada’s parliament passed legislation, the so-called Clarity Act, that stipulates that should Quebec ever secede its borders would be subject to renegotiation.

Today, two decades on and with capitalism in systemic crisis, the struggle to forge the fighting unity of the workers of the world and to politically defeat all those forces, from the fascists to the unions and pseudo-left, who seek to divide it along national, ethnic, and religious lines is more vital than ever.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)