

# Canada: The RWL/LOR experience: my explanation of a failed fusion

Monday 19 October 2020, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2020).

**About two years ago John Riddell posted on his [website](#) a two-part article on the Revolutionary Workers League/Ligue Ouvrière Révolutionnaire with [his explanation](#) of what he termed “a failed fusion” experience. He focused on the “turn to industry” adopted by the League in the late 1970s, the aim of which was eventually defined as getting the overwhelming majority of its members into jobs organized by Canada’s major industrial unions. John cited convincing evidence that, as he puts it, “the industrial turn was based not on existing reality but on a prediction regarding future conditions. Such a future-based orientation is impervious to the test of experience.”**

As he explains, the League was convinced that a workers’ radicalization would “occur in the near future. When the great uprising did not occur, its expected date of arrival was simply postponed. Lessons of experience thus had no authority in determining policy, which came to be based on belief rather than the test of reality.”

Like John, I was one of the main advocates in the League of the turn to industry as it was originally conceived, and I am in general agreement with John’s analysis. What follows below is intended to supplement what he says. I base my account here on what I wrote in a 2009 email exchange with U.S. socialist Barry Sheppard, who was working on the second volume of a memoir of his experience as a leader of the U.S. Socialist Workers Party. [1] Barry had asked several of us who were veterans of the RWL/LOR, about (*inter alia*) our experiences with “the turn to industry and how it changed over time.” His question was prompted by knowledge that the SWP had been instrumental in persuading its northern comrades to emulate its own industrial turn.

Roger Annis was the first to reply. With his agreement, I quote what he wrote, in part, because I will refer to it in my own account.

“The turn to industry in Canada was factionalized from the beginning. Those who did not grasp the urgency and immediacy of undertaking a turn were regarded with great skepticism. Worse, there was no regard to national circumstances that might have crafted the turn in Canada. In particular, the early application of the turn was quickly factionalized over the issue of the public sector unions. [2] A series of splits or resignations on this issue took place from 1980 to 1982. [...]

“The onset of the 79-81 economic recession and the unemployment that lingered for years afterward had a great dampening effect on trade union struggle. We never took account of this reality, believing it to be short-term. A steady drift to propagandism took place in the RWL factions. We were less and less comfortable as trade union activists, preferring the insular world of propagandism. To be sure, there were repeated admonishments by the leading bodies of the RWL to connect our propagandism to action, and vice versa. But we had little living and historical experience upon which to

draw. [...]

“By the early 1990s, I was fed up with the propagandism that had overwhelmed our trade union work. ‘Strike solidarity’ work was the key activity of trade union fractions, but it consisted almost entirely of visits to picket lines in order to sell the *Militant* and bring workers to forums. I saw the looks of skepticism in the eyes of picketers at many strikes – Nationair (1992), Irving Oil (1994-95) – as they saw that we were doing nothing to advance their struggle.”

And why were the comrades selling the *Militant*, the SWP’s weekly paper? Because, Roger noted, the RWL paper *Socialist Voice* had folded in 1986.

“In my opinion, that was as close to a death knell as we could have pronounced for the RWL. We were relieved to begin to sell the *Militant* because the Voice had been reduced to a shadow of its former self: published biweekly in a small-size format with four or five articles, no columns and strident editorials. Yet, a newspaper is the thinking machine and organizing tool of any serious party or grouping. We voluntarily gave up that organizing tool because we were at a loss to figure out how to produce something that would appeal and would have some impact in politics in the country.”

And Roger added an important note:

“Of course, a vital side to the story of the RWL is that of its French-language section, the LOR. All the problems cited above were doubled in their consequence there because the turn’s initial reception was less enthused and the mechanical replication of strategies drawn from the SWP had less relevance and application than in English-speaking Canada. What’s more, we made a grievous sectarian error in abstaining from the 1980 referendum vote on sovereignty (I believe we reversed course at the last minute). I think it’s fair to say that most LOR members were quickly disaffected of the turn to industry, if they were ever won to it at all.”

I then offered my explanation, most of which I reproduce below.

### **From my letter to Barry Sheppard**

You ask a series of questions about developments from 1980 on, most of which I am unable to answer because my own relationship with the Canadian section of the Fourth International ended abruptly in May-June 1980.... However, I would like to address the rationale presented at the time for the turn to industry, because I think retrospection yields a number of clues to what subsequently went wrong.

Roger writes: “... there was no regard to national circumstances that might have crafted the turn ; in Canada.” I would nuance this somewhat, based largely on a recent re-reading of the major line text on the turn, “Why the RWL/LOR Must Make an Immediate Turn to Industry,” by R. Brock, J. Connolly, J. Crandall, and S. Lachance (respectively, Richard Fidler, John Steele, John Riddell and Colleen Levis), RWL/LOR PanCanadian Preconvention Discussion Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 5, November 1978 [not on line].... Less than a year later, a much shorter text drafted by a newly composed majority on the Political Committee, “For a major reorientation of the RWL,” reiterated many of its arguments, without fundamentally altering the overall description of the political situation.

The backdrop to the turn for the Canadian comrades — in addition to the impetus from the U.S. SWP, which had already initiated such a turn — was the need to develop a unified line of march, following the fusion convention of 1977, in relation to three major components of the class struggle

in the Canadian state: the Quebec national question, the politics of working class struggles in English Canada and in particular the question of the NDP, and our work in the women's liberation movement. The fusion brought the various FI groups together around general principles [3] but failed to launch the new organization on the basis of agreed campaigns around a unified conception of our immediate tasks. During the first year of the fused organization's existence, internal debate was largely devoted to a seemingly irresolvable debate on the gay question pursuant to an agreement at the fusion convention; it was dominated by the views of a substantial minority of comrades who saw some "revolutionary dynamic" in sexual liberation and, if anything, projected a turn toward countercultural and identity politics.

The turn to industry, as articulated by the SWP leadership, seemed to many of us to provide a way out from the confusion surrounding these initial internal debates. In our turn document, we sought to develop a particular Canadian perspective on the turn. We did try to motivate the turn on the basis of "national circumstances," but I have to say, with the benefit of hindsight, that our explanations and conclusions were rather unilinear and schematic — and in many ways refuted by the subsequent course of events.

For what it's worth, my own recollection of the decision to initiate the turn in Canada begins a few months earlier, in August 1978, at the annual SWP gathering in Oberlin, Ohio. I showed [SWP national secretary] Jack Barnes a typewritten draft of a document I had written on the NDP question for potential discussion in the RWL, seeking his feedback. Jack responded by calling an informal meeting in his room between a number of RWL leaders (all of them, I think, from the former LSA/LSO) and a number of SWP PC [Political Committee] members to whom he had circulated my text; I think you were there. We kicked the draft around a bit, and then some of you SWPers suggested that we pose the NDP question in the context of the need to develop our presence in the major industrial unions that were aligned with the NDP. A few days later, Colleen Levis and Sam Anderson returned to Canada from an SWP National Committee plenum all fired up with the proposal that we turn our own September plenum, which at that point lacked a focus, into a discussion on the need for our own turn to industry. So the SWP leadership's direct input was an important factor in our decision to implement the turn to industry in Canada. It was subsequently reinforced by the draft World Political Resolution of the Fourth International, drafted with major input by the SWP leadership, which projected a global "turn to industry" by the FI sections. (My amended draft theses on the NDP were published in the preconvention discussion bulletin, along with a counter-position by Tyson (Steve Penner); neither position had received a majority at the September 1978 plenum.)

Following the plenum [...] some former LSA/LSO leaders authored a specific proposal for the turn. Since we represented only one of the two major founding components, Roger's statement that the turn in Canada "was factionalized from the beginning" is true in more than one sense. At the April 1979 convention, this turn perspective failed to win a majority and little progress was registered in getting comrades into industrial jobs until, in August, a new realignment of forces in the Political Committee (again, provoked in large part by discussions with SWP and FI leaders at Oberlin that year) brought some important leaders and members of the old RMG and GMR on board. This new majority leadership wrote the "major reorientation" document mentioned above.

The more positive aspects of this turn document lie in its retrospective analysis of the then-recent history of working-class politics in Quebec and the rest of Canada: the struggle against wage controls and the one-day general strike in 1977; the Quebec labour upsurge in the early 1970s; the debate on the action program of the postal workers and other militants at the CLC convention, etc. It did a pretty good job of demonstrating the interrelationship of the Quebec national struggle and the women's movement with working-class politics and how recent labour struggles illustrated the applicability of key transitional demands.

But the document is also striking in its proposal of a continental (in fact, global) tactic of industrial implantation to prepare for the projected imminent confrontation between Capital and the industrial workers — exactly the same method, the same kind of undialectical schema, some of us had only recently campaigned against in the FI in relation to the Latin American guerrilla struggle and the European “new mass vanguards.” [4] For example:

“The international context is crucially important. Capitalist rationalization and restructuring, and the measures comprised by the current antilabor offensive, will not bring about the needed qualitative increase in the average rate of profit. The forces of stagnation remain deep and predominant. To radically reverse the trend, major defeats of the masses are required, with all that that implies. However, such catastrophic defeats of the anticapitalist forces on a world scale remain extremely unlikely. And attempts to impose them would touch off such intensified class struggles as to place on the agenda fresh opportunities for victorious socialist revolutions. This is especially true in the imperialist countries, where the proletariat has experienced no major defeats since the last imperialist war. [...]

“The very depth of this combined crisis excludes the possibility that the capitalist class can buy off the working class through massive social concessions and reforms. [...]

“The outlook is for a continued, sustained rise in the class struggle. Major battles lie ahead — battles that will confront the capitalists and their governments with the united power and combativity of the major industrial contingents of the proletariat of Quebec and English Canada. [...]

“We are in the initial stages of a radicalization now beginning to reach into the major industrial sectors of the labor movement. The depth of the capitalist crisis is such that this radicalization will not be fundamentally stemmed or reversed before the working class has had a chance — in a series of major imperialist countries, including quite possibly Canada —to wage a decisive struggle for state power against the bourgeoisie. [...] (pages 6-9)

“We must turn toward the industrial working class in order to participate in the fight for a class-struggle left wing and to build our party. The turn to industry is essential to all our work — building the women’s movement and struggles against national oppression, participating in the student movement, defending immigrants, and so on. The turn is already overdue. Failure to make it will place us increasingly outside the mainstream of the class struggle. Our survival as a revolutionary party is at stake. We must get the majority of our members into industrial jobs and into industrial unions as quickly as possible. [...]

“The turn to industry is not simply our general proletarian orientation. It is not simply a turn to the unions. to doing more union work. Placing a majority of our membership in industrial jobs at this time is a specific tactic to ensure the presence of our party, our cadre, and our program at the strategic center of the radicalization as it unfolds today — among industrial workers. [...] (page 14)

“The developing offensive of the Canadian ruling class is aimed squarely at the nearly four million workers in the resource industry (mining, forestry, energy, etc.), heavy industry (steel, auto, etc.), manufacturing and food processing, transportation (air, rail, city transport, trucking, etc.), and communications (mail, telephone, etc.). These workers are the most powerful social force in capitalist society. When they strike, they bring

production to a halt; the capitalists immediately feel the effects on their profits. And once they begin to fight back, they become the center of the radicalization because of their strategic importance.” (page 16)

Also worth noting is the somewhat formulaic approach to the question of leadership in the unions, and the roseate view of the short-term prospects for anti-bureaucratic struggles and the building of a revolutionary anticapitalist leadership:

“In a time of economic and political crisis, when the perspective for reforms considerably narrows, the bureaucracy’s class-collaborationist program becomes less and less realistic. It can’t even defend the workers’ current conditions let alone lead the struggle to improve them. As struggles intensify, more and more workers will draw conclusions about the kind of leadership they need to win against the bosses and capitalist governments. They will learn that struggles are not lost because the workers aren’t strong enough to win but because they were betrayed by their own leadership. And they will become more receptive to proposals for restoring rank-and-file control of the unions.” (page 13)

Overall, the document was correct to identify the turn in the political situation with the end of the postwar phase of capitalist expansion, the end of the postwar accommodation of unions within the now-traditional industrial relations regime, and the developing ruling-class offensive aimed at overcoming a crisis of profitability stemming from overproduction, etc. But it failed to anticipate a range of possible alternative responses by Capital, which would not necessarily be hinged on direct immediate catastrophic confrontation with the strongest contingents of the proletariat as the document tended to argue. [5]

The neoliberal strategy was only in its initial phases. But in the following years the capitalist response to its profitability crisis included a range of components: attacks on public employees, cutbacks and deterioration of public services as a prelude to privatization and public-private partnerships; financialization of pensions and creation of new financial instruments; the corralling of the union bureaucracies into investment fund strategies, starting with Quebec and the FTQ’s Solidarity Fund; and culminating of course in the move toward “free trade” and the lowering of tariff barriers, globalized investment regimes, transfer of production to the Third World, etc. Union membership declined, precarious and temporary labour and self-employment increased. Yes, industrial workers were attacked but in a more selective and astute way than anticipated by the turn document: the rulers probed for points of particular vulnerability, and effectively maneuvered reformist leaderships into collaborating with many of their initiatives. And many working people, seeing no perspectives for gains through collective struggle, were seduced by the ubiquitous consumerism of contemporary neoliberalism.

We may also have underestimated the corroding effect on the unions of the entire postwar industrial relations regime reflected in the dues checkoff, the replacement of grievance processing for the right to strike during the life of a contract, the management residual rights protection, etc. enforced in the various collective bargaining provisions and laws, and the expanded role of the bureaucracy in policing the contract to the detriment of internal union democracy and on-the-job action. There was little or no mention of this in the turn discussions in which I participated.

There were exceptions to this pattern, of course. A notable one was the no-concessions split of the Canadian Auto Workers from the UAW and the CAW’s emergence for a period as a class-struggle antibureaucratic alternative for many workers. This important development the RWL/LOR initially opposed as I recall, with SWP counselling no doubt.

With employment declining in the major industries, it became impossible to implement the industrial turn as originally envisaged. Comrades got jobs where they could, often in marginal industries with weak unions or even no unions at all! The turn took on a moral complexion, I believe: it became a virtue in itself to work with the most oppressed and exploited. But workers with starvation wages, large families, often without citizenship rights, with few language skills, are hard to recruit. As Roger notes, there was a drift toward propagandism and, I would add, a real depoliticization. Roger and other comrades who lived through these years can say more than I about the consequences of these developments on the remaining cadres.

By the way, we should note that the 1978 turn document did include some qualifications on the application of the turn. For example, it stated (page 15) that “We would be wrong to vote that all comrades in teaching or hospital jobs quit to go into industry. The work of these comrades is important. But our main task is not to build up by colonization what we have now in the service unions, but rather to break new ground. Where we have real operations, they should be maintained and the emphasis placed on recruitment.” And it cited favourably the work of comrades already involved as shop stewards in the postal union and the auto workers. As early as 1980, however, the RWL/LOR was advising comrades not to take any posts or leadership positions in unions, and existing public sector fractions were being dissolved in favour of a one-sided focus on getting jobs and establishing party fractions in industry.

On a related matter, Roger notes the Political Committee’s shift on the eve of the Quebec referendum in 1980 toward favouring the yes side, as opposed to the abstention position adopted by the pan-Canadian convention only two months earlier. I was not a participant in that decision, but as I recall it helped to provoke the split of the bulk of the LOR in Quebec the following month. Taken unilaterally, without consultation with the LOR as a whole, it was my impression that this arbitrary shift in line may have been the drop that overflowed the cup for many in the Quebec wing, already very resistant to the turn to industry. In my view, the decision to support the yes side on the PQ’s referendum was programmatically justifiable, but the unilateral process seemed calculated to drive many Quebec comrades out of the organization. This, too, was an early manifestation of the sectarian super-centralized leadership precepts that were soon to triumph in the party as a whole.

In fact, the major development in Canadian politics during this period, 1978-80, was not an antilabour offensive but the preparation for and holding of the first Quebec referendum on sovereignty, sponsored by the PQ government. The Quebec national upsurge, which had continued throughout the Seventies, posed a fundamental challenge to the stability of the Canadian state. I think it could be argued that the development by the RWL of a coherent campaign by the entire organization — for independence in Quebec (and participation on the referendum yes side in the context of the deep polarization of class forces around that issue), and in defence of Quebec’s right to self-determination in the rest of Canada — would have done more to unify and build the RWL/LOR politically than the “turn to industry,” which, as it developed, tended to tear at the fragile unity forged in the fusion process. [6]

The defeat of the referendum in May 1980 was a major defeat of the Quebec national movement, consolidated by the federal government in the 1982 patriation (from Britain) of the constitution with an amending formula that effectively ruled out unilateral secession by Quebec and a “charter of rights” that laid the basis for a string of judicial rulings overturning aspects of Quebec’s legislation in defense of its French language and culture. The setback in Quebec was a great boost for the Canadian bourgeoisie as it moved to implement neoliberal austerity in the Eighties and Nineties.

In addition to a greater focus on the Quebec issue, the RWL/LOR would have benefited from paying more attention to building solidarity with the Nicaraguan and Grenadian revolutions of 1979 on. But the turn to industry, once adopted, absorbed so much of the organization’s energy and resources



that it tended to preclude attention to other, political questions. And it was accompanied by a tightening of the party regime, including greater emphasis on disciplinary actions, etc., that created an atmosphere inimical to critical thought and discussion. A more relaxed regime would have been able to accommodate the necessary debates and differing positions that were developing over a number of difficult unforeseen situations — Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and its war with China; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the Solidarnosc experience in Poland, etc. — on all of which there were sharp divisions in the FI that did not always replicate the alignments in the previous period. But I imagine that these same points could be made about the evolution of the SWP at this time. I was not a direct witness to this process, however.

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## Richard Fidler

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## P.S.

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2020/09/the-rwllor-experience-my-explanation-of.html>

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## Footnotes

[1] *Interregnum, Decline and Collapse, 1973-1988: A Political Memoir* (London: Resistance Books, 2012). The first volume, *The Sixties: A Political Memoir*, was published in Australia by Resistance Books, 2005.

[2] Roger suggests that this be added here for further clarity: “The hard-line proponents of a ‘turn to industry’ argued that the labour power of workers in state-run industries such as postal service, health care and education was only tertiary to the workings of capital and therefore these workers could not be expected to play a leading role in coming class battles.”

[3] [Revolutionary Workers League Statement of Principles](#) (1977), Toronto, 1977.

[4] Between 1969 and 1975 the majority of the Fourth International favoured a strategic “tactic” in Latin America based on rural guerrilla warfare, supposedly applicable by revolutionary forces throughout the continent. This line was opposed by a minority including the SWP and the LSA/LSO. In Europe the FI majority favoured a generalized approach to party-building in the 1970s based on orienting to “the concerns of the new mass vanguard” layer of militants that had emerged in some major class confrontations in the late 1960s – which were by no means synonymous with the concerns and interests of the broader working class.

[5] I might have added that less than a decade later, the demise of the USSR, which shifted the global balance of forces even further toward U.S. hegemony, had a deeply negative impact on the international class struggle.

[6] In his "[Inquest into a failed socialist fusion](https://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/1961-/Quebec/Ind-Soc-Quebec-1970.htm)," John Riddell incorrectly refers to "the two overriding issues in Quebec that had divided the LSA/LSO from the GMR: the call for an independent socialist Quebec and for building a mass workers' party in Quebec based on the trade unions (a 'labour party')." While there were differences on the applicability of the demand for a "labour party" in Quebec (the GMR called for a "workers' party"), the LSA/LSO had in fact supported an independent socialist Quebec since 1970, when a party convention adopted a document by that name: <https://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/1961-/Quebec/Ind-Soc-Quebec-1970.htm>. The GMR tended to express it differently: "For a Workers Republic of Quebec." In my view, both formulations are compatible.