

Class and the nation - A Québécois perspective

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One of the crucial achievements of historical materialism is to have shown that there can be no unity of the working class without a policy of complete national equality. That can only mean the right to self-determination of oppressed nations, up to and including independence. Otherwise, the working class of the dominant nation will inevitably follow its own ruling class. At the same time deep suspicion will be created among the people of the oppressed nation, who will in their turn be driven to line up behind their own (petty) bourgeoisie. In this article, Quebec socialist Marc Bonhomme starts from some broader considerations concerning nations and nationalism before moving on to the national question in Quebec.

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The crisis of socialism and the triumph of neo-liberalism have left the field open for nationalist and reactionary forces to take over the leadership of national movements. But while these forces have certainly reduced the liberating potential of national movements, they haven't destroyed these movements: far from it, such is the oppressive weight of neo-liberal imperialism. Isn't that exactly the terrible paradox that we see today in Iraq? However, as the example of East Timor has demonstrated, national movements can still win battles. But these victories are won at a high cost in human lives and the concrete results are disappointing. That's why they don't have many positive consequences for the democratic and working-class movements.

But it would be wrong to underestimate the revolutionary potential of national movements. The demand for the right to self-determination, or even independence, must not only be made for negative reasons. We have to recognise that the nationalism of oppressed nations is an inevitable reaction to the chauvinism of the dominant nations, especially in an epoch of resurgent imperialism and of a general weakness of the left.

It would also be wrong to think that national struggles have nothing to do with the strategy of the permanent revolution, in other words with the possibility for the democratic struggle for national independence to grow over into a revolutionary struggle for a socialist world. We have to break with the old Stalinist theory of "building socialism in one country" on the basis of national independence.

But we must beware of falling into the trap of making a symmetrically opposite mistake, by reducing the question to a struggle of “multitudes” against a global capitalism with no fixed abode, on the basis of “local” or partial struggles, neglecting completely the national framework.

This national framework remains the main forum of the class struggle. Even the big gatherings of the World Social Forum are first and foremost national gatherings of the host nation. Similarly, the big anti-war demonstrations are a world-wide co-ordination of national mobilisations. That’s why the struggle of the Québécois people for its national independence is still relevant as a central element of a revolutionary strategy for a socialist Canada.

The nation, Class and gender

The nation is to the ethnic group what gender is to sex, that is to say a social relation and not just a sum total of physical characteristics. Certainly, these characteristics are the underlying basis of social relations but they do not at all explain the dynamic of their contradictions. The Marxist method very clearly distinguishes between what is “concrete” and what concerns social relations.

This elementary distinction between nation and ethnic group avoids falling into the trap of a part of the anti-globalisation movement, which confuses the two concepts. This mistake can lead to rejecting the national struggle as ending inevitably in ethnic cleansing. But to ignore the nation means leaving the way open to nationalist forces. What is worse, it doesn’t enable us to take advantage of the discredit of nationalist ideology, for example in the Arab-Muslim world, where the political arena is occupied by a fundamentalism which harks back to a medieval, pre-national mystification of religion as a means of creating an identity that can unite oppressors and oppressed.

It is a normal and healthy reflex for the working class to identify with the nation to avoid being atomised by neo-liberal capitalism. All the more reason for us to intervene in the framework of the nation, but also to subvert it, because the nation is a bourgeois social relation. The construction of the nation expresses the tendency towards a market enclosed within national frontiers, the private property of a gang of bourgeois united in a state. This national market was historically constructed as a political coming together of bourgeois and workers (peasants, artisans) increasingly united by a common language and/or culture and institutions, which implies a common history.

The nation, in addition to substituting national antagonism for class antagonism, is completely tied up with gender and the family. The family becomes the cell of reproduction of the nation, both to extend its market and to provide it with cannon fodder, just as it is the place where labour power is reproduced. So the woman becomes the “mother” of the nation, responsible for the growth of its population. The nation thus becomes the new justification for domestic slavery.

When we talk about a nation we are also talking about a system of nations whose relations are determined in the final analysis by the law of competition, by the fundamental law of capitalist accumulation. Just as the competition between capitals led to the development of the productive forces and to the creation of the national market, so the competition between nations tended towards the extension of frontiers and the creation of colonial empires, mercantilist then imperialist. Which in turn led to the anti-ecological plundering of peripheral regions and colonies, and also the drive to war.

The nation, since it is the framework for the accumulation of capital, is the unit within which capitalism acts. To reject or marginalise it as a diversion from the class struggle is to place yourself outside of history, outside of politics. The overthrow of neo-liberal capitalism involves revolution in a national framework, even if that is not the end of the process. The link between nation and anti-

capitalism lies in the struggle against imperialism, our own or someone else's. Imperialism is the present-day expression of the tendency of the national market and national frontiers to expand without end. Every movement of national liberation, by challenging the imperialist or expansionist nation-state, also challenges the territorial basis of bourgeois power. It is therefore potentially revolutionary.

The nation, real or imaginary?

On this socio-economic foundation arises national ideology, nationalism, that is to say the identification of the nation, which is absolutely real, with a mystical history whose frontiers are imaginary. The frontiers of Greater Israel today are justified by reference to the kingdoms of David and Solomon three thousand years ago. The frontiers of present-day Serbia are justified by the territory of the 13th century Serbian kingdom. Canada's frontiers are defined by the "gift" of native lands by the Hudson's Bay Company to the new Dominion of Canada in 1871; the frontiers of Greater Quebec come from the "gift" of the northern native territories by the federal government to the province of Quebec in 1898 and 1912.

Nationalism has a double goal. It justifies the extension of frontiers in order to justify the expansion of the national market. And it creates a common ideology between exploiters and exploited which diverts the class struggle into channels of national conflict. So to understand national movements as only bourgeois nationalist movements is to reduce the struggle for national liberation to a nationalist struggle. If we do that we are led to see the nation as an imaginary category, outside of real history.

But nations are very real. The American nation has wrought and encouraged immense and very real havoc in the world. As has the Canadian nation in relation to the Native, Acadian and Québécois nations. Of course, we can attribute this to the fact that these nations are states. And as all the English-speaking nations are also states, and among the most powerful ones, when you are English-speaking you can mistake the one for the other and even accord the status of nations only to states, reducing all the nations without a state to ethnic groups who imagine themselves to be nations. That's exactly the meaning of the "multicultural" policy of the Canadian state, which tries to reduce the Québécois people to a large ethnic group that takes itself for a nation.

No doubt French, the dominant language in Quebec, is pure imagination. The history of the oppression of Quebec is pure invention (as is the conquest of the native territories by the "white horde" and the deportation of the Acadian people, which explains their present-day territorial dispersion) [1]; The great wealth of Quebec culture, including its televisual production whose ratings outdo those of American programmes, which is not the case in several European countries, and the financial and manufacturing networks based in Quebec are doubtless products of the imagination.

In the wake of neo-liberalism there has been a world-wide offensive of the English language and in Canada we have seen the anti-French-language immigration policies of the federal government. Despite this, the Québécois nation has welcomed and continues to welcome a high proportion of Canada's national minorities and immigrants. It does so in French, but without seeking to assimilate them, , although they still represent less than the English-speaking minority in Quebec. Only a nation can do that, even if it doesn't have a state.

Imperialism and the nation-state

The coming of imperialism obliged revolutionary movements to link up with national movements.

This necessity was not yet very clear after the First World War (though the Bolsheviks began to understand it after October 1917 and the failure of the German Revolution, as they increasingly grasped the potential of the “revolution in the East”). It became clear after the Second World War.

The response of imperialism to the rise of national liberation movements was neo-colonialism. Encouraged by the development of the productive forces, which increasingly had to be made profitable by access to the world market, neo-colonialism corrupted national independence by disconnecting the national market from the nation-state. To do this, it replaced the old model of national monopolies with world-wide ramifications, as analysed by Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin and Luxemburg [2], with the international division of labour organised by the financial and manufacturing multinationals of “late capitalism” that Ernest Mandel analysed [3]. This required creating a framework of international institutions controlled by them in order to regulate the flow of capital and commodities.

Certainly, in the period after 1945, the political constraints of the Cold War obliged this reorganised “late imperialism” to accept policies of “national development”. At that time, in spite of American hegemony over the capitalist world, there was still scope for the development of national capitalisms, driven forward by mass anti-imperialist independence movements. However these movements, whose echo in the imperialist countries was the “national” social-democratic domination of the workers’ movement, were poisoned by the Stalinist conception of the “building of socialism in one country” which turned national independence into the be-all and end-all of the struggle.

It is true that certain national movements after 1945, not being of a bourgeois nature, tried to break with capitalism, although they all remained more or less prisoners of Stalinist theory. There is a qualitative difference between a national movement led by the (petty) bourgeoisie whose final goal is independence, no matter how democratic, and a movement led by an anti-capitalist force, no matter how Stalinist, which tries to go beyond capitalism, though still remaining confined within a national framework.

So we can’t put all national movements in the same bag. The Chinese anti-imperialist struggle was qualitatively different from India’s; those in Cuba and Nicaragua qualitatively different from Egypt and even Algeria. In China as in Cuba and Nicaragua, the question of growing over into socialism was posed but not resolved.

Neo-liberal imperialism and national movements

These inherent weaknesses of the post-war national liberation movements were the major cause of the strategic victory of imperialism, just as the same nationalist conception of socialism explains in the last analysis the victory of the bourgeoisie against the USSR. After this victory the post-1945 system of international relations, represented by the Bretton Woods institutions plus the United Nations, was freed from any constraint [4]. Along with this went the transformation and enlargement of NATO. The free-trade counter-offensive could now be fully deployed.

The victory of neo-liberal imperialism has shown that national independence can no longer be the ultimate goal of the national liberation movement, even though it remains in the medium-term essential, as the only possible response to national oppression backed up by a strengthened imperialism. The renewed strength of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism illustrates what revolutionaries had understood about the imperialism epoch: just as the socialist revolution cannot stop at the borders of a single country, national liberation cannot stop at the “border” of national independence. Even though the revolution has to begin in one country and national liberation has to begin with independence or autonomy.

The victory of imperialism over the national movements which had been taken in by the mirage of national independence, coupled with the victory of capitalism against Stalinism which had served as a model for national movements, paved the way for the weakening and sometimes the destruction of the national capitalisms of the dependent countries through structural adjustment programmes. This victory even created the conditions for a greater subordination of the weakest imperialist countries, those without major financial centres, without a strong currency or without influence on the euro. To this end, the main imperialist centres liberalised the circulation of capital and to a lesser extent of goods and services – but only in one direction – in order to be able to overcome the welfare state, which was rooted in the legitimacy of the nation state.

This reduced autonomy of several imperialist states, and even more so the new, neo-liberal neo-colonialism, has the paradoxical result of favouring the national movements within these countries through weakening the central state, while at the same time reducing the liberating potential of the demand for autonomy or national independence that is expressed by bourgeois nationalist leaderships. For how could a new state that remained part of the imperialist-dominated free-trade system become really independent?

But it is not so clear that this weakening of states increases the possibility of the political independence or autonomy of oppressed nations within them, because the bourgeoisies of the weakened nation-states in question fight back. They try to increase centralisation of their states so as to maintain and strengthen their position within proto-states like the European Union and within international institutions. Imprisoned in the neo-liberal framework, the struggle for independence becomes more difficult, but paradoxically even more essential as the only possible response to the new forms of imperialist domination and to the deepening of national oppression through state centralisation.

So developing the national struggle as the first step towards socialism is neither simple or without risks. But it remains essential. And precisely because they understand the revolutionary potential of national movements, the forces of capital do their utmost to derail them into nationalist channels that can even descend to ethnic cleansing. But actually ethnic cleansing is above all the method used by nation-states that are on the defensive, very much weakened economically and politically, often fighting for their very existence against imperialism, and not by oppressed nations without a state. All this certainly complicates the strategy of revolutionary movements within multinational states. But whoever said that the revolution was a simple matter, with no risk of historical detours?

Any serious anti-capitalist who wants to act within really existing social relations cannot neglect the national movement. If you do, you are reduced to just waging an ideological struggle, as still happens in the anti-globalisation movement. Or else, feeling the need to have roots, you get involved in “local” struggles, neglecting the national dimension. We cannot reduce the essence of a national movement to its leadership and the ideology it proclaims, any more than we can for the workers’ movement. The task of anti-capitalists is rather to work towards separating national liberation from nationalism.

Today geographical necessity and the need to unite around a shared identity in the face of a faceless and oppressive neo-liberalism, are giving new life to national movements, though sometimes these movements become sidetracked. Neo-liberal imperialism is leading, as in Argentina, to a second struggle for independence, this time against the IMF and the multinationals. If the socialist alternative was more credible, national movements would place themselves in that framework. The leadership would fall to the workers’ movement, which would win out over nationalist forces.

The Quebec national question within Canada

The British colonisers, after the conquest of Canada in 1763 following the Seven Years' War, had in the first instance to accept a policy of conciliation with the largely majority French-speaking population of the St. Laurent Valley. In reality it was with the land-owning and ecclesiastical elites that they had to be conciliatory, so that these elites could protect the people from the contagion of the American and then French revolutions. In vain, as it turned out.

On the basis of this holy alliance was built the colonial power of the "Bureaucrats" of Lower Canada (Quebec) and the "Family Compact" in Upper Canada (Ontario), to which the "loyalists" fleeing the American national liberation revolution had emigrated [5]. In the two colonies, the spread of republican ideas of "responsible government" led to the national-democratic revolutions of 1837-38 [6]. Because of national oppression, the movement was much broader in Lower Canada, even leading to a situation of dual power on part of the territory. However, they were quite easily defeated by the British colonisers.

The causes of the defeat in Quebec lay as much in the refusal of the main leaders of the rebellion to envisage armed struggle, which was finally forced on them, as in their initial refusal to abolish the feudal rents paid to the land-owners and to proclaim independence. Not to mention the fact that three years before the rebellion, the assembly controlled by the "patriots" had annulled the vote for women. The defeat was also due to the strength of the British Empire, then at the peak of its power, and the experience the British had gained during the American struggle for freedom. The lack of co-ordination of the two revolutions was another negative factor. Although they formally supported each other, they were separated by the national oppression of the "Canadians" as the descendants of New France were then called. The stability of the four oldest colonies on the Atlantic seaboard also allowed the British to concentrate troops in Lower Canada. Last but not least was the fact that the revolutionary movements were isolated internationally. Neither the American nor French government supported the rebellions, although there was significant support among the American people. The British Chartist movement did enthusiastically support the attempts at revolution, but this support was only moral.

From this defeat came the turn towards a policy of assimilating the French-speakers, a policy, which still prevails. The "heirs of Lord Durham" [7] that we have had to constantly fight back against having been put into a minority, something that was accomplished in the decade 1850-60 by the creation of an English-Canadian nation around an original nucleus of loyalists and British immigrants. Far from being a concession, the Confederation of 1867 signified both the confinement of the "Canadian" people to the province of Quebec and its official downgrading to the status of a "French-Canadian" ethnic group [8]. Once this had happened, the door was open for the crushing by military force, in 1869-70 and again in 1885, of the French and Native societies of the Plains. The Métis nation, majority French-speaking - French was the language of the fur trade - was not to be allowed to develop a nation-state [9]. Once it had been crushed, the new Canadian bourgeoisie, via the railroad, opened the West up to foreign immigrants, who were assimilated into English-speaking Canada.

The strong domination of the English-speaking bourgeoisie of Montreal over Quebec, the constitutional pre-eminence of the federal government over the provincial government and the renouncing of independence by the traditional nationalist and even Catholic fundamentalist élites, turned the French-Canadian people, constantly replenished by "the revenge of the cradles" (the high birth-rate) into cheap labour, hewers of wood and drawers of water. But this fierce exploitation and oppression, although it fully contributed to the accumulation of capital, also transformed the French-speaking peasant nation into a super-exploited proletariat, which even spread into to Northwest

Ontario and the United States.

The Canadian bourgeoisie underestimated the social consequences of this industrialisation-urbanisation of the French-Canadians. The result was a French-speaking working class, regrouped and organised in unions, which was the driving force behind the renewal of the national and social movement after the Second World War. In the 1960s the national liberation tendency predominated, which the nationalist Parti Québécois (PQ) [10] finally succeeded in taming – but only after and thanks to the crisis of October 1970 [11].

The aim is to anglicise once and for all the Québécois nation, via bilingualism and multiculturalism. Ottawa knows very well that formal equality between languages will “freely” impose, in the long term, the predominance of English, given its pre-eminence as the language of the dominant nation reinforced by its status as the international language of neo-liberal capitalism and of Hollywood-style culture. The Québécois people forced the PQ to respond by Law 101, which Ottawa has been trying with all its might to overturn ever since it was adopted [12].

So we shouldn't be surprised that once again the majority of the Anglo-Québécois population is contesting French as the common language of Quebec and dreaming of complete bilingualism. Basically, it is this dream – which you could call a secessionist, anti-independence insurance policy – that is the driving force behind the present movement for “defusion” [13]. There are doubts about the democratic nature of this fusion as imposed by the PQ. But if it wasn't for the desire of the English-speaking West Island area of Montreal to regain its municipalities, the movement against it wouldn't exist.

We are still confronted with the political project of the “liberal” Lord Durham. The Canadian state is a prison within which the Québécois people are treated with contempt and humiliated. It is faced with constitutional refusal of its recognition as a nation, or even a “distinct society”. A Canadian constitution was imposed on it against its will in 1982, and since the adoption of the so-called “clarity” law, the right to self-determination is formally refused [14].

Among all the factors of division of the working people of Canada, the Quebec national question emerges as the main if not the only uncontrollable factor in Canadian politics. Not because the Québécois nation is “more oppressed” than the Native or Acadian nations or the nationalities of non-white immigrants, or than French-speaking people outside Quebec. It's rather the contrary, even though the main indicators of social and economic progress are lower in Quebec in relation to the ROC (rest of Canada). But because only the Québécois nation, in the foreseeable future, has the demographic, economic and, since the 1970s, the political strength to shake the Canadian federalist state to its foundations.

You have to go back to 1976 to find pan-Canadian united action by the trade union movement. This inability to unite is due in the last analysis to Canadian nationalism, to which Quebecois nationalism is a reaction, and which keeps the working people of Canada deeply divided. Even the regional divisions within English Canada, which for a generation, with a few rare exceptions, have kept working-class struggles within provincial limits, are due to the Quebec national question. The division of Canada into “equal provinces” by the Confederation pact of 1867 is due essentially to the refusal of the bourgeoisie to give the “French Canadians” power in any shape or form that was based on national and not provincial criteria. It is this logic of absolute equality of the provinces that explains the refusal of any kind of “asymmetrical federalism”. The former Conservative Party, an alliance of regional bourgeoisies, tried unsuccessfully to have a watered-down version of this adopted, including recognition of Quebec as a “distinct society”, in a pan-Canadian referendum in 1992 [15].

So a strategy to defeat the Canadian bourgeoisie will have to involve an alliance between the Québécois people, the oppressed nations and nationalities of Canada and the democratic and working-class movements. But for that to happen, the working-class movement in English Canada, and especially its left wing, would have to explicitly accept the demand for the independence of Quebec and not just support the right of the Québécois people to self-determination, as does for example, the New Democratic Party which didn't stop it voting in favour of the so-called "clarity" law [16].

The FTAA sharpens the national contradictions in Canada

The offensive for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) – or its substitute in the form of bilateral pacts to get round the resistance of Mercosur [17] – and the so-called "war against terrorism" make the Quebec national question even more urgent and central in Canadian politics. The dynamic of free trade increases the unrelenting pressure of the federal government on Quebec.

To maintain its room for manoeuvre in the face of its American ally, Canadian imperialism can scarcely count on the kind of inter-imperialist alliances that exist within the European Union. Its ever-increasing economic and military integration with the United States places too many constraints on it. The search for alliances in Latin America runs up against the weak trade links that Canada has with these countries but also the relations of imperialist domination that exist, via the presence of Canadian financial multinationals throughout Latin America and of mining multinationals, particularly in the Andean countries.

So to create a relationship of forces in its competition with the American bourgeoisie, the Canadian bourgeoisie must centralise its political authority and further unify its internal market. This has led to an offensive whose aim is to cripple the provinces financially and limit their political autonomy, an offensive that is being resisted especially by the Quebec government. The FTAA, along with the Doha Round of the World Trade Organisation, would open up to privatisation and to the world market the sectors of health, education, energy and natural resources, including water, all of which are basically the responsibility of the provinces. So it is imperative for Ottawa to take political control over these sectors, while leaving the provinces the job of running them, so as to continue to divide along provincial lines the social conflicts that will inevitably flow from this new phase of free trade.

This policy will meet widespread opposition. In particular it will further aggravate the Achilles heel of the Canadian political system, the Quebec national question, which will lead directly to a pan-Canadian political crisis. This underlines the need for the political left in Quebec, in particular the Union of Progressive Forces (UFP) [18], to make the national question the central axis of its programme, just as important as opposition to neo-liberalism. The Canadian left must also take it up as a central demand. That is the precondition for a united fightback of the pan-Canadian working class against neo-liberalism, and above all for a pan-Canadian anti-capitalist party. The lack of such a party, which would have to be both anti-neo-liberal and anti-nationalist – and even worse the total absence of any perspective for such a party – has been cruelly felt in the current federal election campaign [19]. The Quebec anti-capitalist left has been left with the unenviable choice of voting for the NDP, a party that is social-liberal and Canadian nationalist, casting a blank vote (which isn't even counted) or abstaining.

P.S.

* From frontline 14, Fall 2004 (Scotland). Translation and notes by Murray Smith.

Footnotes

[1] The Acadians were the French-speaking inhabitants of what are today the Atlantic seaboard provinces of Canada. They came under British rule in 1713. In 1755 they were deported en masse for refusing to support Britain in its wars against France. Some of them moved to the then French colony of Louisiana, where their descendants are still known as “Cajuns”.

[2] In the first two decades of the 20th century Marxists like Hilferding (*Finance Capital*, 1910), Luxemburg (*The Accumulation of Capital*, 1912), Lenin (*Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 1916) as well as Bukharin in his writings, discussed what was then the new phenomenon of imperialism and how the workers’ movement should relate to it. An early book on the subject, referred to by Lenin, was *Imperialism* (1902), by the English Liberal J.A.Hobson.

[3] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London, 1972.

[4] The conference held at Bretton Woods in 1944 led to the establishment of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

[5] In the early 19th century the Bureaucrats in Quebec and the Family Compact in Ontario were upper-class cabals who used their wealth to obtain political influence, control patronage and obtain charters and contracts.

[6] The risings were led in Lower Canada by Louis-Joseph Papineau (1786-1871) and the “Patriot” party, and in Upper Canada by Scottish-born William Lyon Mackenzie (1795-1861) and the “Toronto Reformers”.

[7] John Lambton, Earl of Durham (1792-1840) became governor-general of Canada in 1838. The following year he produced a report recommending the union of Upper and Lower Canada with limited self-government, but which also called for the economic and linguistic assimilation of the French-speaking population into English Canada. His report was adopted by the British government and the two colonies were united in 1841

[8] The Dominion of Canada was established in 1867 comprising Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Other provinces joined later.

[9] “Métis” is French for half-breed. The French-speaking Métis, who were a mixture of French, Indian and to a lesser extent Scots, considered themselves as a separate people and sought to be recognised as such when their lands were taken over by the Canadian government from the Hudson’s Bay Company. They rose up under Louis Riel (1844-85) in the Red River Rebellion in 1869-70 and again in the Northwest Rebellion in 1885. Their defeat in the second rebellion led to the destruction of their society and to their dispersion.

[10] The Parti Québécois was founded in 1968 by René Lévesque (1922-87). It first came to power in 1976. Referendums on independence were defeated in 1980 and again, very narrowly, in 1995.

[11] In October 1970 a small group called the Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ) kidnapped the British Trade Commissioner, James Cross, and the Canadian Minister of Labour and Immigration, Pierre Laporte. This unleashed a political crisis, with demonstrations and sit-ins by nationalist students and other sectors of the population. The Liberal government of Quebec called in the army to back up the police and arrested hundreds of people under the War Measures Act. The

FLQ lost sympathy after it executed Laporte and the movement died down.

[12] Law 101, adopted by the first PQ government, made French the only official language of Quebec.

[13] The PQ has reorganised local government in Quebec, fusing suburban boroughs with the main cities, in particular Montreal. The “defusion” movement has arisen in opposition to this. It is essentially based in the well-off and mainly English-speaking suburbs of Montreal.

[14] Canada adopted a constitution in 1982 which Quebec has never accepted. Following the near-victory of independence in the 1995 referendum the federal government passed the Clarity Act which provides for the non-recognition of the results of a future referendum if the majority is not big enough or the question not clear enough – in the opinion of Ottawa, of course.

[15] In 1991 the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney tried to unblock the constitutional crisis by offering increased powers to all the provinces while offering even greater autonomy to Quebec. This “asymmetrical federalism” was rejected in an all-Canada referendum in November 1992.

[16] The New Democratic Party, established in 1961, is a social-democratic party. It has never been in federal government. Most of its MPs voted for the Clarity Act, in violation of a decision by the party’s federal council. During the recent federal election campaign, party leader Jack Layton told a Quebec audience he was in favour of repealing the law, only to subsequently back down in the face of English-Canadian pressure.

[17] Mercosur is a free-trade bloc established in 1995 and comprising Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. Chile and Bolivia are already associate members and Venezuela and Peru have been accepted as such. Mercosur has attempted, if not to block Bush’s plan for a free trade zone of the Americas, at least to negotiate better terms for the countries of Latin America.

[18] The UFP is an organisation of the radical left in Quebec, launched in 2002. It is not explicitly anti-capitalist or socialist but is opposed to neo-liberalism.

[19] Canada had a federal election on June 28, the result of which was not known when Marc Bonhomme wrote this article. The newly formed Conservative Party failed in its attempt to win a majority. The ruling Liberals remained the largest party but lost a lot of support. The main feature of the election was a swing to the left. The NDP got 15.7% of the vote – more than a million votes up on the last election four years ago, and the Green Party vote, at 4.3%, was six times more than last time. In Quebec, the Bloc Québécois (the PQ’s face in federal elections) got nearly 50% of the vote.