

REPRINT FROM THE LAST POST

QUEBEC: INTO THE STREETS



In the winter of 1966, Rene Levesque, then a minister in the Liberal government, spoke in the ballroom at McGill University about reforming Quebec's social welfare schemes.

"The trouble is that you've got a leaking, sinking ship, and people are just bailing the water out.

You've got to patch up the holes," said the Family and Social Welfare Minister, and strained to hear what someone in the back row was yelling.

What the fellow at the back said was: "Why the hell don't we get a new ship?"

This is a background article published in 1969

Nationalist demonstrations are not a phenomenon in Quebec. Neither are militant, bloody strikes. French university students have conducted political protest demonstrations at least since 1901, when they opposed sending Quebecois to fight for British imperialism in the Boer war.

Thirty thousand people marched through Montreal in 1885 to protest the hanging of Louis Riel, so calling the Ottawa government racist and repressive is not endemic to the present. You can find the word "imperialist" levelled at the British in Papineau's writings before the abortive 1837 revolt, and again during the anti-conscription riots of 1917.

So today, students march in the streets of Montreal and Quebec by the tens of thousands; strikes plague north-shore mining towns; the unilinguists assault the school system. And a few English cynics who have read a bit about the history of Quebec still take it calmly as "deja vue", pointing out that in this curious corner of North America, it is, like acne, just a nuisance that comes and goes.

But most English in Quebec know that, today, things are different.

It was not "violence" that shocked them last October 7, when students and taxi drivers ripped apart the buses and cars of Murray Hill Limousine Co. while the entire Montreal police force was on strike. They had seen violence before; they had seen the Stock Exchange bombed, they had watched the riot squad wade into a crowd, swinging their three-foot batons. Nor was it the sight of a few thousand Quebecois in the streets, for that too is quite familiar.

What shocked the English was the painful realization that it is no longer possible to isolate labor problems, the educational system, or language questions — that these are all being attacked together. Militant labor leaders were actively supporting student strikes, students allied with taxi drivers to attack the Murray Hill monopoly. And the greatest shock of all came when the police began behaving like any other labor group, and struck. The lines were drawn frightfully clear that night. The English press across Canada called it a night of terror. It was, for the English.

The great new fear, born of a realization that the problems can no longer be isolated, is coupled with an even greater change from the Quebec of decades past — the Quebecois has begun to realize the same thing. If the teacher demonstrates against his low salary, he is only a corporatist, self-interested protester. But when he joins other workers in a cause that is not supposed to be his own particular concern, he exhibits the kind of solidarity that is the password to liberation. The English call it insurrection.

In 1962, a few hundred students from l'Universite de Montreal demonstrated peacefully in front of the Canadian National Railway's head office in downtown Montreal. It was the first big nationalist demonstration of the sixties, and

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it was protesting the CNR's policy of not hiring French-speaking senior executives. The students burned a Canadian red ensign flag and an effigy of CNR president Donald Gordon.

The great "separatism" debate was on. Toronto theatre groups began inviting Quebec companies to cross the bor-

der and show off their cultural wares to the cognoscenti, and Berlitz started ranking in a fortune.

The next year, the first Front de Liberation Quebecois (FLQ) blew up several of Her Majesty's royal mailboxes in English speaking Westmount.

In 1969, the FLQ was bombing the Montreal Stock Exchange and the head office of Noranda Mines Ltd. And when it hit Westmount, it hit the home of the president of Murray Hill Limousine Services, chief enemy of Montreal's increasingly militant taxi drivers.

The nationalist demonstrations were even bigger, but the demonstrators were talking about more than having executives speak French. When they attacked McGill University, they attacked it not only as an English bastion but as a bastion of English capital.

Citizens' committees were forming to fight the landlords and trust companies — and they soon got the point that the landlords and the banks were English.

The president of the Montreal Council of the Confederation of National Trade Unions was marching in demonstrations for French unilingualism. In Quebec, Michel Chartrand said, capital speaks English and the worker speaks French. A handful of English speaking socialists agreed, and marched for unilingualism too.

If Chartrand was right, and the national and social question are indivisible, why only now, 200 years after the Conquest, is there a movement contesting both.

As recently as 1920, Quebec was still largely rural and backward. There had been some development in the textile and lumber-paper industries, by British and, latterly, American capital. But not enough to change the base of the value system, and of social organization, as it had stood in essence since the battle on the Plains of Abraham.

American Imperialism

Quebec is rich in natural resources — principally minerals, timber and water for hydroelectric power. And it had a crucial plus — an untapped supply of cheap labor. American capital began to move in and overtake the British and Anglo-Canadian interests. In the Thirties, accelerating through World War II and the post-war period, Quebec underwent its major industrial revolution.

Typical of the American entry into Quebec was that of Hollinger-Hanna, a consortium of U.S. steel companies which began exploiting the deposits of iron ore along Quebec's north shore in the late Forties and early Fifties. Hollinger-Hanna consolidated its Canadian operations into the Iron Ore Co. of Canada, which has since sent over 150,000,000 tons of ore to the Cleveland, Ohio, smelters of the Republic, National, Armco, Youngstown and Wheeling Steel Companies.

The Duplessis government, in order to attract the steel companies, negotiated a paltry one cent a ton tariff on ore carried out of Quebec. A few years later, when Joey Smallwood negotiated 30 cents a ton from the same companies for iron ore exploitation in Newfoundland, he faced a chorus of critics accusing him of "selling out to American interests for virtually nothing."

From the same roots as the soft words toward American investors sprang Duplessis' use of the big stick against incipient trade unionism. In 1949, he viciously crushed the