

# An Analysis of French-English Relations Within Canada's Other National Student Union: UGEQ

Editor's note: The writer has attended all three annual congresses of UGEQ as a delegate and later as a reporter.

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"Pierre, why do you keep on making those silly speeches? Why don't you make a bomb?"

Pierre Bourgeault, Quebec's separatist leader of the Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale (RIN), tells this story about a friend of his to point up a certain sense of futility among many Quebec nationalists who are only too aware of the many contradictions in Quebec. Here's one of them.

Eighty-five per cent of Quebec is French. But the 15 per cent Montreal English make up half

of the province's university students. Reason enough to make a bomb? Boom!

The phenomenon of English Montreal's predominance in education and other areas of Quebec society is not new. The English have held sway in Quebec since the conquest of 1759, the defeat of the French on the Plains of Abraham.

Like true conquered peoples the French retreated to the farms — partly at the urging of the catholic church, partly because the English took over the reins of industry and commerce — and are only now succeeding in breaking the English's hold on the province. In the midst of this struggle comes the syndicalist union

of Quebec students, l'Union Générale des Etudiants du Québec.

Formed in 1964 after Quebec's three French Universities — Laval, Sherbrooke and Montreal — withdrew from the Ottawa-based, Ottawa-oriented Canadian Union of Students, it now groups 55,000 students from Quebec universities, classical colleges, trade schools, teachers colleges, nursing schools, and the new general and professional public colleges (CEGEPs) into a cohesive syndicalist union. UGEQ is working hard to maintain the progress of the Quiet Revolution which began along with the bang of separatist bombs over four years ago.

UGEQ's contradiction is the presence of 22,000 English students in its ranks, representing a third of the union membership. They have joined with other students in the province to shape policies for Quebec's future development, which in many cases implies the destruction of the English Empire in Quebec which has run, if not ruled, that province since 1759.

## THE LAVAL CONGRESS

Delegates at UGEQ's first congress at Laval University in the fall of 1965 debated applications for membership by three English universities at length. Some argued if the English entered the union they could form a voting bloc approaching 40 per cent (at that time) and make UGEQ an

other sterile forum for debates on Canadian confederation. This was not their aim when the French students had formed the union six months earlier at their founding congress.

They had formed a Quebec student union of French members; its official language was French; its orientation was Quebec; its policies uncompromisingly left; its philosophy was syndicalist, based on the Charte de Grenoble of the national union of students of France (UNEF), and they planned to operate in the same way as trade unions, often in direct collaboration with them. The English could force a compromise on all of this.

Not so, said the pro-English. The Quebec French didn't withdraw from the Canadian Union of Students because it was dominated by English students. It's policies were judged to be simply not relevant to the realities of the Quebec situation. And, as education is a provincial responsibility, a federal lobby had little relevance to students who saw their main priority as educational and social reform.

In its application bid McGill accepted the orientation and policies of the union, including unilingualism. The majority sets the rules, they said, and we'll join the union on your terms.

## THE ENGLISH JOIN UGEQ

The vote on McGill's application was not even close. Sir George Williams and Marionopolis

College were also accepted at the same time. (In a referendum soon after, McGill students repudiated their executive's move to join the union, mainly because UGEQ was unilingual. They changed their minds a year later however, and McGill re-applied and was accepted back into the union at the Sherbrooke congress in February, 1967.) Loyola also joined UGEQ in Feb. 1967, leaving ultra-conservative Bishop's University the only Quebec university outside the union.

## BILINGUALISM BIDS

At the Sherbrooke congress Sir George Williams prepared a brief in English as a working language. An ill-conceived effort, the brief cited several ambiguous statements by the retiring UGEQ executive to support its case. That the Sir George delegation felt a need for such a brief in itself points up a deep feeling of resentment of their new-found minority status in the new Quebec.

It is a unique situation where English students are forced to speak in a debate in French — often stumbling, halting, embarrassed French — while some Quebecois sit back with a smug smile on their lips, listening. For too long the shoe has been on the other foot. After 200 years on the receiving end of unilingualism, it must have been very satisfying for the French to have the English come to them on their terms.

The Sir George bilingualism brief never did get to the floor; it was dropped at the request of the McGill delegation, which feared it might harm their chances of getting in to the union again after their students had vetoed UGEQ on the language question a year earlier. McGill's membership application was accepted at the plenary session, with only one disquieting question from the floor: "Are they ready to speak French now?"

The answer was a silent yes.

Isolated instances of French-English conflict persist in UGEQ, cropping up mainly at congresses. In February of this year at the Sir George Williams congress McGill tried to place a two languages motion on the agenda without first steering it through a commission. They failed to muster a needed majority to even place it on the agenda.

## PARTICIPATE IN QUEBEC

On the other hand, Sir George's Jean Sicotte stole the show with a motion calling for the teaching of French in English schools beginning at the primary level, "in order to allow the English community to participate more effectively in the development of Quebec society." A half-minute of stunned silence gave way to a loud cheer. The motion

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