

# Québec labour: the roots of unity

## INTRODUCTION

In the October 15 edition, the GAZETTE carried a feature on Québec with a history, an analysis of the October crisis and some projections of the future of Québec.

The economic aspects of the struggle have come to predominate all discussions. A very important part of these concerns the labour unions. Previously they have not involved themselves in the politics of Québec, but the obvious interaction of liberalism, economics and the people has forced the Québec labour unions, particularly the Québec Federation of Labour, to take stands on the political future of Québec. Recently the QFL held an assembly to clarify

their stand, which has been developing on an ad-hoc basis for the past few years. Out of this assembly came a number of important resolutions, some of which show contradictions but at the same time show a new, more involved political stance among unions generally.

The most significant result of the convention is the increased militancy shown by the union membership as a whole. The 235,000 member union represents a significant portion of Québec workers, and these developments add new reinforcement to those struggling for Québec independence.

## QFL: radical new directions?

by Robert Wallace  
McGill Daily

The Quebec Federation of Labour has left the negotiating table and entered the larger arena of political and social struggle.

Although the role the QFL defined for itself in that struggle is an ambiguous one, several resolutions passed by the 235,000-member labour central at its convention last week reflect the new political direction of the Quebec labour movement.

"The overwhelming majority of delegates to the convention expressed their support in principle for Quebec having the total right of self-determination, including the right to declare its sovereignty, with the reservation that this process must be accomplished in accordance with the needs and aspirations of the working classes".

"Another resolution declared

support for "the creation of a permanent inter-union common front on the political and social levels."

"Still another resolution dedicated the QFL to "the establishment of a socialist and democratic society," to be brought about by "struggle" waged "simultaneously on the political and syndical levels."

"The QFL must broaden the front of progressive forces, channelling all the legitimate movements opposing the system which oppresses us." This "movement of solidarity" would operate on a regional basis; the various regional labour councils would work "conjointly with all syndical, popular and political organisations" sharing the QFL's goals.

"Finally, delegates felt the QFL "must consider massive participation in a political party and, if need be, set up a new party."

This last resolution was a

bone of contention between delegates sympathetic to the Parti Québécois and those who insisted it was not a genuine working-class party.

The top leadership of the union took some of the strongest pro-PQ stands. Secretary-General Fernand Daoust interpreted the resolution to mean that "those militants who want to work for the PQ will do so with the blessing of the QFL leadership." Referring to "disquieting" statements made recently by the PQ about labour (the PQ refused to support the massive La Presse demonstration of October 29). Daoust said that QFL militants could now work to change these "petit-bourgeois positions" from inside the PQ.

Federation President Louis Laberge took a similar stand. He asked delegates to "pardon" PQ leader René Lévesque for his criticism of the La Presse demonstration; "we mustn't

forget what Lévesque has done for the workers," Laberge declared.

But the most enthusiastic pro-PQ man was Jean Gérin-Lajoie, vice-president of the QFL and Quebec director of the United Steelworkers of America. Citing the "massive grassroots support" given to the PQ by workers in the last election, Gérin-Lajoie said that since "we" had patiently built the PQ, "we" should not be too quick to discard it. To form a workers' party at the present time would "alienate us from the population".

As is well known, the Parti Québécois has pledged not to harm American corporate interests in Quebec. Structurally, the QFL is the Quebec wing of the Canadian Labour Congress and groups mostly locals affiliated to AFL-CIO unions in the United States. The motives behind its leaders' support for the PQ are

therefore open to question.

Similarly, the reasons for the QFL's new political involvement are not so much revolutionary as practical. According to Laberge, it was "collusion between government, high finance and the judicial system" that forced unions to fight on the social and political fronts as well as by industrial bargaining.

"The best collective agreement is powerless to prevent the government legislating away, with a stroke of the pen, the rights acquired in struggles going back as much as 100 years," he said. This meant that "we have to change the system as a whole".

Laberge added, however: "Our enemies and all the people on the right say we are preaching revolution. It's exactly the opposite. By becoming involved in political action, we will prevent the anarchists from getting power."

by Alwyn Katz  
McGill Daily

The irresistible growth of the "Super-Union", the common front of the Québec Federation of Labour (QFL) and the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), has horrified the Québec bourgeoisie and its press during the last few months. The obvious threat such a common front poses to the status quo has sent better newspapers than the Daily Express into paroxysms.

And well it might. The members of the common front, which at one point included the Québec Teachers Corporation (QTC), are well aware of the nature of the conflict in which they are engaging. "This is the basic struggle for the victory of a liberated Québec," said the president of the QTC, Yvan Charbonneau, during an immense rally at the Forum.

The issue which led to the most significant break-through in labour unity was the lock-out of four unions at La Presse, formerly the largest French-language daily in North America. The four unions, all affiliated with the QFL, were locked out ostensibly because the La Presse administration wished to install new equipment which would eliminate the jobs of some of the workers.

The workers claimed that La Presse, a part of the Gelco-Power Corporation conglomerate, was merely acting in conformity with its policy of maximizing profits at the expense of the workers and that La Presse had not made an effort to retrain the workers or replace them. The La Presse issue was never viewed simply as a struggle between four unions and an employer but was

rather regarded as the confrontation between the Québécois workers and the monopoly capital, which controls the Québec economy with the support of the Québec provincial government.

As the La Presse lock-out continued through July, August, September and October, the long-simmering resentment of the Montreal firemen boiled over. During the month of October the firemen, who had been working without a contract ever since December 1970, decided that further negotiations with the dictatorial government of Jean Drapeau were pointless and walked out on their jobs.

Drapeau quickly obtained a court injunction ordering them back to work and, pressured by their former allies the policemen, the firemen reluctantly reassumed their positions.

During the summer, further confrontation between labour and the capital-government alliance occurred, each time ending in a more or less convincing defeat for labour. The forces of government, business, and the courts combined to overwhelm the scattered forces of labour. In all the history of Québec, only once has a court refused to grant an injunction ordering workers back to work.

The injunctions have all too often been backed up by the powers of the police; during the summer a strike at Seven Islands resulted in a Duplessis-style repression of the workers by the provincial police.

On October 29, 15,000 workers and students marched in solidarity with the locked-out workers at La Presse (in spite of a hastily enacted municipal law which banned demon-

strations in the proposed area), immediately surrounding the La Presse building. The demonstrators were met by the massed forces of the entire police force of Montreal and engaged in a battle which resulted in many arrests, injuries and one death.

Four days after the demonstration, 12,000 people attended a mass rally at the Forum. A common front of workers and students was proclaimed. Most importantly, those present pledged to devote themselves to the struggle of the oppressed people of Québec against the common oppressor.

In a short pamphlet issued last January entitled "There is no Longer any Future for Québec Within the Present Economic System", the CNTU illustrated the dominant role of monopoly capital concentrated in the hands of American multinational corporations in Québec. Moreover, the deep complicity of the Québec and federal governments was revealed.

The CNTU pamphlet proved conclusively that the present economic system pitted the forces of U.S. capital against those of Québec labour and based any development of the Québec economy on the investment of foreign capital. The endemic unemployment and exploitation of the people was traced back to the system which tolerated mass cutbacks in foreign-owned plants on one hand, while on the other went out begging for further foreign investment.

The CNTU recommended that the Québécois end the capitalist domination of Québec and begin a social and economic order "based only on ourselves". A

later and longer pamphlet expressed the same ideas in greater detail.

The most significant recent development was the creation of what appears to be a permanent common front of the major unions in Québec, the CNTU and the QFL. Militants have been forced to shift the focus of their activities from the negotiating table to the political and social arena. To best oppose the forces of the provincial government and multi-national capital, the workers have to unite and struggle on a national level.

This reflects the growing central role of government. Although formerly the government was content to mediate between capital and labour in the disputes which inevitably arose, and to legislate in favour of capital if necessary, government is coming to gradually dominate economic life.

The provincial government is the largest employer in Québec; the payroll of over 250,000 includes civil servants, teachers and other members of the educational establishment, all 12,012 workers of Hydro-Québec, and now, the employees of the James Bay Development Corporation.

The future role of government via vis the economic structure of society may be based on the James Bay Development Corporation model: government will direct the exploitation of resources and population, but the proceeds will go to the U.S. Workers therefore have had no choice but to oppose the government with the united force of Québécois labour. The conflict of its own accord has been transferred to the political forum.

These trends were clearly understood and planned for in both the Forum rally and the recent QFL convention.

A resolution of the QFL convention directed that "the QFL must broaden the front of progressive forces, channelling all the legitimate movements opposing the system which oppresses us." The creation of a political party to represent the interests of the workers has been proposed several times by various groups in the last few months, most recently at the QFL convention.

The CNTU has endorsed the constitutional stand of the Parti Québécois, although it disavows the petitbourgeois nature of its economic programme. However, should the Parti Québécois fail to develop into the workers party it has claimed itself to be, there is little doubt that a new party will appear in Québec politics.

The common front has become an integral part of Québec life. A more restricted front was organized early in the year to negotiate with the provincial government on a united basis, but the front more recently proclaimed at the Forum rally that it intends to deal with the larger issues of social and political change.

The probability of a general strike by the Montreal Central Council of the CNTU hangs over the negotiations in the La Presse dispute, with all the workers of Montreal uniting behind their fellows in opposition to the forces of monopoly capital.

The growing consciousness of Québécois labour is merely a reflection of the growing polarization of the society. As one of the speakers at the forum rally said "On vient de se réveiller".

## Unions form common front

LAST POST — photo: Jean-Michel Joffe



"This is a sacred solidarity. Never again will we be divided," — QFL President Louis Laberge

