

A short history of Quebec's recent economic and social mood

Quebec is part of the political and economic system of Canada, and so Quebecois are grappling with many of the same problems as Canadians in other regions — economic stagnation, inflation and a large-scale lack of jobs. At the same time, the large majority of the people in Quebec are French-speaking and part of a distinctive culture and historical experience as a people since their ancestors first settled the St. Lawrence Valley in the 1600's and 1700's.

As part of the present political and economic system of Canada, Quebec's economic and social development runs head on into many of the same problems that are hitting working people and students all over Canada. With the second largest population and the second most industrialized economy among the regions of Canada, Quebec has been faced for a long time with the same social and economic conflicts that other regions in Canada are just beginning to experience acutely.

Quebec leads unemployment

Quebecois refer bitterly to the fact that Quebec has held the championship in unemployment in Canada for too long. From 1958-1968, average unemployment in Quebec was 7.3 percent, compared with 3.9 percent in Ontario. In the last 15 years, the number of unemployed workers in Quebec has ranged from 20 percent to 40 percent more than Canada as a whole, and from 50 percent to 100 percent more than Ontario.

Today, with unemployment rising rapidly everywhere in Canada, Quebec still leads with 8.9 percent unemployed as compared to 4.4 percent in Ontario. One in 11 people in the Quebec work force are out of a job. Although Quebec has just a little more than one quarter of the total work force in Canada, it has 41 percent of the unemployed. Young people are especially hard hit — 42 percent of Quebec's unemployed are under 25.

Thus although Quebec is rich in human and natural resources as compared to other regions in Canada, the majority of people in Quebec are relatively poor in relation to people in other parts of Canada. If we take the base figure of 100 as Quebec's per capita income, then Ontario's is 127, B.C.'s 118, the average for all Canada 111, with the Maritimes and Newfoundland poorer than Quebec at 31 and 62 respectively.

Economy controlled by English 13%

As a people with a distinctive culture, language and historical experience, the situation of Quebecois within their own territory is characterized by the fact that although Anglophones make up only about 13 percent of the population, they hold most of the decision-making positions in the economy, and consequently most of the high income and status positions. This dominance of Anglophones in the economy is the result of the fact that English-Canadian and American interests control all the important sectors of the economy: banking and finance, manufacturing, and the resource industries. It is estimated that 50 large industrial corporations control 75 percent of industrial (including mining) production in Quebec; only three of these are controlled by local Quebecois capital.

Thus although 62 percent of the work force in Montreal is Francophone, only 37 percent of salaried personnel in large manufacturing corporations earn more than \$5,000. And most of those were not far above the \$5,000 level — just 17 percent of jobs paying more than \$15,000 was held by Francophones.

English salaries average 41% higher

Thus the average income of male Anglophone wage and salary earners in Quebec is 41 percent higher than that of Francophones. And since Francophones are much more concentrated in jobs hit by unemployment and in seasonal-casual employment, this income disparity between Anglophones and Francophones in Quebec is even more gaping if the total income per capita of each group is compared.

The social and economic conflicts generated by the present political and economic system in Canada are beginning to shake loose all kinds of movements and groups among the people in all parts of Canada. The effects of that same system on Quebec, with growing intensity over a longer period of time, have given birth to a whole range of political and social responses. These new events have developed especially among the Francophone people, both because they are most directly affected by economic problems producing inflation and unemployment and because of

the special situation they have as a majority people dominated within their own territory by a minority group.

Social movements in Quebec

These movements in Quebec have developed over the last 10 years in almost every sector of Quebec society: in the slums of Montreal and Quebec City, among trade unionists, students, teachers, and most recently among the people in the outlying regions such as the Gaspé and Abitibi, where annual incomes average less than \$1,000.

Part of this development of political and social movements of people grappling with day-to-day problems of work, language, welfare, schooling has been a tremendous cultural flowering — in literature, the arts, theatre, film, etc. Such poet-singers as Vigneault, Pauline Julien and Charlebois express the thrust towards self-affirmation of the Quebec people in the last 10 years.

These various movements have grown out of the concrete social and economic problems caused by the economic system of Canada. The programmes and activities of these movements have changed over time as they have increased their understanding of what needs to be changed through experience with the present system. Thus the trade union movement, traditionally exclusively concerned with wages, has increasingly carried the struggle for social change to the roots of the present political and economic system by challenging the power of corporations and businessmen to make the important political and economic decisions that affect economic development, wages, schooling, hospital and health care, etc.

Tenants ally with workers

Similarly, community organizations that originally sprang up in working class districts in Quebec's cities to fight urban redevelopment schemes that deprived them of housing have formed an alliance with the trade union movement to win political power in city hall, so that they can make their own decisions about their own communities instead of fighting city hall decisions.

People in the outlying regions such as Cabano in the Gaspé who started by participating in government redevelopment programs and still found it impossible to stop the government's give-away programs of natural resources to corporations, found that the only way to make the government move was by physically stopping companies from cutting wood or building plants until problems of jobs and wages had been settled.

People such as students and intellectuals who started by demanding bilingualism to ensure that French would be spoken in Quebec discovered that bilingualism in Quebec meant that Francophones learn to speak English. Mass mobilizations in the last two years have demanded French unilingualism (French as the only language of schooling and work) as the only solution to the rapid decline in the proportion of Francophones in Quebec.

Federal alternatives exhausted

Finally, the 30 percent of Francophones who voted for the Parti Quebecois last April did not decide independence was necessary to solve Quebec's problems until a whole range of reforms within the federal system had been tried and failed during the 1960's. Two of the PQ leaders, René Lévesque and Jacques Pariseau, were active reformers in the provincial government during the 1960's, and decided after trying the federal system that political independence was the necessary prerequisite for solving Quebec's problems.

While all these movements originally took root in different sectors of the Quebec people around very specific issues, the major phenomenon of the past year has been their convergence on a variety of major issues. This convergence has broadened the support for the independence movement and pushed it towards programs of radical change, thus posing a serious challenge to the Montreal and Toronto big business elite and the federal

government.

The seriousness of this democratic challenge and the broadly-based popular support for radical change first exploded into the English-Canadian consciousness during the spectacular rise of the Parti Quebecois last April. The Montreal and Toronto business elite and the federal government blew their cool by staging the Royal Trust withdrawal of funds from Montreal to Toronto a few days before the election, and by circulating falsified figures of taxes collected in Quebec and federal spending in Quebec.

This campaign of terrorizing the Quebec people might have scared off some of the more affluent PQ sympathizers, but it couldn't stop the PQ from winning more than 30 percent of the Francophone vote and six seats in solid working-class districts of Montreal. The fact that the Quebec Bourassa Liberal Party formed the government with just 24 percent of the Francophone vote and the remaining 30 percent of the liberal vote from Anglophones after a campaign of terror and manipulation of public opinion caused countless Quebecois to question the possibility of effecting serious change, even with the support of the people, within the present electoral system.

Crackdown on new challenge

It is this movement as a whole — the increasing militancy of workers who refuse government rationalizations for unemployment and wage restrictions, the expansion of the trade union movement to include struggle for political power for the majority of the people, the transformation of very localized community organizations into disciplined mass organizations capable of posing a serious challenge to the rule of Drapeau in Montreal, and the politicization of large numbers of students and teachers — which is the target of the massive crack-down in Quebec by federal and provincial authorities.

Active members of every one of the democratic opposition movements in Quebec have been thrown in jail for an indefinite period during the last few days:

- * members and candidates of the Front D'Action Politique, the coalition of trade union political action committees and community organizations in Montreal who are contesting the Montreal civic elections;
- * staff of community projects, including the medical director of the St. Jacques Community Health Clinic in Montreal, the director of the Montreal Family Planning Center, and members of a family budgeting service;
- * members of the Parti Quebecois all over Quebec;
- * university faculty, students and staff, including the secretary of the Union of Professors at the University of Montreal;
- * trade unionists active in the summer confrontation between the construction unions and the government;
- * trade unionists active in building political action committees in cities and towns throughout Quebec;
- * newspapermen, CBC reporters and producers;
- * Gaston Miron, winner of Quebec's highest literary award this year;
- * Pauline Julien, chanteuse known around the world for her singing of songs of Quebec's new spirit of freedom.

This extremist response by the federal government, opposed by a united front of all the significant democratic opposition forces in Quebec, cannot achieve its goal of eliminating this popular challenge to the present system in the short or long-run. In the short run, it would have to build hundreds of jails to hold thousands of people who are part of this democratic opposition which is challenging the Drapeaus, Bourassas, Trudeaus, Royal Trusts which now control Quebec.

In the long run, they would have to make the radical changes in the political and economic system these movements are working towards if they were to permanently remove the social and economic conflicts that have generated these popular movements.

The lesson of history is that it will be the movements rooted among the people that will carry through these changes.