

## **THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY: REFLECTIONS ON THE PEOPLE'S SUMMIT FROM QUEBEC**

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### INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago, the crisis facing organized labour was the most common theme in discussion of the labour movements of European and North American industrialized countries. There was, of course, a membership crisis and another crisis of overly bureaucratic structures.

But there was also a crisis of direction within these extremely institutionalized organizations, which had increasingly incestuous relations with governments while losing touch with the forces of opposition generated by broader civil society. The questions of the day were "If it is obvious that there will always be unions, can we assume that there will always be a labour movement?" and "If the labour movement has become a political actor to be reckoned with, has it lost its ability to 'create' significant social change?"

It is on the basis of this simplified reflection, that I will deal with the Québec labour movement and more specifically its relationship with civil society. I take as a case study the role labour adopted in the fight against the proposed Free Trade

Area of the Americas (FTAA). My fundamental argument is that the FTAA and the reactions it elicits will bear changes for the labour movement (within Québec and beyond), in its relations with both the state and civil society organizations, not to mention North-South relations.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I will start by providing a few socio-historical references on the Québec labour movement before defining elements of the above problematic. Then, I will deal with the People's Summit held in April, 2001 in Québec City .

#### *Québec unions and the state*

The relationship between the labour movement and the state has evolved since the 1960s. The election of a progressive government inclined to recognize unions led to the rapid unionization of public sector workers (they were previously denied the right to unionize). In turn, boosted unionization changed the overall makeup of the Québec labour movement (e.g. more women

union members, high-skilled workers, service sector workers). During this period, many government advisory and administrative agencies were created, which was a partial break with the historical non-transparent and client-centred approach to the exercise of power, and labour organizations were often invited to participate in these institutions. At the same time, however, the most important business associations were born. Funding policies promoting community groups and union education were also adopted (this was a major trend in European and North American countries).

Until the mid-seventies, relations between the Québec government and organizations were pluralistic. They later took a neo-corporate turn which promoted an equal number of seats for business and the labour movement, quite often at the expense of other community organizations. The agency responsible for regulating the prevention and compensation of occupational injuries and diseases is the very prototype of the corporatist model.

Gradually, union organizations moved away from the non-labour community groups. The labour movement had become a major political actor, enjoying media coverage and being frequently consulted by the government on diverse matters.

### *The trend towards social democracy*

From the mid-seventies, labour organizations fell into line one after the other with social democratic ideals and policies. Swedish society became a continuous inspiration, not only because of its political regulation schemes but also because it was, like that of Québec, a nordic society with a relatively low population. Social democracy entails classist representation schemes, based on the government/business/labour triangle in which the labour movement is called upon to represent all of civil society with the exception of business. In Québec, the trend towards greater social democracy was set in a vacuum created by the disarray of extreme left groups with no models to follow, and it fed on growing sovereignist sentiment. Sovereignty had become a popular project in Québec and was building upon the call for consensus (initially heavily based on ethnicity) promoted by the social democratic ideal.

### *Sovereignty*

One after the other, the main labour organizations took a stand in favour of a sovereign Québec. This was not necessarily a stand in favour of the Parti québécois (PQ), the political party spearheading the cause, but it certainly called for some cooperation with the governments formed by the Parti québécois. The PQ, initially a social democratic party, fostered this

cooperation in its early history. Québec sovereignty is now, however, fading from the agenda and the political party that embodied it is less and less social democratic (although it has become increasingly difficult to define social democracy). But the fact remains that the alliances forged have had a lasting effect on the practices and discourse of the labour organizations in Québec. I do not believe that it is very healthy or particularly easy for labour organizations, thrown off by the fall of the international left, to carry on such a project which is both socialist and nationalist. This will be made all the more difficult in the course of an intense Québec versus Canada, sovereignty versus federalism debate, as was the case during the two referendums lost by the sovereignists (albeit by a narrow margin the second time around), when union leaders and a vast number of activists had worked tirelessly, at all levels, for sovereignty and a winning referendum.

There has also been a weakening of labour organizations from an ideological point of view as we ended the 1990s. The Québec labour movement tended to drop demands that were less compatible with modes of regulation highly influenced by dominant North American trends. Demands relating to job protection legislation and shorter working hours, which were implemented in Europe, were

simply set aside. The Québec labour movement has also been very complacent with respect to the calls for inter-class consensus. The Québec labour movement has done a poor job of adopting the policies of European social democracy. It has forgotten the original and basic revolutionary plans while falling back on policies fitting neatly into the sovereignist project (e.g. a full employment policy with tripartite management). It did this even though it might mean losing the leadership of 'leftist' political organizations.

#### GLOBALIZATION: A TURNING POINT?

For some time, some observers of the Québec labour movement have been feeling the winds of change. Labour is more critical of the government and business. Confrontation is reappearing. In April 2001, The People's Summit provided the best opportunity to see the new face of the Québec labour movement. The excessive security and repression marking the Summit of the Americas served to mobilize not only the Québec labour movement but also students, community groups, and non-governmental organizations from countries around the world with a common purpose to fight against globalization.

Previous free trade agreements (the 1989 Canadian United States Free Trade Agreement and the 1994

North American Free Trade Agreement) had not, when signed, raised nearly as much opposition within union ranks. It is known that both public opinion and the labour movement in Québec were more favourable towards the principle of free trade than unions in English Canada. However, the analysis of the negative consequences of NAFTA for the Mexican people and a better understanding of the content of the agreement (and notably the famous Chapter 11) and of its impact and implications raised awareness concerning the future Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Within a few months, the status of the free trade issue changed completely within Québec unions. While the FTAA was previously only dealt with by senior officers and a few persons responsible for international affairs, unions at all levels became involved in the free trade, now called globalization, issue. During the months leading up to the Summit and the counter-Summit in Québec City, globalization was on everyone's agenda. Many training sessions on the FTAA were held and countless popularized documents were circulated. While the Seattle demonstrations made international headlines and increased awareness even more, unions and non-labour groups prepared for a confrontation of their own.

#### THE PEOPLE'S SUMMIT

#### *Organization*

Opposition to the FTAA was coordinated by a complex pyramid organization. Most unions are, through their central labour bodies, members of the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), a structure nearly unknown a short while ago. At the regional level, the unions are members of wide coalitions that may be joined by any group who so desires. There is one for Québec, one for Canada which includes the Québec coalition and one for all of the Americas which includes all others. There is a certain informality within these coalitions as isolated initiatives may be taken and major decisions are made by consensus. Of course, the weight, representativeness and financial means of the individual groups play a role when the time comes to make decisions.

The People's Summit or counter-Summit and the huge demonstration of April 21st were mainly organized by the Québec coalition (Réseau québécois sur l'intégration continentale - RQIC) with the help of the Canadian organization called Common Frontiers. Each organization mobilized its own activists, or at least such was the case for those groups with a truly militant membership. ALTERNATIVES, an international cooperation organization, provided the coordination team. The People's Summit obtained grants from the federal and Québec governments

and other contributions. The City of Québec, educational institutions and religious communities contributed in various ways, including making dormitories available to demonstrators. In addition to this more “formal” organization work sponsored by RQIC, other coalitions, often in cooperation with English Canadian or American organizations, had developed a program of information and protest activities.

All those taking part in the People’s Summit were struck by the professionalism with which the events were organized. Hundreds of salaried members of the groups and volunteers had lent a hand. From simultaneous translation in four languages to meals, accommodation, media relations, demonstration supervision, representation balance (organizations, gender, North-South, ethnic groups, generational etc.), speakers and facilitators, everything had been carefully planned with the help of the committees responsible (policy, events, teach-in, communications).

The People’s Summit was held on April 19<sup>th</sup> and attended by approximately 2,000 delegates of various organizations. During the days before the People’s Summit, there was a Women’s Forum in the course of which women activists from various sectors prepared to defend their positions in eight sectoral workshops held on April 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. The sectors were: labour; agriculture; education;

communications; environment; human rights; the role of government, and the distribution of wealth. This may seem like an arbitrary list. In fact, it reflects the informality already mentioned. Groups who wanted to organize a forum were free to do so, provided that they take on its full organization, and could report to the People’s Summit. Various workshops were held at the same time, and convergence occurred at the People’s Summit on April 19<sup>th</sup>. The day after the People’s Summit (April 20<sup>th</sup>), RQIC held a teach-in open to all. It had also called for a demonstration on Saturday, April 21<sup>st</sup>. The already full agenda was made even heavier by the fact that other coalitions had also planned activities.

The very meticulous preparations were paradoxically accompanied by a very large measure of freedom of expression. At the Labour Forum and at the People’s Summit, “roving mikes” enabled those who wanted to speak to address the meeting. The Labour Forum certainly allowed North American (and a few Latin American) labour leaders to have their say within tight time limits, but it also gave “ordinary” delegates ample opportunity to express their views, as was also the case at the People’s Summit. After each forum had reported and a final statement had been read, the delegates could speak and suggest additions to the text. There were no votes or any censure. The “debates” were more

like individual testimonies, each unrelated to the previous ones but important because of the identity of the speaker, as spokesperson for a large sector. All addresses were accepted with respect, with no sign of intolerance or aggressiveness shown.

*Contents of the documents and discussions*

American labour organizations have developed, in the past few years, elaborate positions on the FTAA which are extensions of the positions of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Labour's position is non-protectionist, although protectionism is still a sensitive issue within the North American labour movement. The liberalization of trade is accepted but the conditions under which the FTAA is being negotiated between governments are seen as unacceptable, whether with respect to content or process (lack of consultation with the population). That is why American labour organizations have developed a platform based on the requirement to abide by the international conventions of the International Labour Organization which also includes several demands traditionally associated with environmentalist, feminist or anti-poverty groups. Because they are critical of NAFTA, American labour organizations have developed an analysis of its side

agreements, and notably of the North American Agreement on Labour Cooperation (NAALC). Unions and environmental groups, which are clearly the most structured, are the organizations whose positions were discussed the most.

The People's Summit, as described above, and the various related forums naturally had an impact on the content of the final Declaration. Québec editorialists, who were nearly struck dumb with admiration for the logistics and seriousness of the organization of the People's Summit, were in many cases shocked at the content of the final Declaration, which was admittedly quite radical and gave the impression that it rejected not only the proposed FTAA but also the very principle of free trade because of the supremacy of the capitalist system. Anyone who has taken part in the writing of consensus texts late into the night knows how such exercises are dangerous and necessarily produce texts that do not satisfy all participants and include internal contradictions or oppose previous positions.

The final debate with roving mikes at the People's Summit was also rather far from the positions of the labour organizations and of RQIC. The positions of the latter were bold but not far-fetched and could be implemented under propitious political conditions. Utopian ideas came out during the

final debate and demands for new fundamental rights appeared (such as the “right to communication”). Demands that have not been implemented even in the most progressive countries in the Americas were promoted (for instance, full respect and recognition of sexual diversity). Although the FTAA excludes Cuba, Cuban representatives (undoubtedly from State-run unions) gave rise to delirious applause as soon as they approached a microphone (while it is known that political prisoners and gays are mistreated there). While some demands appeared very “northern”, many had spoken of children dying of hunger or scavenging in dumps, of all the people imprisoned in the factories or fields where they work, and of those killed for having demanded basic freedoms.

Such events necessarily give rise to a few inconsistencies. But it was heartening to see two thousand individuals, in an atmosphere where the positions of all were respected and applauded, indulge in an exercise of reinstating our right to utopia. We must ask ourselves, however, how the labour activity of April 2001 enables us to reflect on the situation of the Québec and Canadian labour movements.

#### REFLECTIONS ON THE QUÉBEC AND CANADIAN LABOUR MOVEMENTS

#### *North American inter-union relations*

The four Québec central labour bodies and a few large independent unions took part in the Labour Forum and the People’s Summit, their delegations being in proportion to their memberships. This was an exceptional occurrence in itself. They did use media strategies through which each organization attempted to improve its image but there were no cheap shots (not in public at least). The Summit provided an opportunity to differentiate the independent unions who wish to remain stakeholders in the labour movement from those who want to go it alone.

Although all has not yet been taken into account, the major Québec labour organizations, which lived through the festive ‘event’ of the People’s Summit with a bit of difficulty, can feel confident that they have benefited media-wise and politically. The QFL, in particular, had such an overwhelming presence at the formal demonstration that bitterness would really not be called for.

There were not that many labour representatives from English Canada, and they joined the ranks of the QFL demonstration, presenting a united front in union solidarity while all sorts of irritants came out behind the scenes. The unionists from English Canada were against attending a reception given by the Government of Québec before what came to be known as the ‘Wall of

Shame' was erected. The Québec unionists, however, wanted to attend, among other reasons because the Government of Québec was itself excluded from the Summit of the Americas. The Québec unionists attended the reception with their Latin American counterparts without representatives from English Canada. On Friday, April 20th, the day of the teach-in carefully organized by RQIC, official representatives of the Canadian labour movement deserted the site to go and join a march by student and activist groups designed to end in front of the Wall, which resulted in the use of tear gas. The largely absent American unionists were outnumbered by American anarchists and environmental activists. The short appearance by Mr. Sweeny, president of the American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) who ended his speech by wishing "God bless you!" to a crowd taken aback, was hardly enough to save the face of the American labour movement in the fight against the FTAA

Finally, although this is not really surprising, the various forums were another opportunity to measure the strains and distances between Québec and Canada as well as between Canada and the United States. Some Québec labour officers feel that their Canadian counterparts often act as leftists but are politically weaker, as the most unionized provinces have right-wing

governments. Still, we can not deny the fact that the Canadian labour movement has developed a recognition of the specific character of Québec which is far from that of political and business circles.

#### *North-South inter-union relations*

Redefining North-South inter-union relations is only starting, and the events of April 2001 have greatly contributed to this restructuring. However, some countries still have little or no representation. Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Brazil have more. Some unions, such as the United Steelworkers of America, have developed bilateral relations between Locals whose members work for the same transnational corporations in the North and in the South. That is why an evening of bilateral meetings was held in conjunction with the Labour Forum.

A strong impression was made that North-South relations are moving away from either a "diplomatic" or a "paternalistic" model towards more respectful, friendlier forms within which all parties feel that they need to establish new solidarity. April 2001 has enabled Québec and Latin American unionists to share analyses and perhaps even political sensitivities, although representatives from the South sometimes felt as though they were being taken hostage in the disputes between Québec and Canada.

*Relations between unions and other groups*

Undeniably, the relations between unions and non-labour groups, whether they are very structured and subsidized organizations or direct action cells, were the most surprising. Union officers, who used to take action bearing the stamp of hierarchy and of pyramidal democracy, in April 2001 took part in debates with groups which were previously seen as having low "representativeness". The debates held in Québec City in no way resembled usual, tightly controlled, union debates. The lack of acrimony also contrasted with the tone of internal union debates. So much for form. The content of the debates - and of the final declaration which unions accepted to endorse - was as surprising, as we have already stated. So much so for some labour officers and observers, April 2001 is more than a sign of change: it is a return to a more equal relationship between labour and other groups. It is an awakening to the huge presence of environmentalist or women's groups that can no longer be ignored. There was also a newly-found respect for a generation of youth that was said to be turned off politics who we crossed everywhere in the streets of Québec City that week.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly very few of the individuals present in Québec City in April escaped what must be called a certain form of exaltation, the feeling of living a moment which was historical in many ways. The oldest relived the atmosphere of their twenties and thirties while the youngest were emerging from the depressing impression of having no say in their future. This feeling is no doubt very "québécois", since all activists and leftists, whether they went to Québec City or not, were fed a myriad of reports, clips and pictures on April, 2001. RQIC is now firmly in the saddle but the future of the Continental Social Alliance is more uncertain according to many.

The relations between the Government of Québec, Québec business and the Québec labour movement remain at issue. With a new Premier, the Parti québécois government does not seem more inclined towards social democracy. Several recent decisions, notably in the labour relations field, have appalled many unions, which are increasingly dissatisfied and tend more and more to take stands opposed to those of business. The winds of deregulation are still blowing but the Government of Québec is a far cry from the Harris government of Ontario. Furthermore, Québec unions sympathize with the Government of Québec when it comes to globalization. The Québec

Government is indeed as far removed as they are from official debate on the FTAA and as concerned about the potential exposure of the cultural distinctiveness of Québec to unfettered market liberalization.

**Note:**

This article has been translated from the author's original French version.