

Contents

13. Ottawa Still Hostile to Post-Referendum Venezuela.
John Riddell
 14. Venezuela, Najaf, and New York.
Fred Feldman
 15. Iraqi Kurds' Suspicion of U.S. Grows.
Roj Shuhe
 16. New Book Explores Cuba's Revolution.
Roger Annis
 17. Protest Fire-Bombing of Pennsylvania Socialist Campaign HQ.
John Riddell and Ernest Tate
 18. The 2004 Election and the Left: Some Lessons from Quebec.
Richard Fidler
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Socialist Voice #13, September 3, 2004

Ottawa Still Hostile to Post-Referendum Venezuela

By John Riddell

Venezuelans can relax now. The Canadian government has determined the outcome of their August 15 referendum on whether to recall their president, Hugo Chavez.

The day after the vote, Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) stated merely that "Canada is pleased the referendum was orderly" (*se soit déroulé dans le calme*). It also expressed support for the observers sent by the Organization of American States (OAS). (*Agence France Presse, August 16*)

Ottawa sent no congratulations to the Venezuelan government for the referendum's success and decisive 59% vote in support of Chavez, and it did not defer to the authority of Venezuela's electoral commission. Instead, it awaited the findings of the OAS observers.

Nine days later, Foreign Affairs spokesperson Jennie Chen told Socialist Voice that its initial statement the day after the vote was "misrepresented" by the Globe and Mail and had prompted many expressions of concern. DFAIT wished to clarify its position, Chen said. Since international observers had found no evidence of fraud, "we urge all sectors of Venezuelan society to accept the results." (*by e-mail, August 25*)

The Canadian government has, in effect, applied the Clarity Act to Venezuela. This federal law states that Ottawa will not recognize the result of a referendum by the Quebecois on independence unless the vote meets a set of vaguely formulated conditions, to be interpreted by Ottawa alone. The question must be judged to be "clear," the margin decisive, and so on.

So too, in Venezuela, the will of the people counts for nothing, in Ottawa's view, until submitted to adjudication by observer missions from the OAS and the Carter Commission—both hostile to the Bolivarian movement led by Chavez. Chen specified to Socialist Voice that Canada had contributed four observers to the OAS mission, chosen in consultation with Foreign Affairs, and had covered about 10% of the mission's budget.

Myopic observers

The pro-Chavez majority and the mass mobilization that it represented were simply too overwhelming to be denied by the OAS observers. Even so, two Canadian members of the OAS mission, Ken Frankel and John Graham, expressed grave misgivings in a feature article in the *Globe and Mail* August 24. Graham is former Canadian ambassador to Venezuela. Frankel is a Toronto-based lawyer whose credentials, his website tells us, include "expertise in joint venture and consortium projects in telecom and rail transportation, and outsourcing" in Latin America and elsewhere.

Despite the OAS mission's conclusions, Frankel and Graham still deny that the result "fairly represent[ed] the will of the people." They refer in vague terms to "Mr. Chavez's pre-election manoeuvres" and claim that voters were intimidated by soldiers who assured security at polling booths.

Everything about the Chavez regime gets under their skin. They accuse Chavez of "bestowing high-profile benefits in the tradition of a Boston ward politician." The "benefits" in question go far beyond anything found in Boston, or Canada for that matter: for example, the provision of free dental and medical services in Venezuela's working-class communities, with the help of more than 10,000 volunteer health personnel from Cuba.

In the twisted mind of Ottawa's observers, black becomes white and white black.

- A Venezuelan police raid on the home of a media baron brings the charge, "The media are harassed."
- The government's efforts to create solidarity between army and population signify that Chavez has "politicized the military and militarized the population."
- And Chavez would never had won, we are told, except for U.S. policy in Iraq, "which has driven up oil prices."
- The Chavez government, which has brought masses of working-class Venezuelans into the political process for the first time, threatens to impose "creeping authoritarianism" and to lead Venezuela down the Cuban path.

Gold-medal hypocrisy

The hypocrisy of these charges is mind-boggling. The very right to petition for a recall referendum was itself an achievement of Venezuela's new constitution, won by the Bolivarian movement headed by Chavez. No such nonsense in Canada, where the government rules between elections with dictatorial powers, recallable only by insurrection.

And the very Canadian government that lectures Venezuelans on democracy is itself deeply complicit in the violent overthrow this year of a democratically elected government in Haiti, now occupied by Canadian troops. (See *Socialist Voice* #11)

The referendum result was so decisive, the mobilization of working people behind the government so massive, that the U.S. and Canadian governments have reined in for the moment their provocations against Venezuela. But Frankel and Graham reflect their true stance—one of ongoing hostility to the Bolivarian movement.

What is the reason for this hatred? After all, the Chavez government has left untouched all the pillars of rule by the capitalist class: their monopoly on productive wealth, control of the media, entrenched influence in the state apparatus, police, courts, etc.

Why Chavez offends

What lies behind imperialism's charges that Chavez is authoritarian and anti-democratic? They have good cause for anger: Chavez has committed the crime of crimes against capitalist "democracy." He has refused to obey the dictates of the capitalist oligarchs, and instead has respected the views of those who elected him and acted on his promises.

The ruling rich do not permit any capitalist government, even those elected on a socialist ticket, to grant significant concessions to the masses—all the more in the current era of "neoliberal" capitalist stagnation and heightened competition. The Bolivarian government of Venezuela has violated this rule. It is taking far-reaching measures to bring health care to the masses; to enable working people to acquire literacy and education; to distribute idle state lands to needy peasants; to protect the offshore fishery from corporate greed and overfishing; to provide state credits to farmers and other independent producers; to restore normal relations with Cuba; and much more.

For the capitalist rulers, the most menacing aspect of these reforms is their impact on working people: raising their hopes and drawing them into action to improve their lives.

Outraged, the oligarchs declared war on the elected government. Imperialism rallied behind them, providing millions of dollars in political subsidies, diplomatic support, and a torrent of international "observers." Last year, the oligarchs staged a military coup, which was quickly defeated. Then they launched a bosses' strike aimed at crippling the economy, which failed. The recall referendum was their third attempt to overthrow the government.

Through all this turmoil, the Chavez government committed its second great crime against capitalist "democracy"—it called on the working masses to defend their elected government. And through two years that have approached conditions of civil war, the masses have gained in confidence and organization.

'Accelerate the transformation'

While there is no way to predict the future course of this government, Chavez has indicated a desire to forge ahead. In a televised address reported by *Bloomberg* August 27, he called on private business to join "to build the new economy, transforming the capitalist economic model

into a social, humanist and equality economy.... The time has come to accelerate the transformation.”

To do this, he proposed to confiscate unused land and to “eliminate large land holdings in Venezuela”—hardly a measure likely to win enthusiastic support from private business.

The mass movement led by Hugo Chavez today stands in contradiction to the capitalist state in whose bosom he governs. Over time, this contradiction will be resolved either by a restoration of capitalist normality or by a revolution that overturns capitalism, similar to that in Cuba 45 years ago. The referendum’s outcome wins time for working people to prepare to face this fateful alternative.

Imperialism and the Venezuelan oligarchy have suffered a humiliating, historic defeat. The referendum victory represents a new Venezuelan declaration of independence from foreign rule. An oft-chanted slogan has taken on reality: “The people, united, can never be defeated.” Working people in Venezuela and beyond its borders stand taller, more confident of their strength and more ambitious in their goals.

We in Canada have a crucial role to play in supporting the Venezuelan people and undoing the anti-Venezuelan maneuvers of the federal government.

Socialist Voice #14, September 3, 2004

Venezuela, Najaf, and New York

By Fred Feldman

A sharp new period of class confrontation has opened in Venezuela. The central issue is the land. President Hugo Chavez has called for the full enforcement of the current land law with the imposition of high taxes on the latifundistas. These big rural landowners maintain large quantities of unused land, partly as an investment, and partly in order to force the landless or land-starved rural population to hire out to them. Chavez insists that this land must be brought into production to assure food independence and reduce food imports. He reportedly wants a census of unused land owned by the big landlords to be completed within two weeks. This points to a sharp increase of distribution of land to the millions of poor peasants.

At the same time, Chavez called for mayors and governors to confiscate idle urban land for housing and food production by working people. Chavez made it clear that he favored dialogue and, if possible, cooperation with bourgeois forces in Venezuela. But he insisted that the results of the referendum had confirmed popular support for the revolutionary process and that the dialogue he was calling for would take place in the framework of advancing the revolutionary process and not instead of it.

Transformation of daily life

Meanwhile the expansion of medical care and education at every level and to every age group continues to transform daily life and morale in ways that people who have not experienced this must find it hard to imagine.

On August 29, a joint demonstration of civilians and the army celebrated the initiation of a dozen social programs to provide jobs, basic services, infrastructure and other needs for urban and rural communities across the country. The Chavez government has succeeded in integrating large sections of the army ranks and lower officers into the revolutionary process. In the process, the officer caste has been substantially changed. While there are still divisions in the army that can deepen with the class polarization, there is probably no army in Latin America that is less able to carry out a counterrevolutionary coup. At the same time, it is doubtful that this military force is sufficient to defeat a direct U.S. aggression, or a contra war against land reform coordinated from the Colombian border.

In the months before the referendum, Chavez called for military training of civilians to be undertaken by army officers and others. I do not know how far this process has gone or whether it is continuing. But the level of self-confidence that the workers and peasants are showing in Venezuela, given a Latin American history with which the masses have some familiarity, is not consistent with their being completely unprepared militarily.

Land—a decisive issue

The land issue points to a sharpening of class polarization and conflict in Venezuela. The challenge to the landlords being posed is a decisive one, even though the scope of the land reform is still modest by comparison with the April 1959 reform aimed at the latifundistas in Cuba. But every latifundista in Venezuela stands to lose substantial property in this reform, and to face an energized and mobilized peasantry as a result.

They will fight like tigers to stop this. They will have massive support from Washington, from the Colombian government, and across the border from the great landlords of northeast Brazil. And the Bolivian generals and land barons, who already feel the walls closing in a bit, will take a very vital interest in this matter. We should remember that the first government of the Cuban revolution as well as the rebel army split deeply over this issue.

Of course, all this depends on the Chavez government passing from word to deed. But frankly, it is high time that we all adjusted to the fact that Chavez has accumulated a convincing record of moving from word to deed. After all, he was elected eight years ago promising a revolution — and today we find ourselves in the midst of a Venezuelan revolution, which he is still leading. Not the basic direction of events in Chile under Allende or Spain in the popular front. So I think we should be preparing to rally behind the Chavez leadership of the revolution, not focusing on speculation and debate over whether they really mean it or how far they might go. The hard truth is that they have passed more tests on that than most of us have had an opportunity to do.

Inspiration to fighters everywhere

But the advance of the revolution in Venezuela, which is entering a new sharp period of conflict and challenges, is not just a product of the good intentions, political will, or revolutionary ideas of a leadership.

It depends on broader developments in the class struggle in Venezuela and internationally. The tremendous victory of Chavez in the referendum — an authentic victory in a confrontation of opposed classes — is an example for the whole world. Compare this to the electoral echo, not a choice, offered by the imperialist parties in the United States. The Venezuelan election should be an inspiration and example to fighters for independent working class political action everywhere, and to those who fight in groups like the Green Party in the United States, who seek to provide an alternative to the rulers' course but come under massive pressure to give ground to them. The same is also true of revolutionary-minded people who are active in labor parties around the world. The Venezuelan example should be taken up as an example of revolutionary working-class and poor peasant political action in the electoral arena. We should fight for others to measure up.

Gains in Iraq

A second arena where we have scored gains is in Iraq, where the battle of Najaf ended with saving the shrine from attack — an outcome which was deeply desired by millions of Iraqis and which working people around the world should join our Islamic brothers and sisters in greeting. Not only that, but the imperialists were unable to break the fighting capacity of the Mahdi Army. Their arms were turned in to their organization under the guidance of Najaf religious authorities, not that of imperialism. And the city remains outside the reach of the U.S.-installed puppet

government. The Iraqi police who have entered will be no more able to impose the imperial or puppet will than similar forces in Fallujah or anywhere else in Iraq. They will tend in fact to dissolve into the broader resistance or be defeated unless massive military U.S. military forces can win control of the city.

Now the U.S. government is pushing its Allawi government to provoke a military confrontation with Sadr's forces in Baghdad. They badly need a victory to prevent the disintegration of Allawi's government, further loss of control in all parts of Iraq, and — something no U.S. administration ever forgets at these times — to win the presidential election for Bush.

We have to greatly step up solidarity with the Iraqi people in the next period. The battles are not going to let us wait for the day after the election.

Mass march in New York

There was an enormous mass march of 250,000-500,000 people in New York against the war and against Bush — a demonstration against an imperialist war while it is taking place, and at the peak of an election period. Of course, the great majority of the protesters will support Kerry on the election day in order to defeat the deservedly loathed Bush. Only a relatively small minority — perhaps a couple million — will reject the two-party scam in favor of Ralph Nader and Peter Camejo who have actively campaigned against the war and, in Camejo's case, in solidarity with the struggle of the Iraqi people against the occupation.

Kerry's main advantage is simply not having been president for the last four years. Whether that will be enough to put him over in November is not clear. Kerry's insistence on making support for the war the central issue tends to reinforce the credibility of his opponent, who has a proven record of waging brutal wars. Bush has already delivered what Kerry only promises.

But whoever wins, the recent developments mean that the U.S. rulers are going to be holding a somewhat weaker hand against working people. Victory on election day will not reverse the decline of the Bush administration. (Remember Nixon in 1972!) And Kerry, whose honeymoon period may already be over if the mood of the NY demonstration is any sign, will not have a free hand if he gets the electoral college majority.

The Million Worker March

For working-class fighters in the United States, the next big event is the "Million Worker March" being held, with modest but growing backing from the union movement, on October 17, in Washington DC. The events of the last few weeks should be taken as a signal that skepticism about the prospects of this event should be pushed aside. The mood is there. The march will take place. Thousands and probably tens of thousands of working people will be there.

Socialist Voice #15, September 12, 2004

Iraqi Kurds' Suspicion of U.S. Grows

By Roj Shuhe

Roj Shuhe is a Kurdish socialist and human rights activist now living in Canada.

A notable feature of the larger demonstrations against the U.S.-led war on Iraq in Toronto during the last year was the participation of sizeable and militant contingents from the Kurdish community. The Kurdish population here was deeply and evenly divided between those opposing and those favoring the U.S. invasion. But in recent months, support among them for the U.S. war has been weakening. With Saddam under lock and key, fear of Saddam's return is being shoved into the background by growing apprehension regarding the Washington's role in the region and intentions toward Iraq's five million Kurds.

Unexpected by-product

The cause of Kurdish national liberation in Iraq has interacted in complex ways with U.S. intervention in the region. The creation of a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq was an unintended byproduct of the first Gulf War in 1991. U.S. imperialism has never given the slightest support to Kurdish aspirations for autonomy and statehood. But during the 1991 war, Saddam Hussein's military drove millions of Kurds out of their homes, creating an immense refugee crisis on the Turkish and Iranian borders. It was to ease the refugee pressure that the U.S. government declared a no-fly zone in northern Iraq. Seizing the opportunity, Kurds set up their own regime, independent of Baghdad.

The second Iraq war took a similarly unexpected course. Washington's plan was for Turkey to invade Kurdish Iraq and establish control. But the Turkish government, sensitive to strong anti-war feeling among its own population, refused to intervene. As a result, the war, instead of extinguishing Iraqi Kurdish independence, reinforced it. Tens of thousands of Kurdish militia took part in the military campaign to oust the regime of their hated oppressor.

For the Kurds, this autonomy has represented a cherished opportunity for cultural and economic revival, free at last from the murderous attacks of the Saddam Hussein government.

Self-determination

The Kurds face the stony hostility of all the governments of the region—Iraq, Turkey, and Iran—and have no allies in a position to render effective aid. For 13 years the de facto independence of Iraqi Kurdistan has thus depended in part on U.S. military protection. But Washington is the sworn enemy of Kurdish independence.

None of the major contending political forces in U.S.-occupied Iraq today is willing to concede that the Kurds have the right to self-determination. Yet it will be difficult for the struggle to oust the U.S. occupiers to succeed without unity of all Iraq's peoples, including the Kurds. And Kurdish self-determination is essential not just to satisfy principles of justice, human rights, and international law—but also as a practical necessity for the anti-imperialist struggle to go forward.

We are now witnessing a shift in opinion among Iraqi Kurds with regard to the U.S. role. Kurdish Iraq is the one part of the country not under imperialist occupation. U.S. soldiers go into Kurdistan only to shop—and then, in most cases, they are politely instructed to leave their guns behind and proceed under the guard of a Kurdish militia detachment. Kurds have every reason to wish that this situation continue.

Yet U.S. imperialism makes no concessions to the right of Kurds to determine their own future. They give lip service to ideas of limited federalism, citing the U.S. model, within a new U.S.-dominated Iraqi state in which the Kurds' future would be outside their control. When the U.S. demands dissolution of Iraqi militias, the 80,000-strong Kurdish militia is an obvious prime target.

In this context, sentiment among Iraqi Kurds for national independence is deepening, along with suspicion against the Kurdish governments, who seem more interested in currying favour with the U.S. invaders than in pressing the case for national rights. The governments—for there are two, representing rival coalitions of Kurdish capitalists—seem increasingly fearful that they may soon be swept aside by the people they rule.

Leadership in peril

The Kurdish leadership “is being blamed by Iraqi Kurds for selling out to the Americans to maintain their stranglehold on political and economic power,” write Ali Ezzatyar and Dariush Zahedi in the Beirut Daily Star of August 13. They note that the two Kurdish ruling parties have felt compelled to threaten, in vague terms, to withdraw from Iraq's puppet government.

“If the reputation of Kurdish party bosses is further undermined, it will take only a modicum of revolutionary initiative by mid-level party officials or the Peshmerge (Kurdish militia) to send northern Iraq into a tailspin. A leadership more willing to reflect Kurdish popular wishes could take power,” they add.

Meanwhile, developments in Turkey are in some ways encouraging to the Kurdish cause. Motivated in part by the dogged resistance of Turkish Kurds and in part by the pressure of the European Union, which Turkey wishes to join, the government in Ankara has eased to some degree its repression of the Kurds and conceded greater legal space Kurdish language and culture. The process in Turkey is complex and difficult, but it may be that the impulse to safeguard Iraqi Kurdish autonomy will come from events north of the border.

Referendum on independence

Recently the Kurdish people of Iraq took part in a referendum, in which 1.8 million Kurds voted almost unanimously for national independence. The Kurdish governments, however, refused to announce the results of the referendum, for fear of offending Washington.

The U.S. government casually brushed off the results. In an August 19 press conference, U.S. Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice pointed to Canada as a model of how to cope with referendums. “It has been the role of leadership to convince people that they really ought to stay,” she said, thinking no doubt of Ottawa's “Plan B” for bludgeoning Quebec into submission. “Iraq will need to remain a united country.” (quotations from Kurdish Media)

Unity in struggle

As the present U.S. assault in Najaf shows, the U.S. military is counting on attacking its Iraqi opponents *one at a time*, crushing each one in turn. It is urgently necessary for the peoples of Iraq to find a basis for unity against the invader. Kurdish aspirations for national self-determination are in headlong collision with Washington's intentions for the region, and the Kurdish people are deeply hostile to U.S. domination of their region. There is therefore a real possibility of forging a common front against the imperialist forces.

But whether this happens will depend on the attitude of opposition forces in occupied Iraq. The stand of friends of Iraqi freedom abroad also counts for a great deal. One positive step will be for antiwar coalitions to form strong links with Kurdish opponents of the U.S.-led war.

Socialist Voice #16, September 15, 2004

New Book Explores Cuba's Revolution

Isaac Saney: *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion*.
Fernwood Press and Zed Press, 240 pages, \$19.95.

Reviewed by Roger Annis

How was it possible for poor and beleaguered Cuba to win twice as many Olympic medals as Canada?

Why was Cuba able to send more than 10,000 volunteer medical personnel to bring free health care to Venezuelan working people, when the Canadian government's contribution was limited to sending "observers" seeking to undermine Venezuelan sovereignty? (See *Socialist Voice* #12)

How has Cuba been able to expand educational and social services, when these fields are experiencing sharp cutbacks in Canada?

According to Isaac Saney, the resilience and creativity of the Cuban revolution is rooted in the vitality of its democratic institutions. He has written an informed and well-researched overview of social, political and economic policy in Cuba over the past 15 years, titled *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion*. It is a good introduction to the politics and achievements of Cuba's socialist revolution.

The author is a lecturer at Dalhousie University and Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia and has traveled extensively in Cuba. He is active in NSCuba, an organization that has organized important solidarity projects for Cuba for many years now.

After a brief review of Cuba's 1959 revolution, the book launches into an analysis of the Cuban economy following the collapse of trading relations with the Soviet Union and the other countries of Eastern Europe at the close of the 1980s. Beginning in 1990, Cuba's economy suffered a greater relative contraction than that of the capitalist countries during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Saney details the creative and decisive measures taken by the Cuban government and population to confront the extraordinary difficulties the country faced in those years, a period the Cuban people call the "Special Period." As a result of that effort, a turnaround in the economy began in 1994, and progress since then has been slow and steady.

As Saney details, the measures used in Cuba to confront the economic crisis were vastly different than those employed elsewhere in Latin America in countries facing economic difficulty. He writes, "While throughout Latin America, rural poverty and unemployment have increased, and inequality has grown, Cuban government policies and measures have increased production and facilitated economic growth 'but not at the cost of wealth for a few and misery for the majority.'"

The second chapter, "Governance in Cuba," seeks to explain how the turnaround was possible. "At the center of the 'Cuban miracle' of survival," the author argues, "is the island's political system. As Fidel Castro observed in 1996...the miracle that was 'worked was not economic but

political.’ ” The chapter gives a lengthy description of the history and development of the institutions of revolutionary democracy in Cuba and the vital role they played in mobilizing the country’s ingenuity and resources to confront the collapse.

The key to the success of these institutions is the massive participation of the Cuban people in the political process, Saney argues. “Cuban participatory socialist democracy can be considered a movement towards the ‘parliamentarization of society,’ a movement, as Fidel Castro stated ... that ‘gives viability to what is most important and essential, which is public participation in fundamental issues.’”

The structures of Cuba’s “People’s Power” do, indeed, resemble a participatory version of the parliamentary system in capitalist democracies. But other, more fundamental aspects of Cuban democracy have no counterpart in capitalist countries—the leadership role of a revolutionary party, the Communist of Cuba; popular control over the army, police and other state institutions; the role of neighborhood committees; the structured power of trade unions; and, above all, the fact that corporate power has been eliminated in industry and agriculture and replaced by workers’ control. Many of these achievements are detailed in the book.

The institutions and principles described in the book have come into play most recently in Cuba’s sugar industry. The Cuban government has undertaken a radical reduction in the industry, in response to declining markets and prices for Cuban sugar on the world market. The number of workers in the industry has been reduced by one quarter, from some 420,000 to 300,000. These workers have been offered education and retraining, and they will be paid their salaries during this time. Their future salaries will never be less than what they would earn if still employed in the sugar industry. And all this has been achieved not primarily through government generosity, but through the initiatives, experiments, and decisions of the sugar workers themselves. (See *The Militant*, February 9 and 16, 2004)

Saney provides an informed rebuttal to the false claims of widespread human rights abuses in Cuba. Other chapters in the book explore how Cuba has fought the legacy of racial discrimination it inherited in 1959, how the criminal justice system works, and the history of relations between Cuba and the United States.

One notable absence in the book’s survey of Cuba’s revolution is the place of Ernesto Che Guevara. There are only a few brief references to him in the text, and although the book contains an extensive bibliography, there is no reference to Guevara’s voluminous speeches and writings. Guevara was, of course, a central figure in Cuba’s 1959 revolution and during the formative years of the 1960’s when the socialist revolution unfolded. In particular, he was one of the chief architects of the economic policy that guided the socialist transformation, advocating a course radically different from that followed in the Soviet Union. His influence is evident in Cuba’s present course.

The reader will find an in-depth survey of Guevara’s political thought, and its connection to economic policy, in Carlos Tablada’s *Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism*, published in English in 1989 by Pathfinder Press.

As I read through the book, I was struck by the contrast between Cuba's course and the economic and social catastrophe that has overtaken the countries of the former Soviet Union. Why did Cuba struggle to defend its socialist revolution, in the teeth of fierce imperialist opposition, while other countries heretofore calling themselves "socialist" have moved to dismantle collective property forms in industry and agriculture and are turning back to embrace the capitalist viper?

Cuba's successful resistance stands as an example and inspiration to working people in Russia and around the world. But even today, the U.S., Canada, and other capitalist powers are redoubling their attacks on Cuba. Saney's book should serve to convince many thinking readers to redouble efforts to defend the embattled Cuban people.

(This review has been published simultaneously by *Seven Oaks Magazine*.)

Socialist Voice #17, September 18, 2004

Protest Fire-Bombing of Pennsylvania Socialist Campaign HQ

By John Riddell and Ernest Tate

Editors' Note: *The following appeal has also been posted to the list of the Socialist Project; please circulate widely.*

Prominent individuals in northeast Pennsylvania have issued an appeal for solidarity with the U.S. Socialist Workers Party electoral campaign, whose headquarters in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, was firebombed in the early morning hours of September 11.

The September 28 issue of the *The Militant* reports that the fire badly damaged the front of the Socialist Workers Party hall and destroyed a large stock of campaign literature and books. The fire also threatened the lives of residents sleeping upstairs. Thanks to an alert neighbour, who called the fire department, no one was hurt.

The SWP is running Roger Calero for President and Arrin Hawkins for Vice-President, as well as candidates for the federal and state houses of representatives in local districts. Calero and Hawkins are on the ballot in 14 U.S. states.

“We will not be intimidated by this attack,” says Tim Mailhot, SWP candidate in Pennsylvania’s 11th Congressional District. “We call on others in the area to join us in beating back attacks like this designed to prevent those who express views dissenting from the parties of the employers—the Democrats and Republicans—from participating in politics.”

The SWP reports a steady stream of visitors coming to the campaign office to express solidarity. Teams of volunteers are repairing the headquarters. A restaurant owner across the street donated the use of his premises for a socialist campaign meeting. The SWP has launched a special Campaign Hall Rebuilding Fund with a goal of raising US\$3,500.

We call on all socialists and friends of civil liberties to respond to the following appeal of Hazelton-area residents:

“We ask you to join with us in defense of civil discourse, free political exchange and debate, and the right of the Socialist Workers Party to campaign free of harassment and attack.

“Join us to:

“Send an urgent message to Hazleton mayor Louis Barletta, City Hall, 40 N. Church St., Hazleton, PA 18201, urging that all possible steps be taken to apprehend those responsible for the arson attack and to prosecute them to the full extent of the law. The Mayor can be contacted at 570-459-4910, or faxed at 570-459-4966. Please send copies to the Socialist Workers Campaign at [69 North Wyoming St., Hazleton, PA 18201].

“Send a message of solidarity to the Socialist Workers campaign protesting this attack and defending their right to campaign free of harassment.

“Send a much needed contribution to help rebuild their office. Make checks payable to Socialist Workers 2004 Campaign, earmarked ‘Rebuilding Fund,’ and mail to the Socialist Workers Campaign at the address above.

“Only a vigorous and broad public response can beat back attacks like this one and defend the right to civil discourse and to practice politics free from harassment.”

The appeal is signed by Monsignor Michael Delaney, pastor of the St. Gabriel Church; Douglas McKeeby, pastor of the Trinity Lutheran Church; Walter Howard, professor of history at Bloomsburg University; Anna Arias, from the Pennsylvania Governor’s Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs; Umberto Hernández, owner of Umberto’s International Cuisine restaurant; Beverly Collins, an activist in the Wilkes-Barre Black community; Kassie Harding, president of Unite Here Local 133-1 at Hollander Home Fashions; David Greenleif, Unite Here union representative; Gregory O’Connell, an attorney; and Róger Calero, SWP presidential candidate.

Socialist Voice #18, September 20, 2004

The 2004 Election and the Left: Some Lessons from Quebec

By Richard Fidler

Editors' Note: *The following article first appeared in the August-September issue of Relay, A Socialist Project Review. It is reprinted with permission of Relay and Richard Fidler. Richard Fidler is an Ottawa member of both the Socialist Project and the UFP.*

A few thoughts on the June 28 federal election, focused on the Quebec results and their implications for the left in the Rest of Canada.

1. The sovereignty movement is here to stay

This was the fourth consecutive federal election in which the Bloc Québécois has emerged as the dominant party in Francophone Quebec. And the sixth consecutive election in which the federal Liberals, Canada's "natural governing party," failed to win a plurality let alone a majority among Quebec's Francophone voters. The Bloc received 300,000 more votes than it got in 2000; rumours of its imminent demise proved greatly exaggerated.

Quebec has produced nationalist splinter parties in the past: Henri Bourassa's Parti Nationaliste, the anticonscription Bloc Populaire in the 1940s, Réal Caouette's rural Créditistes. But none with the longevity and popular support of the Bloc Québécois, not to mention the Parti québécois. Throughout most of the 20th century, until the 1980s, Quebecers, as a minority people within Canada, tended to vote overwhelmingly with the party in power in Ottawa. That was how they could exert maximum influence within the federal system of government, the reasoning went. Now, however, the myth of "French power" within the federal government has been largely abandoned.

One obvious explanation for this change in traditional voting patterns, of course, lies in the fallout from the unilateral patriation of the Constitution in 1982 and the failure to repair that error (Meech, Charlottetown). The roots go much deeper, however. During the Trudeau years, many Francophone Quebecers were able to overlook his visceral hatred of Quebec nationalism because his governments, initially at least, offered some real hope of improvement in their status within Canada, through such things as the official languages policy and repeated (albeit unsuccessful) attempts to develop a made-in-Canada constitution that would be acceptable to Quebec. But since the early 1980s federalism — meaning now the constitutional status quo — has been on the defensive in Quebec. Federal politics in Quebec now more closely resemble the alignments that have developed on the provincial level since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, the PQ and now the BQ building on the ongoing strength of the pro-sovereignty sentiment.

Quebec's alienation from the federal regime in the wake of the Meech debacle triggered the collapse of the Tories and now, following the disclosures over the "sponsorship" campaign — with its contemptuous approach to Quebec referendum laws and Québécois political allegiances — has reduced the Liberals to minority government status.

2. Once again, NDP hopes of a Quebec breakthrough are dashed

The NDP's vote in Quebec, while increasing by 95,000, remained well below 10% of the total. And some of its best scores were for candidates known for their pro-sovereignty views, such as Omar Aktouf (14%), a leader of the Union des forces progressistes (UFP). Until recently, Jack Layton and his Quebec adjutant Pierre Ducasse had banked their hopes for big NDP gains on what they perceived as waning support for sovereignty and with it a decline and eventual disappearance of the Bloc — just as the PQ's decline in the mid-1980s, when it dropped the sovereignty goal and embraced the “beau risque” strategy with the federal Tories, resulted in a brief surge in the provincial NDP's support in Quebec. But when the PQ reoriented toward sovereignty under Jacques Parizeau, the Quebec NDP collapsed; its remnants are now in the sovereigntist UFP.

The Quebec national question has plagued the NDP from its inception. At its 1961 founding convention, attended by some 300 delegates from Quebec, the new party adopted a position that recognized Quebec as a distinct “nation”. Even then this was controversial; Eugene Forsey, then the research director for the Canadian Labour Congress, quit the party on the floor of the convention over that nod to reality. Within a few years, faced with the chauvinism of the party's federal leadership and some key members, mainly Anglophone, in Montreal, most of the party's supporters in Quebec had left, first to form the Parti Socialiste du Québec, then to join the Parti Québécois or one of the groupuscules further to the left. Since then, with the notable exception of some goodwill earned by the party's opposition to the War Measures occupation of Quebec in 1970, the NDP's support in Quebec has been inversely proportional to the fortunes of the sovereigntist movement.

The party's claim to support Quebec's right to self-determination has been constantly belied by its practice. In 1982, in the face of unanimous opposition from Quebec's National Assembly, the NDP parliamentary caucus supported Trudeau's reform of the Constitution with its Charter of Rights specifically designed to frustrate Quebec legislation in defence of the French language. In 1992, the party campaigned for the Charlottetown Accord, rejected by a majority of Quebec voters. And in 2000, its MPs voted with only two exceptions for the Clarity Act, Parliament's arrogant declaration that it – and it alone – would decide whether Quebec had a right to negotiate its exit from Confederation.

For a moment, during the recent campaign, it looked as if the federal NDP had finally got it: in Baie Comeau, Pierre Ducasse at his side, Jack Layton denounced the Clarity Act. But Layton's statement was promptly denounced by both NDP provincial premiers and leading members of his parliamentary caucus. Layton quickly backtracked: the Act was “ancient history”, it was time to move on. And its repeal was not included in Layton's conditions for possible support to a minority Liberal government.

The NDP's 66-page platform had one sentence referring to the Quebec national question: it called for “recognizing the fundamental differences that constitute Quebec being a nation within Canada and working with Quebec to obtain common objectives with equitable outcomes, with the option of Quebec opting out of new federal programs with compensation to pursue common objectives and standards in a provincial program.” The emphasis throughout was on the need to

enforce “common objectives and standards” — without even a hint of recognition that many of the planks in the platform are matters over which Quebec has or seeks exclusive jurisdiction. Quebec was treated as little more than a province like the others, albeit one requiring perhaps a bit more attention.

The source of these deficiencies is clear. Social democrats have a fundamentally benign and classless perspective on the capitalist state, which they view as the primary instrument and repository of progressive social policy. Quebec’s national demands, by threatening the integrity of the central state, disrupt this perspective, even though Quebec has in recent decades enacted some of the more progressive legislation in Canada in asserting and occupying its jurisdiction. The NDP’s Canadian nationalism effectively trumps Quebec nationalism and subverts the party’s ability to relate to progressive grassroots social movements and activists in Quebec who are in most cases supporters of a sovereign Quebec. As the NDP’s record amply shows, the party’s entire political culture is hostile to Quebec self-determination. It has more or less consistently tailed the Liberal conception of Canadian federalism.

The NDP’s indifference, misunderstanding and sometimes downright opposition in the face of Québécois national demands and aspirations (recall Ed Broadbent’s spurious claim, just prior to the PQ’s 1976 election victory, that French-language communication between Francophone air crews and ground controllers jeopardized air safety?) has tended to isolate it from some of the most dynamic and progressive forces in Quebec society. And as a direct result, its lack of support in Quebec has undermined its credibility throughout Canada as a serious contender for government in the Canadian state.

3. Strategic challenge for the left

In English Canada, it is not just the NDP, of course, that identifies the defence and extension of social programs with preserving and strengthening the Canadian state. Virtually the entire left and progressive milieu shares this perspective to various degrees, and often reveals a remarkable inability to relate to Québécois concerns.

A notable example of the contradictory dynamics in the two nations occurred in the 1988 struggle against the original Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. The procapitalist PQ favoured the Agreement: free trade, it argued would guarantee access by a sovereign Quebec to the U.S. market, lessen Quebec’s dependence on Canadian markets and investments and limit the regulatory authority of the Canadian state. Quebec trade unions were sceptical and even opposed to the deal. But nationalist-minded Quebec trade unionists and social activists were unable to relate to a movement against the deal that framed its campaign as one in defence of “Canadian sovereignty” and even named its coalition the Pro-Canada (later Action Canada) network!

When Quebec voters, under the influence of the still-pending Meech Lake Accord, helped to re-elect Mulroney’s Tories, leftists in English Canada could hardly contain their anger. It was the definitive breach for many who had found it easy in the 1970s to sympathize with the radical manifestoes then being published by Quebec’s unions, which for the most part had not yet become overt supporters of independence.

The divisions and hostility generated in the 1988 FTA fight graphically illustrated the need for the left to develop a strategy that could encompass Quebec self-determination and independence with English-Canadian workers' concerns and interests in a joint struggle directed against the common ruling class in the Canadian state. The failure to develop such consciousness and solidarity — replicated in both the major political confrontations (Meech, Charlottetown, the '95 referendum, the Clarity Bill) and the ongoing issues over language rights or the fiscal imbalance that strongly favours the federal government — is arguably the greatest single weakness of the working class in both nations.

Significant progress in developing such ongoing strategy and practice of solidarity would do much to help the unions and grassroots social movements in Quebec to see and develop progressive class-based options independently of the current procapitalist leadership of the nationalist movement. In any event, it should be clear by now that there will be no anticapitalist party with mass support in Quebec that does not support Quebec independence.

Developing such a strategy is not an easy task, to be sure, but it is one that in my opinion the Socialist Project needs to address in the near future.

Our founding *Statement*, a 4,500-word document, assigned virtually no strategic weight to the Quebec national question, simply stating that “acknowledging Quebec’s right to self-determination... means being prepared to facilitate sovereignty-association.” The election pamphlet, *A Different Canada is Possible*, acknowledged that “Quebec has a wider claim to jurisdictional authority than other provinces” and urged the NDP to commit itself to “bargaining in good faith for a new constitutional settlement”.

The support for “sovereignty-association” or a “new constitutional settlement”, however, sits somewhat uneasily with the unconditional recognition of Quebec’s right to self-determination. There is certainly no harm in holding out the possibility of a federalist constitutional arrangement that accommodates both nations on an equal footing. But the formulations, as they stand, appear to put the cart before the horse. What if Quebec decides it does not want some form of constitutional “association” or “settlement” with Canada?

A more strategically oriented approach, in my view, would build on the UFP’s call for a democratically elected Quebec constituent assembly to adopt a Quebec constitution that would then be put to a popular vote. After all, it is Quebec $\frac{3}{4}$ a nation that is denied recognition as a nation under the Canadian Constitution, laws and courts $\frac{3}{4}$ that has the right of self-determination, not Canada, an independent country. (For reasons that are unclear to me, the UFP section of our election pamphlet omitted its call for a constituent assembly.)

Unlike the NDP, socialists do not equate the existing state structures with democracy, equality and progress. We have every interest in supporting the struggles of the Québécois for national independence if that is their choice.

And we need to flesh out and implement a strategy that incorporates the right of self-determination in all its expressions. It cannot be confined to the formal issue of separation or federation. It must include day-to-day solidarity with the Québécois fight against all manifestations of national inequality and oppression, including the issue of language rights,

repressive legislation, inequitable tax policies, etc. The recent columns by UFP leaders in *Canadian Dimension* and the joint production of the election pamphlet with the UFP comrades have been very positive initiatives toward beginning to develop this solidarity between anticapitalist activists in both nations.