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Socialist Voice #388, January 4, 2010

## **ALBA Statement on Copenhagen Climate Summit**

*The following statement was issued by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) late on December 18 in response to the results of the UN Copenhagen Climate Summit.*

We, the countries that make up ALBA, denounce before the world the threat that the results of the United Nations Conference in Copenhagen pose for the destiny of humanity.

In the first place, the process of negotiations was corrupted by the violation of the essential principles of the multilateral system. This undemocratic process has not recognised the equality

of all, was dishonest, not very transparent, and exclusive. It was designed to guarantee the positions of a small group of countries.

Our response to climate change must be in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter. This process has lacked legitimacy; it has violated all the principles of multilateralism and the United Nations Charter, above all those of sovereign equality between all countries.

The main characteristic of this unfortunate failed meeting is that a very small group of countries, coordinated and convoked by Denmark, have been for the last few weeks writing an accord that they have unilaterally named “Interested parties”, excluding the large majority of the world, establishing first class and second class countries as criteria.

While the chair of the Summit sent countries to take up the groups again, in order to continue editing and cleaning up the texts that were approved by the participants as a basis of negotiation, at the same time, the Danish prime minister convoked the presidents of a group of countries to edit a document behind our backs.

Further evidence of the exclusive nature of this event is the call of a group of Presidents behind closed doors, without participation of the majority and without explaining the criteria behind the selection.

It's clear that we can't consider the issue of climate change without considering changing the system. The model of capitalist production and consumption is bringing life on the planet to the point of no return and to a crucial moment in human history, and the debate in these situations can't be reduced to the economic interests of a small group.

Until now very little has been achieved, however it is important to preserve the current climate agreements: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol. They are important platforms for advancing the defence of life. Here we have an important world political accord, where all of us agree that climate change is a problem that has to be urgently addressed, and where the countries who are historically responsible for the problem have agreed to commit themselves to reducing emissions by amounts that allow the problem to be addressed.

The current scenario is seeing all this take a big step backwards, and requires us to forget the Kyoto Protocol. In this summit we haven't managed to write accords that address the obligations of the developed countries: to establish aims of reducing emissions or to establish a second period of commitments for the Kyoto Protocol.

There are offers on the table, but none of them compare. The United States doesn't want to commit itself on the basis of the efforts of other developed countries. The developed countries came to this meeting with a prior agenda, and they are violating every democratic proceeding in their attempt to impose it.

In the Bali Plan of Action, approved in 2007, it was agreed that the developed countries would have obligations of mitigation, to which they would add voluntary actions of mitigation of the developing countries.

Now, the developed countries have dedicated themselves to misunderstanding the Bali Plan over the last two years, in order to try to use this manifestation of our will to unite our efforts as a way of transferring their obligations to us. The efforts and will to mitigate of the developing countries can't be used as a way to manipulate us and tell us, after they have destroyed the world, that now its our turn to mitigate so that they can continue contaminating and destroying on the basis of their patterns of exploitation, production, and consumption.

There is also the issue of principles here. We, the developing countries, are dignified and sovereign nations and victims of a problem that we didn't cause. This moral principle, based on historic responsibility, is the reason why the developed countries should provide sufficient resources for the complete implementation of the principles of the Convention.

The environmental crisis as a result of the increased temperatures of the atmosphere is a consequence of the capitalist system, of the prolonged and unsustainable pattern of production and consumption of the developed countries, of the application and imposition of an absolutely predatory model of development on the rest of the world, and the lack of political will for the full and effective fulfilment of the commitments and obligations of the Kyoto Protocol.

Developed countries have over exploited the atmospheric space. This climatic debt in the widest framework of ecological debt includes an emission debt as much as it includes an adaptation debt that should be honoured by developed countries. It's not about charity or a handout, but a judicially bound obligation.

Category 1 countries accumulated a total of \$1,123 billion in military expenses in 2008. The United States spent \$711 billion in 2008, according to the budget for the 2009 financial year, which includes \$170 billion for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. So the world knows that they have the capacity, but what they don't have is the political desire to respond to their international commitments and obligations to struggle against climate change. They are trying to use and abuse the needs of the poorest in order to force illegal accords.

Today, through the carbon markets, those who cause climate change, continue contaminating, while the weight of emissions reductions transfers to the developing countries. They thought that in Copenhagen they could convince us to buy their right to contaminate, in exchange offering promises of paltry amounts of money.

1. We strongly denounce and we request that the documents generated by the chair of the summit without the mandate of the participants, be contested, and that we can state our position against the groups of friends of the chair openly. The chair has not guaranteed equality of participation at all levels, including the presidential level.
2. We reiterate our commitment to the struggle against climate change and to the principles of the Kyoto Protocol, now more valid than ever, whose content we consider capable of improvement with the decisions of the participants, and subsequent accords, but something that we shouldn't allow to die. The complexity of the recent negotiations has shown us that the economic interests in conflict wont allow an accord if the developing countries won't accept respect for the principles.

3. In this sense, we express our political desire to continue working in the framework of the Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. The relaunch of these negotiations should be based on respect, inclusion, transparency, and legitimacy.
4. We recall that while the conference failed in an irreversible way, the voices of the youth who know that the future is theirs, grows stronger. They strongly denounce the manoeuvres of the developed countries and they know that the struggle will continue. We join with them and their protests, and we salute and support them. The people must stay on their guard.

Today more than ever, before the lamentable manoeuvring that has been practiced in Copenhagen for petty economic interests, we reiterate that, “Don’t change the climate, change the system!”.

*Translated by Tamara Pearson for Venezuelanalysis.com.*

Socialist Voice #389, January 4, 2010

## **How ALBA Fought for Humanity in Copenhagen**

**By Ron Ridenour**

“Nobel War Prize winner walked in and out of a secret door, and that is the way capitalism and the United States Empire will end up leaving the planet, through a secret back door.” So spoke Venezuela President Hugo Chavez from the plenary podium on the last afternoon, December 18, of the 12-day long Copenhagen climate conference (COP15).

“While the conference was a failure, it, at least, led to more consciousness of what the problem is for all of us. Now starts a new stage of the struggle for the salvation of humanity, and this is through socialism. Our problem is not just about climate, but about poverty, misery, unnecessary child deaths, discrimination and racism—all related to capitalism,” Chavez said at the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Latin America (ALBA) press conference held at the Bella Centre immediately following Chavez’ last remarks at the plenary.

(ALBA is composed of Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, St. Vincent and Grenadines, and Venezuela. Honduras, also a member, was not present given the illegal coup d’état against the legitimate President Manuel Zelaya.)

Bolivia’s President Evo Morales followed Chavez’ remarks by saying:

“Barack Obama said a while ago — the only delegate to walk in and out of the stage from a concealed door — that he came here not for more words but for action. Well, then you should act by using the money you are spending for wars against the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq, for militarising Colombia with seven military bases to save lives, to save the planet our Mother Earth.”

Both presidents, the only heads of state representing eight of the nine ALBA countries present at COP15, denounced the failure of the Copenhagen conference in both form and content.

Chavez:

“There are no documents presented for consultation by all. The responsibility is a lack of political will by a few rich countries, including the host Denmark, headed by the US Empire.”

Morales:

“There is profound difference between their document [the so-called ‘Copenhagen Accord’] and the peoples fighting for humanity and the planet. This group of friends led by Obama accept that temperatures can increase by 2 degrees Celsius by 2020. This will end the existence of many island states; it will end our snow-capped mountains. And Obama only seeks to reduce gas emissions by 50% in 2050. But we want and need 90 to 100% reduction, in order to save the planet.

“Then they speak of spending crumbs for mitigation and adaptation. The third theme, which they are only just now debating, is how to set up a system of controls for

monitoring agreements and what sanctions there will be if this is not done. That is why we want an International Climate Justice Tribunal that can sanction failure to comply with agreements, so that we can govern based on balance and achieve real solutions.”

President Morales was referring to one of the five questions — to be answered yes or no— that he proposes for a global referendum on climate change. The other four are:

1. Do you agree with re-establishing harmony with nature, recognising the rights of Mother Earth?
2. Do you agree with changing this model of over-consumption and waste that the capitalist system represents?
3. Do you agree that developed countries reduce and re-absorb their domestic greenhouse gas emissions so that the temperature does not rise more than 1 degree Celsius?
4. Do you agree with transferring all that is spent on wars to protecting the planet and allocate a budget for climate change that is bigger than what is used for defence?

At the press conference, and on various other occasions during the three days of his attendance, Morales posed the problem and the solution to it thus:

“The rich countries seek to divide the rest of us ... by offering crumbs of money. Mother Earth can't be preserved with money alone. Europe's food almost entirely depends upon petrol. What happens when there is no petrol? This dependency on fossil fuel is a threat to humanity, so we have to change the structures of food. It is a structural problem of two forms of life: one way of living is the way of over-consumption and waste, the way of luxury, of egoism and individualism-capitalism. The other way is *vivir bien* – living well – food enough for all and living in harmony with others and our Mother Earth, in solidarity and complementarily.”

At the final press conference — for which I was one of two media consultants during this two weeks, along with Nick Buxton — for the ALBA countries, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela attended. Cuba's vice-president Esteben Lazo said that socialism offers greater protection for the Earth than does capitalism:

Before our revolution, capitalism had nearly depleted all our forests. We have focused on replanting and now 20% of the land is covered by forests. We also educate our school children about ecology, and about the ALBA network. We are founded on principles of solidarity, of human rights and nature's rights.

### **Democracy anecdotes**

Nick and I had rushed to put out a media advisory announcing the above press conference, about which we were informed only 90 minutes before that Morales would be attending rather than leaving Copenhagen earlier that day as he had planned. We wrote it in a blink and passed out 200 fliers. At the appointed time, the press room began to fill with media and delegates from several countries. Bolivia was the only state, of which I know, that insisted on allowing anyone to attend

our press conferences, in accordance with Morales' practice of inclusiveness and transparency. The time allotted was 30 minutes.

Morales did not arrive on time, which he usually does. We heard from a top Bolivian delegate inside the plenary that Evo had just gotten an opportunity to respond from the floor to the rich countries' secret document, now leaked. Fifteen minutes ticked by and he did not arrive.

Another phone call informed us that Chavez would be following Evo and then they were both coming to the media hall. Oh, no! Chavez never talks briefly. We would lose the conference time and 100 people present would be disappointed.

Use the "dead" time, my experience told me. I asked two Indigenous social movement delegates if they would take the podium and speak, perhaps about their movements and the five-point referendum. They agreed. I translated for them. They spoke of how this very act of taking the podium before their president's arrival illustrated how democratic the new Plurinational State of Bolivia actually is. Social movements work hand in glove with the government and their president — reelected less than two weeks before with a 64% majority.

As the activists were speaking, about their movement and the referendum, in walked presidents Morales and Chavez followed by the Cuban, Ecuadorian and Nicaraguan leaders. The activists and I calmly walked off the stage and the leaders took our seats as we nodded to one another.

Morales' entourage of ministers and ambassadors took their seats. They are known to us as Eugenio, Pablo, Roberto, Ivan, Angélica, David, Rene and not Your Honorable, Excellency, Minister, Ambassador. When speaking with or about their presidents, most common people call them Evo and Chavez.

On other occasions — such as before 3000 persons at the ALBA People's Meeting held in a sports stadium on December 17, where Morales and Chavez spoke alongside top leaders from Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua — the leaders of the Bolivian and Venezuelan governments thoughtfully thanked their teams of paid workers and volunteers, and the organisers of political events. They also praised the activists inside and outside the Bella Centre conference.

They applauded the 100,000 plus demonstrators who mobilised on December 12 — twice the size of the hitherto largest demonstration ever held in the Banana Republic of Denmark — and the 1500 activists arrested preventatively, nearly none of whom had performed an illegal act. Only two handfuls were eventually charged with any violation. Several hundreds had their hands handcuffed behind their backs and were forced to sit on the cold ground and asphalt for up to five hours before being bussed to makeshift cage cells. No water, no toilet. This is the treatment a "democratic" police state can render potential "terrorists" under their new terror laws, which they deem to be necessary to accompany their imperialist wars.

In addition to these demonstrations, there were smaller ones attended by hundreds or thousand in several parts of the city everyday. Some were decidedly opposed to capitalism and its wars. I participated in one in front of the Yankee Embassy of Murder the day before its president was to receive the so-called Nobel Peace Prize.

## **Evo Morales**

Evo Morales, 50, comes from the people's struggles. He was an amateur soccer player, a musician, a coco farmer and a union organiser and leader before entering politics. He is a man of dialogue with his people. I note one illustration. When he came out of a news conference, the Indian Youth Climate Network, a group of youth from India, wanted him to hear a song one of them had written about Bolivia. He stopped to listen to "I wish I was Bolivian," sung to the tune of "Homeward Bound" by Simon and Garfunkel.

*"Every day they are stalling and they are saying the same old things again,  
But one bright country stands apart,  
They're saying things close to my heart,  
They've got a plan with hope in hand,  
They're saying c'mon, let's just start...  
Bolivia, I wish I was Bolivian...  
Just one degree temperature rise,  
300 ppm in the skies,  
100 per cent emissions down by two thousand forty,  
Does anyone know the price of waiting?  
Fighting, hating, procrastinating,  
My future stands in front of me,  
While people here make history,  
I hope and pray that it will be,  
What the world's children wish to see,  
Bolivia,  
We've got to take the boldest steps,  
There's work to do; clean up the mess,  
Bolivia"*

The evening before, Morales attended one of the hundreds of side events organised by people's movements and NGOs. This one was about the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. He spoke briefly giving plenty of time for questions and comments from the floor. Anyone could speak and there was no formality or nervousness before the president.

At one point, Evo Morales said that he couldn't always set in motion all that we wanted but it would be easier now, given that the Movement Towards Socialism, the president's party, had won so overwhelming in the presidential electoral campaign and also now controls both parliament houses.

*"Politics is a science of serving the people. I live to serve the people. Participating in politics is part of assuring our dignity, our traditional way of life. It is my duty to take your message to the heads of state here. If I make a mistake, let me know so that I can rectify it.*



“I don’t think we’ll make progress here. We must organise and mobilise all the more. Not just climate justice activists, but all of us: workers, farmers, media people, academics, everybody. That is the answer.”

Following this meeting, several Indigenous people told me that those are not empty words.

“We always speak out in meetings with the president and we offer criticisms and make demands. He listens.”

Niels Boel, a writer for the daily Danish newspaper Information had one of two dozen bilateral interviews with Evo Morales. He wrote:

“As the police fought against demonstrators ... the world’s greatest activist, Bolivia’s President Evo Morales, got off with being chased by the press.”

While he did not go to jail this time, the world’s first Indigenous president knows what prison and torture are all about. He was so treated under previous Bolivian presidents doing capitalism’s bidding. As Boel wrote:

“Solutions for Morales come only from people’s organizations, which can overcome capitalism.”

And that is why I say this conference was a smashing success. Especially because of Morales and Chavez’ anti-capitalist dialogue in those few days, and the many thousands carrying picket signs displayed during the massive march that damned the greedy economic system (“Change the system, not the climate”), capitalism is now on the agenda of many more people than in a long time. Even some of the mass media could not avoid headlining this message from the two “bad boys.”

“I have heard many debates in the UN where presidents condemn climate change but they never say — cowardly enough — what causes it. We say clearly that it is caused by capitalism,” Morales said in closing.

**Post-note:** Some institute calculated that the amount of carbon emissions from this two-week ordeal was greater than some of the island nations exude in a year. One of the wastes during this failed non-summit, non-climate conference was the amount of paper used by 30,000 delegates and 3000 journalists and technicians. The official figures published by the UN even on the first day stated that 8 million sheets of paper were provided. I guess that Nick and I used 2000 sheets of paper, which we distributed to let media people know of our news conferences.

*[Ron Ridenour worked with the ALBA countries’ delegation at the Copenhagen climate talks. He has written widely on Latin America and other political developments. His website is at <http://www.ronridenour.com>. This article first appeared at Tlaxcala, the network for linguistic diversity, and is published here with the author’s permission.]*

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## **Québec Solidaire Opts for Independence/Sovereignty**

*LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion.*

*This article appears in the January 2010 edition of Socialist Action. Robbie Mahood is a federal steering committee member of Socialist Action / Ligue pour l'Action socialiste. He is a physician working in a Montreal neighbourhood clinic, and was a Québec Solidaire candidate in the constituency of Mont-Royal.*

### **A LeftViews article by Robbie Mahood**

Québec's small mass left-wing party, Quebec Solidaire(QS), held its fifth convention in a Montreal suburb on November 20-22, 2009. About 300 delegates and observers gathered to further a process of political clarification initiated by the leadership.

In 2008, QS managed to get one of its popular leaders, Amir Khadir, elected to Québec's National Assembly. However, its vote across the province has yet to pass 5%, even if polls sometimes place it as high as 8%. The party has about 5,000 members.

QS was formed in 2006 defining itself as "alter-mondialiste, féministe, écologique et de gauche", a party representing diverse social movements and dedicated to breaking the neo-liberal strait-jacket in Québec politics. Anti-neoliberal it is, but without an explicit working class or socialist perspective, although several left-wing organizations were permitted to form political `collectives` or tendencies within QS.

QS has a history of avoiding controversy in favour of lowest common denominator consensus. The leadership's improvised public pronouncements have often fallen far short of its own militants' expectations, for example on the Afghan war or in response to community outrage at the police killing of a young man, Freddy Villanueva, in one of Montréal's immigrant neighbourhoods.

Highlighted at this convention were debates on the national question, and on secularism in relation to immigrant religious and cultural rights — issues that are controversial in Québec politics as well as within QS.

Socialists in English-speaking Canada and the United States may question the obsession with the national question in Québec, or wonder whether the Québécois any longer suffer national oppression. After all, the national and class agitation of the 1960's and 70's led to significant advances for the francophone majority in Québec. Two failed bids for independence in the referenda of 1980 and 1995 have led the sovereigntist movement, dominated by the bourgeois nationalist Parti Québécois, to an impasse. At present, sentiment for independence is at a rather low ebb. Should the struggle for an independent Québec any longer occupy the place it once did in the strategic thinking of revolutionary socialists?

The view that independence is passé takes little cognizance of the national tensions that have been and continue to be a decisive factor in Canadian politics. Regardless of their views on independence (which fluctuate greatly depending on the conjuncture), the Québécois have a more clearly defined national consciousness than ever before. The exercise of their national rights brings them continually up against the power of the Canadian state and constitution. This is most clearly seen in struggles around language and culture but periodically broaches questions of economic control, defense of social programs and participation in imperialist wars. This unresolved national problem continues to fester away at the heart of the Canadian federation, undermining the stability of class rule exercised by the Anglo-Canadian bourgeoisie and by its junior Québec partner.

This is the context which impelled QS to adopt a more coherent position on this perennial question in Québec politics. Up to this point, the party had defined itself as ‘sovereignist’, a term that leaves some ambiguity. After a vigorous debate over four competing options, delegates opted for the use of “independence or sovereignty” interchangeably, narrowly edging out those who argued for “independence” only. Two other choices, “sovereignty” only, and “neither independence or sovereignty”, were decisively rejected.

At the same time, the delegates recognized the sovereignty of “the ten Amerindian peoples and the Inuit people who also inhabit Québec territory”, affirming their right to self-determination whether through independence or in the form of self-government within Québec.

Delegates also repudiated the ethnic nationalism increasingly promoted by the Parti Québécois (PQ). For Québec Solidaire, the Québec nation is “ethnically and culturally diversified, with French as the common language” and the Québécois are all those who “live in Québec and participate in its life”.

As for how to achieve independence, Québec Solidaire proposes a democratic Constituent Assembly charged with conducting a vast consultative process on Québec’s “political and constitutional future and the values and political institutions pertaining to it.” This exercise in popular sovereignty is in contrast to the narrow and elite-driven referendum strategy of the Parti Québécois (now placed in cold storage by the party brass until so-called ‘winning conditions’ reappear).

Anti-immigrant sentiment surfaced in a major way in the Québec election of 2007 when the right wing populist party, Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), capitalized on latent hostility to cosmopolitan Montreal, especially to its Muslim and Hasidic Jewish minorities, to propel itself into official opposition status in the National Assembly.

Subsequently, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission held public hearings on so-called ‘reasonable accommodation’ of new immigrants.

One of the major achievements of Québec’s ‘Quiet Revolution’ in the 1960’s was ending the Catholic Church’s control over education, health and social services. The secularization of Québec society enjoys overwhelming support in the population and is closely linked in the public’s mind with advances in women’s and to a lesser extent gay/lesbian rights. But these arguments for separation of church and state and against patriarchal oppression are now being

recruited to a xenophobic campaign against religious or cultural minorities, targeting primarily traditionally-attired muslim women. Most recently, debate has erupted over whether public employees have the right to wear religiously identified clothing or symbols.

Delegates voted for a position which distinguishes between the state, which must be secular, and individuals, who have the right to express their religious beliefs. Government employees working with the public should be able to wear religious “insignia” provided they do not proselytize and are not as a result impeded in the performance of their duties. This position clearly distinguishes QS from the PQ, which is seeking a ban on religious apparel in the civil service akin to the coercive laicity of France where the hijab (head covering) has been prohibited in public schools.

QS marked a step forward at this convention in more clearly aligning itself with the perspective of Québec independence, explicitly acknowledging the sovereignty of aboriginal peoples and rising to the defence of religious and cultural minorities. At the same time the party suffers from some important deficits.

In general, the positions adopted are premised on the future election of a QS government, lending them a rather abstract character (for example, the constituent assembly) or similarly, posing solutions in administrative terms, for example, qualifying the conditions under which a state employee would be allowed to display personal religious insignia.

Largely missing from this convention were resolutions that would orient QS to organizing struggles that are immediate and pressing, both in the electoral and extra-parliamentary arenas. One exception to this was the unanimous support given to a resolution in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle committing the party to help build the global Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the Israeli state.

Indeed, there is a noticeable gap between QS’s initial electoral success and its low or non-existent political profile on the streets and in the movements — ironic for a party formed in large measure by social activists. In this respect, the downturn in mass struggles in Québec over the last 5 years has reinforced the party’s electoral pre-occupation. The risk is that with any resurgence of mass mobilizations, QS will be a passive observer content to reap whatever benefits come its way in the polls.

Shifting to a stronger pro-independence stance may lead to a broader and more comprehensive programmatic debate on the measures needed to combat the twin economic and ecological crises. Demands to nationalize the banks, abrogate NAFTA, withdraw from NATO and NORAD, develop unemployment insurance to provide a living wage and re-train workers laid-off in the crisis, bring financially or ecologically bankrupt industries under public ownership and re-orient toward green production, defend public health care against Supreme Court authorized privatisation – these and other anti-capitalist measures imply not only mass mobilization within Québec but, more often than not, a confrontation and break with the federal Canadian state.

Various observers have noted that whatever its limitations, QS is a party in formation. One must be patient and allow time for deficiencies to be overcome. But political differentiation, suppressed for the most part up to now, is becoming more apparent. It would be naïve to

overlook bureaucratic and reformist tendencies, nor should it be surprising given the relationship of political forces within QS since its founding and the impact of its modest electoral success.

The weakness of 'class' politics in QS is a reflection of the society around it. Neither Social Democratic reformism nor Stalinism have ever established a significant presence in Québec, a reality that brings with it mixed blessings. On the one hand, a labour movement renowned for its militancy has yet to assert itself as an independent political actor. On the other hand, there is an absence of hardened reformist currents exercising control over working class politics.

QS's election campaigns have been endorsed by more radical elements in Québec's labour movement, notably the Montreal central council of the Confederation des syndicaux nationaux (CSN). But the relationship between the party and the unions is tentative at best. Certainly, the working class has been given no particular strategic weight in the party's thinking. However, the notion that QS should limit itself to being the political voice of a coalition of movements dedicated to a more just and equitable society (superceding the struggle between social classes) is being undermined by the depth of the current crisis which brings class contradictions in the broadest sense into greater relief.

This convention demonstrated that party militants are capable of vigorous debate and retain a certain independence from the leadership. The role of socialists within QS in advancing a class struggle perspective around transitional anti-capitalist demands, such as those listed above, will be very important. To be sure, this task is not to be approached in a mechanical way from the stance of bringing received wisdom from outside, but rather in the context of discussions as they actually unfold within the ranks of the party. But it is a task that must surely be taken up.

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## **Québec Solidaire: A Left-of-the-Left Formation?**

*LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion. This article first appeared in The Bullet, published by Socialist Project.*

*Roger Rashi is a social and political activist living in Montreal. He is a founding member of Québec solidaire, and a member of Québec Solidaire's Working Commission on the Environment. The views expressed here are strictly his own.*

### **A LeftViews article by Roger Rashi**

The first decade of the 21st century has seen the rise of new 'left of the left' formations in several Western countries. The best known cases are the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France and Die Linke (The Left) in Germany.

These new parties share some common traits: they are based on an explicit rejection of the institutional left in their respective countries, take a good deal of inspiration from the post-Seattle anti-globalization movement and exhibit a coalition character with membership drawn from several social and political movements (feminist, ecological, antiwar, far left, libertarians, community groups).

Québec Solidaire (QS), though not as well-known as the NPA or Die Linke, shares a surprising number of traits with these formations. This includes a growing electoral presence which irks and worries the party fulfilling the role of the 'institutional left' in Quebec, the sovereigntist Parti québécois (PQ).

Since its founding in February 2006, QS has challenged openly and publicly the PQ's hold on the 'progressive constituency' in Quebec. It has argued forcefully that labour, community groups and social movements must have their own autonomous political expression, distinct and opposed to the PQ's 'neoliberalism with a human face' practice and program.

Even more ominously from the PQ's point of view, QS opposes its strategy of putting the social program on the back burner in favour of a 'grand national coalition' and calls for an explicit link between Québec independence (or sovereignty) and social progress. In Québec solidaire's own words, the Québec 'National Question' and the 'Social Question' must be linked in a strategy of social transformation.

### **The Emergence of QS**

The genesis of QS is intimately linked to the rise of the anti-globalization movement after 2000. Following the large mobilization around the Québec Peoples Summit of April 2001, the forerunners of QS, the UFP (Union des forces progressistes) and Option Citoyenne, were founded respectively in 2002 and 2003 with the explicit purpose of giving this rising social movement a political voice. Thus, at its founding in 2006, which saw the merger of UFP and

Option Citoyenne in a unified political party, QS defined itself as “alter-mondialiste, féministe, écologique et de gauche.” Its membership, drawn extensively from these mass movements, is a mix of younger activists, more mature community and labour activists, as well as far left activists acting openly as “recognized collectives” (akin to recognized tendencies) within the party.[1]

The programmatic and practical challenges facing QS also bear a striking similarity to those faced by the NPA or Die Linke. While the ‘anti’ aspect of the platform or program is well spelled-out, the ‘pro’ aspect is yet to be defined. Indeed, what is the “post neoliberal” society envisaged by QS? In its April 2009 manifesto, the question of the link between capitalism and neoliberalism is explicitly stated for the first time and the question posed openly: “Pour sortir de la crise: dépasser le capitalisme?” (To fight the crisis: should we go beyond capitalism?)

This question lies at the root of QS’s present attempt to define its program. Following its recently held 5th congress centered on the National Question, the party will be tackling the socio-economic and environmental parts of the program. At a party school held in early fall, some of the preliminary proposals of the Political Commission going toward an anticapitalist and ecosocialist position were received with great interest by the 100 or so participants. But it remains to be seen whether these positions will gain greater acceptance in the party as the internal debates get going ahead of the next congress.

Practically, the link between electoral activity and involvement in social struggles is yet to be resolved. With the election to the Québec National Assembly of Amir Khadir in December 2008, QS has made significant inroads. It is now credited with a steady 7-8% in the polls, roughly twice its result of 2008. And Amir Khadir has become a popular and recognized figure across Québec, ranking 3rd in a recent poll of political personalities.[2] However, the ongoing link with labour struggles and popular struggles is tenuous at best. Many activists returned to their movements after the election campaign.

### **Open Questions, Coming Challenges**

How will the party build on its electoral successes over the next three years, particularly outside Montreal where the left is not as entrenched? What kind of organic links can be built with labour and the social movements at a time when mass struggles seem to be ebbing in Québec? These are open questions that QS must deal with in the coming period. A positive sign is the willingness of some of the younger labour activists to begin coordinating their actions in the trade-unions as QS gains greater recognition, acceptance (and backing in some cases) among some local and regional union officials.

There are obviously some key differences between the history of the left in Germany and France and that of Quebec. Both the NPA and Die Linke must deal with the complex issues of existing social-democratic and left formations in their countries and its attendant question of electoral alliances (or not) in local, regional, national and European elections. In Québec however, there is no history of mass labour or communist parties and therefore these kinds of tactical questions are not on the agenda. Furthermore, in the present first-past-the post electoral system, the kinds of tactical alliances that a two-stage election (France) or proportional representation (Germany) require are not an issue. However, a question that will dog QS in the near future will be its

attitude toward the PQ, if that party should come back to power and call a referendum on the National Question. But that is, at the very least, three years down the road.

A greater problem is the nature of the link with labour and the social movements. In Western Europe there is a long history of organic links between these movements and left-wing parties. In Québec, despite a history of radical action by labour and popular organizations, there is no history of such organic links. The PQ has no organizational roots in labour despite its history of support from trade-union leaderships. And the NDP has never been a factor in Québec. Thus, QS faces a dual task: wresting away sections of labour and the mass movements from the PQ and, at the same time, developing a form of organic linkage which is new to local political traditions.

Lastly, the Québec National Question, poses some specific strategic and tactical problems to the Québec left, namely: what kind of alliances to build with progressive non-French speakers in Québec (Anglophones and immigrants) who are wary of its pro-independence stand? What kinds of alliances with Native Peoples? What kinds of alliances should be built with progressives in the rest of Canada (ROC)?

It is an unfortunate fact that QS influence is presently very weak among non-Francophones (2% according to the latest polls, which is way below the QS province-wide average of 7-8%). While interesting positions have been adopted on this issue, it remains a question that the party must seriously tackle in the coming years. On the question of Native Peoples, Québec solidaire has adopted a position of full recognition of their right to self-determination. As for the question of links with ROC progressives, there has been no serious thought given to this issue as of yet.

### **Rebuilding Left Alternatives**

To sum-up, it is my contention that QS is similar in nature to the 'left-of-the-left' formations which we see rising in many parts of the world and it shares many of the challenges they face. Like many of these new formations, Québec solidaire is far from being a fully-set and hardened phenomenon. It is an evolving formation, with a program that has yet to be completely defined and a praxis which is still in a state of flux. How the party deals with the challenges ahead – the economic and environmental crisis, its relative electoral successes, the task of linking up with labour and mass movements – will go a long way toward defining its future and role in Québec politics.

These various left-of-the-left experiments must be put in the larger historical context of rebuilding left alternatives after the collapse of Soviet-style socialism and the bankruptcy of Third Way Social Democracy. The radical French philosopher Alain Badiou speaks of us being on the threshold of a “third sequence of emancipatory politics.”[3] Roughly speaking, he posits that the first sequence saw the rise of the working class movement in the 19th century. The second sequence saw the rise of Bolshevik-style parties and the ultimately failed attempts to build socialism in the 20th century. While the third sequence, which we might be entering, will see new forms of political endeavours transcending the experiments of the past.

While I do not agree with his proposal of seeking new forms of political praxis “at distance from the state” and “away from the party form” (much too post-Marxist for my taste, and something the left has experimented for two decades with marginal gains at best), I do think that the notion



of entering a third sequence of emancipatory politics is an interesting one to explore. In this perspective, both the ‘left-of-the-left’ experiments in Western countries and the ‘Socialism of the 21st Century’ experiments in Latin America, take on a new significance and a new light.

**Footnotes**

1. In June 2007, Québec solidaire granted the status of “recognized collectives within the party” to Gauche Socialiste, an affiliate of the Fourth International and to Masse Critique, an anticapitalist and ecosocialist collective, to which I belong. Since then, two more collectives have been recognized: the Parti Communiste du Québec and Le collectif pour la décroissance, a zero-growth radical-ecology collective.
2. See the Leger Marketing poll published in Le Devoir on December 1st 2009.
3. See Alain Badiou “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review*, N. 49 (Jan.-Feb. 2008); and his *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (London: Verso, 2008).

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## **Québec Solidaire's collectives – Help or hindrance?**

*LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion. Richard Fidler is a Socialist Voice Contributing Editor. This article first appeared in his blog, Life on the Left.*

### **A LeftViews article by Richard Fidler**

Several readers of my report on the recent Québec Solidaire convention have asked me whether the QS collectives played any role in the proceedings.

This is a logical question, particularly since QS is the product of successive fusions of various political groups, both party and non-party, some of which have maintained their own identity while participating in Québec Solidaire. The recognition of collectives within QS is a reflection of the party's diversity of opinion, and its attempt to embrace many different approaches and perspectives within a broad spectrum of critical progressive thinking. It lists party "pluralism" as one of its founding values.

The collectives are groupings of QS members organized on the basis of "particular themes or political affinities", to quote the provisional party statutes (article 11). They represent "different and complementary currents of thought" within the party that are allowed "to promote specific orientations to the degree that they undertake to comply with the party's statutes, fundamental values and program". However, they have no right to representation as such in the party's leadership bodies. To be recognized by the National Council, a collective must have at least 10 party members in at least three ridings or campus QS organizations. The collectives are entitled to set up information tables at party conventions and to promote their ideas and proposals for action in the party's internal debates.

From a distance, it is hard for a non-member of the party like myself to see what the collectives do within Québec Solidaire on a day-to-day basis. They had little obvious presence as collectives at the recent convention I attended other than the literature tables that several of them maintained in the registration area. Some are organized around particular themes; an example is a "décroissance" ("de-growth" or negative growth) collective focused on ecological issues.

A few collectives, however, represent long-established political currents or tendencies in Quebec and internationally. Examples are the various Marxist-inspired currents identified currently or historically with Trotskyist, Maoist or Stalinist organizations. These include Gauche socialiste, affiliated with the Trotskyist Fourth International; Socialisme international, part of the International Socialist Tendency (the current best known historically for its analysis of the former Soviet Union as "state capitalist" rather than the more orthodox Trotskyist designation of it as a "degenerated workers state"); La Riposte, affiliated with the International Marxist Tendency; and the Parti Communiste du Québec (PCQ), which split with the Communist Party

of Canada (CPC) over the PCQ's support of Quebec independence. A few CPC members are also in Québec Solidaire but they are not a recognized collective.

Another collective with a more or less Marxist lineage is Masse critique. One of its leading members, Roger Rashi, has recently written his own assessment of Québec Solidaire, comparing it with other left regroupments, particularly in Europe. It is available in English in *Socialist Voice*.

Oddly enough, these political collectives have had little to say about the convention, although some of their members were active in the debates, in some cases defending positions that differed from those of other collectives or the majority of the party. I would have thought the convention was an occasion for more reflection by them on the challenges facing QS as it has confronted them so far. Apparently not.

### **Gauche socialiste: Long live passionate debates!**

Gauche socialiste's web site limits its coverage to a video of the final wind-up rally at the convention. However, GS members are instrumental in the production of *Presse-toi à gauche*, a web publication that is supportive of Québec Solidaire. In a November 24 article Bernard Rioux, a central leader of GS, proclaimed that "Québec Solidaire accomplished a lot during this convention" but simply welcomed the existence of "passionate debates" on Quebec independence, secularism, and the relationship of the national question to its social agenda, without providing any details on their content.

A short article by Marie-Ève Duchesne reported favourably on the major resolution in the secularism debate and Québec Solidaire's decision to oppose dress codes for state employees that would ban indications of an individual's religious beliefs. This and related resolutions demonstrated, she said, QS's strongly feminist outlook. It is unclear whether Duchesne is a GS member. I noted that some GS members voted in favour of such a ban at the convention.

Still another article, by Serge Charbonneau on December 8, welcomed a "superb text" published on a number of other web sites by one Michèle Sirois, "Why I am quitting Québec Solidaire", who had said her decision was motivated precisely by the QS delegates' decision to allow civil servants to display evidence of their religious beliefs in the course of their employment. She saw this as an unreasonable concession to "political Islam" and a violation of the principle of separation of church and state and of male-female equality.

Charbonneau said he "understood her point of view and her dissidence", and praised her "very relevant" observation that "The left movements' lack of understanding of the insecurity of Québécois over their identity represents a real danger, because it leaves the field free for right-wing, even far-right movements to take over the issue of identity..." Unfortunately, there has been no response by GS or PTàG to this article or its endorsement of Islamophobic views.

Gauche socialiste maintained a literature table at the convention and sold copies of a glossy brochure on the ecological crisis featuring, among other things, articles and resolutions of the Fourth International.

### **International Socialism: Quebec independence “not a priority”**

The few Quebec members of the International Socialists group are immersed in Québec Solidaire; one of their leading members, Benoit Renaud, is the party’s national secretary. Socialisme International (SI) published a one-page flyer version of its sporadically published print newspaper *Résistance*, featuring an article on the economic crisis and an article by Benoit Renaud on the Quebec debate on the hijab. An English translation of the latter is available in *Socialist Voice*.

The December issue of *Socialist Worker*, the paper of the International Socialists, SI’s counterpart in the Rest of Canada, published a report on the QS convention by Michelle Robidoux. She interviewed Matt Jones, a member of QS in the Mercier riding. He thought the position QS adopted on “laïcité” or secularism was “mostly really good” although he was critical of its support for banning “proselytizing” religious views by state employees, which he regarded as a concession to “the more ‘secularist’ currents of the party.”

But Jones seemed more ambivalent about the decision to support Quebec independence: “Without a position like this, it can’t move the left project forward. But within that, we would argue that it isn’t the priority. How we organize is key.” A positive feature of the adopted support for both sovereignty (as the PQ proposes) and independence, Jones said, was that it could satisfy everyone in the party: “... it links in the radical ‘indépendantistes’, a large part of whom are the far left, with something that is just more broad.”

### **La Riposte: Unions should affiliate to QS**

Another collective from the Trotskyist tradition is La Riposte, which translates as Fightback, the name of their cothinkers in the ROC. Affiliated to the International Marxist Tendency headed by Alan Woods, La Riposte was recognized as a collective at QS’s fourth convention, in June of this year. Its members staffed a literature table at the convention but did not participate in the debates. Their paper, with the same name, calls on QS to be “a party of the workers with an organic connection to the main trade unions” as well as fight for socialism.

United with the Canadian workers, their natural allies, it says, the Quebec working class can “tear down the bourgeois federalist state and, in its place, set up a voluntary socialist union under equal terms, where the main levers of the economy are nationalized and placed under workers’ control”. However, La Riposte has not yet reported on the QS convention or indicated what they thought of the resolutions debated and adopted there.

### **Parti Communiste du Québec: For independence, and renegotiate NAFTA**

PCQ members were less evident at this convention than they had been in previous ones I have attended. Possibly they were preoccupied with preparations for their own convention, held on December 12. That convention adopted a resolution on Québec’s accession to independence that differs somewhat from the position adopted by the Québec Solidaire convention three weeks earlier. Once a government including the PCQ has been “elected in coalition or otherwise”, it states, the National Assembly should adopt a provisional constitution and unilaterally declare Quebec independence from Canada and the British Crown, then hold a popular consultation on

the constitution followed by election of a Constituent Assembly that would draft a complete constitution for an independent Quebec, to be approved in a referendum. The PCQ would fight to include progressive social rights written into the constitution.

An independent Quebec, says the resolution, would strive for economic as well as political independence, and “renegotiate Quebec’s place within the NAFTA as well as all the other treaties that Canada has signed in our name...” Does this include continued membership not only in NAFTA but in the military alliances NATO and NORAD? The resolution does not say. Although the resolution calls for closer relations with the member countries of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, it also says an independent Quebec would exert “pressure on the governments of the emerging countries to improve the working conditions of their peoples.”

### **Communist Party of Canada: Is QS preparing to compromise with the PQ?**

Although the CPC is not a collective in Québec Solidaire, some of its members are in QS and were delegates to the convention. They spoke against Quebec independence. An article in the December issue of *People’s Voice* by its “Québec Bureau” explained why. It quoted Pierre Fontaine, the party’s Quebec leader: “From a means, sovereignty has become a goal in itself.... The door is now open for compromises with nationalist bourgeois forces – like the Parti Québécois”, Fontaine said.

The CPC thinks that the Canadian capitalist class may be overthrown before Quebec can become independent, and that Québécois should not forestall this possibility by fighting for independence through a united front with Quebec nationalists. Instead, they should fight for “a new, democratic and equal constitution for all nations in Canada”. The article did not express a position on the other issues debated at the convention.

\* \* \*

The preceding summary of positions held by the left or Marxist collectives in Québec Solidaire – a comprehensive understanding of their positions can only be gained from observing their conduct in the party and reading the documentation on the web sites I have referenced – should indicate that none, as a collective, is in a position to exert much influence, positive or otherwise, on the present course of the party. To my knowledge, Québec Solidaire’s unanimous decision to endorse the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel in support of the Palestinian people – a highlight of the convention – was not an initiative of any collective in the party.

This weakness is not the result of any particular limitation on the thinking or action of the collectives imposed by the Québec Solidaire structures or top leadership. Rather, it reflects the general organizational and political decline of the far left in Quebec over the last 25 to 30 years and its inability to overcome these deficiencies even in the favourable environment provided by its participation in the new broad left party.

Conversely, the ability of Québec Solidaire to maintain itself and move ahead in the development of its program and activities on a series of important questions of Quebec politics – as registered by the November convention – is an encouraging sign that the new progressive forces from the feminist, students, grassroots coalitions and the labour movement that have so far

coalesced in Québec Solidaire can make further progress in the period ahead, even without (and in some cases despite) the contribution of the old left.

That said, in my opinion the development of a Marxist left with a solid strategy for building Québec Solidaire as the leading force in the fight for an independent and socialist Quebec could advance the party enormously, and with it the cause of all working people in Quebec and elsewhere. Québec Solidaire is very much a “work in progress”, and socialists elsewhere have every interest in following its development closely. I hope this blog will contribute to that process in the coming months and years.

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## **Israel Resembles a Failed State**

by **Ali Abunimah**

One year has passed since the savage Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip, but for the people there time might as well have stood still. Since Palestinians in Gaza buried their loved ones — more than 1,400 persons, almost 400 of them children — there has been little healing and virtually no reconstruction.

According to international aid agencies, only 41 trucks of building supplies have been allowed into Gaza during the year.

Promises of billions made at a donors' conference in Egypt last March attended by luminaries of the so-called "international community" and the Middle East peace process industry are unfulfilled, and the Israeli siege, supported by the US, the European Union, Arab states, and tacitly by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah, continues.

Amid the endless, horrifying statistics a few stand out: of Gaza's 640 schools, 18 were completely destroyed and 280 damaged in Israeli attacks. Two-hundred-and-fifty students and 15 teachers were killed.

Of 122 health facilities assessed by the World Health Organization, 48 percent were damaged or destroyed.

Ninety percent of households in Gaza still experience power cuts for four to eight hours per day due to Israeli attacks on the power grid and degradation caused by the blockade.

Forty-six percent of Gaza's once productive agricultural land is out of use due to Israeli damage to farms and Israeli-declared free fire zones. Gaza's exports of more than 130,000 tons per year of tomatoes, flowers, strawberries and other fruit have fallen to zero.

That "much of Gaza still lies in ruins," a coalition of international aid agencies stated recently, "is not an accident; it is a matter of policy."

This policy has been clear all along and it has nothing to do with Israeli "security."

From 19 June 2008, to 4 November 2008, calm prevailed between Israel and Gaza, as Hamas adhered strictly — as even Israel has acknowledged — to a negotiated ceasefire.

That ceasefire collapsed when Israel launched a surprise attack on Gaza killing six persons, after which Hamas and other resistance factions retaliated.

Even so, Palestinian factions were still willing to renew the ceasefire, but it was Israel that refused, choosing instead to launch a premeditated, systematic attack on the foundations of civilized life in the Gaza Strip.

Operation Cast Lead, as Israel dubbed it, was an attempt to destroy once and for all Palestinian resistance in general, and Hamas in particular, which had won the 2006 election and survived the

blockade and numerous US-sponsored attempts to undermine and overthrow it in cooperation with US-backed Palestinian militias.

Like the murderous sanctions on Iraq throughout the 1990s, the blockade of Gaza was calculated to deprive civilians of basic necessities, rights and dignity in the hope that their suffering might force their leadership to surrender or collapse.

In many respects things may seem more dire than a year ago.

Barack Obama, the US president, whom many hoped would change the vicious anti-Palestinian policies of his predecessor, George W. Bush, has instead entrenched them as even the pretense of a serious peace effort has vanished.

According to media reports, the US Army Corps of Engineers is assisting Egypt in building an underground wall on its border with Gaza to block the tunnels which act as a lifeline for the besieged territory (resources and efforts that ought to go into rebuilding still hurricane-devastated New Orleans), and American weapons continue to flow to West Bank militias engaged in a US- and Israeli-sponsored civil war against Hamas and anyone else who might resist Israeli occupation and colonization.

These facts are inescapable and bleak.

However, to focus on them alone would be to miss a much more dynamic situation that suggests Israel's power and impunity are not as invulnerable as they appear from this snapshot.

A year after Israel's attack and after more than two-and-a-half years of blockade, the Palestinian people in Gaza have not surrendered. Instead they have offered the world lessons in steadfastness and dignity, even at an appalling, unimaginable cost.

It is true that the European Union leaders who came to occupied Jerusalem last January to publicly embrace Ehud Olmert, the then Israeli prime minister — while white phosphorus seared the flesh of Gazan children and bodies lay under the rubble — still cower before their respective Israel lobbies, as do American and Canadian politicians.

But the shift in public opinion is palpable as Israel's own actions transform it into a pariah whose driving forces are not the liberal democratic values with which it claims to identify, but ultra-nationalism, racism, religious fanaticism, settler-colonialism and a Jewish supremacist order maintained by frequent massacres.

The universalist cause of justice and liberation for Palestinians is gaining adherents and momentum especially among the young. I witnessed it, for example, among Malaysian students I met at a Palestine solidarity conference held by the Union of NGOs of The Islamic World in Istanbul last May, and again in November as hundreds of student organizers from across the US and Canada converged to plan their participation in the global Palestinian-led campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions modeled on the successful struggle against South African apartheid in the 1980s.

This week, thousands of people from dozens of countries are attempting to reach Gaza to break the siege and march alongside Palestinians who have been organizing inside the territory.



Each of the individuals traveling with the Gaza Freedom March, Viva Palestina, or other delegations represents perhaps hundreds of others who could not make the journey in person, and who are marking the event with demonstrations and commemorations, visits to their elected officials and media campaigns.

Against this flowering of activism, Zionism is struggling to rejuvenate its dwindling base of support. Multi-million dollar programs aimed at recruiting and Zionizing young American Jews are struggling to compete against organizations like the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, which run not on money but principled commitment to human equality.

Increasingly, we see that Israel's hasbara (propaganda) efforts have no positive message, offer no plausible case for maintaining a status quo of unspeakable repression and violence, and rely instead on racist demonization and dehumanization of Arabs and Muslims to justify Israel's actions and even its very existence.

Faced with growing global recognition and support for the courageous nonviolent struggle against continued land theft in the West Bank, Israel is escalating its violence and kidnapping of leaders of the movement in Bilin and other villages (Mohammad Othman, Jamal Juma' and Abdallah Abu Rahmeh are among the leaders of this movement recently arrested).

In acting this way, Israel increasingly resembles a bankrupt failed state, not a regime confident about its legitimacy and longevity.

And despite the failed peace process industry's efforts to ridicule, suppress and marginalize it, there is a growing debate among Palestinians and even among Israelis about a shared future in Palestine/Israel based on equality and decolonization, rather than ethno-national segregation and forced repartition.

Last, but certainly not least, in the shadow of the Goldstone report, Israeli leaders travel around the world fearing arrest for their crimes. For now, they can rely on the impunity that high-level international complicity and their inertial power and influence still afford them. But the question for the real international community — made up of people and movements — is whether we want to continue to see the still very incomplete system of international law and justice painstakingly built since the horrors of the Second World War and the Nazi holocaust dismantled and corrupted all for the sake of one rogue state.

What we have done in solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza and the rest of Palestine is not yet enough. But our movement is growing, it cannot be stopped, and we will reach our destination.

*This essay was originally published by Al-Jazeera and is republished with the author's permission. Ali Abunimah is a co-founder of The Electronic Intifada. He is also the author of One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse. In late December Abunimah joined more than 1300 activists from approximately 40 countries in the Gaza Freedom March, a protest against the continuing blockade of the Gaza Strip. Egyptian authorities prevented them from reaching Gaza with their message of solidarity. For more information about the GFM, see his blog from Cairo.*

Socialist Voice #394, January 10, 2010

## **Fidel: 51 Years After the Revolution, We Now Fight to Save Our Species**

**By Fidel Castro**

January 3, 2010 — As the Cuban Revolution celebrated its 51st anniversary two days ago, memories of that January 1, 1959, came to mind. The outlandish idea that, after half a century – which flew by – we would remember it as if it were yesterday, never occurred to any of us.

During the meeting at the Oriente sugar mill on December 28, 1958, with the commander in chief of the enemy's forces, whose elite units were surrounded without any way out whatsoever, the commander admitted defeat and appealed to our generosity to find a dignified way out for the rest of his forces. He knew of our humane treatment of prisoners and the injured without any exception. He accepted the agreement that I proposed, although I warned him that operations under way would continue. But he travelled to the capital, and, incited by the United States embassy, instigated a coup d'état.

We were preparing for combat on that January 1 when, in the early hours of the morning, the news came in of the dictator's flight. The Rebel Army was ordered not to permit a ceasefire and to continue battling on all fronts. Radio Rebelde called on workers to launch a revolutionary general strike, immediately followed by the entire nation. The coup attempt was defeated, and that same afternoon, our victorious troops entered Santiago de Cuba.

Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos received instructions to advance rapidly by road in motor vehicles with their battle-hardened forces toward La Cabaña and the Columbia military camp. The enemy army, hit hard on all fronts, was unable to resist. The people in arms themselves took over the centres of repression and police stations. In the afternoon of January 2 at a stadium in Bayamo, and accompanied by a small escort, I met with more than 2000 soldiers from the tank, artillery and motorized infantry units, against whom we had been fighting until the day before. They were still carrying their weapons. We had won the enemy's respect with our audacious but humanitarian methods of irregular warfare. This was how, in just four days – after 25 months of war that we reinitiated with a few guns – some 100,000 air, sea and ground weapons and the entire power of the state remained in the hands of the Cuban Revolution. In just a few lines, I am recounting everything that happened during those days 51 years ago.

### **Battle to save our species**

Then the main battle began: to preserve Cuba's independence against the most powerful empire that has ever existed, a battle which our people waged with great dignity. I am happy today to observe those who, in the face of incredible obstacles, sacrifices and risks, were able to defend our homeland, and who today, together with their children, parents and loved ones, are enjoying the happiness and glories of each new year.

Today, however, is nothing like yesterday. We experience a new era unlike any other in history. Before, the people fought and are fighting still, with honour, for a better and more just world, but

now they are also having to fight, without any alternative whatsoever, *for the very survival of our species*. If we ignore this, we know absolutely nothing.

Cuba is, without question, one of the most politically educated countries on the planet; it started out from the most shameful illiteracy, and what is worse, our yankee masters and the bourgeoisie associated with the foreign owners of land, sugar mills, production plants for consumer goods, warehouses, businesses, electricity, telephones, banks, mines, insurance, docks, bars, hotels, offices, houses, theatres, printshops, magazines, newspapers, radio, the emerging television, and everything of important value.

After the ardent flames of our battles for freedom had been quenched, the yankees had taken upon themselves the task of thinking for a people that struggled so hard to be the masters of their independence, resources and destiny. Absolutely nothing, not even the task of thinking politically, belonged to us. How many of us knew how to read and write? How many of us even made it to sixth grade? I recall that especially on a day like today, because that was the country that was supposed to belong to the Cuban people. I will not list anything more, because I would have to include much more, including the best schools, the best hospitals, the best houses, the best doctors, the best lawyers. How many of us had a right to that? Which of us possessed, with some exceptions, the natural and divine right to be administrators and leaders?

Every millionaire and rich individual, without exception, was a political party leader, senator, representative or important official. That was the “representative and pure democracy” that prevailed in our country, except that the yankees imposed, at their whim, merciless and cruel petty dictators whenever it was more convenient for them to better defend their properties against landless campesinos and workers with or without jobs. Given that nobody even talks about that anymore, I am venturing to remember it.

### **Climate change and the battle in Copenhagen**

Our country is one of more than 150 that constitute the Third World, which would be the first but not the only nations destined to suffer incredible consequences if humanity does not become aware, clearly, certainly and a lot more quickly than we thought, of the reality and consequences of the climate change caused by human beings if it is not prevented in time.

Our mass media has dedicated space to describing the effects of climate change. Increasingly violent hurricanes, droughts and other natural disasters have likewise contributed to the education of our people on this subject. One singular event, the battle over the climate issue that took place at the Copenhagen summit, has contributed to knowledge of the imminent danger. It is not a matter of a distant threat for the 22nd century, but for the 21st; nor is it just for the latter half of this century, but for the coming decades, in which we will begin to suffer its terrible consequences.

It is also not just a question of simple action against the empire and its henchmen, which in this issue, as in everything else, are trying to impose their own stupid and egotistic interests, but a battle of world opinion that cannot be left to spontaneity or the whims of the majority of their mass media. It is a situation with which, fortunately, millions of honourable and brave people in the world are familiar, a battle to wage with the masses and within social organizations

and scientific, cultural, humanitarian and other international institutions, most especially in the heart of the United Nations, where the United States government, its NATO allies and the richest countries tried to effect a fraudulent and anti-democratic coup in Denmark against the rest of the emerging and poor countries of the Third World.

### **Rich states attempted to load climate burden on poor**

In Copenhagen, the Cuban delegation, which attended together with others from the ALBA and the Third World, was forced into a fight to the finish in the face of the incredible events that began with the speech of the US president, Barack Obama, and of the group of the richest states on the planet, resolved to dismantle the binding commitments of Kyoto – where the thorny problem was discussed more than 12 years ago – and to load the burden of sacrifice onto the emerging and underdeveloped countries, which are the poorest and at the same time the principal suppliers of the planet's raw materials and non-renewable resources to the most developed and opulent countries.

In Copenhagen, Obama appeared on the last day of the conference, which began on December 7, 2009. The worst aspect of his conduct was that, after he had decided to dispatch 30,000 soldiers to the slaughter of Afghanistan – a country with a strong tradition of independence, which not even the English in their better and cruelest times could dominate – he went to Oslo to receive no less than a Nobel Peace Prize. He arrived in the Norwegian capital on December 10 and gave an empty, demagogic and justifying speech. On the 18th, the date of the summit's last session, he appeared in Copenhagen, where he planned to remain for just eight hours. His secretary of state and a select group of his best strategists had arrived the previous day.

The first thing that Obama did was to select a group of guests who were given the honour of accompanying him as he gave a speech at the summit. The complacent and fawning Danish prime minister, who was presiding over the summit, gave the podium over to a group that numbered just 15.

The imperial chief deserved special honours. His speech was a combination of sweetened words seasoned with theatrical gestures, already boring for those of us, like me, who had assigned themselves the task of listening to him in order to try and be objective in an appreciation of his characteristics and political intentions.

Obama imposed on his docile Danish host, so that only his guests could speak, although as soon as he had made his own comments, he “made himself scarce” through the back door, like an imp escaping from an audience which had done him the honour of listening with interest.

Once the authorized list of speakers was finished, an Indigenous man, Aymara through and through, Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, who had just been reelected with 65% of the vote, demanded the right to speak, which was granted, to the resounding applause of those present. In just nine minutes, he expressed profound and dignified concepts in response to the words of the absent US president. Immediately afterward, Hugo Chávez got up to ask to speak on behalf of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; the person presiding over the session had no choice but to also give him the right to speak, and he used that to improvise one of the most brilliant speeches that I've ever heard. When he finished, a strike of the gavel ended the unusual session.

The extremely busy Obama and his entourage, however, did not have a minute to lose. His group had put together a draft statement, full of vagueness, which was the negation of the Kyoto Protocol. After he dashed out of the plenary session, Obama met with other groups of guests numbering no more than 30, negotiated in private and in groups; insisted; mentioned figures to the tune of millions of green bills without gold backing and which are constantly being devaluated, and even threatened to leave the meeting if his demands were not met. Worst of all, it was a meeting of super-rich countries, to which several of the most important emerging nations were invited and two or three poor ones, to which he submitted the document as if proposing, “take it or leave it!”.

The Danish prime minister tried to present that confusing, ambiguous and contradictory statement – in the discussion of which the UN did not participate in any way – as the summit agreement. The summit sessions had already concluded, almost all of the heads of state and government and foreign ministers had left for their respective countries and, at three in the morning, the distinguished Danish prime minister presented it to the plenary session, where hundreds of long-suffering officials who hadn't slept for three days, received the thorny document, and were given only one hour to discuss and approve it.

### **Poor countries resist**

That is when the meeting became fiery; the delegates hadn't even had time to read it. A number of them asked to speak. The first was the delegate from Tuvalu, whose islands would be inundated if what was proposed there was approved; those of Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua followed him. The dialectical confrontation at 3 am on that December 19 is worthy of going down in history, if history should continue after climate change.

As a large part of what happened is known in Cuba, or is on internet web pages, I will confine myself to partially expounding on the two responses of Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, worthy of being recorded in order to know the last episodes of the Copenhagen soap opera, and aspects of the final chapter, which are still to be published in our country.

“Mr. President (Prime Minister of Denmark)... The document that you affirmed on various occasions did not exist, has now appeared. We have all seen versions circulating surreptitiously and being discussed in small and secret meetings outside the conference halls in which the international community, via its representatives, is negotiating in a transparent manner.

“I add my voice to those of the representatives of Tuvalu, Venezuela and Bolivia. Cuba considers the text of this apocryphal draft as extremely insufficient and inadmissible ...

“The document which you are presenting, lamentably, does not contain any commitment whatsoever to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

“I am aware of prior versions which, in questionable and clandestine procedures, were also being negotiated behind closed doors and which talked of a reduction of at least 50% by the year 2050 ...

“The document that you have presented now, precisely omits the already meager and insufficient key phrases that that version contained. This document does not guarantee, in any way, the adoption of minimal measures that would make it possible to avert an extremely grave disaster for the planet and the human species.

“This shameful document that you have brought is likewise silent and ambiguous in relation to the specific commitment to emission reductions on the part of the developed countries, those responsible for global warming given the historic and current level of their emissions, and on whom it falls to implement substantial reductions immediately. This paper does not contain one single word of commitment on the part of the developed countries.

“...Your role, Mr. President, is the death certificate of the Kyoto Protocol, which my delegation does not accept.

“The Cuban delegation wishes to emphasize the preeminence of the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ as the central concept of the future negotiation process. Your paper does not say one word about that.

“The Cuban delegation reiterates its protest at the grave violations of procedure that have been produced in the anti-democratic management of the process of this conference, via the utilization of arbitrary, exclusive and discriminatory forms of debate and negotiation ...

“Mr. President, I am formally asking for this statement to be placed in the final report on the workings of this lamentable and shameful 15th Conference of the Parties.”

What nobody could have imagined is that, after another lengthy recess and when everybody thought that only the formalities remained before the conclusion of the summit, the prime minister of the host country, at the instigation of the yankees, would make another attempt to pass off the document as a consensus of the summit, when not even foreign ministers were left in the plenary. The delegates from Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba, who remained vigilant and unsleeping until the last minute, frustrated the latter maneuver in Copenhagen.

However, the problem was not concluded. The powerful are not accustomed to brooking resistance. On December 30, the Danish Permanent Mission to the United Nations, in New York, courteously informed our mission in that city that it had taken note of the “Copenhagen Accord” of December 18, 2009, and attached an advance copy of that decision. It affirmed textually:

“... the government of Denmark, in its capacity of president of COP15, invites the Parties to the Convention to inform the secretariat of the UNFCCC in writing, and as soon as possible, of your willingness to commit to the Copenhagen Agreement.”

This surprise communication motivated a response from the Cuban Permanent Mission to the United Nations, in which it “... flatly rejects the intention to gain indirect approval of a text that was the object of repudiation by various delegations, not only on account of its insufficiency in the face of the grave effects of climate change, but also for exclusively responding to the interests of a reduced group of states.”

At the same time it prompted a letter from Dr. Fernando González Bermúdez, first deputy minister of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment of the Republic of Cuba to Mr. Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, some of whose paragraphs are transcribed below:

“We have received with surprise and concern the note that the government of Denmark is circulating to the Permanent Missions of the member states of the United Nations in New York. Of which you are surely aware, via which the party states of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to inform the executive secretary, in writing, of your wish to be associated with the so-called Copenhagen Agreement.”

“We have observed, with additional concern, that the government of Denmark communicates that the executive secretary of the Convention is to include in the report of the Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen, a list of the party states which have stated their will to commit to the quoted agreement.

“In the judgment of the Republic of Cuba, this form of acting constitutes a crude and reprehensible violation of what was decided in Copenhagen, where the party states, faced with an evident lack of consensus, confined themselves to taking note of the existence of the said document.

“Nothing that was agreed in COP15 authorizes the government of Denmark to adopt this action and, far less, the executive secretary to include a list of party states in the final report, for which he has no mandate.

“I must inform you that the government of the Republic of Cuba most firmly rejects this new attempt to indirectly legitimate a spurious document and to reiterate to you that this way of acting compromises the result of future negotiations, sets a dangerous precedent for the Convention’s work and, in particular, is injurious to the spirit of goodwill in which delegations must continue the negotiation process next year.”

Many know, especially the social movements and better informed people in humanitarian, cultural and scientific movements, that the document promoted by the United States constitutes a regression of the positions achieved by those who are making efforts to avert a colossal disaster for our species. There is no point in repeating here facts and figures that are mathematically demonstrated. The data is confirmed on internet web pages and are within the reach of a growing number of people who are interested in the issue.

The theory defending adherence to the document is feeble and implies a setback. The deceptive idea that the rich countries will contribute the miserable sum of US\$30 billion over three years to the poor countries in order to offset the costs implied by confronting climate change, costs which could rise to \$100 billion by 2020, which in the context of this exceedingly grave problem, is like waiting for the Greek calends. Specialists know that those figures are ridiculous and unacceptable given the volume of investments required. The origin of such sums is vague and confused, in a way that they do not commit anybody.

What is the value of one dollar? What is the significance of \$30 billion? We all know that, from Bretton Woods in 1944 to Nixon's presidential order in 1971 – issued in order to offload the cost of the genocidal war on Vietnam onto the world economy – that the value of one dollar, measured in gold, has gradually been reduced to the point of today, when it is approximately 32 times less than then; \$30 billion thus signifies less than one billion, and one billion divided by 32 is equivalent to \$3.125 million, which would not even stretch to building one middle-capacity oil refinery at the present time.

If, at some point, the industrialized countries were to meet their promise to contribute 0.7% of their GDP to the developing countries – something that, barring a few exceptions, they never have – the figure would be in excess of \$250 billion every year.

The US government spent \$800 billion on saving the banks. How much would it be prepared to pay to save the nine billion people who will inhabit the planet in 2050, if large-scale drought and sea flooding provoked by the melting of glaciers and great masses of frozen water from Greenland and Antarctica?

### **Divide and rule**

Let us not deceive ourselves. What the United States has attempted with its manoeuvres in Copenhagen is to divide the Third World, to separate more than 150 underdeveloped countries from China, India, Brazil, South Africa and others with which we must fight united to defend – in Bonn, Mexico or any other international conference, along with the social, scientific and humanitarian organizations – genuine agreements that will benefit all countries and preserve humanity from a disaster that could lead to the extinction of our species.

The world is in possession of constantly more information, but politicians have constantly less time for thinking.

The rich nations and their leaders, including the US Congress, would seem to be arguing which will be the last to disappear.

When Obama has completed the 28 parties with which he proposed to celebrate this Christmas, if Epiphany is included among them, perhaps Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar will advise him on what he should do.

Apologies for the length. I did not want to divide this Reflection in two. I ask my patient readers to forgive me.

*(From CubaDebate. Translated by Granma International, slightly amended by Socialist Voice.)*



Socialist Voice #395, January 10, 2010

## **Australia: DSP Merges With Socialist Alliance**

### **Introduction**

*On January 2, the Australian Democratic Socialist Perspective voted to dissolve itself into the Socialist Alliance. Peter Boyle, former national secretary of the DSP, announced the decision that day in the following speech to the opening rally of the seventh national conference of the Socialist Alliance in Sydney.*

Comrades,

My job tonight is to make the unusual – if not unexpected – announcement that the Democratic Socialist Perspective (DSP) decided today at its 24th congress to effectively dissolve into the Socialist Alliance and to transfer all that it has built up, over some four decades of its existence, to the Socialist Alliance.

Sadly, it is an unusual and rare thing for socialist groups, like the DSP, to break from the idea that they are the “true” party of socialism, with the sole correct political program, and seriously embrace left unity.

I say this not to boast but more by way of an apology and excuse for the DSP taking so long to take this step. After all, the Socialist Alliance was launched in 2001 and now it is 2010! I want to thank Comrades Bea Bleile, Dave Kerin, Sam Watson, Pat Eatock, and our many other partners in the Socialist Alliance for their patience and encouragement.

We may have taken a long time to take this step, but at least we can say that when the decision was taken by the DSP today, it had overwhelming support from the DSP members. And this support was also so enthusiastic that we can anticipate that this enthusiasm will be felt in the seventh national conference of the Socialist Alliance over the next three days.

### **Energy**

There's a lot of energy unleashed by this historic decision of the DSP – energy that will give the Socialist Alliance a big boost in the year ahead.

This was the right thing for the DSP to do.

The Socialist Alliance presents an historic opening for the left in Australia because it is an opportunity to unite in a new socialist party socialists from different political traditions, some from pre-existing socialist groups and others who are not members of those groups. And, among those proud members of the Socialist Alliance are some important leaders of the working class and other oppressed groups: people like Comrade Craig Johnston, who went to jail for fighting for workers' rights; and veteran Indigenous activists like Comrade Sam Watson and Pat Eatock ...

Indeed, in the Socialist Alliance today, thanks to our Indigenous comrades, we have an historic opportunity to restore the powerful collaboration between the socialist and the Aboriginal movement, a collaboration that made its mark on the history of Australia, through epic struggles

like the Pilbara Aboriginal stock workers strike in the 1940s and the Gurindji walk-offs in the 1960s.

### **Campaign to link up with working-class leaders**

If socialism is not just to be a good idea then it has to become a movement of the working class and other oppressed groups. And it flows from this that to build the socialist movement we have to wage a permanent campaign to link up with the activists and leaders of the working class and oppressed groups who are fighting capitalist oppression.

Of course socialist groups can and do link up with other activists in movement campaigns, in various “united fronts” around specific issues, such as the campaigns against “Work Choices” or Work Choices Lite, or for Aboriginal people’s rights. But when the activists and leaders of such movements want to join us in the broader and ongoing struggle against the capitalist system itself then what is our duty? Surely it is to unite with them in a party to wage such a struggle, a socialist party.

To build such a socialist party we must be prepared to look for agreement before disagreement. That’s just commonsense. And if we find – as we have in the Socialist Alliance – that we have 80-90% political agreement, then, it is a “no-brainer”: we need to be in a common political party!

But what about those outstanding differences among socialists? What about the 10% (or perhaps even less) that we don’t agree on? Surely, the sensible thing is to not let this stand in the way of us working in a common party for real change. Surely, we have a better chance of resolving the differences that need to be resolved after we have gone through a period of collective struggle to advance what we agree on. Surely, in the process of that struggle we’ll draw some lessons collectively that will deepen our political unity.

Blind Freddy can see that there is still a lot of work ahead of us before we unite the notoriously fractious left. If you roll up to any protest action in any major city, you will still be confronted with a smorgasbord of socialist groups, each harbouring the illusion that it is the true party of socialism with the correct socialist political program. What a sad sight!

### **DSP decision to merge**

However, we’ve made a start in uniting more of the left in the Socialist Alliance. And today, another significant step towards unifying the left has been made with the decision of the DSP to merge into the Socialist Alliance.

In the wake of this decision, we can anticipate that more more people will join the Socialist Alliance or step up their commitment to the project. As Comrade Dave Kerin said tonight, the DSP’s decision opens the way for others like him to take a further step in commitment to the Socialist Alliance.

Earlier today, the members of the DSP ended a stage in our political organisation and embarked on a new stage. This was both a break from our past as well as a change that grew out of our collective political experience. We said good bye to a party to which we have devoted a tremendous amount of loyalty, energy, sacrifice and indeed the life-long commitment of many

comrades over many years. However, we are not mourning this end. Rather we are celebrating. We are celebrating our transfer of that same commitment and energy to the Socialist Alliance.

In his greetings to the DSP congress, Comrade Abelardo Curbelo Padron, the ambassador of revolutionary Cuba to Australia, summed up the broad political situation today in one poetic sentence: “Today the capitalists cannot sleep and they cannot dream ...” But we, he added, have a dream of a radically different world.

We embrace that profound reality. We have a dream of a radically different world, a world based on solidarity and sustainability. And at this seventh national conference of the Socialist Alliance, we have greater means to plan and organise the struggle to advance the transformation of that dream into a reality.

*Long live the Socialist Alliance!*  
*Long live left unity!*  
*Long live the power of the people!*

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### **Socialist Voice Greetings to Socialist Alliance convention**

Dear Comrades of Socialist Alliance,

On behalf of Socialist Voice and our network of contributing editors and collaborators, we send to you our warmest greetings and heartiest wishes for a successful 7th convention.

It is an inspiration for us to see your successes in cohering the broadest possible socialist unity in Australia. We are doubly inspired with your efforts to work hand in hand with fighters for social justice throughout the world, especially those victimized by Australia’s imperialist rulers.

The recent climate summit in Copenhagen served as a stark reminder of the urgency of the worldwide struggle for socialism. Capitalism is bringing the world to ruin. Nothing less than the survival of the human race and the biosphere from which all life sustenance is drawn is at stake in the struggle to replace this system with a new economic order based on principles of equality and social justice.

We stand with you in the struggle for socialism in the 21st century!

Comradely regards,

John Riddell, Ian Angus, Roger Annis  
Socialist Voice (Canada)

Socialist Voice #396, January 10, 2010

## **Socialists and China: An Exchange**

### **A LeftViews Exchange**

*LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and John Riddell's Socialist Voice article on China's 'Great Leap Forward' has prompted a discussion on how socialists should view and respond to China. The following are comments by Walter Lippmann, who maintains the CubaNews mailing list, and Herman Rosenfeld of Socialist Project, with responses by John Riddell.*

### **Walter Lippmann**

#### **A comment on "50 Years After"**

All this doom-and-gloom commentary doesn't help to explain how China, despite all of the terrible things John Riddell says the Chinese leadership has been and continues to do, has become the world economic powerhouse that it has.

Guided by the conception that China's leadership has deliberately done the wrong thing, at least according to the Canadian John Riddell, it would be hard to explain the progress mixed with the problems which has taken place in the People's Republic. As a minimum, China's "failure", as perceived by John Riddell in 2009, can be explained simply by the PRC's failure to do what John Riddell thinks they should have done instead of what they did do, long decades after the Chinese fact.

China today is one of the world's workshops. It's been so successful that the United States of America is in deep economic debt to China, which is holding large amounts of US-government financial obligations. This may be one of the reasons why Washington no longer tries to blockade China as it did for the first quarter century after the triumph of the Chinese Revolution in 1949.

Though some foreign investors have made lots of money from their Chinese investments, and social differentiation in the People's Republic is substantial, it is ALSO true the China is an international economic giant. These facts are at odds with one another from a socialist perspective, but are they entirely contradictory? Isn't it possible that both are true at the same time? It's obvious that it is.

Just why some Canadian radicals, like some in the United States and Australia as well, seem so bound and determined to revile China, rather than focusing primarily on how to understand what has happened and why, is certainly beyond my understanding.

Instead of trying to force the Chinese square peg into the round hole of the experience in the early years of the Soviet Union, it would seem better to try to look at China through the prism of its own history, culture, traditions and experiences. The idea of historical models, against which

each socialist experience is to be judged – and usually found wanting – should be jettisoned, in my opinion.

Fidel Castro has a completely different view of developments in China. A selection of his commentaries on China over the past ten years can be found here: [Fidel Castro on the Chinese Revolution](#).

**John Riddell:  
Reply to Walter Lippmann**

Walter Lippmann is right to stress the remarkable successes of China's development into "an international economic giant." He also provides a link to useful statements by Fidel Castro on the Chinese revolution.

But what is his quarrel with my article, "50 Years After: The Tragedy of China's Great Leap Forward"? Walter's comment makes no reference to my topic and no specific reference to the article. Yet he dismisses the article as "gloom and doom commentary."

Did he read the article's opening paragraphs? They state:

"On October 1, the People's Republic of China will mark the 60th anniversary of its foundation. This will be an occasion to celebrate one of the most influential victories of popular struggle in our era.

"This great uprising forged a united and independent Chinese state, freed the country from foreign domination and capitalist rule, ended landlordism, provided broad access to education and health care, and set in motion popular energies that modernized and industrialized its economy. The revolutionary triumph of 1949 laid the foundation for China's present dynamism and influence, as well as providing an enormous impetus to anti-colonial revolution worldwide."

Does Walter disagree with this assessment?

Walter refers us to Fidel Castro's comments on China. But nowhere does Fidel take up the 'Great Leap' experience. This is in fact unnecessary: one need only compare the heavy-handed methods of 'Great Leap', and its disastrous results, with the care and wisdom of Cuban policy toward farmers over fifty years of revolutionary history.

Walter seems to wonder why a socialist today – a 'Canadian', no less – would wish to analyze events that took place so far away and so long ago.

This question is answered in the sentence of my article immediately following the quote given above. It asks why "the socialist movement and ideology that headed the revolution, identified with Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, disappeared from China soon after his death in 1976."

The revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party began with sweeping authority and prestige in all sectors of society – more extensive than in any other anti-capitalist revolution of its

century. Today the Communist Party still rules, and the flame of anti-imperialism is strong in the consciousness of Chinese working people. But there is no socialist movement in China. No sector of the world's oppressed and exploited look to today's China for political guidance and inspiration. Despite its immense wealth and prestige, China does not carry out international solidarity work on the scale even of small, poor, and embattled Cuba.

My article aimed to take a small step toward an explanation, by describing the circumstances in which the close alliance of the Chinese Communist Party with the peasantry was shattered.

This is an issue worth debating.

**Herman Rosenfeld**

**Email to John Riddell**

Your response is quite correct and quite measured, but it doesn't openly articulate (although it alludes to) a critical point that folks like Lippmann conveniently leave out: China no longer attempts to build a society based on the solidaristic principles and collective capacities of working people – in other words, socialism. It looks to build a modern economic defined and motivated by the private accumulation of capital in all of its most fetishistic elements.

Just because it is ruled by a single-party dictatorship that relies on its revolutionary roots and the vestiges of an earlier socialist tradition doesn't make it socialist. There are reasons that working people around the world don't look to China as a model of a different society (but possibly as a model of raw development, where a strong state can help shape that development).

**John Riddell**

**Email to Herman Rosenfeld**

You put it very well. You capture the essence of the problem in China.

But I think there is more to it than that:

- The rise of Chinese capitalism builds on the victory of the Chinese revolution against feudalism and imperialist domination. Chinese economic vigour testifies that this revolution is still strong. There is plenty of evidence that it lives in the consciousness of the Chinese people.
- China also benefits from the strength of the state as an economic player, especially with respect to the banks. This has been shown in China's ability to sail through two major capitalist financial collapses, one regional (a decade ago) and the other worldwide. I hesitate to ascribe socialist significance to the state sector; it seems more to be state capitalist. But let's recall what Lenin said about the progressive significance of state capitalism, under certain circumstances. The circumstance in China is that the strong state sector and state economic dirigism greatly strengthen China's defenses against its imperialist rivals.

- China is often called imperialist, but I don't see the evidence. Certainly Chinese international economic policy is motivated mainly by desire for gain and only very rarely by considerations of solidarity. But the Chinese state does not appear to need at present to conquer spheres of influence and assert its economic and political domination over client states and semi-colonies. China has been helpful to countries like Cuba under U.S. attack. China leans toward defending the sovereignty of poor countries, much to the annoyance of the U.S.
- My feeling is that the need to defend China against imperialist incursions is still posed, and needs to be taken into account in approaching questions like Tibetan self-determination.

Socialist Voice #397, January 13, 2010

## **Vancouver Winter Olympics: A Festival of Corporate Greed**

by **Roger Annis**

(Vancouver, British Columbia) On February 12, the corporate sporting behemoth known as the 21st Winter Olympic Games will open to great fanfare here. In a time of economic hardship and government cuts to social programs across Canada, huge sums of public money have been spent to stage this *uber* spectacle.

Billions of dollars have been spent constructing venues, a new convention center and airport terminal; widening and paving untold kilometers of roads and highways; building a hugely expensive rapid transit line connecting the city's airport to its downtown; and erecting new hotels to serve the influx of corporate sponsors and spectators.

The hotel, travel, restaurant and real estate industries hope to make a killing off the influx of out-of-town spectators and partygoers. Construction companies have already earned hundreds of millions of dollars during the years of preparation furiously pouring concrete and asphalt. The official line says there will also be lots of long-term tourism dollars to be made, though this has not happened in other host cities.

Some of the world's largest corporations are Games sponsors, including Coca-Cola, VISA, General Electric, Samsung, and MacDonal'd's. Canadian sponsors include the Royal Bank, Petro Canada, Hudson's Bay Company and Bell. The scale of their participation during the two weeks of competition is such that they have booked entire hotels and restaurants to cater to their executives, invited guests, and assorted hangers-on.

### **Militarization and clampdown on democratic rights**

When Vancouver first submitted a bid for the Winter Olympics, the budget for "security" was said to be \$175 million. The final cost will exceed \$1 billion. An army of Canadian military, federal police agencies and municipal police, about 10,000 altogether, will police the city, complemented by some 5,000 security guards.

A vast network of surveillance cameras of public spaces has been installed, and barbed wire fences and other barriers are going up all over the region to keep protesters and the non-ticket holding public away from Games venues. Police have stepped up harassment and intimidation of anti-Olympics organizers across Canada, in some cases visiting homes and workplaces to interrogate not only Games' critics but also their acquaintances.

The rationale for the overwhelming display of military and police power is the same as that used to justify the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine-that behind every corner lurks a potential "terrorist threat" and the only way to combat that threat is to wage war. Police have warned they will arrest anyone who attempts to stage protests of the Games near venues or along key transportation routes.



The Vancouver police have acquired new weapons to deal with critics, including the Long Range Acoustical Device, a loudspeaker system first deployed against civilians in Pittsburgh last year during the G20 meeting of world political leaders. It emits a powerful sonic wave to disperse crowds. Transit police, meanwhile, will for the first time introduce dogs into the transit system to randomly sniff passengers and their belongings.

Two special laws have been adopted by the provincial government that, in cooperation with Vancouver's city council, will "clean up" the city and curtail visible expressions of opposition to the Games.

The *Assistance to Shelter Act* (termed the "Olympics Kidnapping Act" by housing rights advocates), permits police to remove the homeless or other "undesirables" from streets surrounding Olympic venues and dump them at housing shelters or in other municipalities.

*Bill 13* regulates public signage. It is designed to protect the Olympic trademark and those of Games sponsors, but critics say it will also be used to censor public expressions of opposition to the Games. At the University of British Columbia, for example, students in residence have been threatened with eviction if they post anti-Olympic signs in their windows. In mid-December, Vancouver city officials ordered the removal of a mural painted on the outside wall of an art gallery in downtown Vancouver-four sad faces and one happy face drawn inside the Olympics rings.

Police have refused to say whether police infiltrators will join protests and promote violence. The issue is not a small one. At a protest of world leaders in Montebello, Quebec, near Ottawa, in 2007, infiltrators from the Quebec provincial police urged protesters to throw rocks and incited other forms of violence.

One police infiltration has already come to light. When the Olympic torch arrived in Victoria, BC on October 30 to commence its cross-Canada relay spectacle, hundreds of people staged a protest drawing attention to the contrast between lavish public spending on the Games and miserly funding of social programs. Protestors blocked the relay for a time using civil disobedience tactics. Unknown persons used marbles to disrupt and potentially injure mounted police and their horses being used for crowd control, an action that protest organizers say did not come from their ranks.

One month later in Vancouver, the chief of Victoria police, James Graham, said his force had infiltrated the protest. He told an amused international security conference, "You knew that the protesters weren't that organized when on the ferry on the way over (from Vancouver) they rented a bus ...and there was a cop driving the bus."

Garth Mullins, an organizer with the Olympic Resistance Network, told a public meeting in Vancouver in late November, "If there is violence at the Olympics, it's going to be started by the police." Seated as a panelist at the meeting was Bud Mercer, the head of the Vancouver 2010 Integrated Security Unit.

### **Border controls**

Stiffer controls at the nearby U.S.-Canada border are restricting the movements of possible Games critics. On November 25, respected U.S. journalist Amy Goodman, host of the daily *Democracy Now!* broadcast, was detained for several hours by Canadian border officials while on her way to a speaking engagement in Vancouver. Although the Olympics was not the subject of her talk, officials were worried it might be. They grilled her about it for several hours. Eventually, she was allowed to continue her travel, but was ordered to leave the country within 48 hours.

On December 10, Marla Renn, an organizer with the Olympic Resistance Network in Vancouver and a chairperson of the Stopwar.ca coalition, was refused entry into the United States while on her way to Olympics-related speaking engagements in Portland, Oregon. She was searched, photographed, fingerprinted and grilled for six hours about her political views and her contacts in the United States. Her cell phone was taken and accessed, and her books and speaking notes were read and copied.

After that interrogation, she was delivered to Canadian authorities who subjected her to their own interrogation for several more hours. U.S. authorities ordered her not to return to the United States under threat of detention.

In an account of her treatment published in the weekly *Georgia Straight*, Renn wrote:

“My refused entry to the U.S., accompanied by interrogation, intimidation, and harassment by officials on both sides of the border, demonstrated once again how \$1 billion in Olympic security is designed to stifle dissent, even the public-speaking variety, and not to ensure public safety as is officially claimed.”

Concern about the conduct of the Olympics security force is especially warranted because of the epidemic of police violence sweeping Canada in recent years. Tasers have caused dozens of deaths at police hands, including the RCMP killing of Robert Dziekanski at the Vancouver airport in October 2007 that was captured on amateur video and broadcast around the world.

Deaths by police gunshot and common assault by police are on the rise. In British Columbia alone there were 960 formal complaints of police misconduct in 2009.

Meanwhile, the weak and ineffective RCMP Public Complaints Commission was effectively shut down by the federal government on December 31 when the four-year term of chair Paul Kennedy ended. His appointment was not renewed nor has a replacement been named. Kennedy recently issued a report highly critical of the RCMP's conduct in the killing of Dziekanski.

### **War Games**

Olympic games have always been a showcase for the militarism of host countries. The Canadian Armed Forces, now engaged in a ruthless and predatory war in Afghanistan, is prominently featured in the preparations of these games. Its vehicles routinely accompany the Olympic Torch Relay as it winds its way across Canada. Soldiers will be on the streets of Vancouver throughout the competition. Helicopters and aircraft fighters have been practicing “security” missions in the

skies above the city for months. It's rumoured that the opening ceremonies will pay tribute to Canada's war in Afghanistan.

By tradition, host countries of Olympic games issue calls for cessation of military hostilities and promotion of the "ideals of peace" for the duration of the event. A resolution to this effect was introduced by Canada to the United Nations and approved on October 19 – but the government of Canada has made no commitment to observe a truce in Afghanistan in February.

### **Social housing a victim of the Games**

Vancouver's controversial bid for the Games was launched in 1999 by a provincial NDP government and a federal Liberal Party government. To sell the bid to a wary population, the Games were dressed up as a socially responsible event that would improve the city's sporting facilities, build new modes of public transit, employ "green" construction techniques, and above all expand the stock of social housing.

Metropolitan Vancouver has a chronic housing crisis that sees thousands of people living without a roof over their head and thousands more living in precarious or squalid conditions. The city has the highest cost of housing and shelter in Canada. The first and foremost concern about these Games was always that poor people living in rooming houses would be evicted by landlords intent on sprucing up their facilities and renting them to Games visitors at inflated prices. A related concern was the expenditure of vast sums of public funds on a sporting event instead of social needs.

A pall of uncertainty hung over the bid even after it was awarded in the summer of 2003. The uncertainty was only lifted after deft maneuvering by municipal politicians in the months that followed. Vancouver mayor Larry Campbell (since appointed to the federal Senate) blocked with two right wing counsellors of the conservative NPA party and three counsellors of the progressive COPE party to hold a non-binding plebiscite on the Games. The yes side won 64 percent – but only 46 percent of eligible voters took part and voting was restricted to the City of Vancouver, ignoring the wider metropolitan region, let alone the province.

The yes side enjoyed the endorsement of the opposition New Democratic Party and most of its trade union affiliates. Proponents of the Games within the labour and social rights movements argued that support could "leverage" promises from the provincial and federal governments for increased social spending. Yet once the plebiscite was in the bag, the vague promises by governments to build housing for Vancouver's poor and homeless population were tossed aside.

The last in a string of abandoned housing promises was the decision in early 2009 by a new city administration (composed in its majority of a right-wing split from COPE) to cancel the social housing content of the Athletes' Village, now deemed too expensive. The Village, located in downtown Vancouver, will instead be converted to luxury condominiums after the Games. (A remnant of social housing in the form of subsidized rents for some units is still being debated.)

Outrageously, the Village then required a half billion financing guarantee from the City of Vancouver before it could be completed. Fortress Investment Group of New York refused to continue its financing for the project, a consequence of U.S. financial collapse.

The onset of the economic crisis in September 2008 triggered a new wave of cuts to social programs by the provincial government (see *Socialist Voice*, October 5, 2009). This is the main reason why public support to the Games in the host province has been steadily declining.

### **Public transit: Another victim of broken Olympics promises**

Another victim of broken Games promises is public transit. Most local politicians and transit experts agree that public transit priorities are a rapid service to the northeast of the city, creation of rail service to suburbs in the Fraser River Valley, and substantial expansion of bus service. However, Olympic priorities dictated construction of a rapid transit line connecting the downtown to the airport, at a cost of \$2 billion, or \$110 million per kilometer. Vancouver's transit authority, Translink, says the Canada Line and other road and highway expansion has exhausted funds for any new transit projects. Meanwhile fares continue to rise. They have risen 40 per cent in the past eight years.

In November 2009, the chief executive officer of Translink, Thomas Prendergast, abruptly resigned after 15 months on the job. He gave no explanation for the decision, but Gordon Price, a respected transportation planner and writer, commented that Prendergast "looked at the situation, saw this wasn't going anywhere and said 'What am I doing here?'"

Price summed up the Vancouver region's transportation policy in a commentary in the November 13 *Vancouver Sun*, "We're going full speed ahead, backwards. To the world of the 1950's and 60's, when we assumed that we would be driving everywhere for everything, and went out and built it that way. Now, in most of the region, we're doing it again."

### **Protests planned**

Despite all the threats and obstacles, protests against the Olympic Games and its scandalous public funding have begun and will continue throughout.

The Olympic torch relay has met protests in many towns and cities across the country. A key theme of protest has been the deplorable conditions and ongoing violations of the rights of Canada's Indigenous population, including those living in urban areas. The Olympic Resistance Network (ORN) launched its work in Vancouver several years ago under the theme "No Olympics on Stolen Indian Land" to highlight the fact that much of the land on which the Games will take place is unceded Indigenous territory.

One torch relay protest in Nairn Center, northern Ontario blockaded the Trans Canada Highway on January 2 as the torch procession approached. Eight young people were arrested and then later released. One of them, Mark Corbiere from the Anishinabe people, stated in an ORN press release:

"VANOC [the Vancouver Olympic organizing committee] and the government of Canada can no longer whitewash Canada's brutal legacy of ongoing colonialism, nor its abysmal environmental record; these are the things Canada and VANOC really represent, and we will not let them use the Olympic spotlight to put their lies unchallenged before the global public."

A demonstration will take place in Vancouver to coincide with the opening of the Games on February 12. It is being organized by the 2010 Welcoming Committee and its sponsoring and participating organizations, including the ORN. Scores of public information and protest meetings and rallies have been held in the months leading up to the Games.

The BC Civil Liberties Association has played a leading role in drawing attention to the violations of civil rights accompanying the Games. It is organizing teams of legal observers that will observe political protests as well as other places and events that might experience police misconduct.

One event to take place on February 14 is shaping up as a confrontation with Olympics officials. It is an annual march through the streets of Vancouver to commemorate the scores of Aboriginal women who have disappeared over the past decades in Canada and are presumed to have met violent deaths. The traditional march route overlaps Olympic no-go zones. March organizers say they will not change the traditional route to meet the whims of Olympic officials.

The two week Olympic spectacle will leave in its wake a legacy of financial debt, deepening impoverishment, violations of civil and social rights, and a significant reinforcement of the tools and weapons of the national security state. What's more, five weeks before the Games' opening comes news of yet another Olympic spending boondoggle in the making—Intrawest Corporation, the owner of the Whistler ski resort where most of the Games' downhill events will take place, located 100 km north of Vancouver, is in financial default and may require hundreds of millions of dollars of emergency bailout.

Such a legacy deserves to be challenged.

- For more information on protest actions against the Olympic Games, go to the website of the Olympic Resistance Network.
- For more about the history of the Olympic Games, read *Five Ring Circus: Myths and Realities of the Olympic Games*, by Vancouver author Chris Shaw.

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Socialist Voice #398, January 17, 2010

## **Fidel: We are proud of Cuba's doctors in Haiti**

by **Fidel Castro**

(January 15, 2010) Two days ago, at almost six o'clock in the evening Cuban time and when, given its geographical location, night had already fallen in Haiti, television stations began to broadcast the news that a violent earthquake – measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale – had severely struck Port-au-Prince. The seismic phenomenon originated from a tectonic fault located in the sea just 15 kilometers from the Haitian capital, a city where 80% of the population inhabit fragile homes built of adobe and mud.

The news continued almost without interruption for hours. There was no footage, but it was confirmed that many public buildings, hospitals, schools and more solidly-constructed facilities were reported collapsed. I have read that an earthquake of the magnitude of 7.3 is equivalent to the energy released by an explosion of 400,000 tons of TNT.

Tragic descriptions were transmitted. Wounded people in the streets were crying out for medical help, surrounded by ruins under which their relatives were buried. No one, however, was able to broadcast a single image for several hours.

The news took all of us by surprise. Many of us have frequently heard about hurricanes and severe flooding in Haiti, but were not aware of the fact that this neighboring country ran the risk of a massive earthquake. It has come to light on this occasion that 200 years ago, a massive earthquake similarly affected this city, which would have been the home of just a few thousand inhabitants at that time.

At midnight, there was still no mention of an approximate figure in terms of victims. High-ranking United Nations officials and several heads of government discussed the moving events and announced that they would send emergency brigades to help. Given that MINUSTAH (United Stabilization Mission in Haiti) troops are deployed there – UN forces from various countries – some defense ministers were talking about possible casualties among their personnel.

It was only yesterday, Wednesday morning, when the sad news began to arrive of enormous human losses among the population, and even institutions such as the United Nations mentioned that some of their buildings in that country had collapsed, a word that does not say anything in itself but could mean a lot.

For hours, increasingly more traumatic news continued to arrive about the situation in this sister nation. Figures related to the number of fatal victims were discussed, which fluctuated, according to various versions, between 30,000 and 100,000. The images are devastating; it is evident that the catastrophic event has been given widespread coverage around the world, and many governments, sincerely moved by the disaster, are making efforts to cooperate according to their resources.

The tragedy has genuinely moved a significant number of people, particularly those in which that quality is innate. But perhaps very few of them have stopped to consider why Haiti is such a poor country. Why does almost 50% of its population depend on family remittances sent from abroad? Why not analyze the realities that led Haiti to its current situation and this enormous suffering as well?

The most curious aspect of this story is that no one has said a single word to recall the fact that Haiti was the first country in which 400,000 Africans, enslaved and trafficked by Europeans, rose up against 30,000 white slave masters on the sugar and coffee plantations, thus undertaking the first great social revolution in our hemisphere. Pages of insurmountable glory were written there. Napoleon's most eminent general was defeated there. Haiti is the net product of colonialism and imperialism, of more than one century of the employment of its human resources in the toughest forms of work, of military interventions and the extraction of its natural resources.

This historic oversight would not be so serious if it were not for the real fact that Haiti constitutes the disgrace of our era, in a world where the exploitation and pillage of the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants prevails.

Billions of people in Latin American, Africa and Asia are suffering similar shortages although perhaps not to such a degree as in the case of Haiti.

Situations like that of that country should not exist in any part of the planet, where tens of thousands of cities and towns abound in similar or worse conditions, by virtue of an unjust international economic and political order imposed on the world. The world population is not only threatened by natural disasters such as that of Haiti, which is a just a pallid shadow of what could take place in the planet as a result of climate change, which really was the object of ridicule, derision, and deception in Copenhagen.

It is only just to say to all the countries and institutions that have lost citizens or personnel because of the natural disaster in Haiti: we do not doubt that in this case, the greatest effort will be made to save human lives and alleviate the pain of this long-suffering people. We cannot blame them for the natural phenomenon that has taken place there, even if we do not agree with the policy adopted with Haiti.

But I have to express the opinion that it is now time to look for real and lasting solutions for that sister nation.

In the field of healthcare and other areas, Cuba – despite being a poor and blockaded country – has been cooperating with the Haitian people for many years. Around 400 doctors and healthcare experts are offering their services free of charge to the Haitian people. Our doctors are working every day in 227 of the country's 337 communes. On the other hand, at least 400 young Haitians have trained as doctors in our homeland. They will now work with the reinforcement brigade which traveled there yesterday to save lives in this critical situation. Thus, without any special effort being made, up to 1,000 doctors and healthcare experts can be mobilized, almost all of

whom are already there willing to cooperate with any other state that wishes to save the lives of the Haitian people and rehabilitate the injured.

Another significant number of young Haitians are currently studying medicine in Cuba.

We are also cooperating with the Haitian people in other areas within our reach. However, there can be no other form of cooperation worthy of being described as such than fighting in the field of ideas and political action in order to put an end to the limitless tragedy suffered by a large number of nations such as Haiti.

The head of our medical brigade reported: “The situation is difficult, but we have already started saving lives.” He made that statement in a succinct message hours after his arrival yesterday in Port-au-Prince with additional medical reinforcements.

Later that night, he reported that Cuban doctors and ELAM’s Haitian graduates were being deployed throughout the country. They had already seen more than 1,000 patients in Port-au-Prince, immediately establishing and putting into operation a hospital that had not collapsed and using field hospitals where necessary. They were preparing to swiftly set up other centers for emergency care.

We feel a wholesome pride for the cooperation that, in these tragic instances, Cuba doctors and young Haitian doctors who trained in Cuba are offering our brothers and sisters in Haiti!

(From *Granma International*)



Socialist Voice #399, January 17, 2010

## **Québec Solidaire members defend party's position on secularism and women's rights**

**LeftViews articles by Benoit Renaud and Bernard Rioux**

**Translated and introduced by Richard Fidler**

*The January 6 edition of the Montréal daily Le Devoir featured a hard-hitting op-ed defense of Québec Solidaire's position on separation of church and state and its opposition to the imposition of Islamophobic dress codes for civil servants.*

*The left-wing party's adoption of a "model of secularism" at its November convention, which parallels a similar position taken by the Quebec Women's Federation (FFQ), has been harshly criticized in Quebec right-wing and nationalist circles campaigning against Muslims and other ethnic minorities who wear "ostentatious symbols" of their faith such as the Muslim hijab or headscarf.*

*The first article that we reproduce below is by Benoit Renaud, the general secretary of Québec Solidaire, who also signs himself as an "antiwar, global solidarity and anti-racist activist." It responds to an article likewise featured in Le Devoir, on December 30, by Michèle Sirois, who described herself as a "specialist in sociology of religions" and a "founding member of Québec Solidaire." Titled, in translation, "Secularism – Québec Solidaire goes astray," Sirois' article argued that "our governments are not protecting with sufficient firmness two founding values of Quebec society: state neutrality and the predominance of equality between men and women over religious or cultural particularisms."*

*She attacked QS for its "unreasonable" accommodation of religious minorities, which she maintained was contrary to its claim to be a feminist party of the left.[1] An earlier version of her article entitled, in translation, "Why I am leaving Québec Solidaire," was published with laudatory support in Presse-toi à gauche, an on-line journal edited by members of Gauche socialiste, a collective within QS and the Quebec section of the Fourth International.*

*Renaud's article has proved highly controversial since its publication. In Le Devoir alone, it is by far the most "commented on" article in recent weeks if not longer, registering more than 200 comments, most of them hostile to the position adopted by Québec Solidaire. Much of the critics' language is quite unrestrained. To cite a modest example, Marie-Michelle Poisson, president of the Mouvement laïque québécois, a group that has long been waging verbal warfare on ethnic minorities displaying signs of their religious beliefs, describes Renaud's article as "a catastrophe." She signed an open letter to Québec Solidaire leaders Françoise David and Amir Khadir identifying the MLQ with the position expressed by Michèle Sirois and urging them to dissociate the party from Renaud's article.*

*So far, neither David nor Khadir, who are the designated spokespersons for the party, has responded or said anything publicly about the article or in response to these attacks. In fact, there is no mention of the controversy on the QS web site. Some QS members have published comments in Le Devoir dissociating themselves from the party position, while those expressing support are a tiny minority of the commentators.*

*In a “necessary clarification” Renaud posted in Le Devoir January 8 as a comment on his article, he explained that he was not “speaking on behalf of Québec Solidaire,” that that was the responsibility of Khadir and David “who were not consulted on the content of this article.” Renaud also explained that he “unreservedly supports the position of the Quebec Women’s Federation on the Muslim headscarf: neither obligation nor prohibition”, adding that “The antidote to fundamentalism is dialogue, and if there is to be dialogue it is necessary to avoid excluding or stigmatizing certain beliefs.”*

*A notable feature of this controversy – the first major test of Québec Solidaire’s commitment to a principled position on which there are serious divisions in the Quebec left and nationalist movements – is that it is the two major far-left collectives in QS that have been most prominent in defending the party and its political line. Benoit Renaud, in addition to being Québec Solidaire’s general secretary, is a member of the party’s Socialisme International collective.*

*In the January 12 edition of Presse-toi à gauche, a leader of the Gauche socialiste collective, which until then had stood aside from the controversy, came out strongly in support of the adopted QS position on secularism. The second article reproduced below is a translation of Bernard Rioux’s contribution, which he also published in Le Devoir among the comments on Renaud’s article.*

*In the following articles the word laïcité (literally, secularity) is translated as secularism, the English term more commonly used now in Canada. Historically, laïcité referred to the concept of equal treatment of all religions – as in Muslim Spain of medieval times, where Islam, Judaism and Christianity coexisted – although more recently it has come to mean separation of church (or religion) and state. This is the sense in which the term is understood in Quebec today.*

*[1] Ironically, the Le Devoir version of Sirois’ article was accompanied by a photo of a Muslim woman clad in a niqab (showing only her eyes) apparently staffing a government telephone hotline – in other words not visible to her interlocutors. This, to illustrate an article protesting “ostentatious” symbols of religious belief by government agents!*

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## **THE WEARING OF RELIGIOUS INSIGNIA: QUÉBEC SOLIDAIRE DARES TO GO AGAINST THE TIDE**

**by Benoit Renaud**

(Le Devoir, January 6, 2010) In her December 30 *Le Devoir* article, Ms. Michèle Sirois purports to lecture Québec Solidaire on method, stating that the position adopted at its November

convention concerning religious insignia is lacking in political analysis. But the orientation presented in her article – itself riddled with fallacious arguments, sophisms and problems of method – would lead the left into a totally unacceptable accommodation with the everyday racism that is currently directed against Québécois of Arab origin or Muslim religion. It would also weaken the women’s movement and the antiwar and global solidarity movement by giving in to an ideological offensive that serves the interests of the strongest.

Ms. Sirois assigns great importance to the fact that “the majority of Québécois” think certain accommodations that have been granted recently are “unreasonable.” This is a classic sophism. Using this type of criterion, no political action would be possible other than the basest opportunism. Less than 4 percent of the electorate voted for Québec Solidaire in 2007 and 2008. Should we abandon our left-wing political project because the majority continues to vote for the three right-wing parties?

She accuses QS of “softness” on this issue. On the contrary, I think the QS convention showed great political courage and dared to go against the tide of the pervading xenophobia of which the fanatics of secularism constitute the ‘progressive’ branch.

### **Avoid “wall to wall” thinking**

For Québec Solidaire, human rights must be taken as a whole, and all are important. You cannot simply deny a group of persons their freedom of speech and religion, for example by prohibiting the wearing of “all” religious symbols by “all” individuals working directly or indirectly for the Quebec government, in the name of the principle of laïcité [roughly, secularism].

What is the interest in prohibiting a civil servant who has no contact with the public the right to wear a Jewish *kippa* [skull cap] at work? For what reason would we prohibit a woman teaching mathematics in adult education from wearing a headscarf in the classroom? The position adopted by the QS convention establishes a list of criteria that could be used to avoid wall-to-wall solutions and aim to balance the right of government employees to express their religious beliefs with the right of the public and other government employees to interact in a setting that is neutral in terms of beliefs. This is not “softness” but flexibility, an essential quality when the task is to conciliate potentially divergent rights and freedoms.

Ms. Sirois cites as her first argument the *droit de réserve* [duty of discretion] that applies to political convictions. In the first place, we must be very careful not to push too far the duty of discretion as it applies to politics, or else half a million persons could find themselves prohibited from being politically active in Quebec because their paycheque comes from the government’s budget. Secondly, politics should not be confused with religion. No political conviction requires that its supporters wear a symbol or particular clothing. Prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols by invoking a comparison with politics is therefore an obvious error in method.

More fundamentally, all political currents have some specific and relatively coherent things to say about the government’s orientations. That is the rationale for the duty of discretion: all civil servants must accommodate themselves to the established government whether they voted for or

against it. Conversely, persons belonging to the same religious denomination may differ radically in their political beliefs. In Iran today there are imams on both sides of the fierce struggle between the government and the opposition. In Latin America, there are fervent Catholics on both the far left and the far right.

### **Women's rights**

Ms. Sirois also invites us to “go beyond the diversity of the reasons conveyed in the discourse of individuals to understand the real reasons for their conduct.” This logic should also apply to the supporters of a “*charte de la laïcité*,” a charter of secularism, and the repeated calls to prohibit the wearing of the Muslim headscarf in the Western countries. This debate is in fact unfolding in a context – that of an expanding number of imperialist wars and neocolonial occupations in the Muslim world, from Palestine to Afghanistan.

It is also unfolding at a time when immigration from Muslim-majority countries is an economic necessity for western countries faced with declining demographics. And it is unfolding while the deepening economic crisis is leading to an offensive against the rights of women and the feminist movement.

### **Ideological offensive**

Islamophobic discourse, whether of the right or the left, helps to justify imperialism and colonialism by presenting Muslims as barbarians incapable of governing themselves, incapable of modernity and critical thinking, etc. Muslim women are presented as victims needing an army of Christian men and whites to protect them against their husbands, sons and fathers. They cannot think for themselves, according to some analyses of the wearing of the Islamic scarf such as that of Ms. Sirois.

Secondly, identifying Muslim immigrants as a threat helps to justify discrimination against this population, which allows the authorities to deny it fundamental rights and thus to make it a category of second-class citizens, easily exploitable. The European far right, which has always fought immigration in general, can now assume an air of respectability by targeting the Muslim minority in the name of “secularism” and “values,” the most recent example of this strategy being the Swiss referendum on the minarets. One need only look at the posters used in that campaign to understand that Islamophobia is a major ideological problem.

Finally, and this is the most pernicious aspect of this ideological offensive, identifying Islam and immigrants as the main threat to equality between men and women reinforces the notion that sexist oppression is something that has been overcome in our fine western societies. There is nothing easier than to attack the sexism of “the others.” Ms. Sirois even goes so far as to characterize equality of the sexes as a “founding value” of Quebec! The most minimal study of history should teach us that it is instead Catholic sexism that was a “founding” value against which the feminist movement had to wage a bitter fight.

### **Common struggle**

To respond to the insecurity of identity and the economic insecurities evoked by Ms. Sirois, the left must do something other than repeat in “progressive” language the mantras against accommodation and against minorities. The only solution to the search for scapegoats is the determination of the real sources of economic and cultural dangers weighing on us. It is the comeback of English in the workplace, resulting in large part from our political subordination to the federal authorities, that constitutes the major threat to French and our cultural identity, not the massively Francophone immigration originating from North Africa.

The rational response, therefore, is, as QS proposes, to strengthen forthwith the provisions of Law 101 [the Charter of the French Language] governing the language of work and to make Quebec a country as soon as possible. The main threat to our economic security is not immigration but the present structure of capitalism, which exerts a constant pressure toward the casualization of labour and privatization of public services. We must therefore respond by defending the rights of workers and affirming the responsibility of the government for the protection of these rights and provision of the services that we all require. In short, instead of dividing employees in the public sector with a sterile debate over a charter of secularism, it is necessary to unite them in a common struggle against budget cutbacks and user fees.

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### **SECULARISM: PRODUCTIVE DEBATES REQUIRE LISTENING, EXCHANGE AND THE AVOIDANCE OF ABUSE!**

**by Bernard Rioux**

*[Introductory note by Presse-toi à gauche] Active in the student and international solidarity movements (Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, etc.) during the 1970s, Bernard Rioux has fought for many years in the teachers' unions, at the local level in both the CSN and the CEQ. A socialist activist since the early 1970s, he has been involved in the process of unifying the political left. He participated in the founding of the Parti de la démocratie socialiste and later the Union des Forces progressistes. He is a member of Québec Solidaire and its policy commission, and participates in the Gauche socialiste collective, where he has long been in charge of its web site, [www.lagauche.com](http://www.lagauche.com). He is a founding member of Presse-toi à gauche.*

(Presse-toi à gauche, January 12, 2010) The 165 contributions (to date) in reply to Benoit Renaud's article entitled, “The wearing of religious insignia: Québec Solidaire dares to go against the tide,” show how complex the debate on secularism is. But they also reveal the emotional level such a debate can generate. In far too many cases the opinions expressed are accompanied by confrontation, blanket denunciations, and mockery.

This complexity is revealed in the fact that this debate manifests convergences of social forces which, on other questions, are normally lined up in opposite camps. To put it clearly, the debate divides progressive and left forces, forces that must be united if they are to fight together against

their common enemy. It would be disastrous to try to sweep this debate under the carpet on the pretext that there are more urgent struggles. What is repressed would quickly reappear, you can be sure. Behind the passion that informs and undermines this debate there are some convergences in the left that should be spelled out if we are to establish clearly the actual scope of the issues.

Given all the allegations being peddled about Québec Solidaire's position on secularism, and all the positions being attributed to it, it is necessary, first of all, to return to the facts, to recall what was adopted.

So what did Québec Solidaire adopt concerning secularism?

In the recent debates on Québec Solidaire's positions concerning secularism, a lot of positions and intentions were ascribed to QS. Let us recall here the positions actually adopted at its recent convention.

“Decision 1: We want to live in a secular Quebec that sanctions the separation of religious institutions and the state. Accordingly, Québec Solidaire proposes a model of secularism that combines the neutrality of public institutions in terms of belief (including skepticism and non-belief) with the freedom of individuals to express their own convictions in a context that favours exchange and dialogue. The process of secularizing Quebec's institutions is still not ended. The further advance of this process depends on both a clear state policy and a willingness by the society as a whole to establish, without concessions and definitively, the neutrality of the state in terms of religion. Because the state is secular, religious symbols should not be allowed in public institutions.”

“Decision 2: It is the state that is secular, not individuals. The wearing of religious symbols is allowed for the users of services provided by the state. Agents of the state may wear them provided they are not used as instruments of proselytism and the wearing of them does not in itself breach their *droit de réserve* [duty of discretion]. The wearing of religious symbols may also be restricted should they impede the performance of the duties or contravene safety standards.”

“Decision 3: To table this question [the proposal to end the state funding of denominational schools or of any religious activity] pending more extensive debate at a forthcoming convention on education and government subsidization policies.”

Those are the only proposals that were adopted. As one can infer, there remains a continuing debate within Québec Solidaire, and the vast majority of the members are completely at ease with that perspective. It is a time for continuing the discussion, not for slamming doors.

### **An area of convergence that needs to be defined**

Secularism is essential to any democratic society. State neutrality toward the different religions and convictions, including the right not to believe; the separation of state and religion and therefore the fight against any domination of religion over the state; and respect for freedom of

thought and religion are essential dimensions of secularism. The members of Québec Solidaire seem to share the understanding that secularism is expressed in three spaces: the private space of the individual and the family; the social space of civil society; and the civic social space of the state. Religion does not pertain only to private space. Secularism likewise recognizes the right to manifest one's religion or conviction individually or collectively in the public space. This convergence signifies that secularism does not mean either denying users of public institutions the expression of their convictions or restricting them to private space alone. No proposal along the lines of restricting the right of expression of religious or philosophical convictions of users in the public sphere was presented in the context of the debate in Québec Solidaire. This is a secular position that rejects the logic that presided in the adoption of the 2004 law in France prohibiting the wearing of the veil by pupils in the schools. This convergence is important.

### **An area of divergence that requires balanced regulation**

There is divergence as to the extent of the civic space of the state. The question is not whether institutions should be neutral, but rather what conditions will effectively implement both neutrality and separation between the institutions and religion. For a significant number of Québec Solidaire members, adopting the following proposition represents a definite departure from a thoroughly secular orientation: "... Agents of the state may wear them [religious symbols] provided they are not used as instruments of proselytism and the wearing of them does not in itself breach their *droit de réserve*. The wearing of religious symbols may also be restricted should they impede the performance of the duties or contravene safety standards." In fact, what Québec Solidaire is saying, over and above the social justification, is that the wearing of religious symbols by civil servants does not itself constitute an instrument of proselytism and may be consistent with respecting the *droit de réserve*. What it says is that judgments must be based not on the symbols alone but on actual conduct. As Micheline Milot writes (in her book *La laïcité*, at p. 100):

"The state's neutrality is expressed in the impartiality of the exercise of the duty and the justification for the decisions made.... In most cases, support of a particular belief is not apparent, which does not mean that beliefs do not interfere in the service provided by the individual who holds them or even that they are not offensive to someone else. Freedom of expression would be significantly limited if we were to assume that the noxiousness of an object or a piece of fabric would inevitably affect the judgment of the person wearing it. That could amount, in law, to a rejection of the presumption of innocence, while the person whose convictions are not visible would enjoy a sort of safe-conduct, his or her decisions being presumed neutral."

### **Secularism, foundation for citizen tolerance**

Secularism is founded on citizen tolerance, it should not be an instrument for the ethnicization of citizenship. It should not adopt for its own purposes the discourse on insecurity as to identity. It is the struggles for effective equality of social conditions for all components of the population that will be the central vehicle for integration. It is completely unproductive to call for rallying

around common values if those values are not the product of common struggles for genuine social equality. Above all, it is not the struggle to make the members of minority cultures invisible that will enable them to become actively involved as true citizens. The path to their integration into citizenship proceeds through social, economic and political equality.

**We must stop playing with words**

Equality of men and women in Quebec is far from being a reality; it is an ongoing struggle. We must stop viewing the patriarchy of cultural minorities as the sole and unique danger of women's continued oppression while patriarchy is still doing very well, unfortunately, within the majority. If we fail to recognize this, we avoid examining how the necessary alliances can be achieved. The secularism of the Quebec state is far from being an accomplished fact; a major part of our youth attend private denominational schools subsidized by the government, and Catholic religious symbols remain in public institutions, justified by heritage considerations. The Charest government's decision to leave a crucifix hanging in the National Assembly is eloquent in this regard. Where is the sign that will signify the membership of non-Christians and atheists in Quebec society?

The struggle for secularism is central to the fight for true citizen integration. It cannot be reduced to the defence of an abstract universalism or repeated claims about values that most often serve to conceal the reality. In short, the task is to reduce the disparities between citizen equality as proclaimed and the reality of inequality and discrimination. We must refuse to stigmatize entire populations and we must show that it is concrete social struggles that can provide the effective crucible for mutual sharing and a genuine transformation in the habits of everyday life, the concrete sources of new solidarities.

*LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion.*



Socialist Voice #400, January 19, 2010

## **Secularism – For a broad, open and democratic debate**

**A LeftViews article by Françoise David and Amir Khadir**

*Françoise David is President and spokesperson for Québec Solidaire. Amir Khadir is MNA for Mercier and spokesperson for Québec Solidaire. This article was published in the Montréal daily Le Devoir, January 18, 2010. The translation is by Socialist Voice.*

An intense debate has been going for several months, nay several years, on secularism and how we can achieve a fully secular Quebec. The crisis over reasonable accommodation has propelled this issue to the forefront of social debates.

Québec Solidaire is in favour of a secular Quebec – both the state and its institutions. At the same time, our members, meeting in convention last November, signified their commitment to fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religious belief.

We maintain that a debate is needed to complete the process of secularizing the Quebec state and its institutions. Like the *Mouvement laïque québécois* [Movement for a secular Quebec], Québec Solidaire has called on the Quebec government to organize a debate on secularism in an effort to achieve the strongest possible consensus, and to enshrine that agreement in documentary form. This debate should include all Québécois of all origins. In our view, the discussion about secularism is not a discussion about immigrants!

A number of questions remain undecided and they affect both the Francophone majority as well as minorities. For example, the crucifix hanging over the head of the Speaker of the National Assembly is considered by some to be a matter of heritage that should remain. For others, it is first and foremost a symbol placed at the heart of a secular institution by Maurice Duplessis to seal the alliance between the Church and the state. This crucifix therefore has to go.

### **Secularism: mother of an inclusive modernity**

Among the supporters of secularism “à la française,” the law of 1905 is often invoked. The law on secularism, introduced in France by the socialist MP [Aristide] Briand, was the product of a great republican movement aimed at decisively carrying out a separation between the state and religious authorities and thus to entrenching the neutrality of the French state in relation to all religions. At the same time, the law put an end to discrimination against Protestants, who had been denied access to positions in the civil service and education.

At the time, France was torn between two visions. The radical current of Émile Combes, a senator of the democratic left and heir to a very assertive anti-clerical tradition, wished to instrumentalize the state and the principle of secularism in order to wage a battle on the terrain of beliefs, which could lead potentially to a limitation on freedom of belief. However, for the moderate current of socialist leader Jean Jaurès and the minister Aristide Briand, themselves

non-believers, the ideological battle against the clergy had to be set apart from the responsibility of the state.

The state had to ensure that it was sheltered from religious authority, but “the republic is the right of every man, whatever his religious belief, to have his share of sovereignty,” as Jaurès pointed out. As conceived by Briand and Jaurès, secularism is equally solicitous of the neutrality of state institutions toward beliefs and of the freedom of conscience of each, in accordance with the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

It is this modern conception that eventually prevailed. Freedom of conscience is one of the principal contributions of the Enlightenment to Western civilization and has played an undeniable role in the emergence of modernity. In 1905 it became one of the pillars of French secularism, entailing equality in law of religious and spiritual options and the neutrality of the political authority.

In the opinion of Québec Solidaire, to defend the freedom of conscience of others is therefore a founding act of modernity, the purpose of which, in a manner of speaking, is to include and not to exclude.

### **The veil: Neither obligation nor prohibition**

We are often challenged about our position on the subject of the veil worn by a minority of Muslim women in Quebec. We would like to remind people that the wearing of religious insignia by public employees is only one of the questions that we ought to debate in the framework of steps to achieve a fully secular state. However, as our position on the wearing of the veil attracts questions, we will explain it here again.

The veil originated at least 4,000 years ago, among the Sumerians, well before Islam, Christianity, and even Judaism. Under the Judeo-Christian and Muslim religions it became an instrument to control the bodies of women and, unquestionably, a sign of patriarchal oppression. Conceptually, it was imposed by “sacred” texts, written by the hands of men who lived in archaic societies which did not recognize the equality of rights between women and men. A feminist party like Québec Solidaire therefore rejects the obligation to wear the veil: there is no ambiguity about it.

We reject just as clearly the attacks on the rights and freedoms of women, any and all attempts to dictate to women how to behave, be they by religious or political powers. Women must be free, autonomous, and full-fledged citizens in all societies. Their bodies belong to them, and they must be free to do what they wish with them.

What does this mean in Quebec, then? Among us we have women of very different life trajectories and references. They are evolving in a Quebec that, in the last 40 years, has made great strides in achieving equality between women and men. Nevertheless, this is also a Quebec that is not free from sexism and that discriminates in particular against immigrant women, refused jobs by employers under various pretexts.

### **Domestic space**

How then can we protect the rights and freedoms of all women without excluding some of them from the labor market, for example? For what purpose would we deprive the veiled women of the space of participation in active life which comes with work, condemning them to remain prisoners of often conservative communitarian ghettos? Does rejecting the obligation to wear the veil mean the right to deprive Muslim women of the possibility to work for the largest employer in Quebec: the state? The holders of religious power who prescribe the veil would be the first to rejoice in seeing women confined to domestic space, more easily subjected to their control. If we did that, we would be adding a veil of exclusion to the veil of cloth.

In our view, it is important to wage the battle against sartorial and behavioral religious obligations on the terrain of ideas. We should say that these obligations, including the imposition of articles of clothing that cover women – for their bodies might become “an occasion of sin”! – are sexist and retrograde. And we ought to offer assistance and protection to women who wish to resist their imposition by some men or by some communities.

### **Defend all the rights of all women**

Québec Solidaire has therefore opted for a solution – we make no claim it is perfect – that consists in accompanying these women who have battles to fight and liberties to conquer. This defense of others, even other women and men who differ with us in ideas or beliefs, is, as we indicated earlier, the very essence of democracy and the republican principle of secularism. It has nothing to do with cultural relativism and multiculturalism.

The neutrality of the state, which secularism demands, is determined by the actions of those who work there and not by their clothes. We have therefore chosen not to prohibit the wearing of religious insignia in the civil service and public services, while agreeing that discussion needs to continue regarding situations in which the wearing of religious signs may prove to be inappropriate.

Here, then, is what we propose: to protect all rights at the same time, without losing sight of the need for complete neutrality of the state toward all religions and the absence of influence of any religion on the decisions of the state.

### **Secularism is not racism**

In conclusion, we would like to dispel any misunderstanding that might leave the impression that Québec Solidaire is accusing the secularists of being complicit in racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. Such is not the case. How could we accuse secularism and its defenders when it is one of the central axes of our political project and our *raison d'être*? We are striving, like many other social and political actors, to complete the secularization of Quebec society. All points of view must be heard, with respect for the fundamental rights of everyone and in the search for the common good.

That said, we note that we are not the only ones who speak of secularism. Some xenophobes also speak of secularism – very selectively – in order to exclude more effectively, to discriminate virtuously. They use secularism as a veneer for their fear of others, of strangers who practice religions other than Christianity, for, in their eyes, that threatens the Québécois identity. They seldom say anything about the Catholic or Protestant religious authority, much less question Catholic doctors who invoke their religious beliefs in order to refuse to perform abortions, or elected officials who open their municipal council sessions with a prayer.

In brief, the defense of Québécois identity, however legitimate it is, is sometimes the pretext, these days, to mask a growing intolerance of others, especially newcomers. Muslim communities in particular bear the brunt of it. That we cannot tolerate, in Québec Solidaire.

Secularism as we understand it is inclusive, but it excludes the fear of others or any intolerance with regard to those who arrive in Quebec each year. If these principles are clear and, as we believe, are widely shared by the people of Quebec, irrespective of their origins, pressure must continue to be put on the Charest government to engage in a broad, open, and democratic debate on secularism with the goal of arriving at the most unifying consensus for all Québécois.

*LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion. Another English translation of this article appeared in MRzine.*

*A symposium on the theme Québec in Search of Secularism, sponsored by the magazine À bâbord!, will be held Friday, January 22 at the Université du Québec à Montreal, Québec Solidaire leader Françoise David is a guest of honor at the event, along with Professor Guy Rocher.*

Socialist Voice #401, January 23, 2010

## **Haiti needs emergency relief, not military intervention!**

### *A letter and petition from Canada Haiti Action Network*

The Canada Haiti Action Network, working alongside colleagues in the UK and the United States, would like to announce the launch of a new petition campaign urging the reorientation of the relief effort in Haiti.

It has become increasingly clear that the immediate crisis provoked by the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti has become a pretext for the massive deployment of military forces – particularly from the US, but also from Canada. For many reasons, this is a gravely mistaken policy, hidden amidst the outpouring of genuine concern for the suffering in Haiti.

The petition proposed (copy enclosed below) is an appeal for an alternative direction for this critical humanitarian effort, one that respects Haiti's sovereignty, and directly acknowledges the need to reconcile Haiti's past in order to face the future.

We are fortunate to be able to launch this petition with an initial set of signatories, see below. We hope that CHAN list members will not only sign on to this petition but also send it via email to friends, colleagues, and email lists for which it would be appropriate. You can find the petition online at: <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/relief-not-militarization-for-haiti>

A shortened version of the statement has been published in the print edition of the *The Guardian* (UK) for January 22. There may be many newspapers and magazines interested in publishing this statement — we encourage submitting it to any publications that might consider it, including independent media websites. Please do post any successes in this effort to this email list.

Sincerely,

Kevin Skerrett, Ottawa Haiti Solidarity  
Roger Annis, Haiti Solidarity BC

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### **PETITION: Haiti needs emergency relief, not military intervention!**

21 January 2010. We, the undersigned, are outraged by the scandalous delays in distributing essential aid to victims of the earthquake in Haiti. Since the US Air Force seized unilateral control of the airport in Port-au-Prince, it has privileged military over civilian humanitarian flights. As a result, untold numbers of people have died needlessly in the rubble of Port-au-Prince, Léogane and other abandoned towns. If aid continues to be withheld, many more preventable deaths will follow. We demand that US commanders immediately restore executive control of the relief effort to Haiti's leaders, and to help rather than replace the local officials they claim to support.

We note that obsessive foreign concerns with ‘security’ and ‘looting’ are largely refuted by actual levels of patience and solidarity on the streets of Port-au-Prince. The decision to avoid what US commanders have called ‘another Somalia-type situation’ by prioritizing security and military control is likely to succeed only in provoking the very kinds of unrest they condemn.

In keeping with a longstanding pattern, US and UN officials continue to treat the Haitian people and their representatives with wholly misplaced fear and suspicion. We call on the de facto rulers of Haiti to facilitate, as the reconstruction begins, the renewal of popular participation in the determination of collective priorities and decisions. We demand that they do everything possible to strengthen the capacity of the Haitian people to respond to this crisis. We demand, consequently, that they allow Haiti’s most popular and most inspiring political leader, Jean-Bertrand Aristide (whose party won 90% of the parliamentary seats in the country’s last round of democratic elections), to return immediately and safely from the unconstitutional exile to which he has been confined since the US, Canada and France helped depose him in 2004.

If reconstruction proceeds under the supervision of foreign troops and international development agencies it will not serve the interests of the vast majority of Haiti’s population. Neoliberal forms of international ‘aid’ have already directly contributed to the systematic impoverishment of Haiti’s people and the undermining of their government, and in both 1991 and 2004 the US intervened to overthrow the elected government and attack its supporters, with devastating effect. This is why we urgently call on the countries that dominate Haiti and the region to respect Haitian sovereignty and to initiate an immediate reorientation of international aid, away from neo-liberal adjustment, sweatshop exploitation and non-governmental charity, and towards systematic investment in Haiti’s own people and government.

We demand a much greater international role for Haiti’s genuine allies and supporters, including Cuba, South Africa, Venezuela, the Bahamas and other members of CARICOM. We demand that all reconstruction aid take the form of grants not loans. We demand that Haiti’s remaining foreign debt be immediately forgiven, and that the money that foreign governments still owe to Haiti – notably the massive sums extorted by the French government from 1825 through to 1947 as compensation for the slaves and property France lost when Haiti won its independence – be paid in full and at once.

Above all, we demand that the reconstruction of Haiti be pursued under the guidance of one overarching objective: the political and economic empowerment of the Haitian people.

**Initial signatories:** Pierre Labossiere, Haiti Action Committee (USA); Kevin Pina, filmmaker; Noam Chomsky (MIT); Peter Hallward, Middlesex University, UK; Jean Saint-Vil, Canada Haiti Action Network; Niraj Joshi, Canada Haiti Action Network; Brian Concannon, Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti; Kevin Skerrett, Ottawa Haiti Solidarity Committee/Kozayiti; BC Holmes, Toronto Haiti Action Committee; Roger Annis, Haiti Solidarity BC; Yves Engler, Haiti Action Montreal

Socialist Voice #402, January 24, 2010

## **Should Climate Activists Support Limits on Immigration?**

**by Ian Angus and Simon Butler**

Immigrants to the developed world have frequently been blamed for unemployment, crime and other social ills. Attempts to reduce or block immigration have been justified as necessary measures to protect “our way of life” from alien influences.

Today, some environmentalists go farther, arguing that sharp cuts in immigration are needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slow climate change. However sincere and well-meaning such activists may be, their arguments are wrong and dangerous, and should be rejected by the climate emergency movement.

### **Lifeboat ethics and anti-immigrant bigots**

“Environmental” arguments for reducing immigration aren’t new. In a 1974 article, “Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor,” US biologist Garrett Hardin argued that “a nation’s land has a limited capacity to support a population and as the current energy crisis has shown us, in some ways we have already exceeded the carrying capacity of our land.” Immigration, he said, was “speeding up the destruction of the environment of the rich countries.”[1]

Elsewhere he wrote: “Overpopulation can be avoided only if borders are secure; otherwise poor and overpopulated nations will export their excess to richer and less populated nations.”[2]

Hardin’s ideas have been very influential in the development of the right-wing, anti-immigration movement in the US and elsewhere. In 1979, he helped to found the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an anti-immigrant lobbying group that has been named a “hate organization” by the Southern Poverty Law Center.[3] In addition to the usual array of anti-immigrant arguments FAIR has made a particular point of linking concerns about the environment with opposition to immigration.

Virginia Abernethy, a Hardin collaborator who calls herself an “ethnic separatist,” argues that the ability to migrate to rich countries gives people in poor countries an incentive to have bigger families. “The U.S. would help, not harm, by encouraging an appreciation of limits sooner rather than later. A relatively-closed U.S. border would create most vividly an image of limits and be an incentive to restrict family size.”[4]

### **Shifting gears**

In the past, the “environmental” anti-immigration argument was: *immigrants should be kept out because their way of life is a threat to our environment*. That argument is still made by anti-immigrant groups and some conservationists.

Recently, as concern about greenhouse gas emissions and global warming increased, the anti-immigrant argument has taken on a new form. Now the argument is: *immigrants should be kept out because our way of life is a threat to the world’s environment*.

That's the argument made in a recent briefing from the US Centre for Immigration Studies, a "think tank" founded by FAIR: it says that immigration worsens CO2 emissions "because it transfers population from lower-polluting parts of the world to the United States, which is a higher polluting country." CIS calculated that the "average immigrant" to the US contributed four times more CO2 than in their country of origin.[5]

Otis Graham, a founder of FAIR, made the same argument in his 2004 book *Unguarded Gates*:

"Most immigrants ... move from poor societies to richer ones, intending to do what they almost always succeed in doing, take on a higher standard of living that carries a larger ecological footprint. This being the case, the logic of the relationship is straightforward. Population growth in both poor and wealthy societies, but especially in the latter, intensifies environmental problems. Where immigration shifts population numbers to wealthier societies, it does not leave global environmental damage the same, but intensifies global as well as local environmental degradation." [6]

A recent FAIR report claims that increased population is the primary cause of the huge increase in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions between 1973 and 2007 – and that the population increase was caused by immigration. "The United States will not be able to achieve any meaningful reductions in CO2 emissions without serious economic and social consequences for American citizens unless immigration is sharply curtailed." [7]

The racist British National Party, which likes to call itself the "true green party" because it opposes immigration, also uses this argument. BNP leader Nick Griffin recently told the European parliament that climate change isn't real – but that hasn't stopped him saying immigrants will make it worse. He told author Steven Faris that by accepting immigrants from the third world, "We're massively increasing their impact of carbon release into the world's atmosphere. There's no doubt about it, the western way of life is not sustainable. So what on Earth is the point of turning more people into westerners?" [8]

(It is significant that none of these supposed defenders of the environment take their argument to its logical conclusion: if immigration to the North is bad for the climate then emigration to poor countries with low emissions must be good and should be encouraged.)

### **Greens versus immigration**

For anti-immigration bigots, concern for the environment is just a ploy – they'll say anything to justify keeping immigrants out. It's an example of what author and feminist activist Betsy Hartmann has called "the greening of hate — blaming environmental degradation on poor populations of color." [9]

But it is particularly disturbing to witness the promotion of similar arguments in the mainstream media, and by environmental activists whose political views are otherwise hostile to those of FAIR and the BNP.



For example, Ross Gittins, economics editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said in 2008 that cutting Australia's immigration was "one of the quickest and easiest ways to reduce the growth in our emissions" because "it's a safe bet they'd be emitting more in prosperous Australia than they were before." [10]

Australian renewable energy expert Mark Diesendorf has urged the Australian Greens to call for immigration restrictions because Australia is such a big polluter. "Australia is world's biggest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases. So every additional Australian has a bigger impact than anywhere else." [11]

Even the highly respected U.S. environmentalist Bill McKibben has written that, "the immigration-limiters ... have a reasonable point," because "If you're worried about shredding the global environment, the prospect of twice as many world-champion super-consumer Americans has got to worry you." [12]

Noted environmentalist and journalist Tim Flannery made a similar argument during a debate on immigration policy broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in September 2009:

"Growing Australia's population has a much greater impact than growing the population of a poor country. We are the heaviest carbon users in the world, about 23 tonnes per capita, so people that come to this country from anywhere on the planet will result almost certainly in an increase carbon emissions ...."

As these examples show, "green" arguments against immigration are no longer the exclusive property of anti-immigrant bigots. They are increasingly heard within the climate movement, and so require strong answers from climate activists.

### **Wrong Diagnosis, Wrong Cure**

The view that stopping immigration to wealthy countries is a good way to fight global warming rests on a the simplistic idea that because immigrants come from countries with low per capita emissions to countries with high per capita emissions they supposedly increase total emissions simply by moving.

This argument is false on its face.

To calculate "per capita emissions," we simply divide a country's total greenhouse gas emissions by its total population. This provides a useful baseline for comparing countries of different sizes – but it tells us nothing at all about the emissions that can actually be attributed to individuals.

In fact, most emissions are caused by industrial and other processes over which individuals have no control.

In Canada, for example, no change in the number of immigrants will have any effect on the oil extraction industry at the Alberta Tar Sands, described by George Monbiot as "the world's biggest single industrial source of carbon emissions." [13]

Reducing immigration to the United States will have no effect whatsoever on the massive military spending – up 50% in the past decade – which ensures that the Pentagon is the world’s biggest consumer of oil.[14] To put that in context: a study published in March 2008 found that the CO2 emissions caused directly by the Iraq war until then were equivalent to putting 25 million more cars on the road in the U.S.[15]

Closing Australia’s borders would have had no effect on the climate denial policies of the previous Liberal Party government, or on the current Labor government’s determination to continue Australia’s role as “the world’s largest ‘coal mule.’”[16]

As US immigrant rights campaigner Patricia Huang has pointed out, “the relationship between population growth and environmental destruction is shaped by how we use our resources, not by the number of people who use them.”[17]

Labeling migrants as a climate change problem is not only unjust, but it obscures the real challenges the climate movement faces. The decisive question we must address is who makes decisions about resource use in society. In capitalist society, the big financial institutions, multinational corporations and fossil-fuel companies wield this power with devastating results for the planet’s ecosystems – and governments do their bidding.

Focusing on immigration diverts attention from the real social and economic causes of global warming, and makes it more difficult to solve them. This approach mistakenly links the trends of population and ecological harm, and so misdiagnoses the root causes of the current environmental crisis. It leaves social change out of the equation or consigns it to the far future. It downplays or ignores the fact that immigration would have a very different impact in the zero-emissions economy we need to fight for.

### **A pessimistic outlook**

As we’ve seen, the argument that reducing immigration will protect the environment originated with right-wing, anti-immigrant bigots. Our major concern, however, is that virtually identical arguments have been adopted by progressive activists and writers who are sincerely concerned about global warming.

Despite their sincerity, their arguments betray regrettable pessimism about our common ability to build a climate emergency movement that is powerful enough to win the anti-emissions fight. As Larry Lohmann of Cornerhouse writes, the anti-immigration argument “relies on the premise that changing Northern lifestyles is a lower priority, or less achievable, than preventing others from sharing them.”[18]

In fact, including “close the borders” as an anti-emissions demand tends to make their pessimistic outlook self-confirming, by making it more difficult to build a mass movement. Not only does targeting immigration divert attention from the social causes of global warming, but it divides us from our allies, while strengthening our enemies.

Sadly, some groups that favor immigration control seem oblivious to the danger of lending credibility to bigots and racists who view immigrants as a threat to “our” way of life.

For example, last year the Australian Conservation Foundation praised Labor MP Kelvin Thompson, and Sustainable Population Australia named him to its “Population Role of Honour” when he called for immigration cuts to deal with climate change. Both ignored the fact that just 10 days earlier Thomson had revealed his real motives by calling for immigration cuts “to minimize the risk that people who do not respect Australia’s laws and legal system will enter this country.”[19]

The anti-immigration response to climate change raises a huge wall between the climate movement and the most oppressed working people in the imperialist countries. How can we possibly win migrants and refugees to the climate movement while simultaneously accusing them of responsibility for rising emissions and asking the government to bar them and their families from entering the country?

What’s more, it undermines efforts to work with the growing and important climate justice movement in the Third World, where global warming is now producing its first and most devastating effects. How can we expect to be taken seriously as allies, if we tell those movements that migrants are not welcome in our countries?

The Climate Justice and Migration Working Group, an international coalition of human rights and immigrant rights groups, estimates that between 25 and 50 million people have already been displaced by environmental change, and that could rise to 150 million by 2050. It calls for recognition of the right of human mobility across borders as an essential response to the climate change threat.[20]

The climate justice movement in the rich countries has a particular responsibility to support this demand – but blaming immigrants in general for global warming will make it more difficult to win public support for climate refugees.

Despite the good intentions of its green advocates, support for immigration controls strengthens the most regressive forces in our societies and weakens our ability to stop climate change.

It gives conservative governments and reactionary politicians an easy-out, allowing them to pose as friends of the environment by restricting immigration, while doing nothing to reduce real emissions.

It hands a weapon to climate change deniers, allowing them to portray the climate movement as hostile to the legitimate aspirations of the poorest and most oppressed people in the world.

People are not pollution. Inserting immigration into the climate change debate divides the environmental movement along race, class and gender lines, at a time when the broadest possible unity is essential. It is a dangerous diversion from the real issues, one the movement cannot afford and should not support.

*Ian Angus is editor of Climate and Capitalism and co-editor of Socialist Voice. Simon Butler is a member of Australia's Socialist Alliance and a staff writer for Green Left Weekly.*

### **Footnotes**

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- [2] "Garrett Hardin Quotations." 1
- [3] Southern Poverty Law Center. "New SPLC Report: Nation's Most Prominent Anti-Immigration Group has History of Hate, Extremism."
- [4] Virginia Abernethy. "The Demographic Transition Revisited: Lessons for Foreign Aid and U.S. Immigration Policy."
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