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Socialist Voice #381, December 3, 2009

Why an independent Quebec?

This resolution, entitled "Un pays pour faire quoi" (A country to do what?), was adopted by the Québec solidaire convention. Translation by Socialist Voice.

(a) An independent Quebec will have full mastery of all its economic policies: budgetary, fiscal, commercial, monetary and customs, that is, the powers required to implement a social agenda that is egalitarian, feminist, ecologist and solidaire [based on the principle of social solidarity]. An independent Quebec should provide its citizens with full powers over their policy choices and the political institutions needed to promote the most inclusive and participatory democracy. An independent Quebec would have full powers over its immigration policy, its international policy and the principles underlying them within the realities and constraints of a globalized world.

(b) Achieving true independence that is not limited to political sovereignty means rejecting economic domination and the pillage of our natural resources. Economic independence is the power to exercise our economic sovereignty over our natural resources and to control our own economic levers. A people's freedom depends on its capacity to control, develop and process its own resources. Without a mastery of the economic tools, political sovereignty is simply an illusion. Independence will allow Quebec to renegotiate international agreements based on principles of equity.

(c) Achieving independence means being able to transform political institutions as we wish in order to establish equality between women and men within these institutions. It also means having the power to legislate on the French language in full autonomy without fear that such legislation will be overruled by the Supreme Court of Canada. Under the grip of the bilingualism and biculturalism laws, the French language is always endangered. Achieving independence also

means promoting cultural policies that use the available means of communication (radio, television, etc.) to expand accessibility to cultural property and support the development of a culture of social transformation, justice and solidarity.

(d) Quebec will thereby have all the tools it needs to implement the feminist agenda of Québec solidaire. It will be able to apply a gender based analysis to all of its policies, laws and regulations, as well as transform all political institutions to establish therein a genuine equality between women and men.

Socialist Voice #382, December 3, 2009

Quebec left debates independence strategy

by **Richard Fidler**

(LAVAL) Québec solidaire, the left-wing party founded almost four years ago, held its fifth convention in this Montréal suburb on November 20-22. About 300 elected delegates debated and adopted resolutions on the Quebec national question, electoral reform, immigration policy and secularism.

The convention clarified the party's position on some important questions at the heart of its strategic orientation that had been left unresolved at its founding.

Québec solidaire is the product of a fusion process lasting several years among various organizations and left-wing groups that had developed in the context of major actions by the women's, student, global justice and antiwar movements in the 1990s and the early years of this decade. But the party has faced many obstacles as it struggled to establish a visible presence in Quebec's political landscape.[1]

As in other parts of North America, Quebec experienced a general downturn in extraparliamentary mobilizations after 9-11, with the notable exception of the massive antiwar actions prior to the Iraq war. Added to this was the political demoralization of many militants following almost a decade of neoliberal austerity under a Parti Québécois government that for many discredited the very idea of Quebec "sovereignty" as envisaged by the PQ. Shortly after Québec solidaire was launched, the trade union movement suffered major defeats in the face of an antilabor offensive by the newly elected Liberal government. The student movement has been relatively quiescent since a successful mobilization against tuition fee increases in 2005.

Although antiwar sentiment remains high, mass actions are fewer and smaller.

Aware that "politics" is conventionally viewed as electoral and parliamentary activity, Québec solidaire quickly established itself as an officially recognized party under Quebec law. It soon found its attention, energy and finances absorbed by electoral activity to the detriment of actions outside the electoral arena – contesting two general elections and several by-elections within its first three years, on a limited platform of demands.

Exactly a year ago, however, it scored a significant breakthrough when, despite an undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system, it managed to elect a member to the National Assembly, Quebec's legislature. The election of Amir Khadir in the Montréal constituency of Mercier brought welcome media attention to the party, while increasing the pressure on it to develop a more comprehensive program on the key issues of the day.

Early this year, the party launched what promises to be a lengthy process aimed at producing a formal program. This convention concluded the first stage of the process.

Under the complex procedure established by the national leadership, members were urged to form “citizens’ circles” or affinity groups, which would include non-members. The idea was to use the debate as a means of reaching out to social movement activists. In later stages, a policy commission was to assemble and “synthesize” the proposals from these groups in a series of resolutions that would either reflect a consensus view or offer alternative positions on the various topics, to be debated in the local and regional associations and later at the convention.

About 70 citizens’ circles were formed. But since many were organized around specific views or areas of interest, there was little exchange with others in the initial period. It was only quite late in the process, with the publication of the draft resolutions in September, that the major preconvention debates could begin. The proposals and amendments were then put together in a synthesis booklet for debate at the convention.

National question

The major objective at this convention was to define a clear position on the Quebec national question. Although there is today little mention in Québec solidaire – or, indeed, in Quebec society as a whole – of “national oppression,” the issues that motivate the thrust for national sovereignty or independence testify to the existence of a distinct Francophone nation whose language and culture are under constant attack from the Canadian constitutional and political regimes. For decades now, the people of Quebec have stopped referring to themselves as “French Canadians”; they self-define as “Québécois” and they overwhelmingly reject the existing federal system even though they are divided on whether to reform it or repudiate it altogether by establishing an independent country. That is what is meant by the “national question”: the need to resolve this problem, the major fault line in the Canadian state and the major source of instability in the politics of Canada.

The first task in the Québec solidaire debate, then, was to define what is meant by the Quebec nation. This issue has been much debated since the federal Parliament voted in 2006 that “the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada.”[2] The Harper government motion was widely recognized as a politically opportunist ruse. Québec solidaire approached the issue in a much more serious way.

First, the delegates discussed what the Quebec nation does not include. They acknowledged the sovereignty of “the ten Amerindian peoples and the Inuit people who also inhabit Quebec territory,” and pledged Québec solidaire’s support to their “fundamental right” to national self-determination, however they choose to exercise that right – whether through self-government within a Quebec state or through their own independence.

Ghislain Picard, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, was a keynote speaker at the convention on its opening night. He has praised Québec solidaire as the only party in Quebec that addresses native concerns.

Delegates then adopted an inclusive definition of the “Quebec people” that specifically rejects the concept of an ethnic nation favoured by the Parti Québécois and other nationalists. “Quebec

nationality,” it says, “is essentially defined by living in the nation and participating in its life.” The Quebec nation is “ethnically and culturally diversified, with French as the common language of use and factor of integration...., the Francophone community [being] transformed throughout its history by the successive integration of elements originating from the other communities who have been added to it.” This nation “is based not on ethnic origin but on voluntary membership in the Québécois political community.”

The Anglophone community was defined as “an important minority that is an integral part of the Quebec nation and shares its political fate.”

For sovereignty... and independence

The major debate was on how Québec solidaire should define its position on Quebec’s constitutional status. Four options were proposed for decision: “independence”; “sovereignty”; “independence or sovereignty”; or “neither independence nor sovereignty for the time being.”

Why this debate? Up to now, Québec solidaire has identified Quebec sovereignty as one of its defining objectives. However, “sovereignty,” the term popularized by the Parti Québécois, is an ambiguous concept, especially when coupled with a proposal for “association” or “partnership” with the rest of Canada, as the PQ proposed in the 1980 and 1995 referendum questions. As a draft convention resolution noted, this tends to trivialize the national question by limiting the implications of a break with the Canadian constitutional setup, presenting Quebec sovereignty as a mere continuation of past fights for provincial autonomy or an extension of Quebec’s existing powers within a new, decentralized federation. Moreover, linking sovereignty with association or partnership in a referendum requires a definitive answer from Québécois on something they do not ultimately control: namely, the character of any future relations with Canada, which can only be the subject of later negotiations. This undermines the very concept of “self-determination.”

The federal government took advantage of this ambiguity when, in 2000, it got Parliament to enact the Clarity Act, which allows Parliament to refuse to recognize the result of a referendum decision on Quebec’s constitutional status. Québec solidaire opposes the Clarity Act as a violation of Quebec’s right to self-determination. But the delegates recognized the political problem: the confusion among many Québécois as a result of the PQ’s ambiguities, and the need for an approach that clearly articulates the unilateral right of the Québécois to determine their own future.

Most of the delegates who spoke in the QS debate declared their personal support of Quebec independence. An adopted resolution states: “Canadian federalism is basically unreformable. It is impossible for Quebec to obtain all the powers it wants and needs for the profound changes proposed by Québec solidaire.” A new relationship with the rest of Canada can only be negotiated once the Québécois have clearly established their intent and ability to form an independent state.

However, many were reluctant to confine the description of the QS position to the word “independence.” Some noted that “sovereignty,” the one objective that unites all PQ members

notwithstanding (or perhaps because of) their differences on other questions, is the all-important Article 1 in the PQ program. Was there not a danger, they asked, that if “independence” was chosen as the QS goal, to the exclusion of “sovereignty,” this would become, in effect, Québec solidaire’s “article 1,” its defining difference with the PQ – and thus obscure what all agree is the new party’s underlying conviction: that any new constitutional status for Quebec must be accompanied by a fundamental change in its social conditions, and that for Québec solidaire the national question is indissolubly linked with its “projet de société,” its social agenda.

Beyond the provincial framework?

Because the party has not yet adopted a developed program on economic and social issues, or international affairs, there was an air of abstraction to much of the debate, as there had been throughout the pre-congress discussion (and indeed, since the party’s founding). During its two provincial election campaigns, QS deliberately limited its “platform” to proposals that were (as it admitted) confined to the “provincial and neoliberal” framework. This approach tended to inhibit thinking in the party about what an anticapitalist program for an independent Quebec might entail.

A case in point was the May Day Manifesto published this year by the QS top leadership. Although its overview of the economic crisis was couched in anticapitalist rhetoric, the manifesto’s specific proposals to overcome the crisis failed to go beyond a timid social liberalism.[3]

An anticapitalist and ecosocialist strategy and program would necessarily challenge the existing federal regime. Nationalize the banks? Banking is a federal jurisdiction. Break from the capitalist trade and investment agreements like NAFTA? Trade and commerce are federal jurisdictions. Introduce a comprehensive unemployment insurance program guaranteeing a living income and retraining to those who lose their jobs and livelihoods through capitalist “rationalization”? Unemployment insurance is a federal jurisdiction. Nation-to-nation relations with the indigenous peoples? “Indian affairs” are an exclusive federal jurisdiction. A rehabilitation-based approach to criminal justice? Defense of the right to abortion? Criminal law is a federal jurisdiction. Break from the imperialist military alliances, NATO and NORAD? Support the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela? Foreign affairs and the military are federal jurisdictions. And so on.

Delegates adopted a resolution that outlines in very general terms how Québec solidaire envisages an independent Quebec.

The case for an independent Quebec is immeasurably strengthened when placed in the context of a program for fundamental social change, for building “another Quebec,” a new country that is free of both national oppression and class exploitation. But “class” is a concept that gets little recognition in Québec solidaire’s perspectives. As a party with a leadership that has developed largely in the feminist, community and NGO milieu, it is highly conscious of the need to create an inclusive coalition of interests that can fight to overcome the inequalities of Quebec’s diverse society, but seems little cognizant of the most inclusive concept of all: that of the working class,

which embraces – in their diversity of colour, gender, national and ethnic origin, sexual orientation, etc. – all who must sell their labour power in order to live. The Québécois are oppressed not only by Canada’s federal regime but by Capital; national liberation is incomplete without anticapitalist social liberation, the establishment of a government by and for working people.

Quebec solidaire’s piecemeal approach to program development, by leaving key questions of social and economic policy, including the ecological crisis, to later debate, tends to separate the national from the social. Yet it was precisely the Parti Québécois’ failure to address the need for major social change prior to the achievement of sovereignty that prompted many movement activists to found Québec solidaire.

In the end, after several hours of debate, the convention rejected proposals by small numbers of delegates that QS favour neither sovereignty nor independence, or define its orientation as sovereigntist alone. But it also rejected a proposal, advanced by a substantial number, that QS define its orientation on the national question exclusively as “independentist,” and voted by close to a two-thirds majority that it use both terms to describe its position, depending on context.

A paragraph in the adopted resolution on Canadian federalism indicates how the terms might be used interchangeably: “The Quebec people therefore must choose between subjection to Canadian majority rule, which implies political subordination and uniformity, and the full and unrestricted exercise of political sovereignty. The national question is thereby reduced to its simplest expression: to be a minority nation in the Canadian state, or a nation that decides all of its orientations in an independent Quebec.”

The convention also clarified an additional concept, that of “popular sovereignty.” Although this expression has in the past been used by some QS leaders as a synonym for their constitutional option, and sometimes as a shorthand means of dissociating it from the “ethnic sovereignty” of hard-line nationalists, the convention decision clarifies that popular sovereignty is addressed to procedure, not the goal: it signifies “the power of the people to decide democratically their future and the rules governing their own lives, including the fundamental rules such as whether or not to belong to a country....”

A constituent assembly

How to achieve independence? Since its founding, QS has urged that Quebec’s status be decided in a democratic process involving the entire population, and not simply limited – as in the Parti Québécois procedure – to a yes or no vote in a referendum on a question determined through negotiations among the parties represented in the National Assembly. In a resolution that was adopted unanimously, the delegates sketched the major features of this process as they might be enacted by a Québec solidaire government.

The government would propose that the National Assembly “affirm the sovereignty of the people of Quebec and that they alone are entitled to decide their institutions and political status, without interference from outside.” A distinct Constituent Assembly would be elected by universal

suffrage, composed equally of women and men. The ballot would ensure “proportional representation of tendencies and the various socio-economic milieus within Quebec society,” with equitable access for all to the means of communication. The Constituent Assembly would then conduct an extensive process of participatory democracy in which the people of Quebec would be consulted on their views concerning Quebec’s “political and constitutional future and the values and political institutions pertaining to it.” The Assembly’s conclusions – in effect, a draft Constitution – would then be put to a popular vote in a referendum. Throughout this process, “Québec solidaire will defend the necessity for the political independence of Quebec.... But it will not presume the outcome of the debates.”

Thus, whatever the outcome of the Constituent Assembly proceedings and the referendum vote on ratification, the procedure itself, as proposed by QS, constitutes an act of national self-determination. Several delegates noted in the debate the parallels with the recent processes in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, where an overhaul of constitutions has helped to shift the relationship of class forces more in favour of the subaltern classes.

The delegates also voted that in launching the Constituent Assembly, the indigenous nations should be invited to join the process on whatever terms the indigenous themselves decide and that, irrespective of their participation, the Constituent Assembly should recognize the distinct sovereignty of the indigenous nations.

Is the Constituent Assembly simply to be treated as an item on the agenda of a Québec solidaire government? Until now, the party’s advocacy of a Constituent Assembly has not been accompanied by a clear position of its own on Quebec’s constitutional status: “The people will decide, through a process of participatory democracy.” This ambiguity reflected opposition to the independence option or unease about it among some of Québec solidaire’s founding members, especially those coming from the grassroots community-based activist milieu that tends not to see politics in strategic terms as a struggle for state power.

By a very close vote, the delegates decided that Québec solidaire should launch “a vast campaign of popular education” to build “a democratic, social and national alliance that will bring together all of the trade unions, popular movements, feminists, students, ecologists and sovereigntist parties” in support of “popular sovereignty concretized by the election of a Constituent Assembly.” So far, the only concrete indication of how this campaign might be conducted is the decision that building this coalition of forces “will be the focus of our intervention within the Conseil de la souveraineté.” The Conseil is an umbrella coalition of pro-sovereignty organizations dominated organizationally and politically by the Parti Québécois, which uses it to promote support for its own referendum strategy and option on the national question. QS is a member of the Conseil.

Further initiatives and actions will be needed to build the mass support needed to achieve not only a democratic Constituent Assembly but independence. In Latin America, popular agitation for constituent assemblies did not await the advent of progressive governments, but in some cases (e.g. Bolivia and Ecuador) helped to prepare their election through mass mobilizations

focusing on the need for fundamental changes in the social structures of those countries. These experiences might offer some useful pointers for Québec solidaire as it develops its campaign.

Democratization

The convention also adopted proposals that would democratize Quebec institutions and the electoral process. The delegates unanimously voted in favour of establishment of democratically elected regional governments with independent powers and funding to replace the present system of regional municipalities and conferences, purely administrative entities that are nothing but creatures of the provincial government. Québec solidaire also favours a combination of incentive and mandatory provisions to establish equal representation of women in all elected bodies, including municipal councils and boards of directors.

Delegates adopted a series of proposals for proportional representation that Québec solidaire MNA Amir Khadir plans to present in a bill in the National Assembly within the coming months. Under the proposed procedure, 60% of MNAs would be elected under the present first-past-the-post system as constituency representatives, and the other 40% according to the proportion of the vote held by the various parties that received 2% or more of the vote nationally.

This is, understandably, an important issue for Québec solidaire, which barely managed to elect Khadir, in 2008, and has slim prospects of electing other MNAs under the existing system. However, although the need for proportional representation has been debated and widely supported by many in recent years, there is no evidence that the major capitalist parties, the governing Liberals and Opposition PQ, are sympathetic. Each has managed to establish “majority” governments on the basis of mere voting pluralities, sometimes even less. And they intend to keep it that way.

Freedom of belief within a secular state

Québec solidaire has always been a partisan of a secular Quebec, one in which church and state are clearly separated. The abolition of church control of schools and hospitals was a major achievement of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, overcoming the grip of the Catholic hierarchy and spurring the growth of the feminist movement. This combination of national secularization and feminism was reflected in the acquittal on abortion charges of Dr. Henry Morgenthaler by four successive Quebec juries in the 1970s, leading eventually to decriminalization of abortion throughout Canada.

The convention adopted what it termed a “model of secularism” as part of the party’s program. It distinguishes between the need for state neutrality toward religious belief or lack of belief, and the freedom of individuals “to express their own convictions in a context that favours exchange and dialogue.” And the delegates attempted to define their position on an issue that has been hotly debated in Quebec in recent years: whether a secular state should impose restrictions on expressions of personal religious belief by its employees and public officials. In recent years, right-wing politicians and narrow nationalists have campaigned against Muslims and other ethnic minorities who wear “ostentatious symbols” of their faith such as the Moslem hijab, or scarf.[4]

Delegates voted in favour of allowing “state agents” (employees and officials) to wear religious insignia (a crucifix, hijab, whatever), but added some caveats that leave much to subjective interpretation and enforcement by employers: “provided they are not used as instruments of proselytism” and do not interfere with their *droit de réserve* (duty of discretion), or “impede the performance of the duties or contravene safety standards.” Delegates rejected other resolutions that would impose no such restrictions or, alternatively, would impose secular dress codes on civil servants, and they rejected as well a proposal to refer the whole issue for further decision at a later convention.

In a 2007 brief to the Bouchard-Taylor commission on “reasonable accommodation”, Québec solidaire argued that “We do not think the State should legislate on the wearing of religious symbols by persons working in the public service,” while urging public employees to “subordinate their personal, religious and political beliefs to the ethics of their duties.” A similar position was recommended by the commission in its report, hailed by Québec solidaire leaders Françoise David and Amir Khadir for its “modernity and wisdom.”[5]

At the convention, David and many other delegates, particularly women, spoke strongly in support of “intercultural secularism” and “reasonable accommodation” of the beliefs and customs of immigrant and ethnic minorities. A young woman delegate graphically illustrated the distinction between state policy and individual belief: “I object to a state agent who refuses a gay marriage licence because he or she is homophobic. But I have no problem with one who grants the licence while wearing clothing that signifies his or her religious belief.” Others noted that similar issues of individual choice were involved in the fight to legalize the right to abortion. The debate confirmed that feminist consciousness is alive and well within Québec solidaire. This positive feature of the party is reflected in all its activities. For example, in the two general elections since its founding, a majority of its candidates have been women – a first in Quebec and probably in Canada.

The convention debate echoed similar debates in the Quebec feminist and gay movements in recent years. Bolstering the QS leadership’s stance was the progressive, integrationist approach taken last May by the leading feminist coalition, the Quebec Women’s Federation (FFQ), after a lengthy discussion among its many affiliates.[6]

But it was clear that some Québec solidaire members are not immune to the nationalist and Islamophobic backlash against immigrants, especially Muslims. Some are influenced by the monolithic concept of citizenship that is characteristic of republican France, which has banned the hijab even from the public schools.

In the convention’s closing moments, however, the delegates voted in favour of an immigration policy that would welcome immigrants to Quebec and especially refugees – not only those categories already recognized by UN convention but also “women who are victims of violence, persons whose survival is threatened by natural catastrophes and climate change, and persons persecuted by reason of their sexual orientation or identity.” And they called for a Quebec that is “diversified, pluralist and inclusive,” in which French, as “the language of public life,” is “not

only the expression of a culture but also the instrument of a democratic agenda.” In particular, they called for stronger measures to help immigrants acquire the necessary facility in French in order to function fully as citizens.

These concepts were eloquently described by Louise Laurin in a keynote speech on the convention’s opening night. Laurin, a well-known and longstanding advocate of Quebec independence, was the founder and leader of the coalition that finally achieved secularization of the Quebec public school system in the 1990s. As an educator, she has specialized in developing programs for the integration of immigrant children in the schools.

“The use of a common language, French,” said Laurin,

“acts as a unifying element. Secularism of the state and its institutions is a signal of acceptance of pluralism.... Once we have founded a country, we form the majority. We no longer need to situate ourselves as a protesting minority, sometimes competing with others. It falls to us to be an exemplary majority that respects minorities, as we are already doing. When Quebec becomes sovereign, new arrivals will become Québec citizens. The feeling of membership in Quebec will be able to develop further: citizenship establishes equality among citizens.”

Some omissions

With few exceptions, the convention reaffirmed positions that have been expressed by Québec solidaire leadership bodies in the past. These now have the stamp of authority as “program.” However, it is worth noting that the adopted resolutions do not cover even the full range of issues being debated publicly today on these topics selected by the QS leadership for adoption at this convention.

For example, there was little reference to language policy, although French is the key defining characteristic of the Québécois nation and its defence is the principal driving force behind independentist sentiment. The recent Supreme Court judgment striking down yet another provision of Quebec’s popular *Charter of the French Language* underscored the fragility of the progress to date in making French the “common language of public discourse,” as several delegates noted in the debates.[7] But the primacy of the French language is also threatened by capitalist globalization and demographic trends – particularly in Montréal, the metropolis, where statistical projections indicate that it may become a minority language within a few years. There is an urgent need for aggressive measures to encourage the acquisition of French-language skills among immigrants and to assist their integration into the work force, as well as to increase the mandatory use of French in the workplace.

Unemployment rates are several times higher for immigrants than for the general population. Does Québec solidaire favour affirmative action for newcomers in Quebec government jobs, where French is the language of work?

The Charter mandates francization committees in all businesses and industries with 50 or more employees. There is growing support in Quebec for extending this requirement to companies with fewer than 50 employees. Likewise, many Québécois want to prohibit attendance at English-language junior colleges (CEGEPs) by Francophones and others whose first language is not English. Others, aware that many Francophones and allophones attend the English CEGEP to gain fluency in that language, instead propose measures to qualitatively improve the teaching of English, but within the French-language setting of the public school system.

In its 2008 election platform, Québec solidaire called for establishment of French-language monitoring committees in firms with 25 or more employees and strengthening of French-language education. But clearly its demands could be fleshed out further.

Since its founding, Québec solidaire has displayed a preference for general policy statements on which a broad consensus already exists, both within Quebec society and within the party. A notable exception was the leadership's opposition to banning ostentatious symbols of individual religious belief – a position that has brought the party and Françoise David in particular under vicious attacks from “left” nationalists, although in this instance, as indicated earlier, it is consistent with the views of many feminist organizations.

This culture of consensus was understandable in the period immediately following the founding of Québec solidaire, given the quite different organizational legacies of its two major components. One of these, the Union des forces progressistes included young people from the global justice movement – internationalist, anti-capitalist, and strong supporters of Quebec independence – along with an older layer of members, many with long experience in left and far-left politics. The members of Option citoyenne, on the other hand, tended to be involved in feminist coalitions and community groups organizing around tenants' rights, food and housing co-ops and the like, where the politics of consensus and accommodation of conflicting views and interests are valued. The newly fused party needed time in which the members could gain experience working together in a common organizational framework.

However, over time the downside of this approach became evident. Increasingly, the party executive was setting policy to the exclusion of discussion among the broader membership. This trend was facilitated by the party's lack of publications other than a web site in which most of the political content was devoted to reproducing leadership statements. Meanwhile, with the election of an MNA, the party was confronted with new challenges of developing policy on a host of issues confronting it in the National Assembly.

A beneficial discussion

The preconvention program debate, limited as it was, may have marked the end of this period. For the first time, Québec solidaire leaders differed publicly. François Saillant and Stéphane Lessard, members of the party executive, took issue with the draft program proposals published by the QS policy commission preparatory to the convention. “What is proposed to us,” they wrote, “is nothing less than the program of an independent Quebec and an eventual Republic of

Quebec. Whatever the commission's intention, independence would thereby become Article 1 of the program, from which everything else would follow." They proposed "another logic that does not make our proposals as a whole conditional on the accession to sovereignty, even if we are equally convinced of its necessity."

Saillant and Lessard argued that "a large part of what we propose is feasible here and now." A Québec solidaire government, they said, would have to govern for years before a Constituent Assembly had opted for an independent Quebec. Meanwhile, the party would have to govern within the provincial framework, doing what it could to implement its social agenda.

The adopted position – both independence and sovereignty – is not inconsistent with this view.

A contribution signed by, among others, Arthur Sandborn, past chair of the Montréal council of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), questioned whether sovereignty was even necessary as an objective. Québec solidaire, it argued, "should maintain an open and inclusive stance on sovereignty."

Quebec, it said, must have all the powers needed for its full development socially, economically, culturally and politically. Such development, it conceded, "is not entirely possible in the present federal framework." But sovereignty should be considered a means, not an end, and there was a danger that an unequivocally independentist party would alienate progressives who are not comfortable with the prospect of a sovereign Quebec. Moreover, they argued, the federal regime was not the main threat to Quebec's culture and language: "the struggle for cultural or economic sovereignty, in many respects, lies more in a struggle against the United States than against Canada."

After this perspective got only 9 votes out of 250, Sandborn announced he was resigning from QS and stormed out of the convention. Generally, however, the discussions were notable for their high political level and respectful engagement with dissenting views. And the open discussion of differing perspectives contributed to the clarity of the debates and the comprehension of the issues.

Electoralism

If Québec solidaire was deeply involved in extraparliamentary struggles "in the streets" and not primarily a party "of the ballot boxes" – as the mantra goes – the membership might be better equipped to confront these issues, develop responses, and build the party, in light of their experiences, as a real anticapitalist, ecosocialist and independentist alternative. But QS has evolved since its founding as an essentially electoralist formation, focused on electing its candidates to the National Assembly. As a result, it participates very little as a party in Quebec's grassroots social and international solidarity movements or in the trade unions (although some unions have endorsed QS election candidates). Instead, the party tends to see itself as an electoral or parliamentary expression of these movements. The party has issued statements of support to some labour, environmental and feminist struggles. A few of its associations and committees

have authored briefs on specific issues for presentation to legislative committees. But the only centrally led campaigns are around elections.

A very positive development at the convention was the vote to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against apartheid Israel. (See “Québec solidaire supports pro-Palestine BDS campaign.”) However, there was no discussion of how the party might implement this campaign, the only such extra-parliamentary action that made it onto the agenda.

The result of this electoralism, it seems, is a certain demobilization of the membership and a stagnation in recruitment. The party’s national coordination committee reported that Québec solidaire has 5,000 paid-up members (that is, who have made a minimum commitment of \$5 annually), although there is a list of another 5,000 who are considered financial donors or sympathizers. Shortly after its founding, QS boasted close to 6,000 members. As an official party under Quebec’s election laws, Québec solidaire derives most of its funding, directly or indirectly, from the state although its share of the popular vote has yet to exceed 4% nationally.[8]

Of the 72 recognized constituency associations, one-third were reported to be “very active,” another third “less active” and the rest minimally active. The party has five full-time employees in addition to staff in Amir Khadir’s parliamentary office. It has a functioning national office and a web site that features leadership pronouncements and media releases, but no regular public media such as a newspaper or magazine. A summer training camp was attended by about 100 members.

One weakness that was very evident at the convention is that Québec solidaire is overwhelmingly white. Neither its membership nor its leading bodies reflect the diverse ethnic and immigrant composition of Quebec, although its one MNA, Amir Khadir, is an Iranian-Québécois representing one of the most ethnically diverse constituencies in Quebec. The party has adopted an open integrative approach to minorities. But clearly much more needs to be done. Active intervention in the unions and social movements around the perspective of an independent ecosocialist Quebec, if made the axis of Québec solidaire’s activity in the coming period, could help to build its influence among people of colour. Khadir’s success indicates the potential for advances along these lines.

These are some of the challenges facing Québec solidaire. This convention registered important progress, clarified a few key issues, and indicated some of the problems to be tackled by the party in the period ahead.

Richard Fidler is a Socialist Voice Contributing Editor. He writes the blog Life on the Left.

Footnotes

[1] For background, see these Socialist Voice articles

- Quebec Left’s Merger Plans Spark Discussion
- PQ’s Rightward Shift Opens Space for New Left Party in Quebec.

[2] See A ‘Québécois Nation’? Harper Fuels an Important Debate.

[3] In addition to calling for increased spending on public transit infrastructure, social housing, energy efficiency, childcare facilities, etc., the manifesto proposed fighting “excess profits” through encouraging worker co-ops and purchase of locally produced goods; curtailing government subsidies to businesses; countering increases in the cost of living by exempting more products from sales tax and raising the minimum wage to \$10.20 an hour; protecting pensions by reducing contribution limits on individual retirement savings plans (RRSPs) and increasing Quebec Pension Plan contribution limits, and getting the Quebec Caisse, which manages the QPP (and had just announced a loss of \$40 billion on the financial markets), to invest in “ecologically and socially responsible businesses.” None of these modest proposals conflicts with the federal regime. For a detailed critique (in French) of the manifesto from an anticapitalist perspective, see Marc Bonhomme, Discours anticapitaliste, plan anti-crise social-libéral.

[4] See What the Québec Debate on the Hijab Conceals. For background:

- The Kirpan Ruling: A Victory for Public School Integration
- Quebec’s Debate on ‘Reasonable Accommodation’ – A Socialist View.

[5] See the QS brief to the Commission, and the David-Khadir response to the Commission report, as well as page 271 of the English version of the Commission’s report.

[6] See La FFQ Prend Position – ni obligation religieuse, ni interdiction étatique.

[7] Québec solidaire leaders slammed the Supreme Court ruling. See Québécois Denounce Supreme Court Attack on Language Rights.

[8] Under Quebec election law, the government reimburses 50% of legal election expenses to every party obtaining at least 1% of the popular vote. In 2008, Québec solidaire, which ran 122 candidates in the general election, qualified for \$300,000 in government funding from this source. In addition, the government pays an additional amount to each party for day-to-day administration under a formula based on the number of registered voters. Québec solidaire received a further \$100,000 from this source. Of the party’s total annual revenues of \$1,045,000, therefore, about 40% was direct funding by the government. Membership fees accounted for only 3% (\$28,367). However, the party also raised about \$540,000, just over half of its total revenues, from individual contributors who are eligible for a tax credit of 75% of the first \$400 contributed; this amounts to an indirect subsidy from the state. Trade unions are prohibited from contributing to political parties. Source: Directeur général des élections du Québec.

Socialist Voice #383, December 8, 2009.

Ottawa Citizen Smears Progressive Activists

by **John Riddell**

It's not every day that the *Ottawa Citizen* mentions *Socialist Voice*, but on November 30 the pillar of the Canwest media empire broke its silence – and misquoted us as part of a smear attack on all progressive activists in Canada.

The page 3 article by Ian MacLeod, headlined “Activists, extremists primed for 2010,” aims to promote fear of possible protests against Israeli apartheid, the Winter Olympics, and the planned G8/G20 meetings in Ontario.

Most of the article is based on comments by one Tom Quiggin, described as an “Ottawa security intelligence specialist who has worked with police to analyze the extreme end of the activist movement.” Quiggin says that “Canadian anti-capitalist, anti-globalization, anti-war and anti-free trade groups are now in common cause with pro-Hezbollah and pro-Palestinian groups.” This sinister alliance, MacLeod and Quiggin predict, will take to the streets in Canada in 2010.

The only evidence offered of radical convergence with organizations Ottawa has branded as “terrorist” is a supposed quotation from *Socialist Voice*.

“Among delegates from other countries, the most authoritative voices were those of Hezbollah and Hamas,” *Socialist Voice* newsletter editor John Riddell wrote later. “Socialists in Canada need to strengthen their ties of solidarity with these vanguard fighters in the Middle East.”

The words in quotes did in fact appear in a *Socialist Voice* article in April 2007, “Cairo Conference Calls for World Resistance Against Imperialism,” but the first sentence appeared eight paragraphs after the second, and in a different context.

Here is the sentence about “strengthened ties,” in its original context:

“The success of the Cairo conference is an encouraging sign that a new pole of international leadership in anti-imperialist struggle may be emerging in the Middle East – analogous to what we see arising in Latin America under the impulse of Venezuela and Cuba. Socialists in Canada need to strengthen their ties of solidarity with these vanguard fighters in the Middle East.”

By tacking part of that paragraph onto an earlier sentence on a different subject, the *Ottawa Citizen* is blatantly misrepresenting what we wrote. The reference was to ties with the Cairo conference, not Hamas and Hezbollah.

As the article explained, the Cairo conference brought together a broad range of Middle Eastern anti-imperialist currents: Islamic, secular nationalist, and socialist.

Among the 2,000 participants in this open conference were representatives of Hezbollah, one of Lebanon's strongest political parties, and of Hamas, the democratically elected government of occupied Palestine. These organizations' resistance to Israel's murderous attacks has earned them official designation as "terrorist" by the Canadian government.

Hamas is listed by Public Safety Canada as "terrorist" because it "uses political and violent means to pursue the goal of establishing an Islamic Palestinian state in Israel." On the face of it, this description does not correspond to the conduct of Hamas as the democratically elected government in the Gaza Strip, seeking to defend its people against the overwhelming violence of Israel's siege and military assaults.

Nor is it clear why the pursuit of a Palestinian state – a declared goal of the Canadian government – is a threat to the Canadian people.

Branding Hamas and Hezbollah "terrorist," however, obstructs objective consideration of these issues.

The "terrorist" ban makes it illegal to knowingly contribute, directly or indirectly, to enhancing the ability of a listed organization to carry out terrorist activity.

This provision is applied so broadly as to prevent Hamas from presenting its views in Canada, or for anyone to speak on its behalf. The chilling effect is evident in the continuing fuss over the 2007 Cairo conference.

That conference was condemned in the media because someone from Hamas was present. Canadians were threatened with "police attention" for attending a conference where a member of Hamas was present, and in at least one case, a Canadian resident was hauled before an immigration officer and challenged for his acquaintance with a Canadian who had attended the Cairo conference also attended by a Hamas member.

Such a pattern of intimidation and guilt by association is a genuine threat to freedom of speech in this country.

Agenda for 2010

Now, by promoting the false charge that Canada's protest groups are allied with Hamas and Hezbollah, the police and their media allies at CanWest are trying to prepare the ground for "anti-terrorist" repression against protest actions in 2010.

Ottawa gave us a taste of its agenda for 2010 on November 25, when U.S. radical reporter Amy Goodman, host of the popular *Democracy Now* program, was detained by Canada Border Service agents for more than 90 minutes at the Douglas border crossing in British Columbia, while on her way to a scheduled meeting at a Vancouver public library. The agents grilled her as to what she planned to say in Canada, on suspicion that she would make critical remarks regarding the coming Winter Olympics. She was ultimately permitted to enter the country, but only on condition that she leave within 48 hours.

Clearly, the right of free speech and assembly will be under attack in British Columbia in February.

We can expect similar efforts to undermine Israeli Apartheid Week, March 1-7, and to obstruct the expression of dissident views during the planned G8 and G20 governmental summits in Ontario in June.

United efforts are needed to ensure that these actions take place without police disruption. All supporters of democratic rights must respond firmly to every attack on free speech, including the *Ottawa Citizen* smears.

John Riddell is an editor of Socialist Voice. The Ottawa Citizen has not responded to his letter demanding a retraction.

Socialist Voice #384, December 10, 2009

Protests Condemn Canada's Climate Crimes

by **Roger Annis**

“Climate Inaction Costs Lives.” That’s the message that activists of the Greenpeace organization delivered during a spectacular protest action in Ottawa, Canada on December 7, the opening day of the United Nations’ climate conference in Copenhagen.

Nineteen activists scaled the roof of Canada’s Parliament building and unfurled banners that condemned the inaction of the country’s Conservative Party government and the largest opposition party, the Liberals. Police arrested twenty people — nineteen who were on the roof and one who was on the ground. They will face criminal charges of public mischief.

Canada is one of the largest per capita emitters of greenhouse gasses in the world. The tar sands extraction projects in the province of Alberta are the largest single source of carbon pollution in the world. This has led climate change campaigner George Monbiot to label Canada a “corrupt petrol state.”

In an extraordinary commentary published in Canada’s largest circulation national daily, the *Globe and Mail* on December 5, Monbiot condemned Canada’s role in sabotaging global climate talks. Three days later, he told CBC Radio’s *As It Happens* that Canada has “systematically sabotaged” the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 that aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and has more recently sabotaged the creation of a new protocol at Copenhagen to take account of new and alarming trends in the biosphere.

Canada, Monbiot said, has “gone out of its way to obstruct meetings aimed at creating a new and stronger protocol to deal with climate change.”

Greenpeace echoed these charges in its statement during the December 5 action. While hanging from the roof of the Parliament building, Greenpeace climate and energy campaigner Mike Hudema said,

“Harper and Ignatieff [leaders of the governing Conservatives and opposition Liberals, respectively] are failing to take seriously the staggering human tragedy of the climate crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people die every year and millions more are displaced because Canada and other developed countries don’t take action on climate change. The Global Humanitarian Forum warns that this is just the beginning of the human tragedy of climate chaos.”

Monbiot’s commentary in the *Globe* pointed, importantly, to the devastating consequences of the Tar Sands for the estimated 20,000 Indigenous peoples who live in the vast geographic area being despoiled by the projects. He wrote,

“No one who has seen images of the oil-sands operations can quite believe what Canada is doing to its own land. No one can quite believe that this prosperous country is treating

its aboriginal peoples like Nigeria treats the Ogoni of the Niger Delta. The oil sands are turning Canada into a harder, crueler place.”

Greenpeace is calling for the Alberta tar sands projects to be shut down. That’s a very different message than the one presented by Canada’s pro-capitalist Green Party, the trade union-supported New Democratic Party, and by most environmental NGOs. They call for a “moratorium” on future tar sands projects, which would leave untouched the massive, multi-billion projects already producing the dirty oil or that will come on stream in years ahead.

During a recent speaking tour to Canada, climate campaigner Al Gore also called for a shutdown of the Tar Sands.

Two other oil and natural gas-rich Canadian provinces – British Columbia and Saskatchewan – are similarly proceeding headlong into huge, “unconventional” (read dirty) oil and natural gas developments.

The bulk of dirty oil and gas produced in Canada is sold to the industrial/military complex in the United States.

Roger Annis is an aerospace worker in Vancouver and an editor of Socialist Voice.

Socialist Voice #385, December 13, 2009

Bolivia: Morales Sweeps General Elections

Introduction by Richard Fidler

In Bolivia's December 6 general election the governing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS-IPSP), headed by President Evo Morales, won a resounding victory, with 63.46% of the votes. The vote for its nearest rival, the right-wing PPB-Convergencia headed by Manfred Reyes Villa, was 27.15%.

Perhaps even more important, the MAS candidates won a two-thirds majority in both the Senate and the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, which will enable the government to proceed with important legislation implementing key provisions of the new Constitution ratified in January of this year. The MAS will have 25 of the 36 Senators and 90 of the 130 deputies. The MAS vote increased significantly even in some bastions of the right wing, in Santa Cruz, Pando and Beni departments.

In a parallel referendum held consecutively, a majority vote for indigenous autonomy was registered in at least 8 of the 12 municipalities.

In the following article, written shortly after the election, the Argentine socialist Atilio Boron analyzes the significance of the MAS election victory with particular reference to its implications for the left in the countries neighboring Bolivia, the "Southern Cone" comprising Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile.

When he is sworn in for his second term of office, on January 22, Evo Morales will be unveiling some 15 bills that are major components of his program in the Legislative Assembly in the coming year. They include a vast overhaul of the state apparatus through provisions on indigenous and regional autonomy and a new constitutional tribunal; establishment of universal medical insurance; an agrarian reform law providing for expropriation of unused lands deemed appropriate for agricultural use; and anti-corruption laws that will authorize investigations of major private fortunes currently evading taxation.

WHY DID EVO WIN?

by Atilio A. Boron (*Rebelión*, December 8, 2009)

A week ago we were celebrating the triumph of Pepe Mujica in Uruguay. Today we have renewed, and more profound reasons, to celebrate the extraordinary victory of Evo Morales. As the Bolivian political analyst Hugo Moldiz Mercado pointed out some time ago, the convincing verdict of the ballot boxes marks at least three extremely important milestones in the history of Bolivia: (a) Evo is the first president democratically re-elected in two successive terms; (b) he is also the first to improve his percentage of votes from his initial electoral victory: from 53.7% to the present 63.3%; and (c) he is the first to obtain an overwhelming majority in the Plurinational

Legislative Assembly. Moreover, although we do not yet have the definitive voting results, it is almost certain that Evo will obtain the two thirds in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies that would allow him to appoint judicial authorities and apply the new Constitution without opposition. All of this makes him, from the institutional standpoint, the most powerful president in Bolivia's tumultuous history. And a president who is committed to the construction of a socialist future for his country.

Obviously, these facts will not prevent Washington from repeating its well-known criticisms about the "defective institutional quality" of Bolivian democracy, Evo's "populism" and the necessity to improve the political functioning of the country in order to guarantee the popular will, as for example they are doing in Colombia. In that country alone, some 70 supporters of President Álvaro Uribe among the members of parliament are being investigated by the Supreme Court for their alleged links with the paramilitaries, and 30 of them have already been given jail sentences. Four million persons displaced by the armed conflict, a surge in drug trafficking and paramilitary activity under official protection and with Washington's acquiescence, the systematic violation of human rights, submission of national sovereignty to the United States through a secretly negotiated treaty that conceded the installation of seven U.S. military bases in Colombian territory, and the fraudulent manipulation of the process to re-elect President Uribe, are all features of a democracy of high "institutional quality" that are no cause for the least concern by the self-styled custodians of democracy in the United States.

The Bolivian leader's performance is impressive. He obtained an overwhelming triumph in the convening of the Constituent Assembly, in July 2006, which would establish the institutional foundations of the future Plurinational State. He won another crushing victory in August 2008 (67%) in the Recall Referendum forced on him by the opposition-controlled Senate with the openly professed objective of overthrowing him. In January 2009, 62% of the voters approved the new Political Constitution of the State, and just a few hours ago he obtained a further plebiscitary ratification by almost two thirds of the electorate. What lies behind this impressively successful electoral machine — indestructible notwithstanding the erosion of four years of administration, the obstacles imposed by the National Electoral Court, the hostility of the United States, numerous campaigns of destabilization, attempted coups d'état, separatist threats and assassination plots?

This is a government that has fulfilled its election promises and accordingly has developed an active social policy that has won it the indelible gratitude of its people: the Bono Juancito Pinto [a family allowance] that is given to more than a million children; the Renta Dignidad, a universal [pension] program for all Bolivians over the age of 60 who lack another source of income; and the Bono Juana Azurduy, a payment to pregnant mothers. A government that has eradicated illiteracy, applying the Cuban "Yo Sí Puedo" methodology that taught more than a million and a half persons to read and write in about two years, with the result that on December 20, 2008, UNESCO (not Evo's supporters) declared Bolivia a territory free of illiteracy. This is an extraordinary achievement for a country that has suffered an age-old history of oppression and

exploitation, subjected to heartbreaking poverty by its ruling classes and their imperial friends despite the enormous wealth it retains in its depths, and which now, with Evo's government, is being recovered and placed in the service of the people. On the other hand, the internationalist solidarity of Cuba and Venezuela has also allowed the construction of numerous hospitals and medical centres, while thousands of persons are recovering their vision thanks to Operation Milagro [Miracle]. Major advances are being registered in the area of agrarian reform — about a half-million hectares of land have been transferred to the hands of the farmers — and in the promised recovery of the basic oil and gas resources, which at the time provoked some nervousness among its neighbours, especially Brazil, more concerned with guaranteeing the profitability of Petrobras than in cooperating with Evo's political agenda. Lastly, the careful handling of macro-economics has enabled Bolivia, for the first time in its history, to count on significant reserves, an estimated ten billion dollars, and a tax bonanza that, combined with the collaboration of Venezuela under the ALBA agreements, has enabled Morales to carry out many infrastructural projects in the municipalities and to finance his ambitious social agenda.

Of course, many matters are still pending, and not everything that has been done is exempt from criticism. In a recent column Pablo Stefanoni, editor of the Bolivian edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, warned of the unstable coexistence between “an eco-communitarian discourse in international forums and a developmentalist sermonizing without much nuance in the domestic context”. Although this tension exists, it must be acknowledged that Evo's eco-communitarian vocation amply transcends the level of his arguments in international forums: his commitment to Mother Earth, the Pachamama, and the original peoples is sincere and effective and is a milestone in the history of Our America. Of course, the focus on natural resources extraction in his pattern of development is undeniable, but also inevitable given the brutally predatory characteristics that capitalist accumulation has assumed in Bolivia. It is completely unreal to think that overnight the people's government could sustain an alternative model of development setting aside the exploitation of the country's immense mineral and energy resources. Bolivia does not have the latitude, at least for now, that Ireland or Finland had in their day. But it would be unfair to overlook the fact that the orientation of its economic model and its strong distributionist content clearly separates it from other experiences under way in the Southern Cone. Not to mention Evo's declared intention to move ahead with the risky — and thus slow and conflictual — construction of a renewed socialism, something that has nothing to do with the nebulous “Andean-Amazonian capitalism” that some persist in presenting as an inexorable and implausible antechamber of socialism.

All these achievements, combined with his absolute personal integrity and a Spartan-like day-to-day routine (that contrasts favourably with the exaggerated fortunes and high consumption patterns exhibited by other “progressive” leaders and politicians in the region) have made Evo a leader endowed with a formidable personal charisma that enables him to beat any rival who dares to challenge him in the electoral arena. But in addition, his constant concern to raise consciousness, mobilize and organize his social base — stepping outside the discredited bureaucratic apparatuses which, like those in Argentina, Brazil and Chile, do not mobilize or

raise the consciousness of anyone — not only satisfies the inescapable need to construct a subjectivity that is appropriate to struggles for socialism but also, at the same time, constitutes a decisive asset when it comes to prevailing in the electoral arena. The forces of the suffering “centre-left” of the Southern Cone, which are looking to an unpromising political future in view of the growth of the right-wing fuelled by their own resigned acceptance of possibilism, would be well advised to note the brilliant lesson offered by Evo’s triumph in the elections of last Sunday. A lesson which demonstrates that, faced with the danger of restored domination of the right, the only possible alternative is the radicalization of the processes of transformation under way. Defeated on the electoral terrain, the right will redouble its offensive in the many scenarios of the class struggle. It would be suicidal to imagine that they will bow out without a battle in the face of an electoral setback. Let us hope that this lesson is learned.

A shorter version of this article was published in Página/12 on December 7, 2009. Translation by Richard Fidler

Socialist Voice #386, December 14, 2009

Canada: Afghan torture scandal deepens

by **Roger Annis**

The Canadian government's moral case for waging war in Afghanistan is collapsing with astonishing speed. Its clumsy effort to deny and cover up the torture and abuse of Afghans detained by Canadian and other NATO forces has exploded in its face.

As reported in a previous *Socialist Voice* article, on November 18, Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin told the Standing Committee on National Defence of the Canadian Parliament that in 2006 and 2007 Canadian troops knowingly turned Afghan civilians over to the Afghan National Police for interrogation and torture. Soldiers or diplomats who disagreed with the policy and spoke out were ignored or silenced. Colvin's testimony touched off a political firestorm.

Denial and stonewalling

On December 7, the *Globe and Mail* published the field notes of Canadian officers concerning one detainee who had been turned over to Afghan authorities in June, 2006 and then was taken back into Canadian custody after suffering a brutal beating. The officer wrote, "We then photographed the individual prior to handing him over, to ensure that *if the Afghan National Police did assault him, as has happened in the past*, we would have a visual record of his condition." (Emphasis in *Globe* article.)

As the notes reveal, it was common knowledge among Canadian soldiers that the captives they "rendered" to their Afghan allies were routinely abused and tortured.

The story is significant because the government and military have flatly denied Colvin's testimony, going so far as to label him a "dupe of the Taliban." But the denials have fallen flat.

On December 8, the current chief of staff of the Canadian armed forces, General Walter Natynczyk, appeared before the Standing Committee and repudiated the June 2006 field report, saying his troops were mistaken in believing that they were responsible for the detainee's condition. The Canadians were on a joint patrol with Afghan forces, the general argued, so he was an Afghan detainee over whom the Canadians had no responsibility.

Less than 24 hours later, Natynczyk hastily convened a press conference to say that he was mistaken. "*I did not have this information* [his officer's report] in May of 2007 nor yesterday," reported the *Globe* on page one the next day. (Emphasis in *Globe* article.)

The newspaper headlined the story, "In Command, In the Dark."

The focus on this single case by the mainstream press and opposition political parties leaves the impression that the whole controversy boils down to it alone. In reality, Colvin reported routine transfers of many Afghans, and his was only the most recent such revelation.

The *Globe* shook Canada's Afghan war policy in April, 2007 when it published a series of articles detailing multiple cases of detainee abuse. After a botched attempt to deny the evidence, the Conservative government of the time announced it had reached yet another deal with Afghan authorities to ensure proper treatment of detainees. "This issue [Colvin's revelations] was dealt with 2, 3, 4 years ago," said Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently.

Now the *Globe and Mail* reveals in a December 14 front page story that, "An unknown number of Taliban insurgents captured by Canadians and turned over to Afghanistan's secret police are unaccounted for—a serious violation of the Harper government's "improved" detainee-transfer agreement..."

Defying Parliament and courts

Far from backing down after Natynczyk's public humiliation, the government is taking its obstruction of any inquiry into the scandal to new heights. It has blocked investigation by its own Military Police Complaints Commission by refusing to give it relevant diplomatic reports and correspondence as well as military reports. It has fired Peter Tinsley, the head of the commission and refused to replace him, effectively bringing the MPCC's work to a halt.

The government is defying Parliament itself. On December 10, the House of Commons voted 145 to 143 to demand that the government release the relevant diplomatic papers surrounding the scandal. The Harper government has refused. Parliament is now adjourned until January and it's not clear if or when the opposition parties will take action to force compliance.

As if the government didn't have enough critics already, its smear attacks on Richard Colvin have met with an anguished response in the foreign service. A total of 111 (and counting) former Canadian ambassadors have signed an extraordinary public statement condemning the government's attacks. They argue that diplomats must be free to speak their minds without fear of retribution or public dress-down.

The opposition parties

A political scandal of this character and scope should give a boost to any political party that opposes Canada's war in Afghanistan. Sadly, there is no such party in the Parliament. The opposition Bloc Québécois and New Democratic Party have, in the past, voiced opposition to the war and Canada's aggressive role. They have now fallen largely silent. Neither party has made the slightest criticism of the recently-announced escalation of the war in Afghanistan by U.S. President Barak Obama.

The Bloc and the NDP are calling for a public inquiry into the latest revelations of detainee abuse. But they have ducked any criticism of the war itself or the conduct of the Canadian military, saying that *it's all the fault of the political leaders*.

Their critique is so weak that the pro-war Liberal Party is able to pose as the lead voice in the call for a public inquiry. Canada joined the assault on Afghanistan in 2002 and escalated it significantly in late 2005, both times under a Liberal government.

Another critic of the war who is simultaneously loyal to the military and political institutions prosecuting it is Scott Taylor, publisher of *Esprit de Corps* magazine, which has a wide readership in the Canadian military. He calls Afghanistan a “quagmire” for NATO forces and says that Canada is propping up a “corrupt regime.” He wants a public inquiry where the military can come forward to explain its detainee policy and listen to proposals to change it. “Then we can put all this behind us,” he told CBC Radio on December 10.

Forget, for one moment, about detainee abuse. What about the thousands of Afghans who have died, and continue to die, as a result of the NATO war in their homeland – from indiscriminate bombings, chance encounters with foreign troops, forced dislocations or hunger and disease?

The last inquiry to take place into the conduct of the Canadian military looked into allegations of torture and abuse of prisoners it captured in Somalia in the early 1990s. The inquiry was shut down by a Liberal government when its line of questioning reached too far up the political and military chain of command.

Roger Annis is an aerospace worker in Vancouver and an editor of Socialist Voice.

Socialist Voice #387, December 14, 2009

Copenhagen: People vs. Polluters

Introduction by Ian Angus

On December 12, 100,000 people marched through the streets of Copenhagen: the largest climate protest in history demanded immediate action to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Demonstrators chanted “Make love, not CO2,” and “Change the system, not the planet.” A group of young Canadians participated in this and other actions, calling on the Canadian government to shut down the Alberta Tar Sands.

At a separate demonstration organized by alleged anarchists, Danish police arbitrarily arrested and detained about 1,000 activists. Almost all of those arrested were released without charge by the following morning.

Demonstrations, rallies and vigils were held in 131 other countries as well. The largest outside of Denmark were in Australia, where 15,000 people took part in “Walks Against Warming” in each of Sydney and Perth, and thousands more marched in other cities.

The actions were organized to coincide with the UN climate change negotiations now underway in Copenhagen. The following article, from the U.S. newspaper *Socialist Worker*, looks at why, for all their talk and promises, capitalist politicians are resisting any effective action against climate change.

THE PEOPLE VS. THE POLLUTERS

by Chris Williams

We have reached the deadline and there is no going back. Now is the time to capture the moment and conclude a truly ambitious global deal. This is our chance. If we miss this opportunity, we will not get a better one.”

So said Connie Hedegaard—former Danish climate minister and president of the two-week climate summit in Copenhagen—on December 7.

One wonders if the “ambitious global deal” she was thinking of was the one leaked to the *Guardian* newspaper one day later that revealed the extent of backroom deals already being concocted by her own government, the U.S. and the UK.

The document sets out a plan to squeeze developing countries by shifting the costs of moving to a low-carbon future disproportionately onto the countries of the Global South, those least responsible for causing the problem in the first place. Not only that, but the draft proposal ices out UN oversight of any future treaty in favor of that well-known paradigm of environmental responsibility, the World Bank.

In other words, the bandits who have robbed the South blind for 400 years—and have created the climate crisis over the last 250—now want to enshrine banditry into the treaty to save the planet.

Meanwhile, Australian climate ambassador Louise Hand declared that “Copenhagen can’t be a business-as-usual outcome.” Perhaps she missed the vote, but this is precisely what representatives of her own parliament just voted for—by refusing to pass legislation that would have set binding targets for emissions control through the so-called cap and trade scheme.

At the other end of the power spectrum, the tiny nation of Tuvalu, a collection of nine small islands in the South Pacific—a country unlikely to have a very long future if climate change continues along its same course—brought the conference to a rancorous halt with a desperate plea for a binding agreement.

Ian Fry, an official with Tuvalu’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, said that the talks should end December 18 with a new set of commitments under the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 agreement that was aimed at reducing greenhouse gases, plus another agreement that finally includes the U.S., which is not part of Kyoto.

“Being one of the most vulnerable countries in the world, our future rests on the outcome of this meeting,” Fry said. “We are here to seal the deal. We are here to commit to a legally binding agreement that will guarantee the future of Tuvalu and the future of millions of people around the world...The time for procrastination is over. It is time to deliver.”

Unfortunately for the 10,000 Tuvaluans, the people who are busily making decisions about their destiny have shown themselves completely uninterested in their fate—or that of much of the rest of the planet.

Members of the U.S. delegation in Copenhagen have already made it abundantly clear that they will refuse any deal that looks even remotely like Kyoto. Further, U.S. delegate will oppose any agreement that doesn’t load responsibilities onto developing countries, particularly China and India.

Todd Stern, the top State Department climate envoy, said immediately after arriving in Copenhagen that President Barack Obama has no plans to sign onto the 1997 Kyoto accord. The only parts of Kyoto that the U.S. would consider incorporating into a new treaty are the use of offsets and market-based trading systems, measures that have proven ineffectual—except at making money for carbon traders. “We’re not going to do Kyoto, and we’re not going to do something that’s Kyoto with another name,” said Stern.

So why has Copenhagen collapsed in fractious recriminations even before the conference has truly begun—even before tens of thousands of protesters turned out for demonstrations planned to start this weekend?

It was an outcome fully predicted by Michael Levi, senior fellow for energy and the environment at the Council on Foreign Relations, in an article he wrote for the September-October issue of the

journal *Foreign Affairs*, a mouthpiece for the more forward-thinking sections of the U.S. ruling class.

Levi gave a succinct picture of what to expect due to the competing imperial interests at play in Copenhagen:

“The odds of signing a comprehensive treaty in December are vanishingly small. And even reaching such a deal the following year would be an extraordinary challenge, given the domestic political constraints in Washington and in other capitals that make such an agreement difficult to negotiate and ratify.”

Even were a deal to be struck, Levi adds that a global agreement on paper is “only half the problem.” That’s because there’s no international ability for enforcement:

“Even a blockbuster deal in which every country signed up to binding emissions caps would come nowhere near close to guaranteeing success, since the world has few useful options for enforcing commitments to slash emissions short of punitive trade sanctions or similarly unpalatable penalties.”

A comprehensive international treaty that actually addresses the issue of climate change and will lead to meaningful and swift reductions in carbon dioxide emissions is, in fact, impossible for several structural and systemic reasons.

First, all countries are beholden to a world economy that essentially revolves around a single natural resource: oil. No capitalist entity, nor the individual nation-states that facilitate their global operations, can walk away from \$13 trillion in investments that are tied directly to the oil extraction industry.

It isn’t just about oil, but all of the associated industries and infrastructure that have been built up over the last 100 years of global economic development. All of the car and truck companies, road and pipeline construction corporations, the asphalt, rubber, electricity, fertilizer and petrochemical companies, and steel manufacturers are inseparably connected to fossil-fuel extraction and refining. The location and growth of large cities and ports the world over are completely bound up with the oil industry.

What’s more, nine of the 10 largest corporations on earth, with turnover in the hundreds of billions of dollars, make their money from oil-related activities. To cut the oil-lubricated umbilical cord is to sever their relationship to profit, with catastrophic consequences for the parent company.

To drag down even one of these companies is unthinkable. Look at how the Obama administration bailed out the Detroit auto companies—rather than nationalize them and force them to reorganize and manufacture useful and more environmentally friendly products like wind turbines and trains.

These oil corporations and the politicians they bankroll, therefore, prefer to mortgage the long-term future of the planet to some amorphous hope in market-based solutions such as carbon

trading. They want to pump money into so-called “clean coal,” revive supposedly “environmentally friendly” nuclear power and develop socially and ecologically destructive agro-fuels like ethanol.

While none of these measures offer a real solution to climate change, business prefers to pursue them rather than seriously contemplate the demise of short-term corporate profits—even if, in the long run, they manage to turn the planet into a sun-ravaged hothouse.

If business is determined to pursue short-term profits at the cost of long-term ecocide, than governments will be compelled to support those efforts. Each country has to protect and, where possible, extend the influence and competitive advantage of its own national corporations. Every political, economic, military and diplomatic lever must be pulled to further those interests.

This dynamic naturally pits nation against nation as they squabble over the details and thrash out compromises based on the balance of world power, rather than a rational and objective appraisal of what’s needed.

The Copenhagen conference is no different. The UN meeting and similar international conferences merely represent the neutral gathering points for each round of arm-twisting. National emissaries will maneuver to consolidate old positions of power, or secure new ground in the never-ending economic and political battle for supremacy—all shrouded in the polite language appropriate to diplomatic discourse in civilized society.

All this makes a meaningful agreement almost impossible, as every country seeks to angle for its own advantage—and insert escape clauses and exclusions that are large enough to drive a fleet of Hummers through.

Meanwhile, there is a clear schism between the competing interests of the developed and developing world, especially as the U.S., European Union and Japan try to place the blame for the lack of progress on rising powers China and India.

This is one of the fault lines that helped to drag down the World Trade Organization talks 10 years ago in Seattle. The parallels with Copenhagen, down to the mood to break up and disrupt the conference with mass civil disobedience by protesters kept out by barbed wire and water cannon, grows greater with every day.

However, as the world-renowned environmental activist and author Vandana Shiva makes clear in her book *Soil Not Oil*, the primary schism isn’t between rich countries and poor countries:

“It is between corporate industry in the North, and farmers, indigenous people and vulnerable communities. Corporations in the North and South have now formed partnerships, and the corporations in the South must first pollute and then reduce pollution to get credits.”

But what makes an agreement on climate change different—and more difficult to achieve—than a treaty on trade is that it would limit corporations’ freedom to ransack and plunder the planet with impunity. All countries would have to enact an international treaty equally. Otherwise, the

countries that unilaterally put in place environmental legislation will be “unfairly disadvantaged”—and will lose out in the competitive race to make the most money in the shortest possible time.

Hence there’s an extra complication with conferences that seek to address global warming. Political leaders know they need to show up and make polite noises to divert attention and public pressure from more unpalatable options. Some of them even realize they need to do something real to avoid climate disaster.

But none of these leaders are really committed to the process, whatever fine words of planetary platitudes flow from their mouths. This is because real solutions through government regulation are all anathema to capitalism. They place restrictions on markets and profits that are deemed unacceptable.

There’s an important contradiction here. Part of the function of the state is to counter-balance the competing short-term interests of individual corporations, and look to the longer-term needs of the whole national commercial enterprise. The state is responsible for enabling capital to operate in the most profit-friendly environment possible, and hence will seek to ensure that adequate infrastructure exists for transportation purposes to get workers to their jobs and transport goods to markets.

This relationship between the state and capital is in itself an impediment to any agreement on climate change. But the obstacles are still greater after the ideological assault on social spending and “big government” for the last 30 years. Since addressing the roots of climate change means a frontal assault on the citadels of capitalist power, the state is paralyzed by the environmental crisis.

Furthermore, it’s in the economic interests of the major corporations to ensure that the South develops a car culture and fossil-fuel-intensive economy. Northern markets for autos, for example, are at saturation point. By contrast, Southern markets offer a bonanza of expanding markets—especially now that an Indian company has designed small cars such as the Nano that sell for \$2,500-\$3,000.

Along with an expanding auto market comes the need for road expansion and increased manufacture of steel, aluminum, concrete and rubber. All this is to the detriment of local cultures, ecologies and quality of life as public transportation is neglected—and, of course, the global environment.

Thus, the best that can be hoped for in Copenhagen is a partial, piecemeal plan that’s implemented only when it’s far too late to avoid climate catastrophe. Which is why James Hansen, head of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies at Columbia University and one of the world’s leading climate scientists, has said that the collapse of the talks is the best possible outcome.

It's impossible for even supposedly environmentally conscious governments to develop and implement a real plan. To do so would require acknowledgement of the deep systemic problems that go to the very root of the entire social system—and a reorientation of social priorities toward workers, peasants and farmers and the earth we depend on.

That's why it's not viable to win ecological or climate justice without social justice. The inequality and exploitation that lies at the heart of capitalism ravages humans and the planet in the interests of a tiny minority hell-bent on reshaping the planet in the service of profit. To be a climate justice activist therefore necessarily makes you a social justice activist in equal measure.

In any case, the negotiations in Copenhagen are already in danger of collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions. The hope is that protesters outside the meeting rooms can help drag the whole mess down—so we can start focusing on real solutions instead.