

Labour solitudes: Quebec labour, free trade, and Canadian labour politics

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Introduction

On September 15, 1987, the Quebec Coalition Against Free Trade, composed of all the principal Quebec labour organisations as well as the United Farmers' Union, presented its brief to the Quebec Parliamentary Commission holding hearings on the proposed Canada–US Free Trade Agreement. In it, the Coalition spoke of its 'ferocious opposition to' and the 'disastrous consequences of' free trade (Coalition québécoise, 1987). It called on all like-minded organisations and individuals to join in the movement to stop the US–Canadian deal. The Coalition spoke for the Quebec labour movement as a whole on the question of the FTA.

Five years later, on December 8, 1992, the group, now renamed the Quebec Coalition on Trilateral Negotiations, still representing the labour movement (minus the farmers but now joined by a wide range of community and international cooperation organisations)¹ presented its brief to the Committee of the Canadian Parliament holding hearings on NAFTA. However, this time the Coalition stated itself not at all opposed to the expansion and deepening of economic exchanges with Mexico, but opposed to NAFTA in its currently proposed form (Coalition québécoise, 1992).

Emphasis matters. With a slight shift of emphasis, the Quebec Coalition's 1992 brief signalled that Quebec labour was ready to make a basic break with tradition and change in strategy: it was ready not only to change the unconditional opposition to free trade it had espoused since the struggle against the original FTA in 1987 and 1988, but also to break with the position it had shared with the English Canadian labour movement and its labour and community coalition, the Action Canada Network. From 1992 on, Quebec labour would focus on working within NAFTA, rather than calling for its repeal—quite a different strategic option from that which the English Canadian labour movement is pursuing.

What had changed between 1987 and 1992? In the discussion which follows I will argue that this shift of position by Quebec labour on continental economic

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¹ This coalition was composed of the three principal trade union confederations: *la Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec*, (CEQ), *la Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN), and *la Fédération des travailleuses et travailleurs du Québec* (FTQ); *l'Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale* (AQOCI); and several of AQOCI's members, including CUSO-Quebec and *Développement et paix*.

integration, far from being simply tactical, signalled (1) the renewed primacy which Quebec unions accorded to the campaign for Quebec independence, (2) a profound transformation of Quebec labour's attitude towards capitalism and labour-management relations, and (3) the beginnings of Quebec labour's articulation of a new and independent place for itself within the North American economy, autonomous vis-à-vis the Canadian labour movement, if not vis-à-vis Quebec capital. This shift—from opposing free trade and seeking its abrogation, to seeking to create multilateral alliances and strategic opportunities within NAFTA—has also had profound impact on the relationship between the English Canadian and the Quebec labour movements in international affairs, on labour politics in Canada, and on the ability of each of the two labour movements to forge alliances in the US and in Mexico with progressive and labour groups. This paper begins by providing some context for Quebec labour, arguably the last social movement organising workers in North America. It then moves on to analyse the changing class bases for Quebec nationalism, and the pressures this placed on labour politics. The next section traces the stages in the shift in Quebec labour's position on free trade, from the bilateral agreement of the 1980s to the trilateral agreement of 1992. The final section discusses the implications of Quebec labour's independent path for Canadian labour politics, and for the future relationship of Quebec labour to union movements throughout the North American continent.

Quebec labour in context

Canadians have come to take for granted that Quebec, whose population is 82% French-speaking, is in most important ways a separate society, separated from the rest of (English) Canada by language, by culture, by social institutions, and by its self-definition of apartness and powerlessness. The apartness of Quebec civil society from the rest of Canada is part reality, part illusion, and part conscious political choice (see, e.g., Rioux, 1969). Its historical roots go back to the eighteenth century. Since then, the sense of separateness and powerlessness, the urgency of cultural survival for an island of French speakers in a North American sea of English speakers, has been reinforced and reinterpreted by the principal Quebec institutions such as the Quebec government, the Catholic Church, the school system, the media, and the trade unions. It has also, in some historical circumstances, been reinforced by parts of the English Canadian political and economic elite (Ryerson, 1968; Brunet, 1969; Rioux, 1969).

As might be imagined, the separateness of Quebec within the Canadian federation is not without its complexities and its contradictions. It has led to some peculiar and volatile institutional arrangements, to say nothing of strange strategic bedfellows. For these reasons, when we try to explain why the unions in Quebec and in the rest of Canada are taking divergent positions concerning NAFTA, it becomes realistic to identify two labour movements, partly overlapping and partly separate.

It is relatively easy to identify the Canadian labour movement: its major component is the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), which has provincial federations of labour in all provinces including Quebec. Virtually all large industrial and tertiary sector unions are affiliated to it, both those which have members only

in Canada and those which are Canadian 'regions' of US-based unions. Union density is relatively steady at 37%, and more than two-thirds of unionised workers in Canada belong to the CLC. In the past 30 years, the CLC has come to be, overwhelmingly, the Canadian peak council, and a movement towards the 'nationalist reappropriation' of Canadian labour, beginning in the late 1970s, has played a central role in legitimising the CLC: in 1964, 71% of Canadian unionists belonged to Canadian branches of US unions. Today, less than 30% do. The two largest components of the CLC are those public sector unions which have membership only in Canada and the 'newly-Canadian' industrial unions which seceded from a US 'parent' union sometime during the past 15 years.¹

The nationalist reappropriation of the Canadian labour movement has not been without fallout, however. Within the CLC itself, ideological debates often divided along national-international (i.e., Canadian-only versus US-affiliated) union lines, and that division is important in the CLC's continuing inability to centralise power within its own offices. In addition, the nationalism of the CLC provoked the secession of those building trades unions which continued to give priority to their US links. They formed the Canadian Federation of Labour in the early 1980s, now a constant but bit player on the Canadian labour stage. The Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), founded originally in the years of a post-war settlement to liberate the Canadian union movement from US control, continues its separate existence but is in terminal decline. Its local unions have increasingly chosen to merge with nationalist Canadian unions within the CLC. To complete the portrait of the Canadian labour movement, there is a scattering of independent unions such as teachers' associations and nurses' unions, miners, aluminium workers, and others. In the past 10 years, several important independent unions such as the Teamsters have affiliated to the CLC. At the same time, a wave of union mergers has swept the industrial sector of CLC-affiliated unions, while in the private services sectors, the traditional definition of jurisdictions has all but dissolved, leading to increased competition and raiding.²

¹ On the relationship between nationalism, militancy, and trade union structure, see Gindin (1989) and Yates (1990).

² In Canada, as in a number of other industrialised economies experiencing deindustrialisation and the mushroom growth of the under-unionised private service sector, the traditional jurisdictions are dissolving. Most of the large, heavy-industry-based manufacturing unions have reacted to the shrinkage of employment in their original jurisdictions by merging with smaller unions and branching out into organising in sectors where unionism has been weak, complaisant, or lazy. The United Steelworkers and the Canadian Autoworkers, for example, have undergone a wave of recent mergers, e.g., the International Association of Machinists is currently merging into the Steelworkers. (A similar merger in the US includes the Autoworkers. The Canadian Autoworkers have merged with the United Electrical Workers, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and General Workers, and the Canadian Association of Industrial Mechanical and Allied Workers. The Steelworkers in Canada have merged with the Retail, Wholesale and Distributive Store Employees, although in the US the RWDSU merged with the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union.

In addition to mergers, the Steelworkers and the Autoworkers have begun serious organising in the hotel, restaurant, casino, fast-food, taxi, and security sectors, to name a few. In the hospitality industry, however, at least one union (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees), and as many as three others in English Canada have what they believe to be historically-legitimated claims to jurisdiction in this sector. They therefore view the CAW and the Steelworkers as threatening interlopers. It may be concluded from this that the CLC does not maintain an effective dispute settling role when it comes to establishing and enforcing jurisdictions.

In North American terms this passes for a unified labour movement, with the Canadian Labour Congress speaking as the Canadian voice of labour without much central authority, while real power lies with the large, affiliated unions. The fragmented reality behind the formal facade of a unified labour movement, however, coupled with the recent history of the secession of Canadian sections from a number of important US unions, has made the new construction of international labour links to deal with NAFTA problematic. In terms of political economy and labour politics, the recent dynamism of nationalism makes it more than difficult to stimulate trade union interest, in English Canada, for the building of activist links with the same US unions from which Canadians recently seceded.

Quebec labour, which is partly separate from and partly connected to the Canadian labour movement, views NAFTA differently, however. A number of factors lead us to define the Quebec labour movement as a separate, or partly separate, entity. First, structure. Unlike the basically unitary structure of the labour movement in the US and English Canada, Quebec labour is fragmented and inter-union competition is legitimated. About 30% of trade unionists belong to unaffiliated unions, and the three peak labour organisations (or *centrales*), with partly overlapping jurisdictions, compete for membership, forming a kind of union pluralism more common in France, Italy, and Belgium than in North America. One of these, the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), is formally the Quebec provincial branch of the Canadian Labour Congress. The other two, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) and the Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (CEQ), trace their origin to the Catholic Church and the international Catholic labour movement. All told, more than 50% of Quebec trade unionists belong to unions without any structural link to unions in the rest of Canada or the United States. Although labour legislation is inspired by the Wagner Act model, the long-legitimised existence of plural unionism introduces a volatility into Quebec labour politics that is often absent in nominally unitary union confederations (Lipsig-Mummé and Roy, 1989).

Second, the Quebec unions may be seen as a labour movement in their own right because of their consciousness of collective identity and their shared language and history; in short, because of their national identity. Third, the three union *centrales* focus on competition and collaboration with each other rather more than they do with English Canadian unions, regardless of nominal affiliation to English Canadian or US 'parent' unions. Fourth, all Quebec unions give priority to lobbying their provincial rather than the Canadian federal government, and they all demonstrate a preference for developing projects on a Quebec rather than a Canadian scale, in both domestic and international arenas. Fifth, the Quebec unions—regardless of affiliation—have a profound commitment to Quebec, rather than Canadian, nationalism. But the redefinition of that nationalism has been both cause and effect of the labour movement's fundamental shift of orientation towards NAFTA.

To say that there is a distinct Quebec trade union movement is not to deny the links that Quebec unions have with English Canadian and US labour organisations. It just means that Quebec unions, whether they are affiliated to English Canadian or to US 'parent' organisations, or whether they have only Quebec members, have tended to work more closely with each other than they do with unions in English

Canada. Moreover, this 'apartness' and 'separate' identity of the Quebec labour movement has long historic roots in international Catholic trade unionism, and has led it to mark out a specifically different path from the Canadian labour movement concerning free trade and continental alliances. Indeed, the separate Quebec labour position on free trade is essential to the strategic trajectory of winning sovereignty for Quebec.

It may be imagined, then, that the structure of the Quebec labour movement, composed of three competitive union peak confederations with partly overlapping jurisdictions and a parcel of independent unions, looks like a battleground between the highly politicised union pluralism of France, Italy, or Belgium, and the monopoly-of-representation structures associated with collective bargaining which were crystallised by Wagner Act legislation throughout North America. We may call the Quebec labour movement hybrid in structure. Its unique juxtaposition of Catholic and European union pluralism with a typical unitary North American model of representation can be traced, historically, to competing ideological visions.

Ideological traditions have divided the Quebec labour movement for almost a century. Within Quebec, the division of worker representation among three competitive labour confederations, and the proliferation of small unaffiliated unions, are the legacy of the first third of the twentieth century. After 1900, the Catholic Church founded and directed trade unions linked with Church-created student, young worker, farmer, and women's organisations.

These confessional unions entered into competition first with US-based craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, and later with the social unionism of affiliates of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (Rouillard, 1979; Harvey, 1980; Lipton, 1959). By the late 1950s, however, unions from both the US-based traditions had merged in Quebec (as they had elsewhere in North America) to form the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), the provincial affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress. In the FTQ, as in the CLC, the socially progressive industrial union tradition shaped the new body, marginalising the spent tradition of business unionism (Bernard, 1968).

The two principal Catholic unions, the CSN and the CEQ, were, however, pursuing a more radically transformative course (Harvey, 1980; Lipsig-Mummé, 1980). In the mid-1960s, when Quebec was in the throes of a telescoped modernisation process known as the Quiet Revolution (Corbett, 1967; McRoberts and Postgate, 1976), the CSN (originally a general union, now the largest representative of public employees) and the CEQ (in the process of transforming itself from a teachers' corporation to a confederation of education industry unions) not only shed their religious affiliation but moved rapidly towards a form of libertarian socialism, derived from a complex amalgam of influences. In this they were influenced by the French CFDT, which was also shedding its Catholicism and debating the meaning of worker self-management and self-managing socialism. During the 1960s and 1970s, the CSN and CEQ were a fertile battlefield where unionism worked out its new definition of socialism and the just society, debating and struggling with proponents of syndicalism and the various Marxist-Leninist and Trotskyist groups which had so much influence over Quebec community life during these years (Lipsig-Mummé, 1993). It is important to stress that these debates were

at the heart of the Quebec union movement, and not on its margins, and to note that these two important union confederations had no structural links to unionism in the rest of Canada.

In these debates the CLC's Quebec affiliate, the FTQ, was somewhat on the margins, although it was numerically larger than its rivals, the CEQ and the CSN (Cyr and Roy, 1981). Eschewing visionary reconstruction of the just society as 'pie in the sky', the FTQ fused ordinary Canadian social democracy (which in English Canada produced support for the New Democratic Party) with Québécois nationalism to make the FTQ the most important early union supporter of the separatist Parti Québécois. Its nationalism was thus coloured by the kind of pragmatic social democracy which can live quite well with capitalism, and even with foreign-owned capitalism, provided that the state recognises the union movement as its special partner, and retains for itself the powers to plan, tax, regulate, and redistribute.

The changing ideology of Quebec nationalism

The recession of 1982 had been a critical historical juncture for Quebec labour in several ways. First, the Parti Québécois, the independentist party holding provincial government, which was supported by the vast majority of trade unionists and widely seen as being favourable to labour while insistently refusing to become a labour party, had chosen to deal with its deficit by imposing wage cuts on its 350,000 public employees.¹ These workers, mostly unionised, concentrated in the CEQ and the CSN, were used in negotiating with the provincial government in a common front. They quickly became locked in conflict with the PQ government. As is usually the case when a government sets its mind to it, the PQ was able to divide and defeat the public sector unions, but the victory was pyrrhic. The union *centrales*, demoralised and distrustful of each other, refused to support the PQ in the provincial elections of 1985. Even the PQ's most consistent and pragmatic supporter, the FTQ, withheld support, while the CEQ and the CSN practised targeted negative voting, with the result that the more unabashedly anti-union provincial Liberal Party was voted into office and stayed there for 9 years.

How can we explain this basic shift in the ideology of the leading independentist party?² Briefly, from its founding in the late 1960s through the beginning of the 1980s, the Parti Québécois had interpreted the national struggle of Quebec as having both class and national dimensions. On the one hand, anti-capitalism had long historic roots in the profascism that swept Quebec politics in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, which defined capitalism as a tool of foreigners, identified it as exclusionary to and exploitive of native French Canadians, and branded its leaders as greedily uninterested in the well-being of the collectivity (see, e.g., Trudeau, 1956; Monière, 1977; Milner and Milner, 1973). But during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, conservative anti-capitalism merged with underdevelopment theory, forging a vision of Quebec as an internal colony of Canada and drawing Marxist and libertarian socialism into dialogue and eventual synthesis with the older, xenophobic anti-capitalism. We may characterise the PQ's nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s

¹ For a discussion of earlier state-union conflicts, see Ethier and Pottie (1975).

² See Murray (1976); for a different treatment, see Coleman (1984).

as a hesitant modern social democracy balancing between an anti-capitalism which identified capitalism with US neo-imperialism and an ethnic nationalism struggling to become civic nationalism (Ignatieff, 1993).

But even before the PQ took office in 1976, a series of provincial and federal government measures had begun to make the administration and ownership of private enterprise in Quebec more permeable to francophone entrepreneurs and managers. These measures focused both on making French the working language of all workplaces and on promoting the development of small- and medium-sized businesses, of the sort and size that francophones, who had long been excluded from the commanding heights of the Quebec economy, could aspire to owning (Sales, 1979; Coleman, 1984). While these measures by no means transformed Quebec into a society capable of autonomous determination of the course of its own economy, it did open at least one sector of the corporate spectrum—small- and medium-sized business—to francophone entrepreneurs.

By the time the recession of the early 1980s had reached its nadir, then, the Parti Québécois had come to see the ownership and operation of private enterprise as not necessarily controlled by strangers, not necessarily exploitive of its own citizens, and not necessarily hostile to the French language. Capitalism became separated from imperialism in the PQ's internal vision sometime during the early 1980s, and with this shift the Parti Québécois sought a new base and new allies while redefining its vision of the just society. Capitalism, entrepreneurship, profit, and international development by Quebec firms became something to be proud of. Francophone entrepreneurs, rather than the francophone working class, came to be identified by the PQ as the vanguard, and the PQ tailored its policies to their aspirations. The image of Quebec, Inc., was born, and it was to prove a powerful magnet for reshaping nationalism within the Quebec labour movement. (Later, in the 1990s, Quebec, Inc., would expand from a shorthand symbol of the brave new francophone entrepreneur to a philosophy of labour-management partnership, thereby marrying an ideology of class concertation to a strategy for political secession.)

In general, the Quebec unions were left out in the cold by this basic shift in the orientations of the Parti Québécois in the 1980s. However, the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), the CLC's affiliate, made the shift to the PQ's entrepreneurial nationalism with relative ease. Social democratic rather than libertarian in orientation, the FTQ had, even before the critical juncture of 1982–1983, begun to formulate innovative organising strategies, and develop a hybrid corporatism aimed at softening the impact of de-industrialisation on its mainly blue-collar membership. [By hybrid corporatism I mean the establishment of collaborative links between unions, government, employers, and the community over the development of specific job creation and economic transformation projects at one or several of the following levels: in the workplace and within the enterprise (micro-corporatism); in the neighbourhood, community, or economic sector (meso-corporatism); and at the level of national or provincial economic planning (macro-corporatism).] The FTQ did not so much reject capitalism and the capitalist state as it sought to elect a labour-friendly government to run the state so as to encourage and regulate capital. The hybrid corporatism of the FTQ sprang from the belief that both direct and indirect state investment and active collaboration with locally-rooted business

would be needed to create or save jobs in the declining manufacturing industries. To obtain this funding and to weld unions, employers, the community, and the state into an effective job-creation mechanism, the ordinary conflicts of interest which divided the actors would have to be shelved. This hybrid corporatism focused on two distinct strategies. On the one hand was the Solidarity Fund, a pool of union-controlled investment capital based on a contribution scheme for workers, protected by government-sponsored tax breaks, whose twin goals of job creation and pension contribution were realised through its risk capital investments.¹ On the other hand, job creation or retention was also pursued innovatively through 'neighbourhood corporatism', the creation of community and union action committees with active participation from local employers in the dying industrial communities (Fournier, 1991).

The other two *centrales*, the CEQ and the CSN, did not make the shift to the PQ's new entrepreneurial nationalism so easily. For almost 20 years, their anti-capitalism had been influenced by dependency theory and the Marxist framework of neo-imperialism. From 1970 onwards, these Quebec unions etched the image of Quebec as a rich Third World colony into the popular conscience. In document after document, the state, whether Canada or Quebec, was presented as a 'comprador cop', ruling the Quebec working class in the interests of American imperialism and its English Canadian lapdogs (see, e.g., CSN, 1970, 1971; CEQ, 1972; FTQ, 1972). French Canadians were seen as 'the white niggers of America',² and national independence for Quebec became the logical synthesis of the struggles of a class and a people for freedom. Even as late as the free trade debates of 1987 and 1988, it is this perspective that informs the arguments put forth by the Quebec Coalition Against Free Trade.³

In sum, then, when in the 1980s the Parti Québécois turned to embrace home-grown entrepreneurial capitalism, to develop Quebec, Inc., as a positive model, and to express (strategically necessary) admiration for the United States during the years immediately preceding the free trade agreement, the more radically libertarian, but numerically quite important, Quebec unions were left in ideological and strategic limbo (see Chodos and Harmonovitch, 1991). Throughout the middle years of the 1980s, they found they could neither support the Parti Québécois nor develop an alternative political vehicle for advancing their own increasingly defensive vision of the just society. During these years, Quebec labour's involvement with nationalism reached its nadir, and as it did, even the unaffiliated Quebec unions reached out to English Canadian labour—first to engage in a dialogue, then to work together against free trade as well as in support of a number of federal social programmes.

1987 and 1988, the free trade years, were a difficult time for the Quebec trade union movement. While the Canadian economy was struggling back from the recession of the early 1980s, Quebec's official unemployment rate remained above

¹ On the Fonds de Solidarité, see Gill (1989). For an uncritical and adulatory approach, see Fournier (1991).

² The book, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*, by Pierre Vallières, became a most famous slogan and rallying cry.

³ See CEQ Congress Resolutions, June 1986 and Resolutions of the Conseil général, December 1986 (A8687CG-047); March 1986 (A8586CG-057); April 1994 (A9394CG-055, 055A, 055B).

10%. In the old inner-city industrial neighbourhoods of Montreal's southeast and southwest, the closure of huge old mills and factories threw whole communities out of work, while unemployment in the long-stagnant rural hinterlands reached upwards of 30%. Union density in Quebec remained around 40%, but the traditional base of unionism, the manufacturing and extraction sectors, was devastated. The public sector, which had emerged at the end of the 1960s as the leadership of a rapidly modernising labour movement, was in disarray as a result of its divisive conflict with the separatist Parti Québécois in 1982.

As a result, as the unions moved into the free trade year of 1988, there had been 5 years of deeper-than-usual division in the trade union movement: hostility because of raiding; disagreements as to how to relate to politics; debates as to which economic sector should be given priority in reducing unemployment, how unions in disparate industries could set joint objectives, and under what circumstances could partnerships with employers be undertaken. Nationalism, on the other hand—commitment to political independence for Quebec from Canada—which had, up until the recession of 1982, offered both an overarching source of idealistic cohesion and the fuel for union militancy, was itself in eclipse and reconsideration.

Free trade and strategic repositioning

The Quebec Coalition (Coalition québécoise d'opposition au libre échange) came into existence in 1986 as a farmer-labour alliance which saw free trade with the US hovering on the horizon and feared the loss of manufacturing, service, and agricultural jobs. Founded by the FTQ, the CSN, and the CEQ, as well as by the UPA (the Farmers' Union), the Coalition based its opposition to US-Canada free trade on a number of arguments (Coalition québécoise, 1987):

First, that Quebec manufacturing was particularly vulnerable since the sector was 'overdeveloped' in the stagnant industries, such as apparel and furniture, which would be particularly hard hit by US competition. The Coalition feared the loss of up to 76,000 jobs in these industries. In services, where seven out of ten Quebecois were employed, it was feared that finance, transportation, communications, and services to business jobs would be the most affected.

Second, that Quebec agriculture would be all but wiped out by free trade, and that the family farm was important to the social and economic fabric of the non-metropolitan regions of Quebec.

Third—and this argument was shared with unions and social movements in English Canada—that free trade with the US would sooner or later undermine Canada's social safety net, as the US sought to 'level the playing field' and wipe out Canada's cultural industries.

Fourth, that 'the spillover effect of free-trade for the political autonomy of our governments in the areas of employment security and regional economic development' would block the ability to 'set up adequate programmes of transition' (Coalition québécoise, 1987, p. 3) to the new regime, and that all government regulation of foreign ownership would effectively be gutted.

Fifth, that free trade would 'create enormous pressures on the costs of production' which would 'undermine the wages, working conditions and benefits of a large

number of workers. In the slipstream of this opening of the frontiers, fear of losing one's job could well lead unionised workers to accept concessions on their acquired rights' (Coalition québécoise, 1987, p. 6).

The Coalition focused on the immediate, and feared middle-term impact of free trade not only on particular sectors in Canada, but on the whole fabric of state regulation of the labour market, planning, and regional and sectoral development. When it turned to the specific and feared impact of the free trade agreement on Quebec itself, however, Quebec labour's vision returned to the rejection of American social values and political economy which had underpinned its earlier analysis of Quebec as a rich colony exploited by US neo-imperialism: 'More than any other province, the Quebec government has played a central role in promoting economic development, particularly through the Crown Corporations . . . Who says that these . . . will not eventually be targeted by the Americans? . . . In social programs, the Quebec public sector is the vanguard of all the provinces . . . These programs might be challenged . . . [And] who knows whether, eventually, Quebec's specific language requirements pertaining to product labelling . . . will not eventually be challenged by American companies because they constitute protectionism?' (Coalition québécoise, 1987, p. 22).

Quebec labour saw itself as a major architect of the progressive and egalitarian measures that had come to define modern Quebec life, and saw these threatened by free trade with the US. Significantly, when the Coalition turned to recommendations, it proposed 'a multilateral liberalisation of trade agreements . . . rather than the deepening of our dependence on the United States' (Coalition québécoise, 1987, p. 22).

But in 1987 Quebec business was uniformly enthusiastic about the prospect of free trade with the US, and the new leader of the Parti Québécois, Jacques Parizeau, was as well. It is significant that in the 1987 and 1988 struggle against free trade with the US, the Quebec Federation of Labour, so closely allied with the pro-free trade PQ, played only a nominal role in the Coalition, while the CEQ and the CSN, the two union *centrales* more closely identified with libertarian socialism, a radical critique of free market culture, and the rejection of US domination, took the lead.

But it is also significant that the Coalition failed to make any serious dent on public opinion in Quebec, despite its recourse to public and union meetings, links with the community and the media—despite, in other words, the union coalition's recourse to its traditional means of mobilising supporters. In the 'free trade federal election' of November 1988, a majority of Québécois voted against the Conservatives, the only political party supporting the FTA, as did a majority of voters in the rest of Canada (Bakvis, 1993). But in Quebec, the 49% of voters supporting free trade and the Conservatives translated into 63 out of the 75 seats, thereby ensuring the Conservative victory nationwide. Within the next 2 years, anti-free trade activists in English Canada would state, with bitterness, that Quebec had brought free trade upon Canada.

Sovereignty and the politics of free trade

In Quebec politics, there was a world of time between 1988 and 1993. During that period, the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord was rejected (in 1990) by the other

Canadian provinces, and Quebec society reacted massively and personally to what it perceived to be a rejection of its search for a more secure and autonomous position within the Canadian federation.

Had the failure of Meech Lake not occurred, the Quebec union *centrales* would probably have gone on as they had before, with the FTQ innovating in meso-corporatism and instrumental alliances with employers, the state, and the Parti Québécois, and the CEQ deploying professionalism as a lure to create a public sector labour *centrale* at the expense of the CSN and through the affiliation of independent unions. The CSN, however, was already in controversial evolution in terms of its attitude towards workplace and collective bargaining. Late in 1989, it had begun to undertake a difficult re-evaluation of its industrial strategy, which emerged at its biennial Congress in the spring of 1990 as the call for a '*Nouveau partenariat*', or New Partnership.¹ This combined elements of the strategies put forth by Piore and Sabel (1984) concerning the union's role in regaining international competitiveness for national capital in the high wage countries, with ideas drawn from the AFL-CIO and Hecksher (1988) on the new unionism. The CSN's New Partnership identified close collaboration with employers at the enterprise level as an extension of economic democracy. It also sketched out the need for new union linkages which would develop industrial and regional coalitions between unions in the US, Quebec, and English Canada. Later, these ideas would be extended to include Mexico.

So by the time the critical juncture of Meech Lake took place in the early summer of 1990, all three Quebec union *centrales* had moved far from their earlier ideas of militancy, and redefined their workplace and sectoral strategies in terms of partnership with employers and the state in order to court elusive international economic competitiveness.

As the national question erupted again on every union's agenda in the spring of 1990, there were still some trade unionists who tried to give it a working-class definition, to capture the renewed movement from the left. But when the shift towards workplace cooperation was coupled to the spread of neighbourhood committees to save jobs and seek local investment, anti-capitalist nationalism no longer had any foothold. Instead, the full range of organised labour in Quebec set itself to working with employers and with the provincial government (even led by the Liberal Party), to make Quebec, Inc., a truly formidable competitor with English Canadian corporate enterprise.

¹ This author was a member of a group of 12 who were asked by the President of the CSN, in December 1990, to brainstorm with him over the course of several evening meetings about the priorities for the CSN in the next 10 years, and for Quebec society in general. We were meant to work with him to set the context in which the New Partnership idea would be presented to the CSN's biennial Congress in May 1990 as the President's Biennial Report. As has often been the case in these meetings, which have become a tradition amongst CSN Presidents, the participants had diverse ideas and came from a wide range of community and intellectual sectors. Among the ideas we worked on were how the CSN could extend its sectoral links to US and Mexican unions, and how the CSN could safely become involved in neighbourhood corporatism without sacrificing its ability to protect its members in the neighbourhoods concerned. As has also often been the case, the President did not inform us as to the direction his own thinking was taking, and used our ideas as input to crystallise his own thinking. See also Lipsig-Mummé (1991).

The new 'concertation' made itself felt in labour's transformed attitude towards free trade. In 1991 the old anti-free trade coalition was reborn, with a significant new name and an extended list of participants: *La Coalition québécoise por les négociations trilatérales* (The Quebec Coalition for Trilateral Negotiations), expanded to include all the important international and community action groups in Quebec, but minus the farmers.

The CQNT's December 1992 brief to the Canadian Parliament was a summary document, some 16 pages long. Four months later, however, in March 1993, when the CQNT was called upon to argue its position before a committee of the Quebec National Assembly, its argument took on a much more developed form: we are not opposed to economic exchanges with Mexico or the rest of the American continent, the new brief said, but we insist that the multilateral pact focus on more than commerce. It must include a social dimension and it must 'serve, in a real way, the interests of the majority of the population concerned' (Coalition québécoise, 1993). NAFTA was argued against on the basis of its impact on Quebec's autonomy and interests: it was argued that NAFTA would conflict with the desire to protect francophone language and culture, that the Federal government would use NAFTA to usurp (again) jurisdictions that belonged to the province, that NAFTA would have a destructive impact on a number of Quebec industries, and that opening government purchasing at the state and provincial levels to competition from all three countries would make it even more difficult for Quebec to develop a coherent policy of industrial and regional development. The provincial government was called upon to oppose NAFTA in its present structure, while underscoring Quebec's commitment to the promise of extended economic and social exchanges with Mexico.

This CQNT brief went on to sketch out the dimensions of the promises of trilateral relations: Canada would be in close relationship to a Third World country for the first time, and it could use the opportunity to harmonise commercial policies with foreign aid programmes. Potentially, the CQNT argued, this would be more important than all the foreign aid programmes. In addition, if the spiralling down of competitive conditions was to be avoided, the basic standards for social programmes in all three countries should be set at the level of the most advanced nation. Even more importantly, 'on condition that the Accord contributes to an amelioration of working conditions, environmental protection, salaries and human rights, it could become the basis for a real Pact for the Development of the Americas' (Coalition québécoise, 1993).

Labour's solitudes

During the 1987–88 fight against free trade, the Quebec union movement and the coalition of union and community groups in the Action Canada Network had united in calling for a simple rejection of the FTA. By 1991 and 1992, however, divergence between the Quebec and the English Canadian positions had become evident. ACN's position remained constant from the 1980s through the 1990s: Canada must abrogate the FTA and NAFTA if it was to preserve its sovereignty and reverse the erosion of its manufacturing base. What made the English Canadian position ironic,

however, was that it continued to be maintained well into the 1990s, at which time the New Democratic Party, the only political voice that might have brought about abrogation of free trade if it had been elected, was dying as a national political force. As conflicts between the NDP and the public sector unions alienated a significant portion of the NDP's base in Ontario, mirroring the split between the PQ and the public sector unions in Quebec 10 years earlier, the ACN's affiliates turned their attention towards coalitions, the amorphous dream of a large alliance of social movements and unions which might dissolve the sclerosis of formal, parliamentary politics.

The shift by the Quebec unions from rejection of free trade to the articulation of an alternative vision of multilateral relations made sound political sense—for Quebec. For one thing, many of the most active of the Quebec unions, affiliated with the CSN or unaffiliated, had discovered that relationships and information-sharing with opposite numbers in English Canada, the US, or Mexico was blocked by the CLC or the FTQ. As unions perceived an increasing need to shift the locus of their influence from the national to the international, Quebec labour's lack of national affiliation threatened isolation. It was thus logical that, in an attempt to get around the CLC's insistence that it spoke for all Canadian labour, CSN unions in a number of industrial and service sectors reached out sectorally to unions like themselves elsewhere in the Americas, circumventing the CLC.

In this, Quebec labour had useful prior experience. Drawing on international Catholic links that stretched back before World War II, the CSN had both been a member of the Catholic *Confédération mondiale du travail* (CMT) and had a working relationship with the FAT in Mexico. The CEQ, through its active participation in teachers' international organisations, had developed contacts the length and breadth of Latin America. In the 1970s, the CSN and the CEQ had created a coordinating body, known as CISO, for their international work. In addition, the CSN and the CEQ both had long, practical experience with international aid and development projects, often funded by the Canadian government, in francophone Africa, Haiti, and elsewhere in the Caribbean. When the Quebec unions shifted from rejection of NAFTA to developing an alternative vision, they called upon this rich reservoir of prior collaboration to create joint union information-sharing programmes, brainstorming meetings, and union-to-union development projects.

But the largest union confederation in Quebec was absent: the FTQ. Although it remained only a provincial regrouping of CLC unions in Quebec, the FTQ has been led by independentists for two decades. As such it has been torn between two imperatives: the need to appear as authentically Québécois as its rivals, the CSN and the CEQ, and the need to assert its autonomy vis-à-vis the CLC. In response to the latter, it has sought to play off the American unions with which its member unions are affiliated against the CLC, which, although strongly Canadian nationalist, continues to house a combination of Canadian unions and Canadian affiliates of US unions. In response to the former, the FTQ's leadership has made itself the leader of independentist forces within the Quebec trade union movement, and has remade its image so as to strengthen its role. But the fact that a majority of FTQ members belong to 'branches' of US unions, combined with the control that the CLC

exercises over international activities of its affiliates, has kept the FTQ really absent from Quebec labour's growing involvement with Latin America.

The logic of this new position for Quebec labour is solid. It fits in with the unions' present objective of attaining and maintaining Quebec independence: if Quebec, instead of facing an angry Canada alone, can diversify the players by adding the US, Mexico, and other Latin American countries, it will have more leverage for negotiation with Canada. From this perspective, a European-type political structure would be ideal.

But what international structures might labour develop? No formal proposals have come forward. In developing these, the most dynamic Canadian unions are, ironically, hampered by one source of their dynamism: the progressive nationalism which led them to disaffiliate from their US 'parent' unions over the past 20 years, which has created a legacy of distance that makes it difficult to come together in cross-border labour alliances in the new continental economy. If Quebec nationalism, and in particular Quebec trade union nationalism, targets Canada and the Canadian labour movement as its source of subordination, English Canadian unions identify the US labour movement, and their former labour 'parent' unions, in much the same way. Thus, the mirror images of Quebec and Canadian nationalisms together operate to impede the development of international trade union alliances.

But two quite disparate groups have, independently, developed interesting ways around the solitudes which divide labour. The Communication Workers of Canada (merged in 1992 to become the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers' Union), which had long been interested in bringing together all unions which negotiate with the same multinational, convoked a world council of Northern Telecom unions in 1991. In doing so, they bore out the ambitious and controversial theses of Charles Levinson (1969), who predicted the growing importance of international, sectoral union groupings, and the decline in importance of national peak councils, as national states increasingly lost control of footloose, international enterprise.

The CSN and the CEQ have also sought to strengthen international, sectoral links: the CEQ with SINTE (the teachers' union) in Mexico, and the CSN with telecommunications and other workers in the US, Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America. For the CEQ this is a natural development—it has always been seen as an innovative teachers' union abroad. For the CSN, however, construction of union-to-union, international, sectoral links is a newly developed strategy to evade the isolation imposed by its lack of affiliation with the CLC.¹

All this does not bode well for the continuation of unified opposition to NAFTA in Canada. It does isolate English Canadian unions, who are often seen, in Latin America, to be uncomfortable with links with that continent, and protectionist to boot. It also augurs the intensification of competition between English Canadian

¹ The CSN's preoccupation with its isolation on the American continent is not new. When the Canadian Labour Congress was formed in 1956, out of a merger of the Trades and Labour Congress and Congress of Canadian Labour, respectively the Canadian branches of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CSN proposed that it join as well. Its affiliation foundered in a complex set of organisational rivalries, particularly expressed by the FTQ unions. More recently, the CSN has quit the CMT and petitioned for membership in the ICFTU.

and Quebec unions in the same industrial sectors, as they scramble to develop links to their opposite numbers in Mexico.

But this transformation of Quebec union attitude towards NAFTA, from a position based on rejection of US imperialism and fear of the loss of Quebec and Canadian sovereignty, to an openness towards cross-border sectoral union alliances and the development of socially progressive (although confused about its class bases), multinational labour collaboration, can only help Quebec unions as they seek to entrench themselves in the wider playing fields of the Americas. It remains to be seen whether multilateral connections will be adequate as a countervailing force against the eager downward suction of desperate Latin American economies, the unfettered militancy of US corporations, and the intense pressures towards national consensus that today determine the parameters of Quebec social life.

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