

Quebec: Toward a new left party in 2005?

by Richard Fidler — February 7, 2005

Quebec's new left party, the Union des forces progressistes (UFP), itself the product of a regroupment process, hopes to continue this process through a projected merger with Option citoyenne (Citizen's Option, or OC). The two groups are now engaged in formal negotiations with the goal of combining forces by the end of 2005. At present the UFP claims about 1,300 members, the OC 1,500.

At a November membership convention, Option citoyenne voted by a substantial majority to appoint a negotiating committee which would meet at intervals with UFP representatives to discuss various "themes" and establish and clarify points of agreement and disagreement. A further national meeting of OC will be held in the spring of 2005 to discuss the process and develop OC's position on issues such as the national question, about which OC members are deeply divided.

This process will continue through the summer, with the perspective of creating by the end of the year a new party "centered on the public interest, social justice, respect for the environment, equality between men and women and solidarity among peoples".

In December, the UFP's Council accepted the OC's proposal. Negotiating committees from the two groups have held three joint meetings since mid-December, most recently on February 6. Both groups report wide agreement on the topics discussed so far: the economy, feminism and "functioning and culture of a left-wing party", according to perfunctory reports submitted to the members of the two organizations.

Different political cultures

Understandably, there is much optimism and hope in both groups that the process will result in a party of several thousand members with a correspondingly greater political impact and attraction than the two groups could have as separate organizations. However, a number of key issues need to be clarified if this potential is to be realized.

It is already clear that a new party will not simply be a larger version of the UFP. For one thing, the fusion process involves two groups with somewhat different backgrounds and orientations.

The UFP, which describes itself as "independentist, feminist, ecological and internationalist", was formed in 2002 in the wake of the enthusiasm generated by the massive demonstrations at the Quebec Summit of the Americas, the mobilizations around the World March of Women, and a successful by-election campaign in Montreal's Mercier riding in which the candidate of a broad coalition of left groups and community grass-roots activists won 24% of the popular vote.

The party was initiated by an informal coalition of three groups: the Rassemblement pour l'alternative politique (RAP); the Quebec Communist party; and the Parti de la démocratie socialiste (PDS), all of which became affiliated "entities" or formal tendencies within the UFP. (The RAP has since dissolved, DS is now Québec socialiste, and the International Socialists became an entity in November 2002.) But most of the UFP's members are individuals not aligned with any of these formations.

The UFP's founding platform, adopted after wide debate by the members, sets out clear positions and demands on international solidarity, rejection of imperialist military alliances and capitalist trade and investment agreements, and defense and extension of workers', women's and immigrants' rights and social programs, etc. Although the UFP does not define itself as anti-capitalist or socialist, that is the thrust of its platform. And two of its founding principles were opposition to the parties of "neo-liberalism", including the Parti québécois, and support for the independence of Quebec.

(For background on the UFP, see www.greenleft.org.au/back/2003/565/565p25.htm)

Option citoyenne originated as one of three groupings or "options" that developed in a discussion within D'abord solidaires, an ad hoc coalition formed before the 2003 Quebec general election to defend social programs and fight the far right-wing party led by Mario Dumont, Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which at one point in the months before the election was registering 40 percent support in public opinion polls. D'abord solidaires was officially indifferent between the governing Parti québécois and the opposition Liberals, not opposing a vote for either as a "lesser evil" to the ADQ.

The OC option favoured political action to the left of the PQ, although it initially rejected an invitation to join the UFP. In the summer of 2004, OC leader Françoise David, a former president of the Quebec women's federation (FFQ), toured the province promoting her book *Le Bien commun* (the "common good" or "public interest") and probing support for a new left party independent of the UFP. David encountered much support for uniting the political forces to the left of the PQ and widespread criticism of her support for "asymmetrical federalism". David has since come out in favour of both unity with the UFP and Quebec independence.

To some degree the UFP and OC represent different milieus. The UFP's members include young people from the *altermondialiste* 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 political experience of many OC members, on the other hand, has been within feminist and community organizations — 60% are women — and in local organizing around tenants' rights, food and housing co-ops and the like, where the politics of consensus and accommodation of conflicting views and even interests are valued.

UFP observers at its November convention found that OC had few members under the age of 25, and "very few" trade union members. On the other hand, its predominantly female membership would compensate for the gender imbalance in the UFP, where only a quarter of the members are women.

An anti-capitalist party?

Option citoyenne, while defining itself to the left of the PQ, is certainly not anti-capitalist. Its program, in so far as it is developed, reads at best like a pale echo of the classic social democracy long associated with the NDP. For example, at its November convention the members adopted a resolution on "the economy" that contained few specifics while promoting "values and principles" such as economic security, distribution of wealth, democratic participation, the regulatory role of the state, etc. — all of which is completely compatible with liberal or "neo-liberal" capitalism. A resolution opposing trade and investment deals that are "opposed to our fundamental values" (without naming any specific deal) was simply tabled. The capitalist state was described as "an instrument of the community" and "guarantor of the public interest". Similar positions are developed at length in Françoise David's book. David and OC

do not mention the NATO and NORAD alliances, opposition to which is a basic plank in the UFP platform. OC has no position at present on Quebec independence.

Is the OC a clear break from the PQ? Significantly, the OC resolutions do not mention the PQ. But in her book, David says the left should not “contribute to the re-election of the Liberals”, and that “When the elections come, we will see what we have to say to the PQ”. These statements, of course, are not inconsistent with the lesser-evil politics she and D’abord solidaires defended in the 2003 election. In fact, David states on the very first page of her book that she does not want to be “the Ralph Nader of Quebec and contribute to the defeat of the PQ” as U.S. Democrats allege Nader helped defeat them in 2000.

Fusing organizations with such different political cultures is unlikely to be a smooth process, notwithstanding the agreement on rather abstract principles professed by both groups. A major challenge is clearly the conflict between, on the one hand, the UFP’s support of Quebec independence and opposition to the PQ and, on the other, OC’s tendency to adapt to the PQ despite its own ambiguity and divisions on the national question. At its December Council meeting, the UFP identified opposition to the PQ and support for independence as “principles” that should in its view be adopted by a new party. It is common ground for most members of the UFP that a party seeking to outflank the PQ must be independentist.

The ambiguities of Option citoyenne have prompted a few members of the UFP to question whether the new party will be as independent of the PQ as the UFP now is. In articles posted on the UFP’s web site and intranet, they draw attention to statements by David and others, including a few UFP leaders, indicating that the party might consider a deal by which, for example, the PQ declines to contest one or more ridings against the left and in return the left desists from running against the PQ. Any such deal, these critics point out, would make the new party a hostage of the PQ and discredit its claim to be a consistent opponent of “neo-liberalism”. The new party would become a barrier to building an anti-capitalist movement if it degenerated into a left appendage of the PQ.

Debate just beginning

The fusion debate in both the UFP and OC is still in its early stages. So far it has focused on relations with the PQ and election strategy. It may well expand to cover other topics relevant to the fusion.

One topic both UFP and OC activists might consider is the history of previous attempts to build a united party of the left in Quebec. For example, in the 1960s Quebec supporters of the Canadian “new party”, the NDP, attempted to build an autonomous counterpart in Quebec, the Parti socialiste du Québec (PSQ), that was sympathetic to the nationalist upsurge. In the early 1980s another attempt was made to build a united left party, the Mouvement socialiste. Both the PSQ and MS failed but there are valuable lessons to be learned from those experiences.

A much more positive development occurred in the early 1970s, when all three major union centrals in Quebec — the FTQ, CSN and CEQ — debated and adopted radical anti-capitalist manifestoes. While only the CSN’s was explicitly pro-socialist, all three advanced the concept that working people should take control of society. A labour-based municipal party in Montreal, the Front d’action politique, or FRAP (headed by Paul Cliche, now a leader of the UFP) campaigned around the central slogan “Les salariés au pouvoir” — workers to power. For a while it seemed that Quebec labour might manage to establish a mass workers party.

Unfortunately, this movement was subsequently deflected into support for the PQ. Much smaller parties to the “left” of the PQ (such as the Maoists), opposed to Quebec independence, were unable to mount successful resistance to that diversion.

But today the PQ, after a total of 18 years in office, stands exposed to many for its anti-labour, anti-worker record. And while the labour movement is still reeling under the blows of the neo-liberal offensive, there are encouraging signs that politics are returning to the agenda in the unions. In the fall of 2003, the unions spearheaded massive demonstrations in opposition to the Charest government’s assault on union rights and social programs, even forcing the government to retreat on some of its objectives. Although the strike movement eventually fizzled, the march of more than 100,000 workers in Montreal last May Day demonstrated the ongoing potential for a militant labour-based fightback.

These developments indicate the need for the new party to start probing the possibilities to link up with militants in the unions — the natural constituency for an anti-capitalist party — and to develop a long-term strategy for building a class-struggle socialist tendency in the labour movement. The new party needs to renew and pursue the positive legacy of the union manifestoes, not the discredited record of futile lesser-evil reliance on the PQ and other capitalist saviours.

Significantly, opponents of the UFP and Option citoyenne are already mobilizing in the unions. For example, a new grouping, Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre (SPQ-Libre), initiated in part by some leaders of the major union centrals, is attempting to channel “progressive” trade unionists and working-class sovereigntists into the PQ where it will function as a recognized “club”. So the PQ remains a key issue for debate both in left unity initiatives and within the broader working class milieu.

These and many other challenges will have to be worked through in the months ahead as the fusion process proceeds. The process would be advanced, in my opinion, if the two groups could now develop some joint campaigns in which their respective memberships work and discuss with each other and begin to build a common organizational framework in which agreements can be solidified and disagreements can be clarified and resolved.

Of course, in the new party there need not and will not be 100% unity on all issues, even some important ones. Many questions can be resolved through common action and debate within the unified party — especially a party characterized by rank-and-file democracy with pluralist structures that recognize tendency rights, as the UFP has pledged to establish. •

For further information:

UFP: www.ufp.qc.ca

Option citoyenne: www.optioncitoyenne.ca