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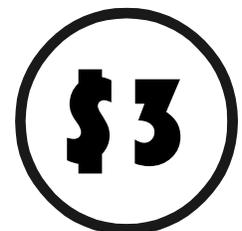
RELAY

#10 MARCH / APRIL 2006

A SOCIALIST PROJECT REVIEW



FAITH-BASED ARBITRATION * CAW DEBATE
MAS IN BOLIVIA * FEDERAL ELECTION
HEALTH CARE PLEBISCITE * GRAND THEFT AUTO





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Printed by:

Open Door Press
Winnipeg



About Relay

Relay, A Socialist Project Review, intends to act as a forum for conveying and debating current issues of importance to the Left in Ontario, Canada and from around the world. Contributions to the re-laying of the foundations for a viable socialist politics are welcomed by the editorial committee.

Relay is published by the Socialist Project. Signed articles reflect the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors.

About the Socialist Project

The Socialist Project does not propose an easy politics for defeating capitalism or claim a ready alternative to take its place. We oppose capitalism out of necessity and support the resistance of others out of solidarity. This resistance creates spaces of hope, and an activist hope is the first step to discovering a new socialist politics. Through the struggles of that politics – struggles informed by collective analysis and reflection – alternatives to capitalism will emerge. Such anti-capitalist struggles, we believe, must develop a viable working class politics, and be informed by democratic struggles against racial, sexist and homophobic oppressions, and in support of the national self-determination of the many peoples of the world. In Canada and the world today, there is an imperative for the Left to begin a sustained process of reflection, struggle and organizational regroupment and experimentation. Neither capitalism nor neoliberalism will fade from the political landscape based on the momentum of their own contradictions and without the Left developing new political capacities. We encourage those who share this assessment to meet, debate and begin to make a contribution to a renewed socialist project in your union, school and community. For more information on the Socialist Project check our web-site at www.socialistproject.ca or e-mail us at socialistproject@hotmail.com.



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The Conservative Cabinet: The 'Revolution' Comes to Ottawa

Murray Cooke

Once Stephen Harper unveiled his cabinet choices, the media and public reaction understandably focused on two controversial selections, the floor-crossing David Emerson and the unelected Michael Fortier. While they demonstrate a breathtaking degree of hypocrisy, these two selections have served to distract attention from a wider survey of the shape of the new government.

Despite the two missteps, Harper continues to carefully manage the image of the party, choosing to overlook many long-serving western MPs from the Reform wing of the party. He is desperate to broaden the appeal of his party across the country, particularly in Québec. Still, Harper clearly felt it necessary to include a significant social conservative contingent within his cabinet. Finally, Harper is, above all else, a hardcore free-market conservative or neoliberal and his caucus reflects that priority.

THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN OF BRIAN MULRONEY

Long-time Reform Party supporters must have been shocked to realize that the new cabinet has as many links to Brian Mulroney as to Preston Manning. Ministers Rob Nicholson (House Leader, Democratic Reform), Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Labour) and Greg Thompson (Veteran Affairs) were all MPs under Mulroney. The new Government Leader in the Senate, Marjory LeBreton is a confidante of Mulroney and a long-time Progressive Conservative Party insider. Once you add Derek Burney, Hugh Segal and Mulroney himself on the transition team along with Michael Wilson as the new ambassador to the USA, you've got serious flashbacks to the Progressive Conservative government that first spawned the Reform Party reaction in the west.

The only former Reform MPs in cabinet, beside Harper, are Monte Solberg (Citizenship and Immigration), Chuck Stahl (Agriculture) and Gary Lunn (Natural Resources). This leaves twenty veteran MPs who got their start during the Manning years (elected in 1993 or 1997) on the Conservative backbenches.

NEW-COMERS FROM QUÉBEC

If this wasn't enough to cause some unease in Alberta, Harper appointed nine ministers from Ontario, five from Québec and only three from Alberta. Having elected ten MPs from Québec, Harper appointed four of them to cabinet and is adding the unelected Michael Fortier to the Senate and cabinet. While Blackburn is a holdover from the Mulroney years, the new Québec ministers are not well known especially outside of Québec.

From 1985 to 1999, Michael Fortier (Public Works) practiced law with Ogilvy Renault, the same firm at which Mulroney currently hangs his hat. More recently, he has been an investment

banker with Crédit Suisse First Boston and TD Securities. Politically, he was president of the Progressive Conservatives in the 90's and ran for the leadership in 1998. During his leadership campaign he advocated private health clinics and merger discussions with the Canadian Alliance. In 2004, he served as co-chair of Stephen Harper's campaign to lead the new Conservative Party of Canada. He was CPC campaign co-chair in 2004 and 2006.

Lawrence Cannon (Transport) was an aide to Robert Bourassa in the early 1970s, became a Member of the National Assembly in 1985 and Minister of Communications from 1991 to 1994. In 1990, he worked on the Sheila Copps campaign for the federal Liberal leadership. In 1994, Cannon left politics and became a vice-president of the telecom company Unitel. Under Harper's proposed conflict of interest rules, such a move would not be acceptable. More recently he has been involved in local politics.

Josée Verner, the new Minister of International Cooperation and the Minister for La Francophonie and Official Languages, also worked as an aide to Robert Bourassa. However, in the 2003 provincial election campaign she campaigned for the right-wing Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

Maxime Bernier (Industry) is a lawyer who once worked as an aide to Parti Québécois Finance Minister Bernard Landry. He then served on the executive of Standard Life Assurance. More recently, he was vice-president of the Montreal Economic Institute, Québec's version of the Fraser Institute. The wealthy and powerful Desmarais family is said to be a financial benefactor of the institute and Hélène Desmarais, who is the wife of Paul Desmarais Jr., also sits on its board of directors. Bernier advocates a flat tax and as a supporter of a greater private sector role in healthcare, he welcomed the Supreme Court decision in the *Chaoulli* case.

A STRONG VOICE FOR SOCIAL CONSERVATIVES

For Reform party supporters the most promising (and to many on the left, the most disconcerting) aspect of the new cabinet was the prominent positions given to rabid social conservatives like Stockwell Day (Public Safety) and Vic Toews (Justice and Attorney General). Harper is not part of the social conservative wing of the party but his appointment of Toews to Justice is a bold and dangerous step. Toews is well known for his law and order approach and reactionary social views. In all, there appears to be nine outspoken social conservatives (anti-abortion, anti-same sex marriage) in cabinet: Day, Toews, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl, Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn, Citizenship and Immigration Minister Monte Solberg, Minister for Democratic Reform Rob Nicholson, Natu-

ral Resources Minister Gary Lunn and National Revenue Minister Carol Skelton. At the same time, some prominent social conservatives, including Alberta MPs Jason Kenney and Diane Ablonczy, did not make the cut. On the other hand, Jim Prentice and some of the new comers to caucus and cabinet, including Cannon, Verner, Emerson and John Baird are liberals (in relative terms) on social issues.

In terms of relations with the First Nations, the selection of Jim Prentice as Minister for Indian Affairs has some Native groups cautiously optimistic since he does not share the reactionary views of Harper advisor Tom Flanagan. During the early 1990s, Prentice served on the executive of the federal Progressive Conservative Party. In 2003, he ran for the leadership of the PCs advocating a merger with the Canadian Alliance. During the election campaign Solberg attacked the Kelowna agreement between the First Ministers' and Native groups, but Prentice supported it.

RE-LAUNCHING THE "COMMON SENSE REVOLUTION"

Even if the inclusion of the social conservatives is alarming, the real story for the new government is the prominent role given to a group of fiscal conservatives from Ontario. There are only five women among the twenty-seven cabinet ministers and they hold relatively minor positions. The main players in cabinet appear to be a group of experienced male politicians with hard-right, neoliberal track records. Coinciding with the on-going inquiry into killing of Dudley George, the new federal cabinet marks the ominous return to political power of three members of the "Common Sense Revolution" regime in Ontario. Jim Flaherty (Finance), John Baird (Treasury Board) and Tony Clement (Health) take on central positions in the new government. All three are committed right-wing ideologues. The Harris regime blazed a path of destruction across Ontario and these three cabinet ministers certainly played their part, particularly when it came to poor-bashing and privatization.

Flaherty twice ran for the leadership of the Ontario Conservatives (in 2002 and 2004) and was perceived as too right-wing to lead the party. Now he occupies the most powerful seat in the federal cabinet. His provincial legacy provides a cautionary tale. As Attorney General, Flaherty declared war on squeegee kids and the homeless with the *Safe Streets Act*. During one of his leadership campaigns, he proposed making homelessness illegal and sending the homeless to jail. As Finance Minister, he introduced the private school tax credit.

Clement was a key player in the battle to shift the Ontario PCs from the centre-right party of Bill Davis to the hard-right during the late 1980s and early 90s. Later, he was actively involved in 'unite-the-right' initiatives during the late-90s and beyond. As Ontario's Transportation Minister during the 1999 strike by TTC workers, Clement admonished Torontonians for being too dependent on public transportation. As Health Minister, he supported private clinics and P3 hospitals. When the SARS crisis hit Toronto in 2003, Clement expressed surprise at the shortage of nurses and the casualization of their working conditions.

During his time as Minister of Community and Social Ser-

vices, Baird oversaw the province's workfare system and the government's costly and incompetent deal with Andersen Consulting to restructure the department's computer system. He introduced drug-testing for social assistance recipients, a welfare fraud line and a lifetime ban for welfare fraud. In 2001, such reforms contributed to the death of Kimberly Rogers who died while under house arrest for collecting social assistance and student loans at the same time. Baird was Energy Minister at the time of the 2003 Toronto blackout.



SHILLING FOR BUSINESS: OTHER NOTABLES

Before his stint in the Liberal cabinet, David Emerson (International Trade) was the President and CEO of Canfor Corporation. Previously he had bounced back and forth between the public and private sectors, including posts as the president and CEO of Western and Pacific Bank of Canada, the head of the Vancouver International Airport Authority, the deputy minister of finance and the deputy minister to the premier of British Columbia.

The new Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor is a former General and worked as military lobbyist with Hill & Knowlton until 2004 when he was first elected. He even lobbied for Airbus on a contract for military transport planes that he will now play a leading role in judging. While Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay plays the role of diplomatic red Tory à la Joe Clark in the Mulroney years, O'Connor will be pushing for a more aggressive and expanded military role for Canada including Canadian participation in the American missile defence project.

Rona Ambrose, self-described as a libertarian and avid reader of Ayn Rand, gained a cabinet post as Environment Minister →

ahead of many other more experienced Alberta MPs. She has previously worked on intergovernmental affairs for the Alberta government. She will place a leading role in defining the government's position toward the Kyoto Accord.

Diane Finley (Human Resources and Social Development) previously worked for Canadian Medical Response, Canada's largest private ambulance service company. She was also actively involved with The Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships. Having attacked the Liberal child care proposals during the campaign, she now becomes the minister responsible for the Conservative plan.

Bev Oda becomes Heritage Minister. She is a former commissioner with the CRTC and vice-president at CTV. Her strong ties with, and fund-raising support from, the private sector players does not bode well for the future of the CBC.

BUILDING A COALITION FOR A NEOLIBERAL MAJORITY

Stephen Harper is an ideologically committed neoliberal. He does

not want to waste his mandate as Prime Minister by not introducing significant neoliberal reforms. At the same time, he realizes that to have room to manoeuvre he is going to need a majority government. That will require some patience and pragmatism in the short-term. He is trying to appease his core supporters while reaching out to new constituencies, particularly in Québec. The extent to which Harper is trying to resurrect the Mulroney coalition of western social conservatives, Ontario business interests and conservative Québec nationalists is striking. Harper hopes that a law and order agenda and some free votes on social issues and will appease the social conservatives in the caucus while not scaring off mainstream voters. Even with large budgetary surpluses to work with, the combination of lowering the GST and addressing the fiscal imbalance may require his neoliberal Finance Minister to introduce significant program cuts. The federal state and civil service, already under dramatic attack during the Chrétien-Martin years, face even further downsizing. **R**

Murray Cooke is a member of CUPE 3903 and teaches at York University.

Electing Money:

The election through the lens of party finance

Robert Macdermid

The scourge of liberal democratic politics has always been money. It is the differences in access to money and wealth, of course, which have always been the basis for the class limits of liberal democracy. And it is money that has always greased the wheels of the party system and elections. Money is of no small matter for democracy.

Money and how it is used in campaigns matters to the outcome of elections. Research has shown spending is tied to success in local campaigns. The relationship is complex: things like incumbency, possibly gender, local partisan histories, national opinion trends and campaigning skill also matter but money *is* important. Candidates need contributions to pay for signs, print brochures, hire staff, pay for telephone canvassing and increasingly, to buy TV and radio ads.

The daily media image-generators, the central campaigns, are no less reliant on

cash to produce ads, buy TV and radio airtime and pay for the leader's tour that produces the scenes and sets for campaign events and policy announcements. Parties also need money to hire the experts, the polling firms and other advisors that run the national campaigns.

Parties can borrow money, usually from the same banks they regulate when in office, but eventually expenditures have to be partly matched by contributions, if not in an election year then in the intervening period. It is true that since the radical changes to federal campaign finance laws in 2004, parties get a generous annual allowance based on their previous election vote totals, but they still need contributions from citizens.

The 2004 party financing reforms reduced corporate and trade union contributions to \$1,000 and capped contributions from individuals at just \$5,000. The Liberals and Progressive Conservatives had

always relied on money from corporations and wealthy individuals for as much as 75% of their total income. Both parties' funding coalitions, the set of individuals, corporations or trade unions that finance a party at a given election and over a longer period of time had to be refashioned. The new rules meant that the parties had to develop new and much broader funding coalitions, ones more diverse than a tour down Bay Street. Ted Rogers is now limited to giving just \$5,000, rather than the \$90,000 he had given to the PCs in 2000 and could no longer direct the \$41,000 that he had given to the same party through Roger's group corporations.

The new rules forced the NDP to replace contributions from unions with those from individuals. While in most years, union contributions made up a surprisingly small percent, usually well under 20%, and the party allowance replaced most of this, for the NDP to increase its funding, it and

the unions had to persuade union members to give money to the party and its candidates. The figures in the tables below suggest that this hasn't happened to any great degree. The NDP has always depended on small contributions from a broad base of supporters with modest incomes, but they were far behind the Conservatives in the number of small contributors. The party dropped most of its class language and class appeals during the 2006 campaign and unions still seem to be confused about how they can help the party now that they can no longer write a cheque. They did very little to mobilize their members in support of local NDP candidates and Buzz Hargrove's strategic voting campaign affected the results. To compete financially with the two parties of business, the NDP needs to appeal to a much broader base of supporters. Without class appeals that lead to worker support, it is hard to see how the

large proportion of the money, about 70%, came from small contributions, people giving less than \$200. This is not the group that usually funded past Progressive Conservative campaigns and speaks of the growing attraction of neoliberal messages to people of modest means.

The divided and tainted Liberals came out of the 2004 campaign having borrowed almost \$35 million during that election year. Most of that was paid back with election spending rebates and the party allowance, but in 2005 they took in just \$8 million in contributions. That was in the form of just 36,000 contri-

result of the Martin forces colonizing the entire organization, pushing out the Chrétien supporters and those who tried to be neutral. The Gomery inquiry's daily rev-

	Four quarters of 2005		% of contributions less than \$200
	contributions	number of contributions	
Conservative	\$17,849,716	166,796	70
Liberal	\$7,964,813	36,060	24
NDP	\$5,130,587	52,272	59

elations of corruption surely reduced further those willing to financially support the Martin Liberals. And no doubt, Paul Martin was in office just long enough to show that his "visionary" leadership too often resulted in nothing concrete. The vision theme was further undercut by the unrelentingly negative Liberal TV ads. In the end, the campaign was short on vision and long on negative attacks on Harper. It was all too desperate and negative for many past Liberal voters.

Can the Liberals fashion a new funding coalition? The withdrawals of Frank McKenna, John Manley and Brian Tobin from the leadership, all with important ties to the corporate heights, suggest that business is queuing behind the Conservatives. The Liberals are going to have to find a message that can rebuild their finances and their votes. Much will depend on Harper's ability to contain the social conservatives within his party and to distance it, through free votes, from positions on issues like same sex marriage that are unpopular in urban Canada and Québec. Don't expect to hear the Liberals leading the charge in opposition, Harper's policies are not much different from their own, more a difference of means than final ends. The Liberals will need two years to elect a leader and to fashion an appealing message that can restore the party's finances. The sad state of Canadian democracy will hardly have improved by then. **R**

Robert Macdermid teaches political science at York University.

	2004 annual contributions	total state funding*	Total	Total state %
Conservative	\$12,907,357	\$18,283,797	\$33,221,803	0.55
Liberal	\$6,085,121	\$23,200,372	\$31,484,239	0.74
NDP	\$5,187,142	\$13,358,209	\$18,672,850	0.72

* includes election rebates and the annual party allowance of \$1.75 for each vote at the past election.

party can build a wide enough funding base to challenge the two parties of business.

The Conservatives adapted to the new funding rules much more rapidly than the Liberals. The refashioned Conservatives inherited a funding coalition from the populist Reform party heritage that was based on small contributions from a large number of committed supporters. A large proportion of this base is probably the social conservative block that figured so prominently in the Reform and Alliance parties and still remains a significant power block in the Conservative party. In 2005, the Conservatives raised almost \$18 million in the form of 168,000 contributions. By the beginning of the 2006 election they would be able to spend up to the \$19 million central election spending limit. A surprisingly

large proportion of the money, about 70%, came from small contributions, people giving less than \$200. This is not the group that usually funded past Progressive Conservative campaigns and speaks of the growing attraction of neoliberal messages to people of modest means. The divided and tainted Liberals came out of the 2004 campaign having borrowed almost \$35 million during that election year. Most of that was paid back with election spending rebates and the party allowance, but in 2005 they took in just \$8 million in contributions. That was in the form of just 36,000 contributions while about one-quarter of the total sum raised came from small contributions under \$200. In contrast to the Conservatives, the Liberals relied on a shrinking coalition of wealthier supporters. The Liberals went into the election heavily in debt and will have dug an even deeper hole as a result of the campaign. With a leadership race in the near future they will have no financial capacity to fight an election for at least two years. Moreover, if Harper can mute the social conservatives in his party and enact his pro-business tax-cutting agenda, we may see the spectacle of a minority government trying to engineer its own defeat while the opposition Liberals try to ensure that it stays in office.

Liberal fundraising was probably affected by the deep split in the party as a

Canadian Election Aftermath: New Actors, Same Play?

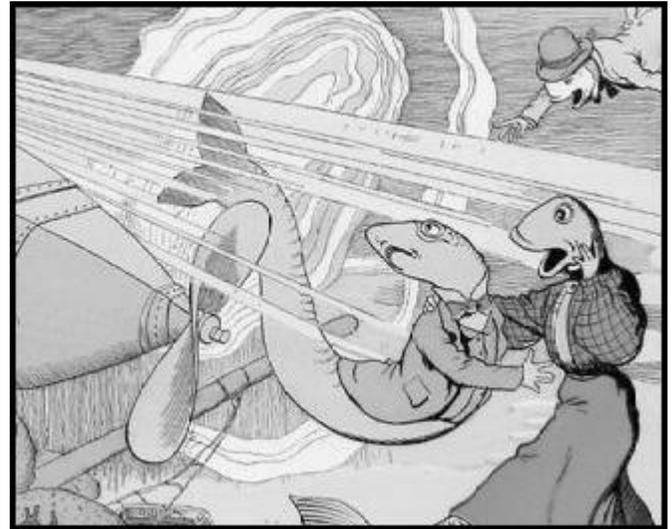
Gregory Albo

The more things change, the more they remain the same. This commonplace statement contains more than a little truth of what liberal democracy has become in Canada today. The daily political discourse might adopt a ‘compassionate conservatism,’ a ‘social liberalism’ or even a social democratic ‘third way,’ although all the parties agree that the benefits of globalization are beyond contesting. A policy might shift here and there in re-regulating, say, the electricity sector while still privatizing energy production and distribution. More accountable scrutiny of judicial appointments to the Supreme Court by elected representatives might be advanced, even as Canadian troops enter into combat roles in Afghanistan without even a Parliamentary resolution being put to debate. The all-party consensus on free trade, a more regressive tax system, a ‘market-friendly’ public sector, the necessity of Canadian support for the U.S. ‘long war’ in the Middle East, and a national ‘law, order and security’ agenda safely insulates the critical issues of the day from the damage that might result from subjecting them to democratic debate. Governments rotate between political parties: neoliberalism continues on.

MINORITY PARLIAMENT ENCORE

The Canadian Federal election of January 23, 2006 to form the 39th Parliament had all these liberal democratic markings. In a suspenseful evening vote on November 28, the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin fell. Then, in a dramatic turn in the course of the campaign, the Conservative Party under the leadership of Alberta based Stephen Harper suddenly surged into a lead in the polls of some 10%, after consistently lagging the Liberals for several years. Aided by continual Liberal corruption scandals, the political incoherence of the Martin campaign, and the populist message of ending the arrogance and insider dealings of Ottawa under the Liberals, the Conservative campaign gained traction. Most surprisingly, nationalist Québec voters began shifting preference to the Conservatives, though they held no seats in the province and could hardly claim a political organization. With the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Québécois (BQ) vote largely moving sideways, this was enough to return a Conservative minority of 124 seats and a 36% vote share, with the Liberals holding 103 seats and 30% vote, and the rest of the 308 seats split among the BQ (51), the NDP (29) and an independent. In a truly exceptional display of Canadian ambiguity, a change of government to punish the Liberals was delivered without a decisive verdict for a new political direction.

Alternating the Conservatives for the Liberals returned the unstable division of the prior Parliament. The Conservatives cannot fashion a stable majority with either the Liberals or the NDP:



the Liberals remain the alternate governing party and a critical vehicle for accessing power for a range of professional elites, and the NDP would be signing its own death warrant by undercutting any reason to support them as an opposition to the Right. And the BQ as a sovereigntist party has no interest in governing federally. Indeed, the Conservatives and the BQ will reach a compromise only over specific pieces of legislation where there is agreement on what they don't want the Federal government doing. In essence, different reasons to support, on the one hand, decentralist measures, and, on the other, stronger economic ties with the USA: for the one, on the basis of the free market faith, and for the other, in the desire to build greater political independence for Québec.

NATIONAL PROJECT

The divisions of Parliament, in turn, reflect the uneven balance of social forces across the country. Since the early 1980s and the failed nationalist turn of the governments of Pierre Trudeau, the combination of political fragmentation and neoliberalism has dominated the political landscape. The ruling classes have lacked any clear national project other than securing market access to the U.S. via NAFTA and other measures to deepen institutional linkages between the two countries. No political party has subsequently been able to act as an integrative political force, and regional fragmentations of economic and political interests have fractured into the regional basis of the various parties. Indeed, the interest of the ‘nation’ has become equivalent to ‘Canadian competitiveness’, as fused into the interests of regional capitalist classes. Neoliberal

economic policies and NAFTA have played opposite roles but with the same consequence: the former has gutted social policy capacities in Ottawa and downloaded programme spending to provincial governments, while the latter has served to strengthen the capacity of the national state to reinforce the free market principles of the trade agreement. The failure to address Canada's internal national questions in terms of Québec and the Aboriginal peoples has added to the disrepute of the national government and the political inability to forge any alternate agenda. The parliamentary impasse reflects deep-seated political divisions and the particular features of Canadian capitalism.

In this balance of social forces, it is political 'negativity' that dominates: the failed and undemocratic constitution of Canada cannot be addressed; new initiatives can be vetoed by one or another region of Canada; national social programmes and public institutions can be dismantled, off-loaded or simply allowed to wither but not developed; and the ruling classes can deepen the integration with the U.S. militarily and economically through the weight of events and the internationalisation of Canadian capital without constraint.

The initial policy agenda of the Harper regime is consistent, then, with the Canadian variety of neoliberalism. Harper's declared five priorities fits the agenda: a cut in the Goods and Services Tax (GST); increased accountability of ministerial spending; tougher criminal sentencing; a market-based childcare system left to the provinces to determine; and a cut in healthcare wait-times through more flexible provincial funding systems. Beyond these lie increased military spending and commitment of Canadian troops overseas, and closer trade ties with the USA. At the centre of these proposals are the same contradictions of George Bush's economic policy: tax cuts set against increased spending rubbing against adequate public services. This is the longstanding tactic of neoliberalism of strangulating non-market provision of incomes and services and expanding the capitalist sector.

Harper's selection of cabinet ministers tilts in the direction of both seasoned and hardened neoliberals. It is seasoned to try to gain a quick handle on the bureaucracy, to negotiate with the provinces, and to help stick-handle through some of the controversies over gay marriage and other issues of social conservatism. It is hardened because of the desire to crack open some of the last vestiges of universalism of the Canadian welfare state, particularly around access to healthcare, and to deepen integration with the U.S. in trade, energy, military and security matters.

LEFT DILEMMAS

The election itself, and subsequent strategizing about opposition to the Harper government, revealed many of the dilemmas facing the Canadian Left. Despite the NDP seat totals rising from 19 seats in the 2004 election to 29 seats in this Parliament, the percentage of the popular vote budged by only about 2 points to 17.5%, although this was Jack Layton's second electoral run as leader. A few brighter faces will appear on the benches, notably Olivia Chow and Peggy Nash in Toronto and via a strengthened BC caucus; but none represents any new departure in policy or politics. Indeed, the most striking thing about the NDP election

campaign was how thoroughly the 'third way' modernizers on the right of the party, who have gone by the names of NDP-Progress or the 'Pink Paper' group in varied incarnations in the past, have gotten their way under Layton.

The predominant discourse Layton and NDP political advertising adopted, in directing their political attack primarily at the Liberals and Martin, was one of being more 'sincere,' more 'business-like, and ready to get things done,' more 'accountable to Parliament,' and so forth. This allowed the NDP to be consistently out-flanked by the Conservative's more populist message of pitting the 'average Canadian taxpayer' against the 'vested big interests' being defended by the Liberal Party. Harper and the Conservatives consistently sounded more radical (and they are from the Right) than Layton and the NDP. This electoral tack was consistent with Layton and the NDP's attempt to recast the party as a post-labour, pro-green alliance of urban progressives. Its impact is certainly further to confuse and disorganize, such as they are, working class identities in Canada.

The NDP policy platform delivered even more disorder to the Left. It was, perhaps, the most right-wing set of policies that a social democratic party in Canada, at whatever level of government, has at yet run on. In a series of high-profile media events during the election, the NDP systematically let it be known they were moving even further to the centre and openly embracing the market: with a Bay Street economist turned NDP candidate in hand, a pledge was made for no new taxes; Harper was given a more or less free ride on his proposed GST cuts; Layton came around to endorse the Clarity Act, an act bitterly opposed by the majority in Québec as an infringement on their right to self-determination; the all-party consensus left largely unmentioned Canadian foreign interventions in Haiti and Afghanistan; increased military spending was endorsed; the embargo on speaking out against NAFTA was maintained; Layton signalled a willingness to consider greater market-based delivery of health services; and, in the final nail in the coffin of the NDP's moral standing, a tough law and order platform endorsed mandatory minimum sentencing for youth convicted of gun violence. The party put forward a defensible set of proposals around the issues of daycare, ecology and agriculture, but it is difficult to find much else that was daring, innovative or principled in the way of alternatives to neoliberalism. The electoral platform clearly put paid to the notion that some have still kept (all the evidence of NDP governments at the provincial level to the contrary) that Canadian social democrats had insulated themselves from the more free market-oriented policy realignment that Western European social democracy had long undertaken. From out of the shadows, the 'third way' made a most public debut during the election.

The furore generated over 'strategic voting' needs to be put in this context. The call for a vote for either the Liberals or the NDP depending upon which party in each riding had the best chance to defeat the Conservatives became particularly associated with the campaign interventions of Buzz Hargrove and the CAW. The controversy was further stirred by the embarrassing 'jacket-gate' hug by Hargrove of Liberal Prime Minister Martin at the CAW national convention in December. It is certainly true that the Liberals and the Conservatives are parties of the →

ruling classes of Canada, and the NDP sustains its social democratic heritage in maintaining a greater base in unions and workers. With no other electoral options in English Canada (as in Québec the Bloc Québécois merits support from the left), it is relatively straightforward to call for an NDP vote. But it has to be noted that this is not a critical issue of avoiding a ‘class against class’ sectarian turn of isolating social democrats or of maintaining an oppositional bloc built around unions and workers to capitalist markets. An NDP vote no longer plays the same role in class formation it once did. The NDP in government, and as a party through its policy shifts and organizational restructuring, also plays an active role in disorganizing the class. The NDP is now a centrist party of power and pragmatism. A vote for the NDP may be a principle, but it ultimately is also one of pragmatism. Both the advocates of strategic voting and the NDP were forwarding different means to achieve the same desired outcome of an NDP-Liberal alliance in a minority Parliament. Hargrove and Layton both consistently made grandiose claims about how fruitful this had been under the Liberal minority government.

At the end of it all, all the heat generated by the strategic voting debate misses the pivotal development that the left needs to account for. The federal NDP has been remaking itself under Layton in an attempt to forge a new long-term centre-centre alliance with the Liberals in opposition to the Conservatives. This includes the distant hope of reproducing the two party system that the NDP has forged in Western Canada, with the NDP emerging as the centrist alternative. This overriding strategic objective will form the backdrop to the jockeying between the Liberals and the NDP as the ‘little Caesars’ of Parliament calibrate their support or opposition to Conservative initiatives as to when to attempt to bring down the government. Other than the search for power and electoral advantage, it is anything but clear what point of principle the opposition forces will fight on given the degree of programmatic convergence and consensus during the election.

Against this centre-centre realignment of parliamentary and party political forces in Canada, the social movements lacked any significant mobilization during the election. Their capacities after the election for resistance to a hyper neoliberal government of Stephen Harper are quite unclear. The unions put out a number of election information kits for members, but offered little in the way of a sustained campaign. In a post-election assessment, CLC President Ken Georgetti went so far as to claim wildly that through its ‘Better Choice’ effort “our priority issues became the leading issues of the campaign, we look forward to meeting with the Prime Minister-elect Stephen Harper to see what we can get done.”

Major social movements such as the First Nations, the Council of Canadians and the Canadian Peace Alliance were barely noticeable. In the midst of the imperialist interventions by Canada and the re-organizing of the Canadian state to support U.S. security interests, there was no major national anti-war mobilization during the election. Smaller successful campaigns were had around healthcare issues, against foreign intervention in Haiti, and against Canadian involvement in the U.S. ballistic missile defence initiative. But these were the exceptions not the rule. The ‘Vote for a Change’ project launched by the Centre for Social Justice had an

ambiguous campaign message, and remained a marginal effort in any case. And the ‘Think Twice Coalition’ that brought social movement notables together a few weeks before voting day to warn against a Harper government made yet another call for a centre-centre alliance. It looked like the plea of despair that it was.

With such a poor foundation, it is not surprising that the social movements have no clear orientation after the election to begin to put together a new anti-neoliberal campaigning vehicle in opposition to the Harper government. Political initiative will lie with the government, and the unions and the social movements will be reactive as best as they can. They will receive little in the way of parliamentary support as the kinds of sustained efforts and militancy necessary to break neoliberal policies would also rupture the NDP’s centre-centre realignment strategy.

NEXT ROUND

The left exists in Canada today largely in the form of a politically drifting social democratic electoral machine, a union movement in retreat and disarray, and the scattered fragments of a global social justice movement. The radical left is mainly a series of hardened micro-organizations living in the past and replaying the tired lines of political actors long gone. These social forces as such can re-write some of the passages of the policies of the government of the day, but they cannot prevent the neoliberal tragedy from continuing to unfold. Indeed, after more than a quarter of a century of neoliberalism, the left is still unable to author an alternate script to neoliberal globalization, never mind gather the new actors together for a performance of an entirely different kind. The final illusions of a new opening coming from the Layton leadership of the NDP (which the New Politics Initiative, with its’ folding itself into the NDP and the Layton campaign with the embarrassment of no commitments being obtained, bears more than a little responsibility for) are now shattered.

The resistance to Canadian interventions in Haiti and the Middle East; the solidarity work forming for Venezuela and Bolivia; the campaigns against healthcare privatization; the growing boycott Israel campaign in support of the Palestinian struggle; the different relations being struck within – and with – the Québec left; and the unrest bubbling up in memberships in both CUPE and CAW over political drift and the lack of union fightbacks; are all hopeful voices for democratic alternatives that the Canadian electoral theatre is keeping silent. They must necessarily be heard. A different performance might move the Canadian peoples from passively watching the train wreck of capitalism unfolding, to start participating and dreaming of alternate scenarios. Otherwise, in 18 to 24 months from now, the Harper minority government will be drawing the curtain, a few new characters will enter the stage, but we will be witnessing the same electoral play all over again. This is the bleak reality of elections in liberal democracies in a time of neoliberalism. **R**

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Woodstock's Health Care Plebiscite:

Experiences Gained, Lessons Learned, Challenges Ahead

Kim Yardy

Canadians have clearly identified public, not-for-profit Medicare as an issue of great importance – many have said our public health care system is a defining feature of Canada, a part of our national identity. Despite the polls showing support for a public system and election promises of protection, the system remains under significant threat of privatization. In Ontario, Dalton McGuinty ran on a platform which opposed P3 (Public/Private Partnership) hospitals and yet has proceeded to announce several such deals and failed to halt existing projects. Although the Liberals have been careful not to refer to the projects as P3s, they use the much less tainted “alternative funding” term, there is no mistaking what the projects mean – the private sector getting their foot in the door of hospital infrastructure in a big way.

As part of a strategy to halt this incredible erosion of public hospital infrastructure, the Ontario Health Coalition has held several plebiscite votes on the question of hospital funding, ownership and control. In communities which face the possibility of local infrastructure projects becoming P3s, local coalitions organize and conduct a public vote on how hospitals should be built – publicly or as a P3 scheme.

WOODSTOCK

Woodstock, Ontario is in many ways an unlikely place for such an experiment in participatory democracy but in November of last year this small, yet important, exercise in democracy took place there. Woodstock is a small town in Southern Ontario with a population of about 30,000. It is the largest community in very rural Oxford County. Politically, Oxford County is double blue, with both a Conservative MP and MPP.

Based out of Woodstock, the Oxford Health Coalition took on what proved to be a pretty contentious issue – how the proposed new Woodstock hospital should be funded. The community had been anxiously awaiting an announcement of a new hospital with no concrete commitment from the province. The hospital foundation, working with members of the community, had spearheaded a postcard campaign to try and push the province to announce the hospital. The issue had been a hot topic in the community for months.

It is in this context that the Oxford Health Coalition – a small citizen's coalition – decided to organize and hold a plebiscite vote in Woodstock. None of us on the coalition had done this scale of community-wide organizing before but we were eager to take it on. The

community response was, in many ways, quite surprising. During the five-week campaign information meetings were held in local retirement homes, union halls, churches, senior centres, schools and workplaces. Overall community response was very positive. Members of the small business community allowed us to set up polling locations and vocally supported the plebiscite. This was a pleasant surprise, demonstrating yet again that interests of small business owners are not necessarily the same as the corporate elite.

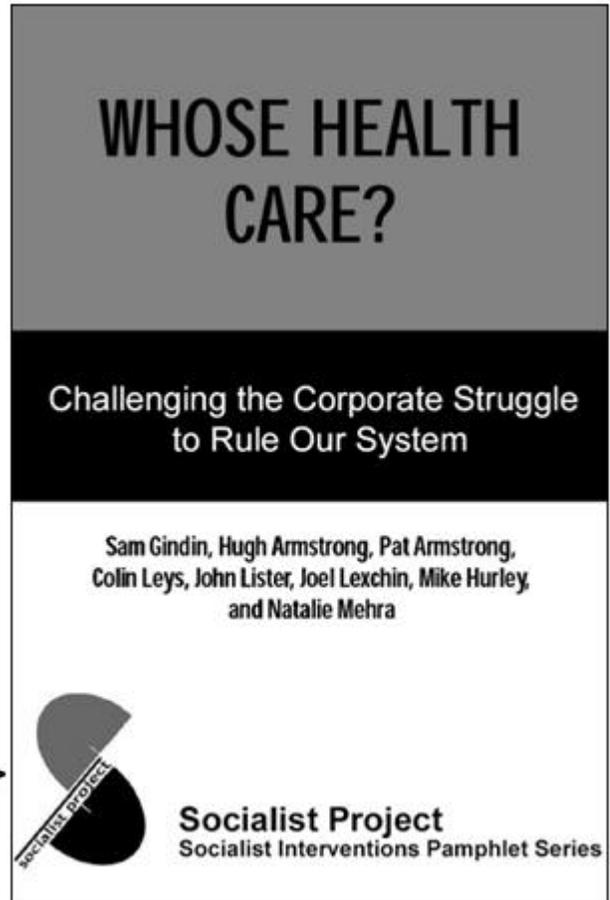
DISCUSSIONS, OPENINGS & CHALLENGES

The discussions with the general public were fascinating and incredibly rich. The level of interest and the depth of understanding in the general public were – I hate to say it – surprising. I had totally bought into the notion that generally the public was apathetic and what I found was that wherever we were able to engage people in discussion the opposite was in fact true. At all of →

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the meetings the questions and subsequent discussions were quite deep, with people making clear connections between privatization, globalization, growing corporate domination and a lack of control over their lives as citizens.

Many of those discussions were some of the most surprising and incredible of my life thus far as an activist. I went into this exercise believing that the challenge would be in convincing people that the issue was important and relevant. What I found was that the difficulty was in convincing them that their personal engagement could make any kind of difference. Most people were convinced that they were, as citizens in a supposedly democratic country, powerless to stop the encroachment of privatization. Saying that many feel powerless – and perhaps rightly so – to change the direction of society is very different than arguing that people are simply not interested in making change. That identifies a much deeper flaw in our society but it also speaks of potential opportunities.

The interest and desire to participate politically clearly exists. Members of the community are concerned about their community and more generally about the direction of society. What is missing is a method of engagement and a form of organization that both empowers them and inspires hope for something different. This is clearly the challenge for those of us on the left. How can we build on that interest and engage citizens in these broader and important discussions? What needs to happen to change that interest into action and full engagement? How do we build an alternative to the incredibly limited political processes that are our reality in Canada presently? The successes of plebiscite votes such as the one in Woodstock (over 97% voted in favour of a public, not-for-profit hospital) demonstrate possibility – where we go from here remains the unanswered question. **R**

Kim Yardy is an activist in CAW and works at the CAMI plant in Ingersoll.

Let's Fight for Child Care

Tammy Findlay

Child care is fundamental to gender equality, to the healthy development and social inclusion of all children, and to a democratic economy. So social justice advocates had reason to celebrate when, after years of fighting for a national child care system in Canada, substantial progress was finally made last year. Between May and December 2005, the federal government signed the Bilateral Agreements-in-Principle on Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) with each of the provinces, and set in motion the introduction of the first new national social program for Canada in decades.

THE BILATERAL AGREEMENTS-IN-PRINCIPLE ON EARLY LEARNING & CHILD CARE

The ELCC Agreements are certainly not perfect. Only two of them (Manitoba's and Saskatchewan's) commit to investing and expanding non-profit services only. This leaves an opening for the expansion of big box, commercial, child care chains which have proven to be a disaster in Australia. And there is still not enough money available to build a complete and universal, child care system. Studies estimate that long-term funding, over 15 years, would need to reach an additional \$10 billion annually. Stable funding is required to establish ELCC as a permanent social program, as is federal legislation that guarantees the right of every child to services. The Agreements also are not clear about the importance of moving away from user fees toward *direct* public investment in programs, as exists in Québec. The language on universality is weak, and on unionization it is non-existent. Additional resources and supports are required to meet the needs of

school age children, as well as children from Aboriginal and rural and remote communities. Finally, stronger reporting and accountability measures are necessary.

Recent investments in ELCC through these agreements – although not enough – provide a foundation on which an effective and comprehensive child care system can be built. The agreements create a framework for a national, regulated, publicly funded child care program in Canada, after more than three decades of struggle. It makes an initial investment of \$5 billion over five years for services for children under age six. All of the provinces have agreed to invest in common areas – the four QUAD (Quality, Universally Inclusive, Accessible, Developmental) principles. In the provincial Action Plans that have been released so far, this has already brought commitments to improving the wages and training opportunities of the almost entirely female, and grossly under-paid, child care workforce. These Action Plans also signal increased funding for children with disabilities. The ELCC Agreements provide the opportunity to support the communities across Canada who have worked very hard to build responsive child care in their diverse neighbourhoods. Progress made so far has been possible because of their efforts.

With the new minority Conservative parliament, this progress in child care is threatened.

CHILD CARE & THE HARPER CONSERVATIVES

During the federal election campaign, the Conservatives said they would only honour the Bilateral Agreements for one year. Then, they will replace the agreements with the much-criticized,

and highly dubious, child care allowance (which experts estimate will be as little as \$1 a day after taxes for some families), and tax credit, both of which, as has been consistently pointed out, will do nothing to create child care spaces. Income supports for families are certainly necessary, particularly for addressing poverty. However, cash transfers to individuals and tax incentives will *NOT* build a child care *system*, and cannot be a replacement for a child care *plan*.

CHILD CARE IS GOOD PUBLIC POLICY

Harper claims to care about good public policy. Here is his chance to prove it. His so-called ‘child care’ plan lacks public policy credibility, having been tried and failed by others in the past (by the Harris government in Ontario, for instance). Public funds must be invested responsibly, in ways that will lead to good policy outcomes. Only by building a child care system will we meet the early learning and child care needs of *all* women, children, parents, and communities. Most of the democracies around the world have long known this. Effective child care systems in other jurisdictions make high quality, affordable services accessible for families and social science research affirms the need for a quality child care system. A national child care system is just good public policy.

CHILD CARE & FEDERALISM

Harper claims to respect the provinces. Let’s see him prove that too. The provinces have all signed onto agreements that they believe will meet the needs of their citizens, and they are developing the Action Plans to reflect their own priorities. The Conservative government should value, and support, the choices made by the provinces in these intergovernmental agreements. One of the biggest fears that provincial governments had about moving forward on a child care system, was that they would make a substantial commitment to child care, only to have the feds pull the rug out from under them. Hopefully this minority parliament will assuage these fears by living up to the federal government’s child care obligations to the provinces, and to Canadian families. Otherwise, the provinces have a lot to lose. Mr. Harper must assure the provinces that a deal is a deal.

CHILD CARE & GENDER EQUITY

Harper also claims that his Conservative government will not threaten women’s rights. He can prove it – by recognizing that women have a social right to child care and that gender equality is impossible without a child care system. The minority parliament must represent *all* Canadians. This means *all* women – including those who want the choice of a regulated child care program. An ELCC system will support the *majority* of working and studying families, and the 70% of women with young children who are in

the paid workforce. It advances women’s equality by facilitating access to paid work for those who choose/need it. It will improve the wages and working conditions of child care workers. It also benefits stay-at-home parents and their children by providing parenting supports and other opportunities for early learning. Very simply, we will not have gender equality without child care.

THE POLITICS OF CHILD CARE

Finally, Harper claims that his government will be moderate, and can cooperate with the other parties. He can prove that as well. He does not have a clear mandate to scrap the Bilateral Agreements. He has three political parties in the opposition that support a publicly-funded child care system, who collectively represent 64% of the voting population. If the Conservatives want to “Stand up for Canada,” how about standing up for good public policy, for federalism, and for gender equality?

FIGHTING FOR CHILD CARE

For their part, all of the opposition parties (the NDP, the Bloc, and the Liberals) claim that they are committed to a publicly-funded child care system. This is their chance to prove it. Child care is a test for the NDP in particular, who must demonstrate that electing more New Democrats will actually make a difference. It will also determine if the Bloc will help to save the ELCC money for Québec, or if it will allow the child care system that has served as a model outside of Québec, to be threatened. The Conservatives have a fragile minority government and therefore, they must cooperate with other parties to stay in power. The opposition, if they choose, can make child care a deal-breaker. They can fight for child care.

More importantly, this is a chance for our movements to actively demonstrate their commitment to gender equality and to democratic communities, by fighting for child care. Parliamentary politics are certainly not the only focus for our political attention, but we need to take seriously what is at stake here. And we need to support the workers, women, parents and advocates who have worked for years in neighbourhoods across the country to develop community-based child care services and democratic forms of organization. Let’s not allow their work to be undermined.

Opposition parties, advocates, activists, and parents, must urge the Conservatives to do the right thing – to honour commitments made to the provinces, to women, to parents, to families, to children, and to child care workers, who want a system of early learning and child care. We must work together to fight for child care. **R**

Tammy Findlay teaches at Trent University, and is a consultant for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (CCAAC).

BEWARE THE 'REAL DEAL' FOR CITIES

Stefan Kipfer and Karen Wirsig

The new Conservative government is poised to end the possibility of national redistributive programs such as child care, housing and welfare. And some within the broad coalition for a new deal for cities appear ready to support the cause. Groups and leaders such as the Joint Ontario Business Sector (JOBS) Coalition, the Toronto Office Coalition (the lobby group of downtown office tower occupants), and Toronto Mayor David Miller see the Conservative election as an “opportunity” to keep cities and municipalities in the federal-provincial game to “redress” the so-called fiscal imbalance.

The 2005-6 federal election campaign was largely silent on the new deal for cities, as the race devolved into a four-way popularity contest in the weeks leading up to the vote. But the stars had been aligning for months to present the repairing of the “fiscal imbalance” between Ottawa and the provinces as the solution to the new deal. And the Conservatives were ahead of the Liberals in promising to fix it. It would be imprecise to dismiss the Conservatives as a ‘rural’ or ‘small-town’ alternative to a ‘progressive’ urban agenda, as some commentators suggested during the campaign. In fact, the Conservatives turned selective elements of the new deal for cities agenda – more decisively than the other parties – into a strategy against a federal role in national equaliza-

tion and complemented it with campaigns for heterosexist ‘family values’ and law and order (‘more police on the streets’).

Here’s the logic: Ottawa hands over some of its legendary budget surplus to provinces such as Ontario, Québec and BC, which could then afford to upload income redistribution programs (housing, welfare, education), thereby relieving property tax payers of that inappropriate burden in the now-celebrated economic engines of Canada: Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver. Note that under this scenario, the so-called “have” provinces would get a bigger share of the pie.

Sounds simple. In fact, the project fits well into the consolidation of a neoliberal Canadian state that shifts spending from the few remaining federal social programs to the military, prisons, police, border and migration controls, tax expenditures on individuals (including “child care” allowances and tax credits for transit pass holders), as well as the management of an increasingly privatized health care system. (See the Conservative Party’s election platform document “Stand up for Canada”). The unspoken story is that under a Conservative urban policy, suburbanization would continue to run rampant wherever the market supports it with the backing of CMHC mortgage guarantees and targeted “national” infrastructure investments (ie. highways). This is of course good news for the Conservatives, developers and those municipal politicians for whom mass-produced suburbs are ready-made receptacles for individualized lifestyles centred on the suffocating rule of private property and patriarchal domestic life in its various multi-cultural forms.

Advancing a neoliberal urban position against equalization, influential conservative economist Thomas Courchene has argued that municipalities should have access to the tax revenues they generate, an idea that Toronto’s social democratic mayor greeted with enthusiasm, according to John Barber (*Globe and Mail*, June 25, 2005). And that would spell the end of Canada’s equalization system, allowing urban areas in parts of the country that control fewer of the spoils of our persistently resource-based economy (including Regina, Halifax, Winnipeg, Saint John, St. John’s) to fall into unchecked misery unless they can attract a critical mass of investment bankers.

The push for a new deal for cities was initially a response to neoliberal strategies to privatize, eliminate or download public services, the effects of which (rising municipal property taxes, homelessness, spiraling traffic congestion, crumbling infrastructure) were broad enough to become problematic even for some business interests. Not surprisingly, the new deal for cities has always been a contradictory set of demands put forward by a broad church of advocates, from homelessness activists to the Toronto Board of Trade. In this way, it was positioned as a Third Way alternative to the neo-conservatism of former Ontario Premier



Mike Harris and Alberta's premier-for-life, Ralph Klein. But it is the more powerful forces in the ad hoc coalition – including newspaper editors, urban politicians and Bay Street operatives – who tend to dominate the new deal agenda. And they seem quite happy to allow national social programs to come unhinged, as long as they get their share of the spoils. Rather than campaigning to establish a federal role in abandoned or new redistributive programmes (social housing, child care, public transit), corporate and municipal leaders see the new deal primarily as an opportunity to further erode the federal role in fiscal equalization.

The crowning touch for 21st century capitalists who have been aggressively reclaiming the urban centres of North American cities is the all-party support that emerged in English Canada during the election campaign to fit Ottawa with the iron glove of vengeful populism: more police, more effective deportation of unwanted immigrants, and longer jail terms and less bail eligibility for poor youth of colour caught in the web of racialized criminalization. The most repeated and heartfelt campaign plank presented to urban voters in English Canada during the election campaign was tougher penalties for gun crime suspects.

Only Gilles Duceppe of the Bloc Québécois broke ranks with Harper, Martin and Layton (also Mayor Miller) to dismiss punishment as a way of solving the issue of gun violence. The ground is fertile for crime control and anti-terrorism to take their place with marketization and competitiveness as the horizon for all social and cultural policies in the Conservatives' Ottawa.

But while the Conservatives appear to want to use Québec as a wedge to kill the possibility of federal social programs, progressive groups in Québec are in the midst of creating a political force that may turn out to be an anchor in a left movement across Canada to create an internationalist, feminist, ecological alternative to an increasingly bleak urban future. *Québec Solidaire*, the new political party formed in early February, is challenging the *Parti Québécois* and notion of Québec sovereignty at any social and political cost. Ironically, this new party may push the Bloc Québécois to fend off the complete neoliberalization of the Canadian state.

It's long past time for the left in Canada to come forward with an unequivocally socialist urban strategy. To start, we need to

recognize that the bulk of federal policy in Canada – a largely (sub-)urbanized collection of metropolitan areas, resource towns and industrial farming settlements – is, in fact, urban policy. What the experience of the 'new deal for cities' has shown is that a left urban strategy leaves justifiable demands for an active, redistributive federal role in housing, child care and public transit vulnerable if these demands are only opportunistic add-ons to the ambiguous agendas of municipal federations, business groups, and philanthropic outfits. But a left urban strategy can ultimately be independent only if it emerges from social struggles in particular urban situations and refuses to substitute such struggles with a desperate search for corporatist alliances with whatever powers-that-be. It must come from and facilitate a political space where

often ghettoized radical political claims that emerge from everyday struggle – class-based, feminist, anti-racist, ecological, queer – meet, cross-fertilize and strengthen each other.

In the immediate term, the strategy must encompass a clear statement against the devolutionary direction of the new deal for cities and the re-vanchism of the law and order advocates. It must

provide an ideological counterpoint to the neo-conservative urban strategy that disorganizes people along lines of private property and individualism while mobilizing collective passions in vengeful anti-feminist, homophobic and racist ways (against potential 'terrorists' and 'gang' members as well as enemies of the patriarchal family such as same-sex partners). In contrast, a long-term left strategy must reclaim 'the city' as a prism through which separated social groups reconnect and demand a future beyond demarcated life in the universal suburb that Canada is fast becoming. It is only by linking and transforming a plurality of critical claims that the old left saying "an injury to one is an injury to all" will be more than a slogan. **R**

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The Challenges in Québec Must be Met: A Response to David Mandel

Marc Bonhomme

Since David wrote his contribution in the November/December issue of *Relay*, the public sector unions leadership has collapsed in the face of the Québec Liberal government's special law in mid-December – although the large CSN general health-care employees union, the FSSS, without even a last-minute settlement on non-wage issues and first in line for the privatization block, was ready for an illegal general strike. (Who knows, they might still bounce back.)

It is in this demoralizing context that the UFP and Option citoyenne will merge in February. As a balance sheet of the UFP, I agree with David who says that “the [UFP] has a marked electoralist orientation [which] risks growing stronger with the upcoming merger ... with Option citoyenne.” Hence we must expect an independantist NDP as the final result. But because the membership is “vaguely left and not clearly defined politically,” that most probable result is not yet crystallized. A happier result might occur, depending on the direction of the social struggles but also on the capacity of the socialists to work together for the UFP to be a “party of the street” to which the party of the ballot box is subordinated on the basis of a clear anti-capitalist platform of emergency measures.

To bring the membership more in this direction, David proposes “to develop a strong enough presence to force debate and education on the fundamental questions [...and] organizing the trade unionists in the UFP in order to work out forward-looking alternative union strategies and to offer each other support...”

Theoretical education on the nature of the state, on strategy, on independence, on the kind of party, and so on, is certainly necessary. Such education was done in the fall of 2004 but dropped in 2005 by both the UFP and its internal organized tendencies. I would suggest, though, that the most important education, given the “vaguely left” characterization of the membership,

would be to enhance the political debate within the party on a year-round basis around current events such as, for example, the public sector struggle.

The two tendencies that David does not mention – the Québec branch of the International Socialists (IS) and Québec Socialiste (QS), the remaining non-Trotskyist core of the old PDS – did that education systematically, especially through proposals and interventions in the Conseil de l'Union, the leading UFP body through congresses. Plus, the IS does it through its newspaper, *Résistance*, and QS through contributions to the “tribune libre” of the UFP Web site when it is not censored. Strangely, the two tendencies that David does mention, his own Gauche socialiste (GS) and the PCQ, which has recently split from the Canadian CP, were in no way critical of the UFP's majority leadership and very rarely made proposals. Moreover, David's comrades had practically stopped publishing any written literature, not even their own members' contributions, on their web site.

As for organizing trade unionists, such a proposal was voted for in the fall of 2005 by the Conseil de l'Union but the leadership undemocratically failed to act on it because they “oppose treading on ‘union territory’ for fear of alienating potential support from union leaders.” Not only that, but realizing that “the Québec labour movement seems in a dead end, its leaders having allowed it to be pushed even further (than it already was) onto its knees by the Liberal government...”, this same Conseil de l'Union proposed a campaign on the necessity of a “general strike, public and private [sectors], all together.” Again the leadership completely ignored the adopted resolution. These decisions, albeit ultimately not implemented, did not come out of the blue. They were proposed and argued mainly by QS and IS. GS and the PCQ did not back these proposals and did nothing to implement them although GS was

the first, earlier on, to advance the idea of organizing the trade unionists within the UFP.

Maybe David would explain this contradiction by the fact that there was not a “strong enough presence” of socialists in the UFP... and that there will be still fewer in the new party. More broadly, the two tendencies mentioned by David have uncritically and systematically backed the leadership that they were part of, having four members out of 15 on the executive board, the Conseil exécutif national. Considering that ratio and the fact that the four socialist tendencies altogether had probably more than 50 members out of around 1200 members, of which only a minority are activists, the socialist presence was not that weak. The other side of this unconvincing argument, mentioned by David in an intervention at the Conseil de l'Union, is the isolation of left unionists. But doing nothing to bring together these isolated individuals to give them a collective voice makes the situation a catch-22 outcome unless one believes in spontaneity.

I suspect that David would answer that the proof of his point of view is in the pudding of the failure of organizing the left in the unions and elsewhere on the basis of a general strike campaign. I would suggest that the refusal of his tendency and the PCQ to commit themselves probably made that failure a self-fulfilling prophecy. Does this mean that such a UFP campaign would have averted the unfortunate outcome of the public sector struggle? Because of the absence of an organized left tendency in the union movement right from the beginning and because of the weak links between the UFP and the union movement, no overall modification of the correlation of forces would have occurred. But that should not have been the short-term aim. The aim, possible and realistic, should have been to make the UFP a meaningful presence within the activist wing of the unions and to organize an embryonic left union tendency

around the UFP.

It is tempting to see the contradiction between David's well-meaning proposals and the actual behaviour of his tendency as typical straightforward opportunism: no criticism, hard work and get-those-leadership-positions. And who cares about the unavoidable result shown by the nationalist-neoliberal evolution of the Brazilian PT – and “*the fate of the socialists*” within it – or simply the Canadian NDP. That assessment is probably too black and white. For the first time in eons, in late January 2006, fully realizing the very probable right-wing evolution of the merged party, David's comrades published a mild critique on their

web site about the danger of electoralism, of making links with the PQ and the necessity of an emergency platform.

But they did not carry that critique to the “*Manifeste des solidaires*,” a well publicized response in opposition to the pro-Liberal “*Manifeste des lucides*.” The “*solidaires*” statement was in fact initiated by the four spokespersons of the UFP/OC and signed by four PQ and Bloc MPs. Since the new party will be born without a platform or program, this manifesto will be the de facto platform of the new party. To the “*neoliberalism is still possible*” of Lucien Bouchard and the eleven other so-called “*lucides*”, the apostles of the left answer,

in effect, “another capitalism is possible”... à la Lula. The first proposal of the so-called “*solidaires*” is an unbelievable “Support businesses that meet criteria of social utility and general interest, businesses with an ecologist and social conscience...”

Obviously, it is “high noon” for socialists. QS, of which I am a member, proposes organizing an anti-capitalist pole within the new party. Are David and his comrades willing to work in that direction? **R**

Marc Bonhomme is an activist in the UFP-Outaouais, in Gatineau, and in Québec socialiste.

Once More on the Québec Left: Rejoinder to Marc Bonhomme

David Mandel

Since I really have no major differences with Marc on the tasks before the socialist left in the new party, Québec solidaire (QS), I will limit my comments to *method and form*, which in practice, of course, cannot be separated from objectives.

Marc's letter is an example of a style that made his interventions in the UFP so ineffective and, in fact, counterproductive, not only for his own group, but for the entire left of the UFP, which most members, unfortunately, perceived as a single bloc. Marc's letter is litany of accusations of opportunism against Gauche Socialiste (which for some reason he links with the Parti Communiste Québec, while Gauche Socialiste is affiliated with the Fourth International).

What is to be gained by that approach? It certainly can't win converts to his position from within Gauche Socialiste, let alone from within the broad ranks of the new party. As I wrote in my original article – and this was confirmed by the recent fusion congress in January creating QS – most of the members of the new party do not have crystallized political positions, but a considerable part of them does lean in an anti-capitalist direction. At the same time, there is a widespread prejudice against the socialist left, inherited from a not-too-distant past, when Maoist parties, justly or unjustly associated with undemocratic and sectarian practices, were relatively influential. On top of that, there is the general contemporary allergy to the very word “socialism” as something belonging to a discredited past.

The challenge before the socialist left is to present and defend positions that point beyond capitalism in ways that can win people over. That is no simple task. But it won't help to attack other party members – or elected and widely respected leaders – as traitors. It also won't help to toss out abstract slogans and demands for social movements to take up, when their members, in the given context, will not understand them and when the party has no presence in those movements.

On a more substantive level, Gauche Socialiste, which is a very small group with limited forces, did, in fact, make real efforts to organize left union activists in the Montréal region. In one of the activities, not long after Charest began his anti-labour offensive, Herman Rosenfeld from the Socialist Project gave a talk to over a hundred people on the lessons of Ontario's “Days of Action.” Other activities followed. The efforts to organize the union left continue. With the creation of Québec solidaire, more progress is being made. Gauche Socialiste has also been the main force behind the launching of a newspaper (on the internet, for the moment, but eventually a newsprint version) to serve as an organizing tool for the socialist left within the new party and help to inject more radical perspectives into debates. **R**

David Mandel is a member of Gauche Socialiste and Québec solidaire in Montréal.

New Party of the Left Founded in Québec

Nathan Rao

The founding of the new party would not have been possible or worthy of interest were it not for the backdrop of a revival of protest and dissent stretching back to the mid-1990s and speeding up early in the new century.

I left Montréal on Sunday evening feeling positively giddy about the founding convention of the Québec solidaire party (PQS), a new left-wing party that enters the fray with more than 4,000 members and strong roots in Québec's wide array of social movements and left political traditions.

I was impressed by the tone of the event – both serious and playful at the same time – and moved by the broader significance of what had taken place. Not only did more than 1,000 people come together in these cynical and conformist times to defy critics and found a new and confident left-wing party. They did so with an awareness of the enormous difficulties the new party faces, and a commitment to confront these difficulties serenely and democratically. This is going to be a long haul, and everyone present knew it.

The birth of Québec solidaire is itself proof that this measured approach to the usually topsy-turvy business of activist-left politics can work. The PQS has come about through the merger of the Union des forces progressistes (UFP) and Option citoyenne (OC) – themselves the coming together of various strands of the political and social-movement left – patiently debated and negotiated over a period lasting 18 months.

The convention did not lay down the new party's program, but set out a few clear guiding principles (ecologist, left-wing, democratic, feminist, against capitalist globalization, anti-racist and supportive of Aboriginal struggles, and pro-Québec sovereignty). These principles will take the PQS through the next year of recruitment and party-building – and debate on the party's program and electoral platform, which will be adopted at next year's party convention.

The convention also adopted by-laws which, among other things, require gender parity in all leadership bodies. The first national coordinating committee (the day-to-day leadership of the party), elected at the convention, will have nine women and seven men. An interesting discussion on the basic organizing units of the party was settled in such a way as not to give undue weight to riding associations, which would slant the party's activities too much towards electioneering and detract from regional and Québec-wide activist campaigns and mobilizations.

Of course, none of this would have been possible or worthy of interest were it not for the backdrop of a revival of protest and dissent stretching back to the mid-1990s and speeding up early in the new century.

The magnificent April 2001 protests at the Summit of the

Americas in Québec City are something of an obscure memory for most Canadians. In the United States and most of Canada, the terrorist attacks of September 2001, and the American response, largely doused the passions of that heady period of discontent inaugurated by the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle. Sometimes it feels as if the events of 1999-2001 never happened.

In Québec, though, as in much of Latin America and parts of Western Europe, the spirit of those days has lived on among a sizeable minority of the population: in anti-war protests without precedent (2003), the province's biggest ever student strike (2005), and massive and repeated trade-union mobilizations against the right-wing government of Jean Charest (2003-2005). Previous to this, Québec was the birthplace of the successful World March of Women in the year 2000.

Québec solidaire brings together forces that have participated in one or more of these social movements in some way or another. This is an achievement in itself, but the significance of the new party goes beyond this. It lies in the merger of the more activist wing of the social movements (represented by OC, roughly speaking), on the one hand, and the organizations of the left and radical left (the UFP), on the other.

The PQS has created a political framework for those parts of the political and social-movement left at odds, or potentially at odds, with an increasingly neoliberal Parti Québécois – and a space for emerging forces who have never had anything to do with the PQ.

Elsewhere, it has proven very difficult to create and sustain such a framework independent of the neoliberal mainstream left and centre-left. This has meant that much of the potential of the mobilization and revival of radical ideas of the last few years has been squandered, either absorbed into the bureaucracies of the mainstream organizations or relegated to a symbolic role on the sidelines.

The forces of the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist left in France have been wrestling with this problem for a number of years – and especially since the very promising victory of the “no” in the referendum on the neoliberal EU constitution last spring. In Italy, Rifondazione Comunista adopted an orientation towards the building of such a force, from the late 1990s onwards, but it is once again torn between pursuing such a project and carving out a niche for itself within the centre-left alliance that has formed for April's general elections.

And finally, on a far more modest scale, here in “English Canada,” the New Politics Initiative (NPI) collapsed in 2002 under the combined strains of the pull of NDP leadership politics and the ongoing weakness and conservatism of the unions and social movements.

So – though with a less radical profile than their counterparts

abroad, and with very limited labour involvement – it appears that, for the time being at least, the founders of Québec solidaire have overcome a big hurdle facing the critical left in a number of countries.

To be sure, the new party faces an uphill battle. Though shaken and unpopular, the Charest government has forged ahead, not hesitating to impose a draconian settlement on restive public-sector workers late last year. With this defeat, the long wave of social protest against the Charest government has now likely come to an end.

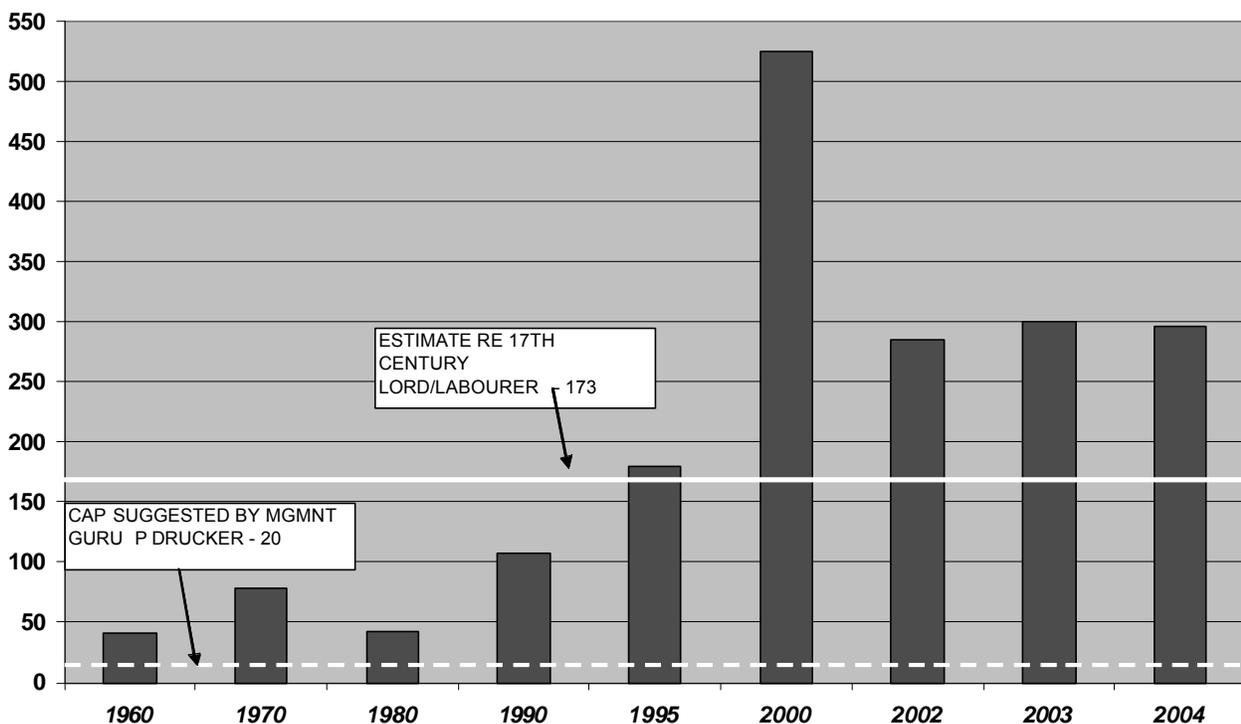
Add this to the jockeying of the mainstream parties and the media attention that will precede the National Assembly elections expected some time in 2007, and it is probable that the new party

will be pushed into the margins by media and public opinion. It will be attacked for “dividing” the anti-Charest and pro-sovereignty vote in the elections, and it will find it very difficult to sustain the activist component of its overall strategy in a morose and socially passive pre-election setting.

Still, it is said that adversity builds character. If the momentum of this past weekend’s founding convention is enough to carry Québec solidaire through the difficulties of the next couple of years, it will be well on its way to becoming a vibrant and incontournable force on the Québec political scene. **R**

Nathan Rao lives in Toronto. This article first appeared on *Rabble.ca*.

RATIO CEO SALARY TO AVG WORKER



Note that on basis of 2080 hours in a year, for 2003-204 period (when ratio in earnings was about 300/1) these top CEO’s ‘earned’ more, with an hour to go on the first day of work after New Years (ie in their first 7 hours) than average workers would make in a year.

Telling the Truth Serves Our Purpose



Review by Dale Clark

Truth is hard to come by in the aftermath of Canada's federal election where right wing parties pretended to move to the centre and those purporting to be on the left quickly joined them. Socialist Register 2006, *Telling The Truth* (editors: Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, Merlin Press: London) is an ambitious project given what the editors describe as the "unprecedented levels of secrecy, obfuscation, dissembling and down right lying that now characterizes public life." Is it possible to move beyond conspiracy theories and the cynicism that Colin Leys says is a condition of the neoliberal age?

You won't find a simple answer within this collection, but instead a thought-provoking and non-sectarian set of historical analyses, a goal of the Socialist Register since its founding in 1964 as 'a survey of movements and ideas.'

Telling The Truth opens with editor Colin Leys' examination of the research and neoliberal policymaking in the United Kingdom where "mission statements" have become a substitute for analysis. It concludes with Terry Eagleton's essay on the historical evolution and philosophical mediations on 'the truth.' In between these two provocative chapters are eleven other essays: Frances Fox Piven and Barbara Ehrenreich put what is deliberately and duplicitously referred to as welfare reform into an historical context of power and struggle; Robert W. McChesney and David Miller offer critical dissections of the corporate mass-media as an instrument of government propaganda prior to, during and following the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. John

Sanbonmatsu critiques postmodern dogma within the increasingly corporatized academic world; and, G. M. Tamas discusses the roots of socialists' ambiguity about the question of class. Atilio A. Boron, Doug Henwood, Loic Wacquant, Ben Fine, Elisa Van Waeyenberg, Michael Kustow, Sanjay G. Reddy, and Michael Kustow contribute pieces on law and order, world development, democracy in capitalist societies, the "business community," development, poverty, and culture.

Socialist Register 2006, *Telling The Truth* is not the kind of book that most readers are likely to absorb in one sitting if they don't have an academic's job description or aren't a reviewer faced with a deadline. However, the book provides a diverse collection of articles that are time-durable, and that readers can select from based on their political interests or available time throughout the year.

It is impossible to do justice to all the essays in a short review, but some stand out. Piven and Ehrenreich's "The truth about welfare reform" recounts the accomplishment of social movements in the United States, and how the political right has attacked all notions of collective responsibility, notions that originally forced Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's Great Society. Piven and Ehrenreich address how past reforms were both ideological and material. The disintegration of those elements has made it increasingly difficult to form progressive left alliances and further marginalized those already suffering by the competitive and individualistic dystopia of neoliberalism.

John Sanbonmatsu's "Postmodernism and the corruption of the academic intelligentsia" outlines the threat to critical thought and concrete political engagement due to the dominance of postmodern theories within universities. Sanbonmatsu criticizes a corrupted intellectual environment where truth is no longer the right of the oppressed but an object of academic ridicule performed as political radicalism. Sanbonmatsu bemoans the fact that more intellectuals seem caught up in a hip post-structuralist rejection of all truth-claims and unifying political strategies than they are linked to concrete social movements. But in doing so, Sanbonmatsu misses how the social movements, especially the unions, have (in the spirit of Gramsci's organic intellectuals) been developing their own intellectual capacity through their education programs for quite some time.

G. M. Tamas confronts those on the left who he sees as having a romantic view of class politics in "The truth about class." When terms like working families and ordinary Canadians are tossed around by social democrats in election campaigns and some progressive academics see class as just one more identity, the left needs to revisit this important topic. Tamas makes many references to past debates within the left, providing a good overview but sometimes demonstrating the unfortunate tendency of Marxist writers to label those who disagree with them as non-Marxists. One of those so labeled is E. P. Thompson whose article in the 1965 *Socialist Register* was part of those debates. Readers would

be well served to read Thompson's own words, which *Socialist Register* will soon have available at www.socialistregister.com along with all back issues up to 2000.

McChesney and Miller's scrutiny of war propaganda in the United States and the United Kingdom offer analyses of media control and manipulation that won't surprise many on the left, but are a necessary inclusion in a collection dealing with the calculated distortions of the truth in this century. Eagleton's closing essay on the nature of truth is a little esoteric (Nietzsche and Freud are two among many thinkers Eagleton refers to). Given the conceptual challenge of Eagleton's article, his inclusion of a reference to that other famous Marx, Groucho, was much appreciated comic relief.

Does this collection help the left move beyond conspiracy theories and cynicism and contribute to building a movement? Eagleton argues that suspicion about what purports to be truth doesn't have to be cynicism, especially if it comes from radicals' "lack of trust in the present political system, which arises in turn from their faith in the human capacities which it stifles." With that stipulation, *Socialist Register 2006: Telling The Truth* serves our political purpose. **R**

Dale Clark holds a lifetime membership in the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and is currently studying political economy at Carleton University.

Long Time Coming: Southern Africa's Liberation Struggle

Review by David Kidd

The Next Liberation Struggle: Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy in Southern Africa
By John Saul, *Between the Lines*, 2005

While we were subjected to the lackluster debate of the federal election of 2006, I remembered the exhilaration of when Nelson Mandela first came to Canada in the early 1990s after his release from Robben Island and he gave a speech at Queen's Park in Toronto. The lawn was covered with people and the mood was full of celebration for what had been accomplished in the fight against apartheid and what was possible in the future when the African National Congress (ANC) would come to power in South Africa. The entire planet was alive at that time with the inspiration that the new South Africa would smash the racist social structure that existed and deliver on material equity for the majority African population in terms of housing, jobs and access to land. Not only has the ANC not delivered on the hope that was generated at that time, but its embrace of neoliberalism has had a negative impact on activists world-wide.

John Saul has been one of the world's best analysts of political and economic developments in Africa, from his years as an academic in parts of Africa and at York University, and as a long-standing activist in the struggle against apartheid and for socialism. This book represents a collection of Saul's best hits – a veritable director's edition of his insightful writings from 1994 to present day on Southern Africa. →

The book contains three sections, each with a brand new introduction that sets the terrain for the articles that follow. The first section provides an overview of Africa – looking at its place in global capitalism, the failures of African socialism and the issue of democracy. This is an excellent section, particularly for anti-globalization and socialist activists and for those fighting for democracy, whether in the electoral vein or within institutions such as trade unions. The second section provides detailed accounts of major moments in the histories of Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. Each chapter provides shrewd analysis of four essential cases of the national liberation and socialist movement in Africa. The majority of this review will look at the third section of the book, which deals with recent developments in South Africa and within the ANC while in power.

One of the excellent features of the book is that three of the chapters of this section were written just after the South African elections of 1994, 1999 and 2004. The articles provide a look back at some of the key moments of post-apartheid South Africa, but also show that Saul has traced the ANC and its pro-globalization position from their first negotiations with the apartheid regime.

It is Saul's position that the ANC is unchangeable, that it has become a champion for trade liberalization and privatization and it has lost its commitment for the redistribution of material resources to the impoverished black majority of South Africa. He even suggests that within world trade conference circles, while the ANC government portrays itself as a spokesperson for other poor countries, it is actually advocating policies that will benefit South Africa's own trade position within Africa. Saul traces the gravitation of the ANC toward neoliberalism and looks at a number of factors – from their isolation and Stalinist structure as an organization in exile, to the protracted pressures of international capital. He portrays the contradiction where the economic fortunes of a number of ANC leaders has changed, as the new South Africa has produced a rising black elite that has accumulated personal wealth, while the South African economy still remains under the control of a mostly white bourgeoisie.

The book also analyses the ANC's shift away from the redistribution program it advanced in its first election program, the ANC support of liberal democratic practices, and their advancement of a bureaucratic state as opposed to the encouragement of popular participation. Part of this process has been the ANC's demobilization of the movements and civil society that worked heroically with the ANC to make South Africa ungovernable in the 1980s and forced apartheid to negotiate a settlement that led to the election where the ANC was first elected in 1994. The ANC uses the banishment and censure method to keep its allies in check. Saul gives the example of the lack of internal debate at the infamous time when ANC President Mbeki made the outrageous discounting of the relationship of HIV to AIDS. The African AIDS crisis was mounting and there was little dissent to Mbeki's position within the ANC.

One of the interesting chapters in the third section is part of a debate that Saul had with Jeremy Cronin, a leader with the South African Community Party (SACP), who still supports the ANC government and has members in the cabinet. As Saul mentioned in the book, it has become increasingly easy to be identified as a 'ultra-leftist' and a pessimist if you're critical of the ANC. I wonder whether the SACP would still be as complacent if Joe Slovo had not died and Chris Hani had not been murdered.

But South Africa's vibrant trade union movement and other organizations are held in check by their unwillingness to either criticize the ANC or to join in the organization of a new party to challenge the ANC at the polls. Saul sees the emergence of new grass roots initiatives in South Africa, such as the Anti-Privatization Forum and other organizations, as having the potential to mobilize South Africans against ANC neoliberal policy and to pursue goals such as the redistribution of material resources. This book is an amazing resource and will assist that process, but it will also engage socialist activists everywhere in the debates that have shaped our movement and will determine our future. **R**



How Wal-Mart Works

Review by Bryan Evans

“Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price”
Directed by Robert Greenwald (2005)

Not since Michael Moore’s “Roger and Me” (1989) has a documentary film concerned with knocking the legs out from a corporate giant received such acclaim, ink, and reaction. It has spawned something of a grass-roots movement through its expose of Wal-Mart’s practices and deception. The public and critical reception has been such that Wal-Mart produced its own documentary (“Why Wal-Mart Works: And Why that Drives Some People Crazy”) and hired a high-flying PR firm with a long history of defending the tobacco industry to rally its defence.

Director Robert Greenwald (also credited with “Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism” and “Uncovered: The War in Iraq”), savages America’s largest private sector employer in a style that is refreshing, witty and populist but not exceptionally radical, if by that we mean a critique of capitalism. One might say there is a certain conservative appeal in the small ‘c’ sense in that Wal-Mart’s business practices are framed as undermining heartland American life-styles and values, in short the idealized small town America. Even god-fearing Republicans line-up to protest Wal-Mart’s abuses of market power. A critique of capitalism as a system of structured exploitation this is not!

Stylistically, Greenwald presents the case against Wal-Mart as a virtual debate with CEO Lee Scott. Every time Scott invokes some clichéd line extolling his company’s virtues, Greenwald follows up by providing space for those who have lived the experience of Wal-Mart to speak. The absence of the usual talking-heads – high profile activist, intellectuals, academic experts – and allowing people who have lived the experience of Wal-Mart to talk is the real strength of this documentary. Moreover, Greenwald traverses a tremendous number of issues which compose Wal-Mart’s business strategy and practices and telescopes it all into 90 minutes. Everything from poverty-level wages, use of unpaid over-

time, racial and gender discrimination, union busting, destruction of small businesses, sourcing goods from low wage sweatshops in Latin America and China – it’s all here. Perhaps the scope is a tad too broad, as no issue is explored in great depth.

What is glaringly absent is the role of the consumer as an active participant in Wal-Mart’s system of exploitation. Clearly Greenwald made this documentary to raise awareness and hopefully change behaviors, but still there was an opportunity to open some space for a critique of consumerism and its role in driving forward a low-wage strategy, which ultimately can only fail for everyone.

Most effectively and poignantly, Greenwald takes aim at Wal-Mart hypocrisy. New employees are advised to apply for state-funded medical care to compensate for the company’s woefully inadequate health plan. In fact, Wal-Mart, an icon of small-town, do-it-yourself free enterprise relies heavily on tax-supported programs. Wal-Mart workers and their families require \$456 million per year in government-supported health care. In Arkansas, 8% of Wal-Mart employees must also draw on public assistance to survive. Wal-Mart has received more than \$1 billion in economic development grants and tax credits from state and local government. All



this while the average Wal-Mart employee earns on average \$13,900/year. Meanwhile, the Walton heirs have a net worth of \$18 billion each!

If you’re hoping to see the story of Wal-Mart placed in a larger context of ‘this is how capitalism works’ then forget it. This isn’t it. Still, it opens space to have a more general discussion on actually existing capitalism. **R**

Bryan Evans teaches public administration at Ryerson University.

Rewinding Reds

Reviewed by Doug Williams

Warren Beatty is an ambivalent socialist. This may come as a shock, as socialists of any stripe are scarce in the United States of America, in Hollywood too (despite claims of it being a haven for leftists).

Before you think to yourself, “Who the hell is Warren Beatty? I just want to read about George Clooney,” remember that history often repeats itself in Hollywood. Reading about a faded movie star in an old film thus might be politically instructive. Just think of Beatty as yesterday’s Clooney: both are very rich and handsome; both have spent much of their careers playing doctor.

Beatty’s an unusual man. As a zillionaire Irish-American Southern-Baptist, he wants to spread the wealth. His rap song in his recent film, “Bulworth,” with the line “Socialism! Socialism! The one word you can’t say in America today!” ensures him a permanent place in my critical pantheon.

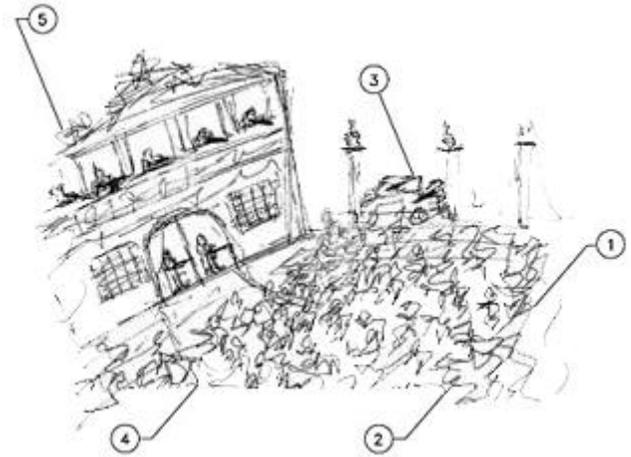
However, if socialist political content were the only criterion for film evaluation, there wouldn’t be much reason to bother with movies, not today, nor back in 1981, Ronald Reagan’s first year in power. Yet, the winter of Reagan’s inauguration experienced an exception: Beatty’s much-anticipated film, *Reds* was a holiday blockbuster about communists.

Beatty was no John Wayne: with *Bonnie & Clyde* and *The Parallax View*, he had made films that responded to the radicalized youth during the counter-cultural years of the 1960s. This time, Hollywood’s leading iconoclast had made a picture about John Reed, radical American journalist. Reed’s best-known book, *Ten Days That Shook The World*, was endorsed by Lenin. Along with Trotsky’s 3-volume history, it’s regarded as a definitive account of the Bolshevik ascendancy to power in Russia. Beatty’s subject was a genuine revolutionist (and his rocky marriage to a radical woman) and he’d cast himself in the lead role.

Beatty’s neither a great director, nor a great actor, but *Reds* is a trove of political content that is untypical of the American cinema. Aside from his penchant for sentimental slapstick and cute puppies, Beatty’s screenplay (co-written with playwright Trevor Griffiths) is filled with well-depicted characters and moments derived from socialist history.

The film begins with interview clips with old-time revolutionaries – actual contemporaries of Reed’s – who reminisce about Reed, radical politics, and the challenge of memory itself. Then we are treated to a glimpse of Beatty, as Reed, comically chasing a horse-drawn buckboard through an exploding Zapatista battlefield.

After glimpsing Reed’s future wife, Louise Bryant (Diane Keaton), at a photo exhibition, frustrated at provincial attitudes towards art, we see Reed – the scion of an influential Portland family – at a Liberal Club banquet, summoned by a jingoist (who has just invoked “patriotism, freedom, our heritage, and a world made safe for democracy”), to speak about his firsthand knowl-



edge of the war in Europe. “What would you say this war’s about, Jack Reed?” Rising, Reed shocks them with the single word, “Profits!” and promptly sits down. The Liberals are stunned, Bryant is enchanted, and Beatty has us in the palm of his hand.

Reed and Bryant embark on a sexy-funny romance that, in its feminist concern with free love and the oppression of traditional marriage, felt utterly contemporary in 1981. Beatty sustains a tone that is comic fun with Bryant’s angry feminism a foil for Reed’s bumbling charm. Scenes with Emma Goldman (Jean Stapleton) and Max Eastman (Edward Herrman) depict radicals spreading themselves between the needs of the burgeoning feminist and anti-war movements.

In a year that spawned the execrable *Indiana Jones* series and the cinematically flaccid Me-Generation primer, *Chariots of Fire*, *Reds* had the unexpected audacity to be a “woman’s picture”: the story is told (unevenly) from Bryant’s point of view.

Initially, Bryant finds it difficult to maintain her ambivalent hold on the widely-adored Reed while trying to keep up with the hot-brained radical New Yorkers. For many of these passionate members of the bourgeois intelligentsia, winding up in “the slammer” for one’s beliefs was a right of passage that separated committed from dilettante. Big personalities and bigger issues swirl around Bryant until she feels diminished and irrelevant. While Reed take a stand with a Red-baiting newspaper editor: “Just don’t rewrite what I write!”, Bryant struggles desperately with Reed for her own independence: “I want to stop needing you!”

Reed’s inner circle retires to Cape Cod to explore experimental theatre. Eugene (Jack Nicholson) O’Neill’s melancholy romanticism further challenges Bryant’s grasp on her own identity: hatred of her desire for male approval threatens to tear her apart.

Reed’s departure for a Democratic convention in St. Louis affords O’Neill the opportunity to taunt Bryant and Reed’s “freedom” as “parlour socialism”; what O’Neill has to offer would “feel a lot more like love than being left alone with your work.” Nicholson plays the part with heavy-lidded, almost sinister conviction and Bryant promptly begins an affair with him. To O’Neill’s bitter disappointment, Reed asks Bryant to marry him, and they become a thoroughly conventional triangle with O’Neill, the loser.

Hollywood romance? Yes, but addressing a very real predicament for radicals: how to live principled personal lives in a capi-

talist patriarchy? Many activists attempt to create utopian living arrangements before the material conditions that can sustain them are realised. Particularly among New Leftists, Maoists and anarchists, communal living, open relationships, and “workerist” lifestyles became a substitute for effective political organization and action.

Beatty peppers *Reds* with frequent cuts to his octogenarian witnesses, who comment with an amusing degree of conflict and delusion. One describes morally conservative times, while Henry Miller bluntly declares: “There was just as much fucking going on then as now.” Though these commentaries, it seems as though socialist history – its hopes, dreams, loves and betrayals – is repeating itself, through the present’s generation of socialist activists.

The film depicts the early activities of the American Socialist Party with crowded, smoke-filled halls, lots of yelling about events in Russia, and a major fight between Reed and Bryant about infidelity. Bryant abruptly departs for Europe, leaving Reed forlorn and sick with kidney disease. Reed then pursues Bryant to the Western Front and convinces her to come with him to Moscow.

Beatty depicts revolutionary Russia with atmospheric scenes of political turmoil and breathless journalistic assessments of the Bolsheviks. Reed mounts a podium and claims that American workers are waiting for the Russian workers’ leadership in pulling out of the war. Over a montage of street demonstrations, political meetings (with convincing shots of Lenin and Trotsky) and lovemaking with Reed and Bryant, we hear *The Internationale*. The film becomes a boisterous red balloon, about to pop, concluding Part 1.

And, lest we forget that our good time is predicated on the struggles of those who’ve gone before, Part 2 of *Reds* opens with an elderly woman singing *The Internationale*, slightly off-key. Henry Miller once said that people who want to “save the world” either have “no problems of their own” or have “problems they can’t face up to.” At the beginning of Part 2, Beatty images Miller saying “Jesus Christ tried to save humanity and they crucified him for it.” This politically pessimistic comment sets the tone for the rest of Beatty’s film.

Bryant and Reed return to an America on full Red Alert: Reed’s notes and documents are confiscated. “Welcome back” says a subdued Eastman, “a lot’s been happening.” Ironically, they embark on a traditional lifestyle, with Louise pouring tea for the boys in revolutionary smoke-filled rooms. Beatty cuts emphatically, to her gloomy face, and the film’s mood shifts.

Convincing scenes of the American Socialist Party depict the willingness of competing factions to split and form new movements. Reed abuses an inept, down-on-his-luck comrade and justifies it by claiming that “only building the party will help Eddie.” The moment illustrates a corollary of the “revolutionary lifestyle” belief: that personal considerations may be shelved in favour of the only effective vehicle for changing human relations: the Revolution.

As Reed and other factionalists get into pissing contests about who really represents the workers revolution, Bryant becomes petulant and withdrawn. Max Eastman expresses her doubts: “You know, we all, more-or-less, believe in the same thing. With us it’s

good intentions, but with Jack, it’s a religion.”

Finally, Reed is elected to represent the Communist Labor Party of America to the Comintern and Bryant explodes. She’s tired of the “petty political squabbling between humourless hack politicians just wasting their time on left-wing dogma.” Bryant insists that he’s a writer, not a politician, and declares she’s not going to Russia.

Suddenly, much of the film’s energy vanishes. Bryant’s negativity doesn’t play well off Reed’s single-minded dedication to the cause. In growing despair, Bryant watches silent cinema cartoons while Reed stows away aboard a Finland-bound steamer.

Reed arrives in Russia and is confronted with signs of parasitic bureaucracy in the person of Zinoviev (Jerzy Kozinski), who feasts on a raw onion and a lemon with salt while Reed talks about the labour movement in America. Reed appears as a fish-out-of-water amongst a revolutionary leadership that has abandoned personal life and made peace with the necessity of severe political repression. After being instructed to amalgamate the two left parties back home, Reed travels back to Finland, where he is promptly imprisoned.

The Kremlin arranges Reed’s release; in Moscow he faces a Comintern that insists on dictating policy to its American sympathizers. Reed resigns and watches a long phalanx of soldiers marching past: the revolutionary state is entrenching itself as the cold wind of thermidor sweeps across the quad.

While Reed blames the decline on bureaucrats, his friend, Emma Goldman, no longer has doubts. In a powerful polemic, she says the revolution is dead: the all-powerful state has destroyed everything they believed in; opposition newspapers are banned; dissenters are exterminated; power is confined to a small group of men. Reed counters with familiar “Revolution is not a tea party!” arguments, but reveals his own doubts when he says: “If you walk out on it now, what’s your whole life meant?” Steeling himself, he tears up his resignation and recommits himself to the revolution.

Reed travels with Zinoviev to Azerbaijan. He’s incensed when Zinoviev, in an opportunistic appeal to local Islamists, rewrites his speech, substituting “holy war” for “class war.” He scrutinizes the Russian, claiming that “When you kill dissent, you kill the revolution!” and “Don’t rewrite what I write!” The train is attacked by Whites and, in the scene’s ambiguous final shot, Reed is seen running towards them.

Bryant meets Reed on a Moscow railway platform. “Don’t leave me. Please don’t leave me!” Political turmoil can’t compete with romantic reunion. Exhausted, sick and hospitalized, Reed rallies briefly and asks Bryant if she wants to come with him to New York. Echoing their first scenes together, he asks “What as?” “Comrades?” replies Bryant. “I want to go home,” he whispers, and dies.

Red’s sad and melancholy ending highlights the tragedy and heartbreak of the 20th century radical experience. Beatty deserves credit for wrestling so publicly with his political and personal demons. Another film of the period – *Jonah, Who Will Be 25 In The Year 2000* – summed it up for revolutionaries, artists and everyone else: “Our lives go faster than history.” **R**

Doug Williams directs television programs in Toronto.

America's Army is Grand • Theft • Auto

Tanner Mirrlees

A military-industrial-entertainment complex has emerged. There is a tight economic and technological relationship shared by the United States Department of Defense and the globally expanding (and highly profitable) American video gaming industry.

The military and the gaming industry share research and development personnel, relay information about new technologies, and participate in joint efforts to produce military simulator games. In 1999, the United States army spent \$45 million to build the Institute for Creative Technologies. Designed by one of *Star Trek*'s esteemed set architects Herman Simmerman and located in California, the Institute connects the technology, expertise, and knowledge produced by the entertainment industries with the military. Here, more than forty-five writers, directors, and special-effects technicians, (many of them Academy-Award nominees) work with the military to synthesize the consumer pleasures and special-effects of entertainment with the goals of military training and war.

File sharing between corporate America and the U.S. military machine (typified by the Institute) have resulted in the production of a number of virtual war games, for both the military and the civilian market. The technology, engines, display monitors, graphics, and 'feel' of these games are often indistinguishable. Military computers predict the outcome of real military actions. They perform the same tasks as the 'engines' in wide-selling gaming consoles such as the Xbox and Playstation 2. Military financed war technology settles the comforts of middle class homes while the game systems played by domestic teenagers are networked throughout the American empire's foreign outposts and territorial bases. To bring the solitary pleasures of retail games to bastions of American troops, fourteen U.S. Air Forces bases – implanted on the continent of Europe – were recently equipped with more than 100 Microsoft Xbox game consoles (at a cost of more than \$200,000).

These connections make it unsurprising that the scenarios of military simulators copy and are copied by commercial war games to write and rewrite the history and future of American foreign

policy. First-person shooter games, well known for their enhancement of eye-hand coordination, exercise nimble trigger-fingers for target practice. Espionage-themed games guide secret agents through covert operations including the unilateral (and, by all international juridical standards, entirely illegal) assassination of enemy threats. Role-playing games introduce players to international power struggles between nation-states. All of this hyper-real warfare aspires to the status of reality minus war's life-shattering effects. It is undertaken within a propagandistic virtual context wherein players are deprived of the capacity to understand and question death and mass destruction as it passes before their eyes, repeatedly activated by their joystick hands.

Gamer thrills offered by the virtual obliteration of other nations and peoples are imputed by the bigotry of nationalism. The point of each game is almost always to protect, defend, and sometimes expand an innocent, benevolent, and righteous American 'way of life.' Whether replaying the D-day assault on Omaha Beach in *Medal of Honor* (2003), defending the homeland against neo-communist evils in *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* (2002), shooting down scud missiles in *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2000) or toppling Saddam Hussein's awful regime in *Conflict: Desert Storm – Back to Baghdad* (2004), and smoking Osama Bin Laden out of Afghanistan in *Fugitive Hunter: The War on Terror* (2003), gamers must respond to situations in which American national security is regularly jeopardized.

But militarism has never existed without patriarchy. The sexual assault of female soldiers by male soldiers on military bases, the physical battering of the wives of traumatized male soldiers in military-dependent small towns, and the under-reported gang-rape of Abu Ghraib's female prisoners by American soldiers, attest to the interrelatedness of militarism and patriarchy. From the reality of a global military game designed by the elite and fought by the working poor to a virtual one programmed by industry men and afforded by middle-class male consumers, gender biases and sexual inequalities explode forth. Male players are invited to dawn the virtual identity of virile and aggressive male protagonists. Women are represented as victims that need to be saved by these heroic military men or as homicidal vixens that must be controlled and sometimes killed.

The collusion between the imperial state and the world of military simulators and commercial war games is clear. Though the 'effect' of these games on players' minds may be indeterminate, the intention behind their making is often not. Corporate video game producers used to dodge accusations that their games deliberately indoctrinated players with militaristic ideologies and turned them into virtual soldiers – a 'sitting army' – by saying that the content of their games simply responded to consumer demand for extreme violence and gore. With the recent production of



America's Army (2002) and *Full Spectrum Warrior*, economic determinism and free-market reflectionism no longer debunk 'conspiratorial' suspicions that industry often works in direct collusion with the imperial state.

America's Army is a free, downloadable and web-based war simulation game that was financed by the United States Department of Defense at a cost of more than six million dollars. By 2002, the Modeling, Virtual Environment and Simulation Institute at the Naval Post-graduate School and industry giants (Epic Games, NVIDIA, the THX Division of Lucasfilm Ltd., Dolby Laboratories, Lucasfilm Skywalker Sound, HomeLAN, and GameSpy Industries) patriotically released this first-person shooter game to the public. *America's Army* seeks to promote the experience of the American military to young audiences. "The *America's Army* game is an extremely popular vehicle allowing young people to explore soldiering in today's U.S. Army," said Colonel Casey Wardynski, chief director of the *America's Army* development process. "*America's Army* is a realistic reflection of the Army, its soldiers and their missions." Though players get trained in boot camps at Fort Benning and Fort Bragg, endure a number of individual tactical missions, and – if they qualify for the elite Special Forces unit – are deployed with other soldiers in anti-terrorist combat operations, losing this game risks only a virtual death.

But real death may be more seductive, and will certainly be the tragic consequence for some gamers when they shed their comfortable online identities as virtual soldiers to materialize on the battlefield of Afghanistan or Iraq as real soldiers with real guns. The recruitment of players as new soldiers, the movement of players from their computer's war-screen to a desert war-scene, is the explicit purpose and ideal 'effect' of *America's Army*. "The game's developers went out of their way to ensure all of the details were exact," said Major Randy Zeegers, 20th Special Forces Group. "We think that this realistic view may open the eyes of young Americans so that they know what it takes to pursue a career in Special Forces, which is especially important now that we are engaged in a Global War on Terrorism." *America's Army*'s mission is being slowly accomplished. For three years, *America's Army* has ranked as one of the top-five on-line video games, registered sixty million hours of virtual combat with more than three million

players, and has recruited many youths as soldiers in the Bush Administration's war.

Full Spectrum Warrior, financed by American tax-payers at a cost of four million dollars and produced by Pandemic Studios, a branch of Sony Pictures Imageworks, is a war simulator game that was originally intended to train existing light Infantry troops in urban combat situations. Muhammad Jabbour Al-Afad, a clone of Osama Bin Laden that 'hates the West,' is the enemy's leader. The geographical enemy is "Tazikhstan," a fictional nation that is a safe haven for terrorists and Iraqi loyalists located between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. This virtual war world is constructed through neo-Orientalist fantasies about the Middle East and negative stereotypes of 'Muslim civilization.' The military, however, wasn't impressed with the feel and look of *Full Spectrum Warrior*. Not because of its racist content and potential to incite violence against racialized others, but because its graphics

and scenarios were not real enough for it to function effectively as a training tool. Though Pandemic Studios wasn't able to craft an essentialist rendering of the military's target, this corporation was able to capitalize on its 'failure of representation' by securing the intellectual property rights to the game from the military prior to developing it. At around fifty dollars a copy and with sales surpassing two-hundred and fifty million, *Full Spectrum Warrior* fills the coffers of its owners and gives



nothing back to the public that financed it but another ultra-violent and expensive military game.

The slaughter of law enforcers, the sexual battering of women, and the destruction of private property undertaken by a dark-skinned Carl Johnson, the criminal protagonist in the virtual gang war of PS2's *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), has recently given groups in the U.S. another reason to censor the production and consumption of ultra-violent video games. The virtual world of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is certainly detestable, but moral condemnations of the game's virtual world belie a much more traumatic reality. The game's promotion of gangs to the male youths of America's decaying urban centers and suburban corporate slums, its potential recruitment of these youths into a subculture of patriarchy and violence, reflects the detestable reality of imperialist militarism that the military-industrial-entertainment complex too, touts as consumer pleasure. **R**

CAW Debate: Bad Moon on the Rise?

The last number of months has seen a huge amount of controversy and debate over the political direction of the Canadian Auto Workers. Since the early 1980s, and even longer, the CAW has played a major role on the left in Canada in leading the social movements. The recent campaign of CAW for subsidies for some of Canada's most powerful corporations; the last round of collective bargaining with the Big 3 auto companies with few social platforms being advanced; and the 'jacket-gate' scandal generated by President Buzz Hargrove's embrace of Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin at the December CAW Convention, in the middle of the Federal election, have raised many questions about the political drift of the CAW. Indeed, the central political campaign of the CAW at the moment appears to be for a new 'centre-centre' alliance between a more market-friendly NDP under the leadership of Jack Layton and a rejuvenated Liberal Party. The possible CAW support for the Ontario Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty in the next election is being mooted amongst activists in the labour movement. Relay reprints here an important exchange, that has been made public, between Hargrove and former CAW Research Director Sam Gindin over these developments. The exchange merits careful scrutiny, as do a range of internal debates in the CAW that are beginning to emerge from many quarters. The Socialist Project e-bulletin is available at www.socialistproject.ca.

Jan 23, 2006

Dear Sam,

I would like to respond to a couple of statements you made in your December 14 Socialist Project e-bulletin #10.

At no time did we state that we had, in our 2005 bargaining, limited job losses at GM to 1700 due to efficiencies. We did say that we stood to lose at least 1700 to 2500 jobs over the next three years due to productivity improvements.

During the 2005 bargaining we fought hard to get a commitment for a new product for Oshawa Plant 2 after the end of production of the 2008 models. Because of all the uncertainty at GM in the U.S. during our bargaining, after much discussion, we came to the conclusion that a strike could not force a commitment from GM for Plant 2. The Oshawa bargaining committee decided a strike may even further jeopardize future opportunities for Plant 2.

We were faced with major challenges in Big 3 2005 negotiations, especially at GM with the Delphi crisis, GM's pending announcement of closure and layoffs and the fact that the UAW was in bargaining with GM, clearly willing to give concessions. In addition, much like 1996, we had the investment community pushing GM for UAW-type concessions in Canada.

The announced closures and layoffs in the U.S. and Canada followed closely the decision of Delphi to file for bankruptcy and the announcement of an agreement on concessions by the UAW on behalf of GM retirees as well as active workers.

These concessions were ratified by GM/UAW members and the UAW quickly followed suit at Ford even though the health care cost argument was not the same and are currently in bargaining with DaimlerChrysler for concessions.

We left the bargaining table with the bargaining committee realizing the uncertainty of the future of Plant 2 and the knowledge that if sales of the Impala and Monte Carlo did not sustain three full shifts of production, we would lose the third shift at

Plant one.

Therefore, when the announcement came, there was no public outcry of anger and/or betrayal because the facts had been before us in bargaining. In spite of that we were unanimous on the bargaining committee with unanimous support from all GM local union leadership when we presented the tentative agreement to them.

We did publicly express surprise and frustration that GM was closing its #1 assembly plant in North America as well as the timing of the announcement. After discussion with the Local 222 leadership, we agreed that at least we have time to try to turn the decision around.

We have continued, at every opportunity, to highlight the fallacy of the neoliberal promise that competitiveness would bring job security. Not only have we criticized GM for closing its best plant but we were successful in convincing a lot of reporters on the issue, many who wrote articles very critical of GM's decision.

So, in spite of the enormous pressure on our union during last fall's bargaining i.e. high dollar impact on labour costs, imports and transplants taking about 50 percent of the market in Canada and the U.S., major losses at both Ford and GM to be followed by major job cuts, and UAW concessions, our union rejected the corporate agenda at every level in our bargaining.

In spite of major demands to outsource work and other takeaways, we rejected concessions and in spite of tough times, made progress in every area of our contracts including wage improvements and COLA that exceeded what both private and public sector unions are achieving.

Yes, we took a proactive stand in support of government financial support for Canada's most important industry. GM benefited from our support as well as Ford, DaimlerChrysler and even Toyota received financial support for a new plant.

Had we not lobbied for government support, the Big 3 new investments may well have gone to one of the many U.S. plants that are closed or scheduled to close.

We continue to work hard to try and force GM to put a new product in Plant 2 after the 2008 model and as you suggested, we have been pushing hard for both levels of government to use the financial support they gave GM to help leverage a new commitment.

Our campaign to open Asian markets to vehicles built in Canada and the U.S. is designed to highlight to CAW members and the public, the unfairness of the increasing share of North America's market going to Asian companies, while Asian governments protect their market at home. We are building support on this issue among our members, the public and political leadership. In the best case scenario this support would lead to government restrictions on imports as well as content requirements for all companies who sell in our market. In other words, an Auto Pact type arrangement with Asian and possibly European countries.

Not perfect but a policy that has been debated and endorsed by the CAW Big 3 Auto Council and the CAW Auto Parts leadership as well.

There is nothing uncomfortable or confusing about our opposition to free trade agreements with South Korea and Japan. CAW is the only union in Canada that has consistently and pub-



licly called for the abrogation of the NAFTA and an end to efforts by our government to negotiate further free trade agreements.

At the CLC Industrial Conference in Ottawa a few months ago, the lone voice calling for an end to NAFTA and an end to discussion on all other free trade agreements was CAW. Top labour leaders, as well as left activists and left academics present at the conference were all strangely silent on free trade agreements.

On the question of concessions, you were part of the leadership team of Bob White, Bob Nickerson and myself when the Canadian UAW Council adopted a strong position of no concessions in 1981. In our 1982 bargaining, we lost our PPH days and a bonus day's pay and not one leadership person, staff member, or

member that I recall referred to these losses as concessions.

Yes, we have suffered some setbacks at places like Navistar, Air Canada, Budd Automotive, Lear and a few others. These setbacks came after a fight in every instance and like 1982 auto bargaining, the major setback was in paid time off the job.

There is no union anywhere in the world which challenges the corporations to defend our members, their families, and their communities' interest like CAW. This has included over a dozen workplace occupations and even more strikes over the last several months alone.

There is no union that challenges politicians of all stripes to support policies that help working people and the underprivileged in our society like CAW.

There is no union where the top national and local leadership constantly challenge themselves to do more for people and do it better in all our many endeavours.

Are we perfect? No. We are working people working collectively fighting against the most powerful rightwing movement that the world has experienced in my lifetime and we are winning some very key battles.

You raised the political scene. Yes, Paul Martin was invited to speak to the CAW Council meeting in December 2004, as we struggled to get governments' support for the auto industry, aerospace, shipbuilding, fishing and others. We also wanted to raise our social agenda i.e. national child care, UI improvements, workplace training and immigration issues to highlight just a few. The PM could not speak to our December Council because of scheduling problems but did spend an hour and 15 minutes over breakfast, prior to the start of Council, with the CAW NEB where we raised these issues and others.

We especially highlighted our fierce opposition to Canada entering in any fashion into an agreement with the U.S. on missile defence.

Paul Martin did commit to speak at our December 2005 Council if schedule permitted. His office notified us a few days before the Council meeting that he would speak. Because the election was on at this time and we did invite Jack Layton to speak as well. His schedule apparently did not allow him to speak but we did have Joe Comartin and Brian Masse bring the NDP message to Council delegates.

My recommendation was debated by the CAW staff on Wednesday prior to Council and presented to Council on Friday morning and we purposely held off debate until later Saturday morning to give delegates and staff time to think about and discuss it. The debate lasted for over three hours with delegates who spoke against the recommendation numbering at least two to one, compared to those who favoured the recommendation. The recommendation passed by at least 85 per cent of the delegates.

You raised, why the recommendation was not debated at an earlier Council meeting, but as you are aware, this is the same procedure that we have always followed on key decisions for the union over my many years at Council, including our union's decision to leave the UAW and set up a Canadian union.

No, this is not about a new relationship with the Liberals. It is about a new political reality facing Canadians including CAW members and the many others in society that depend on our →

union's support. In my humble opinion, with the emergence of the Reform Party and the Bloc Quebecois, federal politics have changed forever in Canada.

No longer can we hope that a split vote between Tories and Liberals will allow the NDP with 18 to 25 per cent support have a chance to hold the balance of power in Ottawa. Over the years, when we had just three major parties this was a possibility but even then only a couple of times, over the many years, were the NDP able to actually gain the balance of power.

Minority governments in today's environment will require, for the most part, three political parties' support and cooperation. This can and has offered opportunity to get some progressive legislation and progressive budgets that address some of the concerns of working people and the underprivileged. Perfect? No. But we can affect change as we build for the future.

With the focus of the hierarchy of the NDP on electoral success, as opposed to offering real change, socialist ideas for the most part are left, with a few of us who are accused of living in the past.

As for the McGuinty government, we will decide at the Council meeting prior to the election what our union's position will be. I will say it is very difficult to get excited about the potential for the Ontario NDP at this point.

I take objection to you saying we haven't criticized McGuinty. We were front and centre leading the opposition to the McGuinty labour law reform and their lifting of the age 65 retirement requirements. We have worked closely with poverty groups criticizing McGuinty for not raising the minimum wage and welfare rates far enough.

We continue to be prominent in the fight for the one per cent solution to deal with Ontario's housing crisis for poor people including the homeless.

The only issue we supported McGuinty on in over two years was the health care tax. We were the only union in the province who supported higher taxes to support our health care system. Why no criticism of the OFL and the other health care unions for not supporting the strengthening of funding for health care and health care workers. We have opposed P3s along with other health care unions and will continue to do so. We have not been invited to join the coalition against P3s, I believe, because of our history of defending Canadian workers in their struggle with SEIU.

Where are we headed as a union? We will continue the struggle against the corporate agenda at the collective bargaining table and in the political arena. We will continue to build the confidence of and support of our members, their families and communities. That alone allows us to carry on the activities of a social union and be part of a broader social movement.

We will be part of a broader social movement and continue to challenge all who say they represent the aspirations of working people and the underprivileged in our society to show, by their actions and deeds that they truly do. While we must deal with the day to day realities facing our union, we will continue to work for a real political alternative.

Our union is fortunate in having some of the most committed and most progressive local union leadership, activists and staff across Canada. As we prepare for a major change in the top lead-

ership of our union over the next few years, I am confident that the structure of the CAW will ensure the continuation of progressive, challenging leadership (including challenging themselves), leading a militant union that not only has a slogan of fighting back makes a difference but will continue the practice.

I appreciate your concerns but I do not believe they are supported by the facts.

Best personal regards.

In solidarity,

Buzz Hargrove, President CAW - Canada

February 5, 2006

Dear Buzz,

Appreciate you taking the time to respond. We agree that these are uniquely difficult times for labour and the left, but our differences go beyond the facts themselves; let me start, however, by responding to a few of the specific points in your letter.

I did not in fact criticize the wages and benefits that were recently negotiated at the Big Three, nor suggest that the union made concessions at this level. (In fact, a number of people from other unions have criticized me for how soft I was on the CAW re this point). My concerns were of an entirely different nature. I thought that certain previously critical areas such as organizing and work time did not get the attention they deserved. And I questioned how the larger issue of jobs and trade was being ideologically framed with the union's own members and the general public.

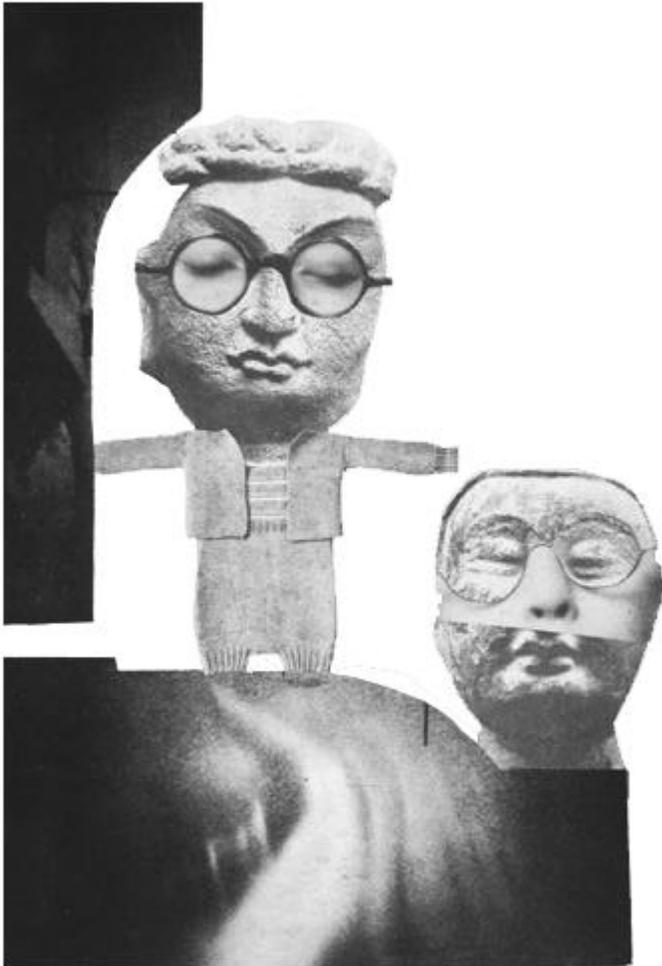
When our union brought auto parts workers together recently to respond to the threat of a new concessionary wave, I wrote to congratulate you on that important initiative. The questions I had, and still have, were: a) How concessions will be defined (the resolution, for example, spoke to wages and benefits but noticeably left working conditions and work time aside); and b) Whether workplace education and mobilization against concessions was in fact underway or planned.

You raise the question of the loss of PPH days in the early 80s to show that the loss of time off should not necessarily be seen as being 'concessionary.' The issue, however, is not the use of a particular word but the meaning of particular historical events. In the case of the very difficult bargaining at Air Canada, I don't know why you insist on denying that the six year agreement (which we had attacked when others did it) was not a concession, and that the losses in working time and workplace rights were non-concessionary – especially when not only the rest of the labour movement but also Air Canada workers commonly saw it as such. In refusing to admit this and move on, it appears to open the door to other such 'non-concessionary' agreements. On the other hand, though losing the PPH days in the early 80s was a specific 'concession,' it was also part of a larger and historic victory for us. At the time, we were also differentiating ourselves from the UAW by hanging on to the principle of an annual improvement factor. Most

important, within months we were involved in the strike at Chrysler which, along with the later strike at GM in 1984, led to the dramatic break with the UAW. The PPH issue, in other words, was part of breaking with the concessionary direction of the UAW.

You assert that ‘at no time did we state that we had, in our 2005 bargaining, limited job losses at GM to 1700.’ That is rather startling since the media quite generally reported this to be precisely how you described the main achievement in bargaining. In your *National Post* column (September 28, 2005) you argued that ‘our primary goal this year was to secure the future prospects of Canada’s auto industry... not to extract the biggest wage gain possible,’ and after reaching each agreement the announcement of the limited number of jobs lost seemed to confirm, for CAW members as well as the general public, the union’s success in respect to limiting job losses.

In any case, what I was raising wasn’t the union’s inability to keep GM to particular commitments, but the lack of criticism when GM announced further cuts so soon after the ratification of the agreement. After all, nothing new had happened in the intervening period. Moreover, the union had been instrumental in getting the \$450 subsidy for GM in order to protect and expand jobs. And the jobs that were being lost were inexplicably from GM’s best plants, by any measure, in North America. In these circumstances what message did the union’s lack of an angry response send?



As for NAFTA, other unions have in fact taken comparable positions to the CAW and this was reflected in the CLC’s resolution on free trade at the last convention: ‘The congress, its affiliated unions and federations of labour will... Work for the ultimate abolition of the neoliberal free trade agreements (including NAFTA and the WTO).’ But all this is secondary; passing resolutions and leading the fight are two different things. To date, people just don’t see your commitment to the fight against NAFTA as being much of a priority. Besides, a serious campaign against NAFTA could not be done alone. It would require rebuilding ties with the rest of the labour movement and contributing to the revival of the social movements. So, especially when this comes up in the context of you seeming to ally yourself, even temporarily, with those who implemented NAFTA, the CAW’s stand against NAFTA doesn’t look very credible.

But let me get to the main point. The NDP has, as you say, distanced itself from left values and politics. In this election, for example, they rushed to identify themselves with the ‘law and order’ side without introducing the actual facts and larger context. They argued for a pharmacare program without acknowledging that unless we also nationalized the pharmacare companies (or at least moved to control their prices) this would just mean a larger subsidy to the companies and soon increased talk of a financial crisis in health care. No mention of oil profits and public control over energy, no challenge to free trade, no discussion of international issues like Canada’s role in Haiti (though there was a brief mention of Afghanistan), no pressure for tax *increases* on the rich, etc. Raising the question of building something to the left of the NDP therefore resonates. Yet can we credibly really proclaim that the CAW has picked up the left banner? In fact, if we do claim this, it may even get in the way of an honest assessment of where the union is now and what it needs to do.

Let me elaborate. The claim that the CAW carries the left banner is sometimes hard for the left to see when it observes the choices you’ve made between candidates outside national politics. Whatever the reasons for your preferences, you were clearly not on the left in endorsing Barbara Hall for Toronto Mayor, refusing to support John Cartwright for head of the Metro Toronto Labour Council, and campaigning for Ken Georgetti as CLC President. In your response to 9/11, the CAW’s left credentials were actually damaged: what else could have been the result of unilaterally declaring the cancellation of a major international protest involving hundreds of progressive organizations including labour, and appearing to cast the social movements in a negative light.

But all this might have been seen as ad hoc and transitory. More fundamental has been the strategy of lobbying for subsidies, which damages the union’s left credentials because there is no way of getting around the fact that it does mean giving millions in public funds to the corporations. It runs the danger of undermining confidence amongst auto workers in their ability to fight back (if we need to ‘buy’ our jobs, can we really fight on the shop floor?); it can confuse our movement allies (why is the CAW fronting for these multinationals?); it encourages auto corporations to make subsidies a condition of investment even if they had previously planned to invest *anyways* (so it does not in fact generate new jobs and, as we’ve seen, very often not even →

protect existing jobs); and it encourages added capacity which may only mean job losses elsewhere (as the union-supported subsidies to Toyota may do). On top of all this, the strategy of subsidies has to be seen, in any case, as inherently limited, since it can't be extended indefinitely.

Furthermore, the focus on exporting vehicles to Japan and South Korea risks being viewed as legitimating free trade – if they only open up their markets everything will be fine. This was dangerous not only because of the mixed political signals it gave, but also because it was analytically confusing. The more open Japan and Korea are, the more their markets will be served by direct investment or shipments from the rest of Asia, not from North America. The issue is how we deal with them here as both imported vehicles and – increasingly – as direct producers since 2/3 of Honda and Toyota sales come from North America plants (an issue of both jobs and unionization).

When you declared after Ford bargaining that the Ford-CAW relationship was 'a model of how a union and a company can work together: not to resist change, but to manage it,' this too put the union in an awkward position. This kind of language can sound awfully close to the labour-management partnerships the union has always been suspicious of – and for good reason as we saw when, soon after, St. Thomas lost a shift.

Finally, the embrace of Martin during the campaign (and not just at "Jacket-gate") also undermined the argument that the CAW is taking a step leftwards. [When, a few days ago you talked about hugging Harper if he came through with auto subsidies it reinforced the view, even though you may have been half-joking, that the issue was not Harper's overall orientation to where the country is going but the narrower issue of what he was doing for a subset of CAW members]. Nor did campaigning with executives

from Toyota and Magna add credibility to the CAW's potential role in leading a new left. On the contrary, it reinforced the view that rather than building the base to challenge and negotiate with power, the CAW seemed to be embracing the elite and accommodating to it.

The formation of UPC committees a year or so ago and the positive step to establishing a new campaigns department seemed very positive, but the committees now seem in limbo and the new department seems to have been relegated to a lobbying function in Ottawa. The union's educational programs are indeed remarkable, but the danger is that the practice of the union may be seen as tending to reinforce rather than challenge the logic of competitiveness, and that the union's efforts may be seen as concerned with lowering expectations rather than with inspiring militancy and hope.

The labour movement and the left are, as we discussed at the staff meeting, in trouble everywhere and this raises many difficult questions. The Canadian working class and the Canadian left desperately need a renewed CAW that does in fact grasp that the only way forward is to build the kind of understanding, broad solidarity, and organizational structures that can truly challenge corporate power. But that also means fundamentally rethinking unions and that includes challenging the direction the CAW has been pursuing. Absent such an internal renewal and the rediscovery of an independent working class vision, unions will sink further into the swamp of cynicism, demoralization and grasping at any straws that seem 'practical.'

In solidarity
Sam Gindin/CAW Retiree

Election Revenge? Buzz and the NDP Once More

Barry Brennan

The recent expulsion of Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove from the Ontario NDP has been a hot topic across the Ontario labour movement. On one side, there is anger and frustration with the CAW's call for strategic voting, Hargrove's open embrace of former Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin and support for anti-union employers, such as former Magna head Belinda Stronach, running as Liberals. On the other, dismay at the rightward drift of Jack Layton's NDP campaign and Hargrove's post-election ouster from the

party. Both the distressing electoral activity of the CAW's President in the just-concluded federal election and the heavy-handed and arbitrary actions of the party's Ontario provincial executive council (which Layton has distanced himself from, but done nothing to reverse) reflect a strategically confused political landscape for Canada's labour movement, and the increasingly centrist and market-oriented politics of the NDP.

Hargrove's expulsion exposes the sad state of the NDP's politics. This is a party

that in Ontario has a member of Bob Rae's worker-bashing cabinet as its leader in Howard Hampton. And at the federal level makes no bones about changing its policies, often in contradiction to its own conference resolutions, in pursuit of disaffected Liberal votes in its embrace of the Clarity bill, push for mandatory sentencing, its acceptance of free trade, and its support for the all-party consensus on Canadian involvement in Afghanistan and Haiti. Hargrove has been expelled from the NDP not because of any policy differences with

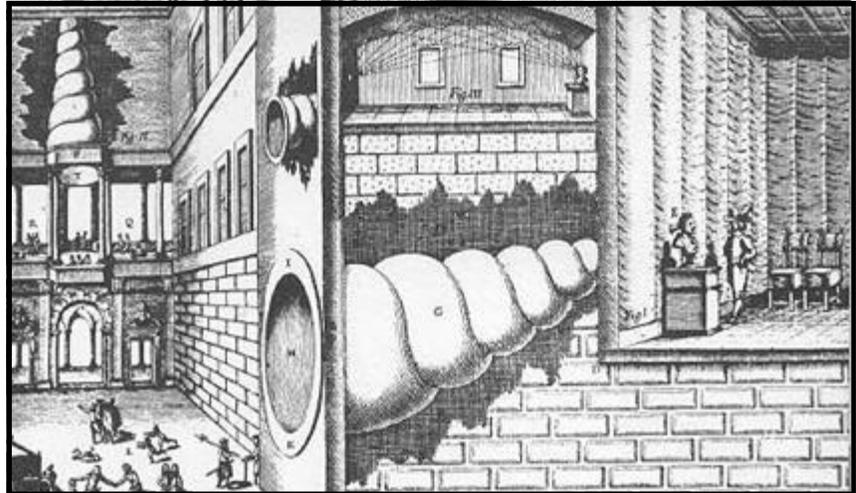
the NDP (the case could be made that the NDP's campaign broke more with party positions than Buzz's), but because of his own fixation with electoral outcomes contradicted the party's own obsession with short term electoral success. Indeed, both Hargrove and the NDP wanted a minority government with the NDP holding the balance of power and supporting the Liberals!

NEW & OLD BATTLES

The decision to expel Hargrove from the NDP partly represents tactical differences over the means to occupy the centre of Canadian politics between Hargrove and the NDP party strategists. It is also a strategic difference as the NDP continues its drive to make itself a post-labour urban party of more market-friendly progressives. The CAW, and Hargrove in particular, is seen as an important obstacle in the way for the 'third wayist' modernizers who have come to dominate the party under Layton. This is one more step in the organizational realignment of the NDP.

The vote to expel Hargrove is also a result of older petty infighting between union leaders, based in institutional competition and what used to be major political differences. The differences are rooted in the early 1990s 'Pink Paper Group', arising out of several large private sector unions, and debates then current about strategies for progressive competitiveness, the role of the public sector and mass action versus electoral politics. The CAW was then taking a more radical position on these issues and raising questions about the limits of capitalism. These key strategic debates have shifted: both the old Pink Paper unions and their adversaries have reached something of a consensus about the necessity of supporting corporate competitiveness, and reining in the public sector. But old petty differences die hard, and the attack on Hargrove clearly bears many of the scars of those battles.

Inside the CAW, genuine concerns about the overall direction of the union and the open support of anti-union liberal candidates in the federal election have been dwarfed by the dismay that activists from the left and the right wings of the union feel about the bureaucratic expulsion of



Buzz from the NDP. This has set back, for a time, what might have been an essential debate, as the union rallies round its President.

STRATEGIC VOTING

The elected CAW Council overwhelmingly endorsed the resolution on strategic voting. It would be a mistake to think that the vast majority who endorsed that resolution necessarily supported all of the elements of the campaign that was to be waged in the next two months by Hargrove and some of his close advisors. The CAW Council debate and the passing of the resolution reflected contradictory political thinking amongst delegates and activists. This thinking ran the gamut from those who called for unquestioning support of the NDP, to those who want a socialist alternative, to those who wanted an increased NDP presence in another minority parliament, to those who wanted the freedom to openly make alliances with employers, through the Liberals.

The whole issue of "strategic voting" also raised other questions. Was it really possible for one union with limited influence to really affect the outcome in a way which would ensure "a Liberal minority government with a stronger NDP presence"? Is the goal of labour electoral activity to simply broker deals between different relatively hostile political forces? Can elections become spaces to build support for progressive ideas and movements and can unions play a role in this? How does a progressive union movement intervene in an electoral process where its tra-

ditional electoral partner isn't part of a movement to challenge capital?

ELECTIONS & THE LEFT

The socialist left – or the broad left, for that matter – hasn't really figured out how best to participate in elections. Even in this era where there are no political parties that represent socialist ideas or policies, elections do create heightened political awareness and interest amongst working people. Electoral periods open up possibilities, though often limited, for mobilizing and educating. Starkest fact of this election is that this did not happen from the NDP, the unions or the social movements.

Perhaps the worst part of Buzz's expulsion is that it displaces a number of important discussions that need to happen throughout the labour movement. First, is the need for the labour movement to end its dependence on a party that embraces neoliberalism and accommodates itself to the strategic interests of capital; that refuses to identify its interests with those of the working class or its organized sections in the union movement; that chooses principles on the basis of whether or not it will increase their votes and lives in a universe of personalities and short-term electoral tactics.

In other words, the concern over Buzz's expulsion shouldn't preclude the necessary debate about the need to build a new movement that challenges capital and neoliberalism, sees itself as organizing and building resistance and argues for a →

different social system. The NDP is not that kind of party and, even while people may vote for it as the “best of the existing options,” and for the residues of its linkages to unions and workers, we should have no illusions about what it is and what it is capable of becoming.

Our problem is not just the lack of a socialist party. Unions as social movements are not acting as the counterforce against neoliberalism that they have the potential to be. We are still mired in reactive modes to neoliberalism. Unions need a rethinking process that gets to the root of how they organize, how they relate to the rest of the working class, their basic approach to employers, internal democracy and politics.

This will not happen by itself. Amongst the growing numbers of activists that are

deeply concerned about the future of their movement – within unions such as the CAW, CUPE and the Steelworkers – there needs to be an organized presence that brings them together to change their unions, and the union movement as a whole. Such an organization must have a basis outside, as well as inside unions, helping left activists inside the union movement move beyond the narrow confines of their individual workplaces and union hierarchies, building common struggles across unions, alongside the unorganized and with communities. There is a need for a space for working class activists to collectively analyze, strategize, organize, and summarize our experiences, in the spirit of challenging the logic of private enterprise and private accumulation.

The election and its aftermath in the expulsion of Buzz Hargrove from the NDP raise the dilemmas the left faces in Canada. Clearly, the campaign the NDP waged should be a wake-up call to all of those on the left who instinctively identify politics, electoral as well as other activities, as support for the NDP. And Hargrove’s agenda for a new centre NDP-Liberal alliance is clearly fraught with contradictions and limits. They deal with neoliberalism only by providing alternate routes to accommodate it. Realistic alternatives for the left now clearly reside elsewhere. But can the unions and social movements rebuild them? **R**

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Unions and the Challenge of Workplace Organizing

Freda Coodin

The auto and auto parts sectors of the Canadian economy have been the home of the Canadian Auto Workers and many of the key gains made by working people have begun in struggles there. But workers in these sectors have been dealing with the effects massive restructuring brought on by growing competition and overproduction; layoffs, outsourcing and speedup and increasing pressure for concessions. The traditions of struggle and political consciousness have, however, deep roots in the sector and in the CAW. There are a number of activists who are interested in building on these traditions.

The Labour Committee of the Socialist Project has been working on an effort to help rebuild a socialist current in the labour movement. The idea has been to work with like-minded working class activists and slowly develop the capacity to apply socialist principles to the workplace and their union and communities. As part of this process, the SP held a series of meetings with worker activists through the fall and winter of the past year.

UNION CHALLENGES

The October London meeting, attended by about 40 participants, was a first crack at bringing together activists from workplaces in Ingersoll, London, Toronto and Windsor, from the private and public sectors, to discuss common challenges in their workplaces, their underlying causes and possible responses. The idea was to go further than simply listing grievances and concerns, but to think about some of the larger, political issues shaping conditions and organizing ourselves to understand and challenge them. As the organizing leaflet noted:

This workshop hopes to start a discussion on how we

concretely organize ourselves to build a capacity to respond to what is happening to us. It will include some SP activists but will primarily include some new workers concerned about where things are at. Though we must eventually move towards raising larger political questions (capitalism, Canada’s relationship to the USA), how far we actually go in this particular meeting will depend on the meeting itself.

At the meeting, participants divided into discussion groups and did a collective analysis of three issues: what is happening in our workplaces? why is it happening? and what we can do about it. The discussions were lively and intense and showed a number of common patterns: intensification of work, increasing job insecurity, layoffs, more power to employers, and a combination of aggressiveness and appeals to “jointness” being made to the unions from bosses. Participants also noticed a weakening of union resolve, the annoying practice of “reducing expectations”, rather than building a fight back and a growing acceptance of the necessity to become more competitive on the part of union leadership.

They also identified a series of common, underlying reasons for the present situation: real-life constraints, such as increasing competition in each sector, free trade, deregulation and the heightened power of employers; the lack of political alternatives to neoliberalism and free trade; the growing feeling of workers that there can’t be any alternative to the way things are; the power of competitiveness and the acceptance of it by unions; the lack of democratic debate inside some unions; not building links with surrounding communities, and a host of other points.

Finally, participants discussed a series of things to do to re-

spond, such as identifying worker interests and expectations at bargaining, building a grassroots movement to politicize union members on local, national and international issues; developing a working class agenda of opposition to the corporate agenda; naming the problem; looking to other workers who are challenging and making gains; creating social activities that take members out of the workplace, such as lunch clubs to discuss issues; discussions at the workplace; talking about and challenging overtime and resistance to lean production; creating workplace newsletters that talk about resistance, ideas and alternatives; organizing the unorganized (especially the transplants) nationally and internationally; discussions about alternatives to capitalism, through reading circles; taking up political campaigns that challenge the new reality; relearning how to take on issues in the workplaces – build on traditions that are still there.

Edur Velasco, from Mexico spoke about the movement to create a worker-based political opposition there and Sam Gindin spoke about the need to link workplace fightbacks with a deeper commitment to challenge the political forces shaping the economy.

WORKPLACE ORGANIZING

A second, smaller meeting was held on December 11th in London. A group of about 20 participants discussed some of the key aspects of the current employer offensive in transforming our workplaces and outlined some strategic responses. The opening presentation outlined four principal challenges in the workplace today: speedup/work intensification; attitudes of workers and the conditions that affect them; dignity issues around harsh absenteeism policies, time-off, and others; and working hurt and overlooking health and safety concerns. It emphasized the necessity of developing collective responses, relying on existing traditions in the workplace of collective direct action struggles and slowly building the confidence of workers and re-creating the capacity of the union to lead these struggles.

In the discussion, participants described their own experiences with speedup, the attacks on their dignity and health and safety and their growing frustration with the lack of ongoing, collective responses by the union. Most argued that we need to create workplace-based newsletters to provide a union-based analysis of employer strategies inside the workplace, and to share experiences across workplaces and local unions.

Participants also brought up other, ongoing issues that were shaping employer and union responses: the federal election and the struggle of workers at Delphi and the Big Three auto compa-

nies against the latest round of concession demands.

THE DELPHI FIGHTBACK

The Delphi situation was addressed in Windsor on February 4th, as Socialist Project members based in that city organized a meeting at the CAW Local 200 Hall. Speakers included Jerry Tucker, former UAW Intl Executive Board Member & co-founder of the New Directions Movement in that union and labour educator/activist; Dennis Delling, long-time Delphi worker and participant in current struggle; Mike Vince, President of CAW Local 200 (Ford) and Sam Gindin from the Socialist Project.

About 85 people, a smattering of union and political activists

from the US and Canadian movements, heard the speakers talk about the fightback at Delphi and amongst workers at GM, Ford and Daimler-Chrysler, the struggle for Canadian-style health care in the US and the importance of solidarity and support from Canadian workers. As all of the speakers emphasized, the most important form of



support is the continuation of the rejection of concessions right here at home.

Vince talked about the importance of maintaining an independent working class perspective in everything that we do and Gindin called on auto workers to organize non-union workplaces introduce limits on investment to challenge the overcapacity that is threatening jobs and the industry as a whole.

Clearly, the process of building a socialist current is still in the earliest of stages. Inside workplaces and in most of the public and private sector, the current generation of activists needs to relearn an rebuild the capacity to organize collective forms of struggle that was weakened and sometime even lost in the most recent employer offensive. Unions are all too often arguing that the need to be competitive means that employer attacks can't be challenged, rather than serving as sources of resistance. This needs to change and activists need to regain the confidence to lead that change. Finally, the struggles that are actually being carried out in today's workplaces and unions are often quite spontaneous and are not linked to larger, more strategic political challenges to free trade, neoliberalism and the logic of capital. This requires inking-up socialist ideas and strategies with the working class movement. This is ultimately the only route out of neoliberalism and the union impasse. **R**

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The Peculiarities of Mexico's Unions

Dick Roman and Edur Velasco Arregui

Mexico's union membership has sharply declined in the last three decades, especially in the private sector, where the decline has been propelled by restructuring, relocation, casualization, and privatization. Estimates of total union membership vary between 10-20% of the labour force, but these figures include many workers who are "members" of organizations that are unions in name only. There are two types of totally fake unions: "phantom unions," paper organizations for which union officials receive pay-offs to preclude the development of real unions and "company unions," in which the "union" is controlled directly by management. The former are common in the maquiladoras and the latter are common in the Monterrey area in northern Mexico, an industrial area of powerful, right-wing business groups. But even the vast majority of other unions are only unions in a very limited and distorted sense. They have a very peculiar hybrid character, combining aspects of a state institution, a ruling party organization, an employment agency and a union. There are very few independent and democratic unions. The railway workers were a strong independent and combative union until they were brutally smashed by the state in 1948 and again in 1958. Since then, they have been an exemplary case of corruption and collusion with management and the state. The Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME—power workers union) is presently the most important democratic union with a long history of combativity. Another important democratic union is the Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (SITUAM) an unusual university union that includes academic, administrative, and blue-collar workers in one union. It has played a key role in linking sections of the workers movement with insurgent movements at certain moments and in working with dissident rank and file caucuses in other unions. Another democratic current is the FAT (Authentic Labour Front), a very small federation of unions, cooperatives, and community groups.

Rank and file caucuses are generally weak because of brutal repression, both through violence often carried out by the *charros'* goon squads (*charros* is the popular Mexican term state-linked, corrupt, and undemocratic union officials) or firings engineered through company, government and union collaboration. The most important and institutionalized rank and file caucus is the CNTE (National Coordinator of Educational Workers), which exists within the SNTE (National Union of Education Workers). The SNTE, with over a million members, is the largest union in Mexico. It is tightly controlled by Elba Esther Gordillo, a leader imposed by former President Carlos Salinas. Gordillo has supported the neoliberal reforms of both the previous PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution) governments and the current Fox government. The CNTE was able to gain control of some state and local sections and survive from the 1970s to the present because of an exceptional set of circumstances, in spite of tremendous repres-

sion, including killings and disappearances. It is strongest in the poorest and most densely indigenous states, such as Chiapas and Oaxaca, where teachers often play important roles as "organic intellectuals," of the local communities.

While labour market conditions and state repression play major roles in constraining working class resistance, they don't tell the whole story. Mexico's state system of labour control, in which its hybrid state-linked unions are central, are crucial instruments for disciplining and containing working class resistance. This system emerged as a key part of the development of Mexico's unique authoritarian regime. It can only be understood in the context of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. The Revolution produced a regime that combined revolutionary rhetoric and a strong "union" presence that disguised the real character of most "unions" and of the regime. This outcome did not happen easily and without major challenges and, at times, concessions to workers and other sectors of the population. In fact, recurrent popular insurgencies and divisions among elites produced the unstable semi-Bonapartist character of the regime.

The old system of labour control has been based on five key, inter-related pillars: 1) labour law that gave the state control over union recognition and the right to strike; 2) integration of the officially recognized unions into the ruling party and state apparatus; 3) authoritarian control over the unions by the union officialdom on the basis of state laws and links as well as the usual control mechanisms of an organizational oligarchy; 4) repression by the state and by thugs commanded by the *charro* officials and; 5) for some periods, a social pact that allowed gains for limited sectors of the working class, especially in the realm of the social wage (most notably in the period of import substitution expansion, the so-called "Mexican miracle" from the 1940s to the 1970s).

These unions were, in general, run in a thoroughly corrupt and authoritarian manner. They controlled labour market access, disciplined the work force, extorted money from workers and capital, and used their labour-managing role (both workplace and political) as part of their base for negotiating their interests both with management and within the PRI-dominated power bloc. Mexican union officials could and did become capitalists either through setting up companies themselves (often in the name of family members) or by extracting revenue from their control of union institutions that could then be used for investments. They also moved back and forth into political party, governmental, and managerial positions in the public sector. They were not simply union bureaucrats but members of an elite sitting on top of hybrid institutions called "unions."

The power of the ruling party has been shaken. The PRI lost the Presidency as well as the control of Congress in 2000 and is going through increasingly bitter and open schisms. But the PRI continues to control many state governments and much of the state

apparatus. The old *charros* have been maneuvering to maintain their control of unions and have been strongly supported in this by the PAN (Party of National Action) and its PRI allies. However, their control over workers can no longer lean on the support of real gains. In earlier periods, workers were able to make significant gains through the extension of social benefits (subsidized food, health care, housing) if not generally in wages. But, in the new export-oriented neoliberal period, these gains are not available. This means that capitalists, the state, and the *charros* need to rely more exclusively on repression and the whip of unemployment.

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organize or to gain democratic control of their unions. The old institutions of labour control remain intact. As well, the high level of unemployment and underemployment combines with institutional barriers to inhibit workers struggles. Massive migration to the USA, which in-

cludes significant numbers of highly skilled and experienced workers, also makes resistance more difficult. All of this makes rank and file resistance and organizing in Mexico extremely tough.

Does this mean that a new union movement is not possible? No. But it requires a strategy that challenges the basic institutional obstacles and is relevant for the mobile and heterogeneous character of the workforce. Narrow trade union approaches that only focus on workers with stable employment do not speak to the vast majority of Mexican workers. The statist system of labour regulation has led unions, even democratic ones, toward strategies of cautious mobilization and political maneuvering within the bounds of the Mexico's labour control system. Mobilizations that would challenge the system have been shunned to avoid show-downs with the regime. This has contributed to a narrow trade unionism that only rhetorically reaches out to the vast mass of non-unionized and precarious workers. This survival strategy has worked for a handful of unions before the neoliberal era, but it is woefully inadequate in the new context of the all-out neoliberal assault on workers' rights, living standards, and working conditions. And none of the major break-away labour organizations has any perspective of large-scale organizing. In fact, the UNT is dominated by undemocratic unions that have collaborated with the state and capital in neoliberal restructuring.

Workers cannot win durable victories as long as this state-based power system of labour control continues. Time and again, heroic local struggles, whether they're for union democracy in old unions or organizing new unions, are crushed by the combined power of the state, the company, and the *charros*. The human cost of each defeat is great and has a strongly demoralizing effect. The state, therefore, cannot be ignored, as its labour regime will continue to strangle any growing workers movements. Nor can the boundaries of its control be simply accepted, as this

will continue to defeat attempts to build a new labour movement. The unholy trinity of state, capital, and *charrismo* have to be fought with a long-term strategy for defeating them.

The 2006 presidential and congressional elections present opportunities and dangers for the development of a combative workers movement. All three major parties stand for the continuation of capitalist development, with more or less neoliberalism. A victory for the PAN or the PRI will definitely reinforce the old repressive system and deepen neoliberal reforms. A victory for Andrés Manuel López Obrador (until recently Mayor of the DF, Distrito Federal—Mexico City) and the PRD (Democratic Revolutionary Party), on the other hand, could have the very important consequence of opening some political space for workers' struggles. But it also would present the danger of the cooptation of workers' movements by a rhetorically progressive government. López Obrador has made clear that he would seek to modify the neoliberal path but not reverse or challenge it. He would bring union and social movement leaders into governmental positions, as he did as Mayor of the DF. And, as happened in the DF, many would join his government with the goal of bringing about some positive policy changes. But, as also happened in the DF, this would weaken the popular movements, bleeding away their leadership and compromising their independence. It would undermine both their ability to pressure the government from caving in completely to capital as well as undermine the potential for the development of a resurgent workers' movement. The insurgent currents and unions in the labour movement must fervently maintain their ideological and organizational independence from all bourgeois parties, whether or not they give critical support to López Obrador. The election is one moment in the struggle for power among rival Mexican elites. The left and the workers' movement have to forge their own program, strategy, and organizations lest they once again be co-opted by "progressive" sections of the Mexican elites.

The absence of a strong and politically independent labour movement has been the Achilles Heel in the resistance to the neoliberal onslaught in Mexico. Resistance, while widespread, has remained dispersed, fragmented, and therefore more easily repressed or co-opted. An urban-based national labour movement would have the potential of pulling together the myriad of defensive protest movements into a movement that could challenge the neoliberal project and the regime. The absence of an independent union movement is an obstacle to the development of a continental labour movement in North America (though that would also require radical changes in the Canadian and U.S. labour movements). The challenge faced by Mexican workers is daunting but their history of resilience and combativity offers hope that it is also possible. **R**

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SALDA Roundtable on Faith-Based Arbitration in Ontario

On September 11, 2005, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty put an end to speculation about how he would respond to the recommendations in the report released by former NDP Attorney General Marion Boyd in December 2004. The report recommended that the government should continue to authorize religious panels of all denominations to settle family-law matters under the 1991 Arbitration Act, stipulating only some additional measures aimed at licensing and overseeing adjudicators and informing participants of their rights under Ontario and Canadian law. McGuinty effectively announced that he was rejecting Boyd's recommendations and would soon introduce a bill to ban religious arbitration.

Two months later, the government introduced a bill that fell somewhere in between the Boyd report's recommendations and the Premier's September announcement. Religious arbitration of family matters would not be banned as such, but would be subject to conditions and restrictions significantly more onerous than those recommended in the Boyd report. Supporters and opponents have argued that this would effectively gut the religious tribunals of any independent role in relation to the public courts and laws. The bill became law in late February 2006. Opponents of religious arbitration have claimed victory, while the various religious groups see the new law as undermining religious freedom.

The main focus throughout the public debate was the application in the spring of 2004 by the Islamic Institute for Civil Justice (IICJ) to arbitrate family-law matters under the Arbitration Act, using a form of Islamic law (Sharia). This led some on the left to decry opposition to religious arbitration as "Islamophobic" (anti-Muslim).

The Toronto-based South Asia Left Democratic Alliance (SALDA) made a submission to Marion Boyd while she was preparing her report, calling for a ban on all forms of faith-based arbitration. In late October 2005 – one month after Premier McGuinty's September 2005 announcement – a number of SALDA members gathered for a general discussion of the various issues involved. The roundtable discussion took place before the new bill was tabled, subject to committee hearings, amended, debated and passed. Participants were Nadira Sher-Alam, Farida Sher-Alam, Aparna Sundar, Sudhir Joshi and Nathan Rao. The following is a heavily edited and abridged version of their discussion.

Nadira Sher-Alam: In its submission, SALDA argued that there should be no arbitration based on *Sharia*, and also that there should be no faith-based arbitration per se under the Arbitration Act. The reason why I felt strongly about the *Sharia* arbitration, is that I work with the newly arrived immigrant community, mostly with Muslims. With language and cultural barriers, they do not know about their rights here. And the way the system currently runs, whether it's social services and general information, it's going to be very hard. You can put out information and flyers and all that, but you don't have people on the ground to support these women. There are just not enough trained personnel, social workers and so on, who actively go in and speak with these women to find out about their fears or their like or dislike of *Sharia*-based arbitration. So the Boyd report and the safeguards were really patronizing in this regard.

Farida Sher-Alam: The more we studied the people who brought forward this proposal, the more unacceptable this whole thing seemed to me. Because it was totally what we were trying to escape when we were in Pakistan – this absolutely narrow interpretation of the *Sharia*. The man [Syed Mumtaz Ali of the Islamic Institute for Civil Justice] did declare that if you don't follow the *Sharia* you're not a Muslim, you're an apostate. And then my subsequent research into what was happening at the tribunal court confirmed in my mind the reason for opposing it. It was clear that this was some kind of right-wing group that is totally uneducated

about how women have been marginalized and how they're continuing to be marginalized under the *Sharia* law. So I felt that this tribunal was not going to assist women; it was just going to continue the status quo that's been going on for hundreds of years. These people are trying to legitimize their presence and their agenda. That scared the hell out of us.

Aparna Sundar: My understanding is that *Sharia* is used or applied differently in different Islamic countries and it's not one body. So this Institute that he's proposing, how did the other groups accept it? Or was there one version that he was going to put forward as the authoritative version? And was that the only version that was going to be used for settling disputes? What about the other versions?

Nadira: He discussed it with imams of other Muslim sects and all agreed to the application of *Sharia* to the Arbitration Act. There were no women in this original group. When this was pointed out to them, they later brought in a couple of women.

Farida: It didn't make me happy to protest against the *Sharia*; it made me feel considerable shame that it had come to this point. But I felt that because *Sharia* law's interpretation and application are being disputed by so many women and we have seen how its misapplication has damaged women's lives and their status within Islam in so many different countries; I felt it was really my

religious duty to oppose it.

Nadira: I wonder on what grounds did the McGuinty government decide to do away with *Sharia*? Did they really understand what they were opposing i.e. that all traditional faith-based legal systems discriminate against women and so should have no place in our society? I think it was the London bombings that clinched it for them. Announcing it on a Sunday afternoon that also happens to be the anniversary of 9/11 seems to point that way. Did I fear Islamophobia when this whole thing came up? Yes and no. Yes, because most Canadians are not well-informed about Islam or *Sharia* or the richly diverse lives of Canadian Muslims, having little or only cursory contact with them, add to this stereotypes and prejudice and you do get Islamophobic commentary. No, because I think people have a right to speak about what's happening in their society. And when it doesn't impact you directly but it is questionable or harmful to some people, then you have to speak out and get involved as those who are vulnerable and directly affected may have no way of getting heard where it matters.

Aparna: The argument that it's Islamophobic, that Islamophobia was the driving force, while it does explain why the campaign gained such currency and visibility, doesn't look at who originated the campaign. I think the originators were mostly women from Islamic countries, people like Homa Arjomand, like you, so it's by and large not white male Islamophobes who started the campaign. And even in a group like ours, even those of us who aren't Muslim, we have strong reasons for supporting the campaign. We acted against Hindu communalism; we see the parallel very clearly. It's a very similar infiltration of certain religious groups into public life, not religion in general but a certain kind of religiosity. That's what we're opposed to, so it's just consistent with earlier campaigns we've taken up.

Secondly, we also have the experience in South Asia, certainly in India, around a very similar move for the Muslim Women's Bill. There, too, just like Nadira said, *Sharia* is such a big body of law, why is it only on women's issues and the family that it becomes so important? This is exactly what happened in India; it's only the Muslim Women's Bill that was seen as somehow defining Muslim identity. If you opposed it, you were somehow anti-Muslim.

A third parallel in Canada is with Native women who had the same arguments against various laws around self-governance, who invoked the Charter against their own community laws. Again it's women who have had to take that kind of position and who are seen as traitors by their leadership. Even for them it would have been a hard stand to take; their male leadership would have said, "you're exposing us and weakening our autonomy when we are already so vulnerable", and all these kinds of things that Muslim women have faced. This also raises the question of who is seen as the "authentic" representative of the community and who is not. And that's what this whole left thing is about: we must seek out the mullahs to be on their side. Well, why aren't you on the side of the secular women or the practising women who oppose the use of *Sharia* family law? Why aren't we seen as "authentic spokespeople" for our community? Why is it only the religious

leaders; why are they the only authentic sites of the community? The same lefties don't go to the churches. They don't go to the religious sites within Western Christian society, so why are they seeking out those people within our communities? But I agree that it is a difficult line one has to walk, conducting this kind of campaign in the climate of Islamophobia that exists, and knowing how it can be used.

Nathan Rao: On this business of authenticity, it's clear that there is growing racialized inequality and that many of the non-whites who are on the bottom end of Canadian society are Muslims. The left is interested in building itself among the most oppressed and marginalized layers of the society. So some on the left, and on the radical left, feel that one path to doing this is by building a de facto alliance with who they see to be the "authentic" representatives, that is the "Muslim leadership." So for them, this issue crystallizes around this strategic choice that they have made: they would be jeopardizing their alliance with them if they don't stand with them at least against the perception of Islamophobia or double standards. Some go one step forward and actually embrace the idea of faith-based tribunals themselves.

I disagree with them for the reasons Aparna has given. Surely there is a "third way" between Islamophobia, on the one hand, and an alliance with the religious leadership, on the other. But it's interesting, because it's not just the left. All the mainstream newspapers supported the Marion Boyd report: the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star* and the *National Post*. All supported the report as a "balanced" approach to this "delicate and difficult" issue. And it seems to me to be a strange marriage of a particular form of multiculturalism and an important part of the neoliberal agenda.

Multiculturalism is often taken as a way to build relays within each of the "communities," such as they define them; the Liberal Party was historically famous for building a network of leaderships within the different immigrant communities, through which they built their base into the broader society. So you have this specific take on multiculturalism, combined with the recognition that there are increasing numbers of Muslims in Canadian society, many who are generally more marginalized from the institutions. There you have the whole neoliberal approach of the last 20 years, which supporters of faith-based arbitration echo in their statements.

It's interesting to see the IICJ website where they say, "why do people oppose this? It's economical and saves taxpayers' money!" So you even have the *Sharia* proponents taking up the Fraser Institute attitude of "cost-cutting" and "slashing bureaucracy" for the "taxpayers" and the "ratepayers." Like some on the left, the Canadian Establishment is also looking for "authentic representatives"; so it's as if there's a race on within the Muslim community itself to see who will be the "authentic representative" and I guess these people from the IICJ see themselves as the primary candidates for this role.

Farida: Maybe there wouldn't have been any question had this matter not also affected the Christian and Jewish rights as well. My sense is that they were trying to protect their own rights as well. So if it had only been the Muslim community that was affected by this law, I don't think you would have such a →

long, drawn-out debate. They would have just put a stop to it much earlier.

Sudhir Joshi: Absolutely. You have to remember that the terms of the initial debate did not include the possibility that the McGuinty government would take away these tribunals from all religious communities. For Haroon Siddiqi of the *Toronto Star*, for example, it was just a matter of giving Muslims a right which all others enjoyed. On those terms, I too would agree with him. But no one foresaw that McGuinty would come along and make such a fundamental change.

Do I have to wear a *hijab* in order to be accepted as authentic?

Nathan: Those on the left who criticize secular Muslim opponents of arbitration say that they're mostly middle class, very disconnected from the community. They say that opponents don't understand that the "real" community wants this and define themselves in a primarily religious way. And therefore to oppose this is to further confirm that you are totally out to lunch, with no connection to the "real" Muslims out there. They also say that if the tribunals don't receive official sanction, they will go on anyway and it will be like the old abortion argument: if you don't give proper, safe access to abortion, it's going to take place anyways in dangerous conditions, in the back alleys and so on. So what's going on in the "real" community, and how do you respond to this matter of "law or not, arbitration will go on," and you're just missing an opportunity to frame and control it?

Nadira: No doubt the anti-*Sharia* campaign was taken on by middle-class, and elite Muslim women. You can see that in the people who appeared on TV, radio and so on. But that doesn't mean that the women of lower socio-economic status are not against it. And a lot of the women who are for the *Sharia* tribunals are themselves middle class. My experience is mostly in Scarborough among low-income Muslims. They are the middle class and the upper class of their own countries. To those who say that these people are working class, my response is "excuse me?!". They don't want to be the working class; they are the middle class of their own country and they want to be middle class here. When immigrant women become aware of their rights as women in Canada, the resources available to them, they spread the word. They also come to learn what this can mean negatively to them and their families. They know they can call 911 if their husband abuses them, but they also know that the Children's Aid Society can take away their children, so they are less likely to call 911. They're aware that if they get into the system of shelters for women,



leave their husbands, get divorced and so forth, that it will be a completely different life for them, and not many of them are prepared for that.

Still some of them choose to seek that help, go to the shelters, and through that process sometimes the husband finds that he can change and so they reconcile. Is there going to be "back-alley *Sharia*"? I suppose there will be for some time, but it's going to die down because it won't have the sanction of the state and I think women are also going to realize that they do have an option, that they can ask under Canadian laws for their rights as women, as abused women or someone in a dissolved marriage. I think that what really matters to women who are struggling, for whom poverty is a major issue, is survival; I don't think religion is such a big issue. The practicalities of life are the real issue. They want their children and themselves to survive as a unit. They want their children; that's one of the most important things to them in their life. If they could get the support through the Canadian system, and they know they're not going to get it through *Sharia*, I think they'll choose Canadian law. They're practical and down to earth women; they've suffered and they're not choosing an ideology, they want to survive and I don't think they would choose *Sharia*. The debate on *Sharia* has taken place though and I think the majority of Muslim women are relieved that there's no *Sharia*-based arbitration. They know that *Sharia* has been messed around with.

I want to go back to the question of who is an "authentic" Muslim and who represents the community, especially in relation to the political parties. They tend to go towards the lowest common denominator. They'll see people like me and others as integrated or even assimilated Muslims. But why does that make us less authentic? If we tell them that inside, we're deeply Muslim, why would they have such a hard time accepting that? We can be deeply Muslim and Canadian and Westernized at the same time. Why does it have to be someone who has got a lot of ethnic trappings? I think there's something really shallow there. Do I have to wear a *hijab* in order to be accepted as authentic? Political parties find it

easier to connect to Muslims who are more affluent, more integrated; it's also easy because we come to meetings and we want to be politically active. But among those whom they think are the authentic Muslims, why does religion have to be the connection? Why are they not concerned about the economic situation of these Muslim immigrants? Like I said, these immigrants don't consider themselves working class. They don't want to be working class. They are thoroughly angry about it. Last Thursday I met this man from Bangladesh and he said, "I didn't come here to work in a factory; I've got this background as an HR consultant to the World Bank. I don't want to work in a factory or drive a taxi." So why can't the left get involved in this issue or the education system where ESL funding has been used for things other than ESL – how can they deprive the most vulnerable? From what I have heard, unions have been sticky about not opening up certain trades and professions to immigrants. The left must do work around these issues if it really wants to network with immigrants.

Farida: I want to respond to the argument raised by Anver Emon (Faculty of Law, U of T) in the *Globe and Mail*, who says:

By banning religious arbitration in Ontario, a real opportunity has been lost. With the contemporary breakdown in Islamic legal education, a vacuum of authority prevails that could have been filled with fresh analysis of the tradition, in the light of critical historical and legal scholarship. A regulated regime of *Sharia* arbitration could have opened the door for Canadian Muslims to grapple with their tradition in a way that reflects the spirit of Islamic law and the values they hold as Canadians.

His position is that, because of this setback, informal back-alley *Sharia* mediations will remain untouched. What Aparna is saying is true. If the tribunal had proceeded, there wouldn't have been any more debate. Whatever back-alley Islamic mediations that are taking place right now, that is exactly what the tribunal was setting up. So there was no difference. It is exactly those practices that the court was going to legalize and legitimize. So that's why we're arguing against it. For various political and international reasons, this has now been stopped, but that doesn't mean we can't continue the debate about the *Sharia*.

Nadira: Had the Islamic court been set up, I think this whole thing would have been confined to the Muslim community. The court would have felt very strong and it would have really divided the Muslim community. Nobody else outside in Canadian society at large would have paid much attention; they would say, "it's their matter, it's an internal matter." And that part of "political correctness" or multiculturalism really bothers me. No, we are one society. If there's something in the Hindu community that bothers me, I have a right to speak out against it. If it's pedophile priests among the Catholics, I want the right to speak out about it. This is where I am living, and the democracy allows me that. The debate about *Sharia* is ongoing, very much so in the West; and I think from here it will go back to the countries we come from,

Pakistan and other places. Back-alley *Sharia* will happen, but hopefully it will die out.

Nathan: Those criticizing opponents of *Sharia* say they are middle class and disconnected. But my impression is that the people who are in favour of it didn't exactly emerge from the bowels of the oppressed masses themselves. They're professors from U of T, and the head of the IICJ himself is a professor at Waterloo.

Nadira: When the left is looking for all these authentic Muslims, do they not see that when they go out to protest, where are these Muslims? Do they come out to the protests? Which Muslims come out?

Nathan: But the progressive cause for which they do come out, though, and perhaps more than some of the opponents to *Sharia*, is for the protests against the war in Iraq or the Afghanistan intervention. It appears to be true that there is a somewhat mobilized segment of the organized Muslim community around those issues; but around issues of the *Sharia* and gay rights, they're not as progressive as one might wish. Perhaps I have a schematic view, but I would say that on certain issues these segments of the Muslim community are our tactical allies. I will participate with all comers, up to a certain point, around issues of importance such as the ones I just mentioned. But at the same time they are strategic adversaries, the leadership of these people. The leadership is a strategic adversary, they have another project that is quite antagonistic to the left.

Take the example of *Globe and Mail* columnist Sheema Khan: I often enjoy reading her pieces about the Muslim world, against Islamophobia, against the war in Iraq, and I agree with a lot of what she says. But around this issue, I was quite struck by her hard line against *Sharia* opponents, calling them "neo-secularists" and even taking Svend Robinson to task for wanting to remove God from the Constitution. I just thought that this is not a person of the left. And when she says things like "neo-secularists," that just reminds me of BJP (Hindu nationalist) types in India who spit the term "pseudo-secularists" out of the corner of their mouths. As if the BJP were the genuine secularists!

Another example comes to mind: the Salman Rushdie affair some 15 years ago in Britain. Some see that as a turning point which ultimately led to the London bombings. *The Satanic Verses* came out and there was the Iranian *fatwa*, and a segment of the British Muslim leadership took up this cause and mobilized around it. I remember visiting London shortly afterwards in late 1990. In the east end of London, I met with the kind of people I'm used to dealing with: left-wing anti-racist campaigners, generally socialists, Labour-left types. I discussed this anti-Rushdie mobilization with them, and they said of course it was crazy to mobilize against Rushdie and they didn't participate in that.

On the other hand, they couldn't but be impressed by the ability of the Muslim leadership to mobilize. And, as with the London bombings, it wasn't immigrants from Somalia or wherever, but rather British-raised youth who mobilized. And the anti-racism campaigners, who were about my age at the time (early-mid 20s), were saying that these are the people that in theory they →

As far as we lefties are concerned, right now we are in retreat and we are unfortunately in a position where we tend to have a schizophrenic existence.

should be mobilizing, but weren't able to.

Aparna: Why is it so impressive? They go out and make an announcement in the mosques and places like that. In India the BJP can pull out hundreds of thousands of people for a rally and a left rally will have a few hundred. I don't find it impressive. You're appealing to their traditional feeling, through the family and the mosque and church. These are the traditional avenues of mobilization. They don't have to do the extra work that the left has to do, keep going in and knocking on doors. As for the anti-war movement, OK so there have been large sections of the Muslim community who came out in anti-war protests. But is it progressive? Of course, you don't want to be bombed and you're going to protest it, right? So if you're coming from Arab countries and you're seeing all this as Islamophobic, which it is, you're going to protest it. But does that inherently make them progressive people who will protest if some other country is being bombed, a non-Islamic country for example? I don't see it as progressive per se, since you're coming out in defense of your own interests. It's natural and to be expected.

Sudhir: As far as we lefties are concerned, right now we are in retreat and we are unfortunately in a position where we tend to have a schizophrenic existence. On the one hand, on issues that involve opposing globalization or U.S.-led wars, we are seen to be tactically allied to one camp. In other matters, we are diametrically opposed to the same camp. A case in point is the anti-war protests. I have a personal experience with this: in the anti-fascist movement against the BJP and the [Hindu communalist] riots in Gujarat. I was sitting on a committee around this issue with the chief Imam of Toronto and we were talking about secularism. I said that we are genuine secularists and happened to mention the injustice against the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan. Suddenly the discussion completely fizzled out because I mentioned the wrong thing! So we are unfortunately in a position where we have very little initiative of our own, whereby we can mobilize people on the basis of issues we choose – with the recent exception of this campaign against the *Sharia* tribunals, which is a genuine issue where we are not just following one large body of people who have their own agenda and just hanging on to their coat tails. We need to define issues and initiatives where we're not seen to be riding on others' coat tails.

Nathan: Around this whole matter of tactical allies, we're actually trying to avoid two sets of dead-ends. Frankly, around this whole *Sharia* issue we also found ourselves in a tactical alliance with people with whom we disagree with on a number of things.

Never mind such right-wingers like Margaret Wente of the *Globe and Mail* and Rosie Di Manno of the *Toronto Star*, who are way beyond the pale. But I also happen to feel physically ill when I read pieces by Irshad Manji (Toronto-based author of *The Trouble with Islam*) or see her video spots on the CBC, and yet we were in a tactical alliance with her around the *Sharia* tribunals. On the matter of Margaret Wente and Rosie Di Manno, though, let me just come back to the fact that the editorial decisions of those papers (*Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, and also the *Toronto Star*) were in defence of the Boyd report. So I get a bit angry when the International Socialists and others say that “by definition” you're allying yourself with the right wing, because of what Wente and Di Manno have said. All the mainstream newspapers and all the mainstream parties have supported the Boyd report; so it's ridiculous to say that the right and the mainstream have unleashed some kind of hysteria around this matter.

Nadira: Salman Rushdie wrote a piece where he echoes what others were saying after the bombings: “how did the Muslim community allow this to happen? Why don't they get involved? Where are the progressive Muslims?” and so on. But I think the home-grown Muslim bombers are not a problem of the Muslim community as such, but rather of all of British society. It's not one community's problem, and certainly not the Muslim community's problem. When I look at where I work and the youth, it does bother me since the London bombings how we are selling short all our immigrant youth and especially the Muslim youth. The parents come and are struggling to do so much, but the doors are closed and people stand aloof from them and will not engage. And they realize that playing by the rules means nothing.

Mainstream society tells you to do this and that, but what do you get out of it? Zero. The parents are the most law-abiding. So these children are obviously learning that there's a lot of hypocrisy going on and what are they going to listen to. It's the socio-economic set-up of this society, not Muslim society, not Muslim parents, not the mosques. It's everyone. People who don't hire immigrants, or the teachers who are condescending and disparaging. This is what they face. It's not a Muslim problem; it's a societal problem. It's a lack of opportunities; where do they go to play? Who welcomes them into their clubs, or talks to them, or invites them to join the debating society or whatever. People shrink away. So many women go to LINC classes to learn English, and they want to talk, but there's no one for them to talk to. There's a very small window of opportunity after that; they work hard and they're not going to come out of that shell, out of that ghetto that's imposed on them. They want to move out; there's no way for them to move out, economically or socially.

Nathan: We can agree that they can't get out of this ghetto, but there seems to be something about this particular ghetto whereby what you describe leads to a reactionary and sometimes violent politicization. Yet, in many respects, the more disenfranchised and marginalized youth in Toronto or even Britain are Black-Caribbean. I know this is a very delicate matter, and there is no evidence of violent groups among Canadian Muslims. But there does seem to be a specific political problem, and A. Sivanandan (of the Institute for Race Relations in London) has written what I felt was a balanced piece about this soon after the London bombings. Others raise this matter in a way that is clearly opportunistic and ill-intentioned.

For example, immediately following the London bombings, Irshad Manji laid down an ultimatum to Muslims everywhere (!) in the pages of the *Globe and Mail* (of all places): "Muslims everywhere face a test in the next several hours...[to help] the world differentiate between the moderates and the apologists." And so on. I think Manji sees herself as an "authentic representative" of another sort, and has built a handsome career around that.

Aparna: In my opinion, that disenfranchisement and looking for other, often more right-wing positions, is not unique to the Muslim youth. That's exactly what happened with Hindu communalism. That's where the BJP and VHP have got their money – from first generation and second generation people here. It's people here who are seeking alternatives because they haven't found certain opportunities here in Canada and the USA and then get drawn into the appeal of the VHP. So I don't think that's unique to the Muslim community. There's a mobilized political ideology, there's political power and state power, and money, available for certain youths. This obviously exists within the Muslim societies, because there are powerful Muslim countries funding these kinds of things. Then immigrant youth can happen to be attracted to it. It so happens that in the Islamic case, there are powerful countries and wealth to fund these movements. This doesn't apply to Black and Caribbean youth: there's no single body of ideology that can't be used, there's not so much money. But more than that, there are also strong reasons for anger, aside from the racism (especially after 9/11) and disenfranchisement they face here. And this has to do with the history of western imperialism in the Middle East, the whole issue of Palestine, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the justification for this in the demonisation of Islam and Muslims. So there's all kinds of historical, political and economic reasons why Islam can become a vehicle in a way that anger at anti-Black racism cannot.

Nathan: And of course the wealthy, powerful governments Aparna is talking about have historically been totally supported by the West, and this brings us full circle, with the case of Saudi Arabia being the most blatant.

Nadira: Absolutely. I attended a lecture on the Muslim diaspora given by someone from France. She said that she was very afraid because they see that there are Muslim youth who feel they cannot be themselves anywhere but in the mosque. There's no other

Those girls who weren't wearing hijabs are now doing so. Who is talking to these young people? There's nobody going and talking to them, even from among the Muslim progressives.

space for them to be themselves – not in the community or school. So they go to the mosque, which provides them with a fully integrated identity which is extremely important for their psychological well-being. If you're going to alienate them so much, any human being will look for that wholeness somewhere, even if the mosque would not have initially been very attractive to them. So this progressive scholar was very worried about what is happening. This puts these youth under the sway of the mosque leadership, and so they're listening to them. The students here who go to the mosque wear the flowing robes and the *topi* caps. Those girls who weren't wearing hijabs are now doing so. Who is talking to these young people? There's nobody going and talking to them, even from among the Muslim progressives. I wonder if they would even have much credibility with those youths, because they're just not used to speaking with them in a way that respects the youth. When I want to do programs with the girls after school, they tell me they have to be home right after school. They tell me that their parents weren't so strict back in Pakistan. Their parents are not integrating because there's nothing to receive them, nothing to integrate into. They're here in a vacuum. When the Muslim parents tell me that they don't want their kids turning out like the Canadian children, I say, "you know what? Canadian parents say exactly the same thing, 'We don't want our parents doing such and such thing'." So you have this in common, but they're not talking to each other. I'm also talking about integrated Pakistanis who have been here for a long time. They have no connection with these people; if I didn't work there I wouldn't have any connection with these people either. **R**

The MAS's First Weeks in Office:

A Few Glimmers of Hope and Many Reasons for Concern

Susan Spronk

On December 19, the Movement Towards Socialism (known by its Spanish acronym, the MAS) won an historical electoral victory. Defying all pollsters' predictions, MAS presidential candidate, Evo Morales, garnered an astonishing 53.7% of the popular vote. For the first time since Bolivia's return to electoral democracy two decades ago, a presidential candidate won a true majority, avoiding the usual show-down to choose the leader of the country. Evo Morales – former coca-grower, llama herder, trumpet player, and soccer player – assumed office with the distinguished and rare title “President-elect” on January 22.

MAS's fans in the international media have tended to uncritically celebrate the fact that Evo Morales is Bolivia's first indigenous president. Having an indigenous president is something worth celebrating, given the intense racism that persists in postcolonial Bolivia. On the eve of the Revolution in 1952, “Indios” could not even set foot in the central plaza of La Paz. According to the constitution, Bolivia is now a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, yet everyone knows that there are some places that indigenous people still cannot enter, especially those with darker complexions. The fact that Morales won a solid majority in a country where a small, ethnically homogeneous elite has traditionally dominated politics makes his victory all the more remarkable.

Within Bolivia and amongst the critical left, however, there are creeping worries that MAS will fail to follow through on its campaign promises to reverse two decades of neoliberal restructuring that have hit the poor, indigenous majority the hardest. Indeed, the track records of candidates and parties claiming to be “indigenous” and/or “anti-neoliberal” during their election campaigns throughout Latin America have been extremely disappointing.

Indeed, most indigenous and indigenous-backed political leaders in Latin

America have embraced rather than rejected neoliberal reforms. In Ecuador, the national indigenous organization CONAIE supported Lucio Gutierrez in the 2002 election with the hopes that he would turn out to be an “Ecuadorian Chávez”, only to bitterly break with his government in 2003 when he turned out to be yet another puppet of the U.S. Administration, and then help to topple him two years later. Peru's indigenous president, Alejandro Toledo, donned a poncho during his election campaign and then imposed IMF austerity packages. In the current fever over the MAS, it is also forgotten that Morales is in fact the second indigenous person to gain high office in Bolivia; Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, full blooded Aymara from the highlands of Bolivia, served from 1993 to 1997 as the Vice President of Sanchez de Lozada, the most unabashedly neoliberal president that Bolivia has had to date. As James Petras, a long-time expert on the region and one of the MAS's harshest critics, correctly points out, having “Indians in high places” does not automatically “lead to the passage of any progressive measures in basically neoliberal regimes.”

At the same time, candidates that have claimed to be “Left” and “anti-neoliberal” have been equally disappointing. Brazil's long-time labour leader, Lula da Silva, made a sharp turn to the right shortly after his election as leader of the Workers' Party. Within a few years in office he expelled leftist militants from the party, cracked down on organized labour, redistributed less land to peasants and paid back more international debt than his predecessor. Are there reasons to hope that the MAS will be different?

Basing predictions on the MAS's behaviour in opposition does not lead to optimistic conclusions that the party will follow through on all election promises. Morales has always been a moderate, which means that sometimes he sides with the oligarchs rather than the indigenous ma-

jority. While in opposition, Morales supported a manipulative referendum on gas in 2004, propped up neoliberal presidents, and generally aimed to moderate social movement demands.

But since its whopping electoral victory back in December, the balance of power has arguably shifted to the left, ending two decades of neoliberal hegemony in national elections. The MAS rode into office on a wave of social movement energy that toppled the second president in two years. With a strong popular mandate, the party may have a unique historical opportunity to make some real changes. Of course, it is still too early to make accurate predictions. Parties must be judged by their policies rather than their electoral promises, as critics such as Petras are quick to point out. Since the end of the December, the party has made key decisions – regarding natural resources, administrative reforms, social programs, its international alliances, and land reform – that offer both glimmers of hope and some reasons to be concerned.

NATIONALIZING NATURAL RESOURCES

The most explosive political issue in Bolivia concerns the future of the country's natural resources. Morales has repeated several times that he is committed to “nationalization.” Coming from Morales, however, this word means different things depending on the day, the audience, and the resource that he is referring to.

When Morales speaks of “nationalizing” Bolivia's most precious natural resource – natural gas – he means something close to what Chávez accomplished in Venezuela. Since assuming office, Chávez has improved state revenues by raising taxes and royalties on foreign corporations and exerted more control over the state-owned oil company, the PDVSA. He has not discussed, at least not publicly, the possibility

of expropriating the private companies operating in the sector. To the contrary, the participation of private and foreign corporations in some areas has actually increased, such as the exploration and development of Venezuela's immense natural gas reserves.

Morales has declared that he wants to tax transnational gas companies in Bolivia "in a fair way" and that he is not opposed to foreign investment, as long as it is "transparent." While similar to Chávez's approach, the MAS's moderate position is out of step with the country's powerful social movements that are pushing for "expropriation without indemnification." In May 2005, the spark that set off massive mobilizations that brought down the second president within two years, was the passing of a law to raise the taxes and royalties paid by the transnational corporations. A broad alliance of students, workers, the working poor, ex-miners, and peasants shut down La Paz for two weeks at the end of May to tell the MAS, which supported a modified version of the law, and the government that they would settle for nothing short of their version of "nationalization." The social movement leaders argue that the contracts signed by foreign gas companies in the 1990s are unconstitutional, illegitimate, and illegal because Congress never approved them. Since his election, Morales has made some vague comments about the non-applicability of the "rule of law" in the Andean context, which may be read as a nod toward this more radical position.

The MAS is tightly squeezed between the conflicting demands of the social movements, who are the reason that the party won the election, and the transnational corporations, which are also playing hardball. It is not an enviable position. There are currently 76 contracts with private transnationals in the gas sector in Bolivia. The controversial legislation that is still on the books gave 180 days for the corporations to migrate their contracts and start complying with the new norms. This period has expired. In the meantime, at least eight transnationals – including Repsol, Total, British Gas, and Exxon-Mobil – have delivered formal notice to the Bolivian government that they may start arbitration proceedings for changing the terms of their contracts that could cost millions

of dollars.

Nationalization is not impossible, although an undeniably risky strategy given an international political system that protect investors' rights to profit over the rights of people to satisfy even their basic needs. Social movement organizations, such as the Coordinator for the Defence of Gas, have proposed a "staged" approach by which the properties without active wells would be appropriated first. Such an approach would minimize the indemnification paid by the state should lawsuits be launched and won. The cancellation of the first lawsuit launched by a transnational corporation against Bolivia bolsters this position. The lawsuit, launched by Bechtel for the can-

office, are that he'll either stick to his guns and be forced to quit, or moderate his position and try to sell the idea to the social movements. The blood that spilled in October 2003, when 80 people lost their lives defending nationalization, is still fresh. It remains to be seen whether the social movements will moderate their demands.

The MAS has also promised to "nationalize" water resources. This time, they share the social movements' definition: kicking out the transnationals. This task will be comparatively easy since there is only one foreign company in the water sector and the last government already promised to cancel its contract. Furthermore, due to the high risk and low returns, it is highly un-



cellation of a contract to run Cochabamba's water system that ended in the famous "Water War" of 2000, ended amicably in January (as discussed further below). Bechtel settled out of court, knowing that it initially misrepresented the amount of money that it had invested in Cochabamba's water system.

If the MAS does not play its cards right, this issue is likely to explode. The decision to appoint Andres Soliz Rada as Hydrocarbons Minister is therefore a highly strategic move. A lawyer, journalist, and expert on hydrocarbons policy, he is also one of the most outspoken critics of the former government's policy who has spoken publicly in favour of expropriation. The most likely scenarios, now that he's in

likely that any other transnationals are interested in investing in the water sector.

To signal its commitment to the nationalization of water resources, the MAS appointed Abel Mamani, former leader of the militant neighbourhood organization, FEJUVE-El Alto, and key protagonist in the 2005 "Water War" as Water Minister. Mamani's job was simplified enormously in mid-January when Bechtel announced that it was dropping the lawsuit against Bolivia. Thanks to intense public pressure, the company decided that it would be better to "save its image" and sold its shares of the defunct water company to the Bolivian government for less than a dollar. Nonetheless, Minister Abel Mamani will have his hands full, since the →

foot-dragging on the Suez issue is causing many to question his leadership within the FEJUVE. No exit plan for Suez has yet materialized even though the government has been negotiating with the company for over a year.

Bolivia also has plentiful mineral resources. In the mining sector, it appears to be business-as-usual. Social conflicts over mining have not had the same profile as conflicts over water or gas, but it is a sector that has enormous economic potential. Here, the promise to “nationalize” does not seem to apply. At the end of December, Morales and Alvaro Garcia gave the green light to approve the go ahead of a bidding process to privatize the MUTUN mine, one of Bolivia’s most lucrative, replete with valuable iron and magnesium deposits. James Petras argues that the privatization of the mine follows the same neoliberal logic that has dominated the other privatization failures in Bolivia. It is a shortsighted strategy to export valuable raw materials without creating many jobs or adding value. The bidding process was shady, involving several powerful transnational corporations and their local partners from the right-wing business class of Santa Cruz.

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

Shortly after moving into the Presidential Palace, Morales cut his own salary 57% (from \$4362 to about \$1875 dollars) announcing that the money would be used to increase teachers’ and doctors’ salaries. It will affect other public salaries as well, since by law the president must have the highest salary. To put the pay cut in perspective, the minimum wage in Bolivia is a measly \$56 per month. And, the majority of workers are employed in the informal sector, thus not even guaranteed that or other work-place protections.

Overall, this is a positive move and a part of the long-term agenda to “nationalize” the public administration. The independent research institute CEDIB suggests that slightly over 50% of government revenue comes from international aid and donations. As Jim Shultz explains in his excellent report “Deadly Consequences,” the privatizations of the mid-1990s destroyed government revenues and public adminis-

tration has since become dependent on international loans and aid to fund its basic operations. This structural dependence has made it even easier for Washington to impose its policies, as revealed by President Carlos Mesa’s pathetic address last March when he asked Bolivians to stop protests for fear that the World Bank would not give him money to pay his staff. So while the wage cut is a disconcerting move, because it may signal government austerity or have a downward affect on public and private sector wages, it is also a positive sign that the MAS is trying to wean itself off “aid” for which all Bolivians have paid too high a price.

INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES

Thankfully, moral support and aid are also coming from friendlier places than the World Bank and IMF. Bolivia will likely join the anti-imperialist alliance with Cuba and Venezuela known as the “Axis of Good.”

Shortly after his election in December, Evo Morales made a visit to Fidel Castro. The two leaders made plans to initiate a plan to eradicate illiteracy in Bolivia within 30 months. No concrete plans have been announced, but a similar campaign in Venezuela that was supported by Cuban professionals and materials officially eradicated illiteracy late last year. Castro also renewed his commitment to provide young Bolivian students 5,000 scholarships for the study of medicine and 50,000 free eye operations for needy Bolivians.

Chávez has also offered material and moral support to the Morales regime. He paid for the plane that took Morales on his world tour, in which he visited some of the countries that have important investments in Bolivia (including Brazil, Spain, France, and China), and made a pit stop in South Africa to check out that country’s experiences with its transition from apartheid (and towards neoliberalism). Chávez is hopeful that Morales will join his initiative to construct an alternative trade network in the Americas – the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas accords – instead of signing Bush’s neoliberal Free Trade Area of the Americas. Chávez is offering a supply of cheap oil in exchange for Bolivia’s soya,

an offer that appeases the demands of the anti-MAS agro-exporters situated in the eastern provinces of Santa Cruz. The PDVSA also opened an office in La Paz on January 23 in order to facilitate the planning of joint projects for the refining and transportation of Bolivia’s natural gas and petroleum.

Relations with Washington are tense but amicable. The Americans know that making a wrong move can easily backfire in a country where anti-imperialist sentiment runs high. The Americans wisely kept their mouths shut during this electoral campaign. Washington is no doubt working behind the scenes trying to turn Evo into another Lula.

A recent editorial in the Economist magazine makes the confident prediction that due to “Bolivia’s crushing international debt and dependence on American aid” such efforts will be successful. The Economist’s prediction might be overly confident since the MAS has not indicated that it is interested in appeasing Washington. While Morales has agreed to support programs to control narco-trafficking in the area, he has also hinted at legalizing coca production. Since the party’s main basis of support remains the associations of coca-growers in the Chapare, the MAS is not likely to renege on this promise.

Another sign that the MAS is not hopping into bed with the gringos is its decision to appoint Sacha Llorenti as the new U.S. Ambassador. A young lawyer and former head of the Bolivian Human Rights Commission, Llorenti is an outspoken opponent of neoliberal trade agreements. His appointment also gives a much-needed boost to the campaign to bring former President “Goni” Sanchez de Lozada to justice for the murder of innocent civilians during the “Gas War” of 2003. Currently, Goni is hiding in Miami and the U.S. has refused requests for his extradition.

Anti-free trade advocates are concerned, however, that now that he is in office, Morales has backed off earlier statements made in November when he opposed any trade agreements with the USA. During his inaugural speech, Morales stated that he will “review” the agreements, such as a bilateral investment treaty currently being negotiated.

LAND REFORM

The land reform program is one of the most disappointing aspects of the MAS's program. In his inaugural address, Evo Morales announced that the land that would be made available for distribution was land used for "speculative purposes." In other words, the government has no intentions to redistribute the fertile, productive land currently occupied by plantation-owners and agro-industrialists, but marginal land that lacks access to adequate transportation networks and markets.

It is not necessarily surprising that the MAS, although ostensibly an indigenous and peasant-based party, is not more committed to land reform. While the coca-growing regions of the Chapare and La Paz are negatively affected by the *minifundismo* (the sub-division of land into smaller parcels as the population grows), the most intense conflicts over land occur in the country's southeast, where distribution is the most unequal. This land was "unoccupied" during the land reform program that followed the revolution and was therefore gobbled up by large estates. Now it is home to today's powerful agro-industrial elite that grows crops for export, principally soya. Land conflicts in the southeast between large estate owners and landless peasants are frequently violent and expropriating

these powerful oligarchs would likely require force. The peasants in the area are not as organized as the *cocaleros* and do not have the same influence in the MAS. To ease the regional tensions that are likely to emerge from this decision, Morales appointed Hugo Salvatierra as the Minister of Agrarian Affairs, a well-respected lawyer and long-time campaigner for land reform from Santa Cruz.

CONCLUSION

The decisions made during the first two weeks in office confirm that the MAS is not a "socialist" party, but it never claimed to be. It will likely raise the taxes paid by the transnational gas companies and channel some of the proceeds into social programs that will help alleviate the burden of poverty. In other areas of the economy, it might be business as usual. While critics such as James Petras are quick to denounce every move that the MAS makes, other observers contend that it is too early to tell which way the administration might turn. After all, as Aijaz Ahmad reminds us in a recent article in *Briarpatch*, when Chávez was first elected in 1997, he presented himself as a "Robin-hood like character" and only started talking about "socialism" about a year ago. It may be easy to denounce Chávez as a "social democratic reformer,"

but he is the most exciting politician that the region has had in decades. As the Bolivarian revolution continues, so does the deepening of democracy in the Venezuelan society and economy.

In many respects, however, Morales faces a more difficult task than Chávez. If the party treads too softly and too slowly, its days will be numbered. The MAS rode into office on the wave of a popular mobilization fighting to return natural resources to national control, and this wave could easily come crashing down. Two of the most militant social organizations, the FEJUVE-El Alto and the Workers' Central of Bolivia, have given the MAS a 90-day grace period before renewing mobilizations to press for their demands. A sign held by a young man at Morales' inauguration delivered an ominous warning: "Do not turn to the right. We are watching." Indeed, one of the most likely scenarios is that unless the party meets some key social movements' demands before the fruits of victory go sour, Bolivians will return to the streets, which they have always found to be their most effective channel for democratic expression. **R**

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An Inch to the Left for Chile

Carlos Torchia

Michelle Bachelet, a member of the Socialist Party (a major partner in the governing coalition of Chile for the last 15 years) has been elected president in the second round of the electoral process, which culminated on January 15. She garnered 53.5% of the votes. Sebastian Pinera, a prominent businessman and candidate of the unified right, came second with 46.5%. Abstentions totaled 12%. Bachelet is the first woman to be elected president on the South American continent. This in itself is a very promising phenomenon. Her ascension to the presidency may be seen as an expression of the increasing demand by women for a role in national affairs. Fifty three percent of women (mostly young women) voted for Bachelet and only 46 % voted for the right wing candidate. Bachelet's eruption into the top political position should not be surprising. In the last 30 years Chilean women have been on the front line in the struggle for social change, participating in the popular movement which gave birth to Salvador Allende's government in 1970, playing a key role in the resistance against Pinochet's regime, and continuing to struggle for equality and participation during the post-Pinochet civilian governments.

It is easy to see that Bachelet is in a catch 22 situation. On one hand she has to respond to her sisters' demands for equality in a patriarchal capitalist economy – where women earn less than 70% of what men earn for the same kind of job, are fired for being pregnant and are subject to brutal exploitation and flexibilization in packing plants, factories, sweatshops and service industries – all this without taking into consideration that Chilean women are still denied access to legal abortions and are subject to high rates of domestic violence. On the other hand, Bachelet is the inheritor of current president Ricardo Lagos' government (plagued by corruption scandals), which has been the most consistent practitioner of the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus. In fact, Lagos' administration has been the most pro-imperialist government in the region, supporting U.S. initiatives such as the Free Trade Area for the Americas, and sending troops to Haiti to back the Canadian–U.S.–French military intervention. It should also be said that the Chilean government is the greatest spendthrift in arms in a region plagued by hard poverty, and Bachelet was Lagos' minister of defense. Thanks to the governments of *La*

Concertacion, the Chilean economy has been deeply penetrated by foreign capitalists, from mining to export agriculture, the financial, fishery and forestry sectors and the lucrative sectors of private pension plans and health care insurance. Bachelet has explicitly declared that the essence of this economic model won't be modified.

Therefore, it is possible to forecast that the stimulation of irrational consumerism (with easy access to credit), frantic individualism, and competitiveness will continue to be tools for ob-



taining consent from a working class that is disciplined in the work place. This is taking place in a country that, in spite of being labeled the “cougar” of Latin America and a model of economic stability, still presents a high percentage of poverty and profound social and economic inequalities. The richest decile takes 41.2% of the national income, and 58.8% is distributed among the other nine deciles. Chile is tenth among countries with the worst distribution of income in the world, with 60% of Chileans earning less than 100.000 pesos (\$180 US) per month. At the other pole of income distribution, the heads of the three larger national economic groups have amassed patrimonies totaling \$9.6 billion U.S. (equivalent to 10% of the GDP 2004), which has been ranked among the largest world fortunes by the American magazine *Forbes*.

This is the country over which Michelle Bachelet will preside. To have a female president is important and has increased the hope of millions of Chileans, especially women, who noisily celebrated Bachelet's victory. Facing the dilemma of choosing between two coalitions that championed the neoliberal model of the economy, Chileans opted to vote for a woman who at least had suffered persecution during the dictatorship, and promised to

seek some corrections in the system.

In spite of her acceptance speech, in which Bachelet expressed her commitment to closing the gap between poor and rich and trying to put a human face on neoliberal capitalism, the fact is that a genuine Socialist president needs a socially transformative program, which her party and governing coalition do not have. Indeed, Bachelet represents a coalition that is responsible for the misery of millions in Chile. This means that she will likely be unable to tackle people's acute problems.

A change in direction requires, as a necessary condition, a strong left, and a radical and coordinated mobilization of Chilean workers and social movements bringing pressure from below. In spite of recent strikes and mobilizations by aboriginals, students, teachers, port workers and copper miners, the level of struggle is not, for now, as intense as that reached by the Argentinian or Bolivian workers and indigenous people. The Chilean left has been working hard to rebuild itself and to build a coalition with the social movements. It must be said that the so-called extra parliamentary left (presently excluded from parliament) grouped in the coalition *Juntos Podemos Mas* (Together We Can Do More) and including the Communist Party, the Humanist Party, the Revolutionary Leftist Movement (MIR), the Christian Left and others, was defeated in the last elections. The left did not elect a single parliamentarian (in either chamber), obtaining only 7% of the votes, and its presidential candidate, Tomas Hirsh, was eliminated in the first round, obtaining only 5.4 % of the votes. It is fair to say that the left has been prevented by scarce financial resources from accessing the highly-monopolized media, publishing daily newspapers or organize an effective national campaign.

Moreover, its electoral possibilities had been eroded by the anti-democratic binominal electoral system (designed by the military regime to favor the right wing forces), which allows a candidate to be elected senator with 27% of the vote. Thus the Chilean Right is over-represented in the Parliament. The pro-Pinochet right wing party UDI (Independent Democratic Union) is the party with the most representatives in the parliament's lower chamber. Bachelet has promised that in the first month of her mandate she will send a bill to parliament to put an end to this system and replace it with a system of proportional representation, which will better reflect the real correlation of forces in the country. Bachelet has also promised to work on reforming the private pension plan, which has started to give warning signals that it won't be able to secure decent pensions to its members at retirement age.

These last two political initiatives were part of a five-point memorandum presented to Bachelet by the Communist Party as a condition for supporting her in the second round of the election. The other three points were the necessity to recognize the rights of aboriginal peoples, to reform the labour code to re-establish the right of workers to collective negotiation, and to protect the environment. To implement these reforms, the new president will have a supportive majority in both chambers. All she needs is political will. Bachelet has declared that in the case of parliamentary obstruction to her projects she will appeal to the people using the resource of plebiscite. Let the stubborn facts speak for themselves.

Bachelet ascends to the presidency at a moment in Latin

America when the winds of revolt and revolution are blowing once again: the rebellion against neoliberalism that has brought Evo Morales to office in Bolivia, the consolidation of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the anti-imperialist activism of president Hugo Chávez, are exerting a huge influence on the continent, empowering the exploited and oppressed. Chile may not remain untouched. To signal that she understands the new situation, Bachelet has stated that she doesn't accept an "axis of evil or good." She promises to work with all democratically elected Latin American governments. However, beyond promises of reform from the new president, it is the Chilean left that has the main responsibility for advancing an anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist alternative, by stimulating and participating in people's struggle for social change in the direction of a socialism, whose form has to be discovered by the people themselves through the struggle. In this perspective, reforms that might be brought about by the new government of *La Concertacion*, aiming to put a human face to capitalism, won't substantially modify the conditions of inequality, exclusion, oppression and exploitation of the Chilean workers and other subordinate segments of the population. The liberation of workers has to be achieved by workers themselves. **R**



On The Road to Caracas (Or, My Trip with Jesus)

Leo Panitch

Leo Panitch spoke on several panels at the World Social Forum in Caracas, January 24th - 29th 2006, where he also helped in the launching of the Spanish edition of the 2005 Socialist Register, which he co-edits with Colin Leys. Below is an account in a letter to his comrades and friends, about his experiences there.

Hello all:

Mainly to tickle your funny bone, here's a report on my trip to the World Social Forum with two of my students. It will concentrate mainly on the adventure we had getting there. It almost took longer (9 p.m. to 4 a.m.) to get from the Caracas airport to Caracas than it took to get from Toronto to Caracas (12 noon to 8 p.m. including a stop and plane change in Miami).

The main road was impassable due to a mudslide that knocked out a bridge. I don't know how the taxi driver got there (his name was Jesus and he had been sent to pick us up by the hotel where the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation was holding a pre-WSF workshop I was to speak at), but it soon became clear that Jesus hadn't a clue where he was going and, despite his asking the few people we passed about how to get to Caracas and being pointed forward and back in this or that direction, we drove around lost for three or four hours on mountain roads in ever more dense fog. At one point one of the students broke the tension with a brilliantly funny, and apt, remark: "What a scenario: Jesus is driving three socialists on winding roads through the fog to Another World is Possible."

But the most bizarre part of the story is that we suddenly arrived in Bavaria. It was as though we had entered the twilight zone (since we twice had gone off the road in the fog, we really thought maybe we had). We drove into a village called Tovar that looked as if it was straight out of the Alps – every building had wood beams and white walls, the Pilsner tavern, the Lutheran Church, etc., etc. It turned out this was a German colony founded around 1848, which was pretty well isolated from the rest of Venezuelan society for a century. It's now a tourist trap I think, but in the middle of the night you'd never know it. Anyway, we found the police and they pointed us back over the fog-ridden mountain we had just come from (we had missed the turn to Caracas, of course).

So off we headed (first stopping at the tavern for a very good local pilsner beer), but the fog was so thick you couldn't see the front of the car. We had noticed on our way up there, a well-lit sign to a Hotel Campesino, so I insisted that if we reached it again, we should stay there overnight. But when we reached the hotel, and drove up to it (located up a little driveway behind the sign), it was shut up tight behind a locked chain-link fence. I then convinced the driver and my two students that we should sleep there in the car (at least it was off the road!) until the sun came up. This was at 2:15 a.m.

Amazingly at 2:30 a.m., a modern SUV drove up with a couple

who seemed to be drinking tequila. After hearing our tale of woe (of course we spoke very little Spanish and they and our taxi driver, very little English – so who knows what they really thought – although they seemed to have some sense we were there for the "Big Conference"), they put on their flashers and we followed them back to the mountain road and through the fog to the turnoff to Caracas we had missed four or five hours earlier. From there it was only an hour!

What with checking into two hotels (my students were at the hotel hosting the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation workshop that I was scheduled to speak at in a few hours and I was at the Hilton where the main WSF headquarters was) I didn't get to sleep until 6 a.m. and so got only two hours sleep before I had to make my way back to the other hotel and speak second on the opening plenary for the Rosa Luxemburg seminar. I did it off the top of my head but by breaking the ice by telling them of our adventure (they were all stitches at the thought of Jesus driving three socialists etc, etc), I had them in the palm of my hand.

The rest of my time there also went very well – a great scouting trip for Latin American contributors to the 2008 Register (which will be on the theme of "Reaction, Resistance, Revolution: Responses to Imperial Neoliberalism") as well as a good launch for the Spanish edition of Socialist Register, 2005. Apart from the workshop, all three of the WSF panels I spoke at went smoothly and were well attended, although I hear that wasn't generally the case.

As is usually the case with these WSFs, the most interesting part of them is who you bump into. I had dinner one night with a bunch of famous people, including Tom Hayden, Philip Agee and Cindy Sheehan (who's thinking seriously of running against Diane Feinstein for Senator in California); and I watched the Canadian election returns at the Canadian Embassy (the new Ambassador claimed I was on her Dissertation Committee at York in the mid-1980s, but I have no recollection of this at all).

But the most interesting parts of the trip by far were visits to two barrios. One with the Québec delegates (three busloads of them) took us to the worst slum I had ever seen. An open sewer of "agua negra" running two kilometres through the shacks. Worse than anything I saw in Johannesburg, Cape Town or Rio. The other, organized by Jonah Gindin for just a few of us, left a far more positive impression. A strong history of left organizing by a group who seemed close to the Tupamaros has resulted in good municipal services, with cinder block houses no worse than in Turkey. In a terrific hour-long visit to a local health clinic run by a Cuban

doctor serving for 360 families (including house calls), we learned from an American nurse who was with us that they dispense the same generic drugs as New York hospitals do for diabetes, heart disease, etc. In the next hour we saw a brand new pre-school (from maternity clinic to seven years of age) incredibly well-equipped materially and with a great pedagogical philosophy.

I felt that this pre-school was the most revolutionary thing I saw there the whole time. And it may be especially significant because this pre-school (and 48 others like it in Caracas, so we were told by the Director) is run by the Ministry of Education which until recently, as with most other state departments, has been quite anti-Chávez and uncooperative, if not obstructionist, with the Bolivarian revolution. In this sense, it has been said that Chávez has not really been in control of the state although he does control Mille Flores (the presidential palace that is seen as the equivalent of White House) as well as the military, and his party now has almost complete control of the National Assembly. This is why so much of what has been done under Chávez, including the literacy campaign and the subsidized food markets in the Barrios, have been run as 'Missions' out of the palace – almost a parallel state.

So the fact the new pre-schools are being instituted under the

Education Ministry seems to be a sign that step by step progress is being made in winning over some sections of the state apparatus to the Bolivarian revolution. And even outside the state there seems progress too: the Cuban doctor told us that whereas at first Venezuelan doctors would have nothing to do with the 15,000 Cuban doctors, by now, having seen how competent they are and what they have accomplished, many are softening and some are even volunteering a few hours at the clinics in the Barrios.

I didn't go to hear Chávez make his big speech in the stadium – I was supposed to be interviewed that night on TeleSur (the TV station for the whole of South America he has funded) but, of course, they never showed up – so I watched it on television in the hotel lobby (the fact it was the Hilton and everyone was sympathetic, made this interesting too). As with his speech last year in Puerto Alegre, the main point of it was to add to the WSF slogan, "Another World is Possible," the phrase "and that world is socialist" – and this was backed up by quotations (and some misquotations) from Simon Bolivar, Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Istvan Meszaros, Bertrand Russell, Castro – and, of course, from the other Jesus.

In solidarity, Leo Panitch

World Social Forum Report-Back

Peter Graham

Two members of the Toronto Social Forum gave a report-back from the sixth annual World Social Forum, held in Caracas. Janet Conway and Carlos Torres, shared their experiences to an audience of 150 at Ryerson University in Toronto. This year the forum is split into two parts, with the first in Caracas in January and the second to be held at the end of March in Karachi, Pakistan.

Attendees were eased into the afternoon program with slides of revolutionary art in Caracas and Latin music before the report-back began. Conway was disappointed to find that many panels for social forum workshops were made up entirely of men and there was little discussion of women. But she did say it built on the success of the Quito social forum in placing emphasis on indigenous issues. She added that Venezuelan social movements had been the grassroots of forum organizing.

Torres found the forum more politicized than past gatherings, with much attention given to anti-imperialism. As a member of the forum's organizing committee, he'd been in Venezuela for a few months. He said that part of the motivation in holding the social forum in Caracas was to compare abstract alternatives with a real, transformative process. Fifty organizations were involved in organizing the forum. Canada was represented by the CLC and Alternatives, a Montreal non-profit, though the former had limited involvement. Of 80,000 attending the forum, as many as 1,000 came from Canada.

The forum saw debates on ecology, endogenous development, Haiti and 21st century socialism. Debates internal to the forum process included whether the forum should be organized more instrumentally and relations between the forum and left governments. Report-back participants were able to attend workshops reflecting many of the hot topics at the social forum. The socialist workshop, chaired by Judy Rebick, had thirty participants discussing the socialist movement in Latin America, with special emphasis on the process in Venezuela. Hopefully at the next Toronto Social Forum event we can go beyond solidarity and discuss how we can join the southern half of the hemisphere in building a better tomorrow. **R**

WIA R

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