

## Once More on Labour, Nationalism and Free Trade

● Debate over how the working class movement should fight the global restructuring of capital is of crucial importance for the Left. For this reason, Errol Black's critique (in *C&C* 46) of my article, 'Beyond Nationalism, Beyond Protectionism: Labour and the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement' (*C&C* 43, 1991) is to be welcomed. Unfortunately, Black's comment fails to come to terms with the central flaws in the nationalist politics which have dominated the Left and the labour movement in English-speaking Canada. Indeed, the lapses and confusions in his article confirm the most important arguments I sought to make. Here I will touch on four points which are of special importance.

First, Black uncritically echoes the view that it is the bilateral free trade agreement (BFTA) which has produced attacks on social spending and workers' living standards. He writes that 'with the integration of the two markets, Canada would be under relentless pressure to harmonise tax, social welfare, labour relations, etc., policies with those of the US.' To attribute these phenomena to a trade deal, rather than the

McNally argues that there are major flaws in the nationalist politics dominating the Left in English Canada which succeed in dividing the working class movement at a critical time and divert attention from the real issues.

laws of motion of capitalism, is to confuse effect with cause, appearance with essence. It is to imply that attacks on labour—which flow directly from the pressures of world capitalist crisis, competition and restructuring—did not exist prior to the BFTA (which is obviously untrue), and that they could be eliminated merely by abrogating the trade agreement. What we have here is the traditional slippage of the left-nationalist perspective into one which sees nations, not classes, as the central units of analysis and as the key agents of political struggle. The drive to raise levels of labour exploitation is depicted as an American phenomenon which is being imposed upon a besieged Canada, rather than as a strategy pursued by the Canadian capitalist class in concert with its American allies.

Secondly, flowing from this analysis are nationalist politics which define opposition to the BFTA as ‘a fight for a sovereign and independent Canada,’ a battle for ‘the survival and independence of our nation’ (Canadian Auto Workers, 1987, p.6; Canadian Labour Congress, 1986). Rather than formulating its opposition in class terms, the leadership of the labour movement and most of the intellectual Left is promoting economic protectionism, and to that end it has chosen to employ the discourse of nationalism, to pose the struggle as a battle which pits Canada against the United States.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the results have been deeply divisive of the working class movement. On the one hand, Canadian unions have tended to ignore possibilities for united action with unions in the US (notwithstanding a few notable exceptions to which I shall return), thus weakening labour solidarity in the face of an offensive by North American capital. And on the other hand, workers in the oppressed nation of Quebec have been shut out by a movement which defines itself in terms of the history, traditions and symbols of its oppressor.

This brings me to the third point: the left-nationalist failure to challenge the upsurge of anti-Quebec chauvinism which has characterised Canadian politics in recent years. One would not know from Black’s article that the English-Canadian Left has been pushing an aggressive Canadian nationalism during a period dominated by attacks on Quebec in particular and the French language in general. Yet, recent years have seen an anti-Quebec, anti-immigrant party, the Reform Party, rise dramatically to 15 per cent support in public opinion polls;

they have seen another anti-French party win 20 per cent of the vote in the province of New Brunswick; and they have witnessed 70 municipalities in Ontario, the country's largest province, adopt 'English only' resolutions promoted by a racist movement called the Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada.

Yet these phenomena, which speak to the urgent need to overcome racial and ethnic divisions within the Canadian working class, merit not a single mention by Black and most left-nationalist commentators. Indeed, many left-nationalists in English Canada have been in the forefront of the Quebec bashing. Philip Resnick in his *Letters to a Québécois Friend*, for example, berates the Québécois for their 'selfishness' and 'churlishness' in not embracing English-Canadian nationalism and its important symbols—such as mounted police and the Canadian flag! (Resnick, 1990, pp.4, 65, 15). Much of the English-Canadian left in fact played a retrograde role when the 1988 Canadian federal election over the free trade issue was followed by a national debate concerning Quebec's place within the Canadian confederation. Anti-Quebec bigots mobilised thousands of people in a campaign to oppose recognition of Quebec as a 'distinct society' in the Canadian constitution. In these circumstances, as I argued, 'the first duty of the socialist Left was to defend Quebec's right to be recognised as a distinct society, and to oppose the upsurge of anti-francophone chauvinism' (McNally, 1991a, p.242). Instead, much of the English-Canadian Left, bitter that Québécois workers had not rallied to the banner of English-Canadian nationalism in the campaign against free trade with the US, lined up with the Quebec-bashers. Resnick, for example, argued vociferously that English-Canada should stop making 'unlimited concessions' to Quebec's national rights, as if such a thing had ever been in the realm of possibility (Resnick 1990, p.66).

It is true, as Black notes, that the Meech Lake Accord which would have recognised Quebec as a 'distinct society' within Canada collapsed in part because of the opposition of a native member of the provincial legislature in Manitoba. But this is to evade the crucial point: mass opposition to the Accord was not based upon support for native rights, but, rather, grew out of a poisonous climate of anti-Quebec bigotry.<sup>2</sup> As one astute commentator notes, 'concern about

the aboriginal question appears to have played only a minor role in English-Canadian resistance to ... the recognition of Quebec's specificity' (McRoberts, 1991, p.38). However valid it might have been in the abstract, opposition to the Meech Lake Accord became entangled in practice with the anti-francophone politics which dominated—and continue to dominate—Canada's constitutional debate. Indeed, much to its credit, Canada's largest women's organisation has recently stated that it regrets the way in which its criticisms of the Accord allowed it to be pitted against Quebec; it has now affirmed its support for recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, and its president has said that 'we will not be pitted against Quebec again' (Delacourt, 1991). One is advised not to await such a correction from the bulk of the nationalist Left in English-Canada.

All of this leads to my fourth and final point of disagreement with Black: the question of how the labour movement fights capital's offensive. Black is quite right to state that 'the role of labour is to defend the interests of trade union members and working people in general against the erosion of their material conditions and to maintain the viability of the labour movement.' (Although its role is also to fight against the division based on race, gender, ethnicity, etc., which divide workers, and to agitate and educate for a socialist transformation of society). Yet, somehow he has managed to persuade himself that the only alternative to nationalist politics is 'acquiescence in the aspirations of the bourgeoisie'.

I readily accept that the BFTA should be fought by the labour movement. But it should be fought because it is one element (and a minor one at that) in a multi-faceted strategy for restructuring capitalism at the workers' expense—a strategy which includes privatisation, wage-cutting, union-busting, and social service cuts—not because it allegedly imperils Canada's sovereignty. Our opposition should be defined in *class* not national terms. This would then enable the Canadian labour movement to build real solidarity with Québécois workers around an inclusive class politics, as opposed to an exclusive and divisive nationalist politics. In addition, it would provide a basis for an internationalism which recognises that workers in the United States (and Mexico which may soon enter the North American trade bloc) are allies in the struggle, not enemies because they inhabit a country other than Canada.

Equally important, such an approach would allow the labour movement to explain that the problem goes much deeper than trade deals; that it has to do with the social relations of capitalism—and their expression in economic crises which produce plant shutdowns, unemployment, and attacks on workers' living standards. Regrettably, the nationalist Left in English-Canada has shown little capacity to adopt such an approach.

Fortunately, there are signs that some groups of workers are growing frustrated with the dead-end of English-Canadian nationalism. At the recent *Labor Notes* conference in Michigan, a number of activists from the Canadian Auto Workers openly scorned the common practice of singing Canada's national anthem at labour rallies against free trade, as if this would somehow defend jobs. And on January 8, 1991, autoworkers in Canada, along with Ford workers in the US, joined autoworkers in Mexico in an international day of solidarity to protest the killing of a union activist at a Ford plant in Mexico a year earlier. A few months later, the Labour Council of Toronto organised a conference around the theme 'Solidarity not Competition' which featured speakers from the US and Mexico (McNally, 1991b). While they are small, these are important steps towards defining the struggle as an international movement of workers against capital, rather than as a national struggle by Canada against US domination.

The left-nationalist perspective has proved a disaster for the working class movement in Canada, dividing it at a moment where it most needs unity and solidarity. At the same time, recent national strikes by federal government employees and postal workers, involving tens of thousands in both Quebec and English-speaking Canada, have shown the possibility of united working class action against the employers' offensive. To build that unity we need a sharp break from nationalist politics. We need a perspective which has the clarity and the courage to put working class struggle and labour internationalism to the fore.

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## Notes

1. One of the consequences of this, as I pointed out in my article, is that many left-nationalists now advocate voting for the Liberals, the traditional party of Canadian capital in this century, as the best way to fight for Canadian sovereignty.
  2. Indeed, recent public opinion polls have shown that only about one-quarter of all English-Canadians are prepared to support constitutional recognition of Quebec as a 'distinct society'.
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