

“Rapprocher les lieux du pouvoir”: The Québec Labour Movement and Québec Sovereigntism, 1960-2000

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IN RECENT YEARS the Québec labour movement has undertaken great efforts to advocate the idea of a sovereign Québec nation state. Having made the promotion of sovereignty a keystone in their respective political action programs in 1990, the province's three major labour union centrals, the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ), the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), actively campaigned for a “yes” in the 1995 referendum on sovereignty. Even after the sovereigntist option had been defeated in the referendum, the three centrals reiterated their commitment to propagating sovereignty. However, Québec labour's recent policy stands in stark contrast to its initial reaction to the rise of sovereigntism. During the first half of the 1960s, when modern sovereigntism first emerged, the three centrals defended Canadian unity. During the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s this position gave way to an increasingly pro-sovereigntist orientation. It will be the purpose of this essay to trace and explain Québec labour's sovereigntist turn.

The Three Federations and the Emergence of Sovereigntism, 1960-1967

Since the mid-1960s unionization rates in Québec have oscillated between 35 and 40 per cent, thus making Québec the most densely unionized society in all of North America, except for Newfoundland.¹ During the period from 1960 to the present, the vast majority of Québec's unionized labour force belonged to affiliates of either

¹Jacques Rouillard, *Histoire du syndicalisme au Québec: Des origines à nos jours* (Montréal 1989), 289; Bernard Dionne, *Le syndicalisme au Québec* (Montréal 1991), 63-4; Luc Allaire and Nicole de Sève, “La CEQ deviendra-t-elle la Centrale syndicale du Québec?” www.ceq.qc.ca/nouvelle/mars00/congres.htm

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the FTQ, the CSN, or the CSQ. Of the three centrals, the FTQ was —and continues to be — the largest. At present, almost half a million workers, or nearly 45 per cent of unionized workers in the province, hold FTQ membership cards. The CSN has about a quarter of a million members, while about 140,000 workers belong to the CSQ. While the FTQ membership has traditionally been dominated by private- and secondary-sector workers, currently about one third of its members work in the public sector. The CSN underwent a transformation from a central, dominated by private- and secondary-sector workers, to one dominated by public- and tertiary-sector workers during the 1960s and early 1970s. Having originally served as the corporate body of Québec's francophone primary- and secondary-school teachers, the CSQ added other public-sector workers since the late 1960s and, thus, became a veritable public-sector central.²

During the last four decades, the three centrals devoted considerable energies to political action. During much of the 1960s, the three centrals subscribed to social-democratic reformism, which aimed at “civilizing” rather than destroying capitalism. The centrals’ social-democratic vision entailed state interventionism, economic planning aimed at providing for full employment, extended welfare-state services, the democratization of the workplace, redistributive taxation policies, and the abolition of poverty. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the centrals espoused an increasingly radical discourse, largely in response to a series of public-sector conflicts with the provincial government. While the FTQ radicalized its rhetoric, but continued to adhere to social-democratic reformism, the CSN and CSQ espoused anti-capitalist positions inspired by a Marxist analysis of capitalism and the role of the state. In 1972, the CSQ adopted a manifesto which defined capitalism as, “une société d’exploitation où les classes dominantes et leur valet servil, l’Etat, exploitent le travail des hommes ... pour accroître leurs profits et leur puissance.” The manifesto also called for a workers’ struggle to produce, “[une] société égalitaire, sans classe.” In the same year, the CSN went on record, “en faveur du socialisme, en tant que système réalisant la démocratie économique, politique, industrielle, culturelle et sociale.” The two centrals continued to promote socialism until the early 1980s. Not having made much headway in raising an anti-capitalist consciousness among their members, the CSN and the CSQ discontinued their socialist discourse and began to undergo a deradicalization process. By the mid-1980s, they once again adopted social-democratic positions.³

²Dionne, *Le syndicalisme au Québec*, 66-78; FTQ, “Membres affiliés,” www.ftq.qc.ca/html/membres.html; CSN, “La CSN au Québec,” www.csn.qc.ca/Pageshtml/MvntCSNque.html; CEQ, “Profile of the CEQ” www.ceq.qc.ca/ceq/proa3.htm

³Rouillard, *Histoire du syndicalisme au Québec*, 287-370; Louis Fournier, *Histoire de la FTQ: 1965-1992: La plus grande centrale syndicale au Québec* (Montréal 1994). For CEQ quotations: CEQ, *L’Ecole au service de la classe dominante* (Sainte Foy, Québec 1972), 12, 32. For CSN quotation: CSN, *Procès-verbal, Congrès, 1972* (Québec 1972), 176.

Québec labour was first confronted with the idea of a sovereign Québec nation-state in the early 1960s when the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (RIN) and several other small sovereigntist organizations sprang up. Most of these organizations were influenced by anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia. "A l'époque actuelle," the RIN declared in its 1960 manifesto, "où dans le monde entier les peuples s'affranchissent du joug colonial et les nations revendiquent leur pleine indépendance le Canada français ne peut plus accepter de demeurer sous la tutelle économique et politique de l'étranger. L'idéal de l'indépendance nationale ... est valable au Canada français comme partout ailleurs." The RIN further stressed that Québec was the political embodiment of the French-Canadian nation and that nations must strive for sovereign nation-state status. The RIN also argued that Québec must separate from Canada in order to provide an effective framework for the cultural survival and economic development of the French-Canadian nation.⁴

Most parts of Québec labour rejected the RIN's arguments. Many unionists regarded nationalism as an inherently conservative ideology.⁵ Some unionists also rejected sovereignty because they approved of Canadian federalism. "Le régime fédéral ... doit être maintenu," the FTQ's Montréal regional council resolved in 1961. "Il a été un des instruments qui ont permis à la nation canadienne-française de se développer, d'affermir son caractère et de maintenir et repandre sa culture et sa langue."⁶ Other unionists took a more critical attitude toward Canadian federalism, but feared that an independent Québec would jeopardize, rather than improve, the condition of the French-Canadian nation. They were particularly concerned that sovereignty might entail economic turbulence, rising unemployment, and declining standards of living.⁷ Thus, during the early and mid-1960s, both the FTQ and the CSN flatly opposed the notion of a sovereign Québec.⁸

By the mid-1960s, however, more and more members of the FTQ and the CSN became attracted to Québec nationalism. Nationalist attitudes were particularly strong among the mine workers who belonged to the FTQ-affiliated Québec section of the United Steelworkers of America (QCUSWA). The mine workers had a long

⁴Marcel Chaput, *Pourquoi je suis séparatiste* (Montréal 1961); Pierre Bourgeault, *Écrits polémiques* (Montréal 1982), I. For quotation: "Manifeste du rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale (1960)," in Daniel Latouche and Diane Poliquin-Bourassa, eds., *Le Manuel de la parole: Manifestes québécois: Tome 3: 1960-1976* (Montréal 1979), 26.

⁵"Les deux solitudes se rencontrent ...," *Monde ouvrier* (January-February 1966), 6; Jacques Keable, *Le monde selon Marcel Pepin* (Outremont, Québec 1998), 223.

⁶Conseil des travailleuses et travailleurs du Montréal métropolitain, *Cent ans de solidarité: Histoire du CTM 1886-1986* (Montréal 1987), 106.

⁷"Sixth Annual Convention of the Quebec Federation of Labour (CLC)," *Labour Gazette*, February 1962, 136-7.

⁸François Cyr and Rémi Roy, *Éléments d'histoire de la FTQ: La FTQ et la question nationale* (Montréal 1981), 61-62; Ralph P. Guntzel, "The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the Idea of Independence, and the Sovereigntist Movement, 1960-1980," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 157-8.

history of acrimonious conflict with their English-Canadian or American employers. Having created the mining towns of northern Québec, English-Canadian companies such as Noranda Mines Ltd. or American companies such as the Iron-Ore Co., dominated life in the small communities and exercised a tremendous hold on the miners' lives even outside the workplace. The economic division in the mining towns was accentuated by a cultural division of labour. As one high-ranking civil servant in the Québec Ministry of Natural Resources noted in 1965,

Allez à Rouyn-Noranda. Là-bas, vous allez voir deux économies qui vivent une côté à l'autre. La petite économie, celle qui est le lot des Canadiens français: les garages, les postes d'essence, les épiceries, les mineurs bien entendu. Tout ce monde-là c'est en grande majorité des Canadiens français. A côté d'eux, ou plutôt en marge d'eux, vous avez la Noranda, la grande économie de la place. A partir d'un certain niveau dans l'échelle de cette économie, on vit en anglais, on travaille en anglais, on habite un quartier qui n'est pas celui du pompiste ou de l'épicière, d'ailleurs — ce n'est pas par hasard — on est entre Canadiens anglais surtout.⁹

French-speaking workers were disgruntled with this ethnic hierarchy. An anecdote told by a QcUSWA staff member illustrates the proto-nationalist nature of this unhappiness. During the summer, members of the wealthy English-speaking minority and the much poorer French-speaking majority of his hometown would go to a nearby lake. "Je me souviens," he relates, "qu'il y avait des Anglais qui nous lançaient des '5 cennes,' ils trouvaient ça ... drôle de voir nous écraser les doigts pour ramasser les sous dans le sable Avec des cents, ils faisaient nous battre entre nous et même nous blesser; ils trouvaient cela 'wonderfull [sic]:' 'it looks like a football game.' J'ai commencé par avoir honte; mais le lendemain, quand j'ai pensé à tout cela, je suis devenu enragé noir. C'était un sursaut de nationalisme causé par doigts déchirés."¹⁰

The anguish of French-speaking miners in the company towns of northern Québec was further aggravated by the companies' opposition to the workers' attempts to unionize. Even if they managed to establish local union sections, the miners were forced to negotiate in English and continuously faced staunchly anti-union policies aimed at crushing local union sections.¹¹ In this situation the miners enthusiastically welcomed the reform of the Québec labour code in 1964, which increased union security and stipulated that the workers could choose the language of the collective agreement.¹² The revision of the labour code was one of the reforms the Québec Liberal government undertook under the instigation of René

⁹James Bamber, "Lévesque contre la Noranda," *Magazine Maclean* (November 1965), 69.

¹⁰[Emile Boudreau,] "Les Anglais nous lançaient des 5 sous ...," *Monde ouvrier* (May 1980), 7.

¹¹Jean Gérin-Lajoie, *Les Métallos 1936-1980* (Montréal 1982), 76-87; Rouillard, *Histoire du syndicalisme québécois*, 282-5.

¹²Gérin-Lajoie, *Les Métallos*, 125-8, 142.

Lévesque, its Minister of Natural Resources. Lévesque shared the miners' dislike of Noranda, whom he accused of displaying, "the supreme arrogance of the colonizer," and of cultivating, "[a] Rhodesian climate" in the mining industry.¹³ As minister he actively helped the QcUSWA to organize Noranda employees.¹⁴ The influx of mine workers tipped the scales within the QcUSWA in favour of its nationalist wing. In 1965, Jean Gérin-Lajoie, candidate of the nationalist wing, was elected QcUSWA director.¹⁵ Following Gérin-Lajoie's election victory the QcUSWA began to advocate special status for Québec within Canada.¹⁶

The CSQ opted for a similar constitutional solution. As teachers using the French language as a medium of instruction, CSQ members reproduced an essential part of French Canada's distinctive culture. Hence, cultural survival played a crucial role in their outlook on the question of Québec's constitutional status. This vantage point led many CSQ members to a critical assessment of Canadian federalism's ability to safeguard the French language and French-Canadian culture.¹⁷ In a memorandum adopted in 1964, the CSQ charged that Canadian federalism promoted English Canada's culture to the detriment of French Canada's culture. "L'Etat canadien," the brief noted, "s'est montré incapable de sauvegarder suffisamment le bien commun spécifique de la nation canadienne-française."¹⁸ For the protection of their national interests, French Canadians had to rely solely on the Québec state. Thus, the brief continued, it was imperative that the Québec state possess all the powers necessary to protect the French-Canadian nation. These powers were to include, but not be limited to, the right to withdraw from federal-provincial shared cost programs, conduct immigration policies tailored to the needs of Québec, and negotiate treaties and agreements with other countries.¹⁹ The original draft of the document had even advocated, "la souveraineté politique et économique du Québec" in combination with, "une structure pan-canadienne composé à part égale des représentants des Etats nationaux."²⁰ The central's enlarged executive, however, eschewed the associated-states model as not reflective of the opinion held by the majority of the membership and replaced it with a call for an ill-defined, but less controversial, special status for Québec.²¹

¹³ René Lévesque, *Memoirs* (Toronto 1986), 187.

¹⁴ Gérin-Lajoie, *Les Métallos*, 128-30.

¹⁵ Gérin-Lajoie, *Les Métallos*, 159-66.

¹⁶ Gérin-Lajoie, *Les Métallos*, 174.

¹⁷ Albert Gervais, "Repenser la Confédération à neuf ou l'envisager ... à 9," *Enseignement* (November 1961), 2.

¹⁸ "La relation Nation-Etat," *Enseignement* (December 1965/January 1966), 18.

¹⁹ "La C.I.C. a présenté un mémoire à la commission Laurendeau-Dunton," *Enseignement* (November 1965), 14.

²⁰ Archives de la CEQ, Sainte-Foy, Québec (henceforth: ACEQ), CIC, Procès-verbal, conseil provincial, 24-25 October 1964, 18.

²¹ ACEQ, CIC, Procès-verbal, conseil provincial, 17-9, 22-3.

For both the QcUSWA and the CSQ espousal of the special status formula constituted but a temporary step on their way to an endorsement of sovereignty. For the time being, however, they were held back by two concerns: first, the economic risks involved in sovereignty; and second, their distrust of pro-sovereignty politicians and parties. Soon the sovereigntist movement began to evolve in a way that greatly diminished both concerns.

The FTQ and the Ascendancy of Social-Democratic Sovereigntism, 1967-1976

Having broken with the Liberal Party over the issue of Québec's constitutional status, in 1967 Lévesque founded the Mouvement Souveraineté-Association (MSA). In 1968 the MSA merged with another sovereigntist party to form the Parti québécois (PQ), with Lévesque at its helm. The PQ significantly changed the outlook of sovereigntism in two respects. First, it discontinued the use of the term "French-Canadian nation" and instead used the term "Québec nation." Second, it departed from the pure separatism of the RIN and other earlier sovereigntist organizations and espoused sovereignty-association, a constitutional formula, which advocated political sovereignty for Québec alongside continued economic association with Canada. Only a few months after the creation of the PQ, the RIN dissolved itself and recommended that its members join Lévesque's party. Thus, within a short period of time the PQ became the almost exclusive political agent of Québec sovereignty. Drawing on Lévesque's political clout, the PQ developed a social-democratic programme and soon became the province's most important left-of-centre political party.²²

The arrival of the PQ had a profound impact on Québec labour, since after 1968 support for sovereignty increased significantly among union activists. While the PQ's sovereignty-association formula failed to entirely eliminate fears about the potential risks involved in severing Québec's political ties with Canada, it did reduce them. Indeed, growth of pro-sovereignty sentiment was not limited to public-sector workers, who enjoyed a certain safety valve due to relatively high employment security. It also spread to private-sector unions including, most noticeably, the QcUSWA. When Lévesque left the Liberal Party, his popularity with QcUSWA members was such that many of them spontaneously adopted a more sympathetic attitude toward sovereignty. As FTQ president Louis Laberge remarked, "Lévesque leur avait souvent donné des preuves de son progressisme et, pour eux, il était presque comme un bon Dieu!"²³ In January 1970, less than two years after the creation of the PQ, Gérin-Lajoie informed USWA president I.W. Abel that there were PQ supporters in all QcUSWA sections. According to Gérin-Lajoie,

²²Vera Murray, *Le Parti québécois: de la fondation à la prise du pouvoir* (Montréal 1976); Kenneth McRoberts, *Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis* (3rd ed., Toronto 1988), 218-9, 238-62.

²³Louis Fournier, *Louis Laberge: Le syndicalisme c'est ma vie* (Montréal 1992), 187.

they were particularly numerous among the iron-ore and hard-rock miners.²⁴ The head of the QcUSWA also estimated that the PQ garnered the votes of 50 per cent of the union's members in the 1970 provincial elections, the first ones in which the party participated.²⁵

Political events during the late 1960s and early 1970s further increased the appeal of the PQ among organized labour. In 1969 the provincial government passed Bill 63 which provided for English-language education wherever it was demanded. Many French-speaking Québécois feared that the bill might accelerate the integration of newly arrived immigrants into the English-speaking community and, thus, adversely affect their own upward social mobility and even threaten the survival of the French language in Québec. In this situation, the three federations joined the PQ in calling for French unilingualism. Meanwhile, the federal government headed by Pierre Elliott Trudeau pursued centralist policies based on the premise that Québec was a province like all others. These policies collided with many Québécois' hopes for the devolution of federal powers to the Québec government. Frustration with Trudeau's policies reached a peak in 1970, when the federal government invoked the War Measures Act in response to activities of the terrorist Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). Under the Act, several hundred sovereigntists, including many labour activists, were arrested. While some saw the military intervention as justified, others, including the PQ and the three centrals, opposed it as an undue infringement on civil liberties and human rights. The language debates, Trudeau's centralism, and the October Crisis, polarized Québec society, but also increased the size of the sovereigntist camp.²⁶

In the 1973 provincial elections the PQ won one third of the popular vote.²⁷ In the elections several union members ran as PQ candidates. One of them was QcUSWA staff member Clément Godbout. Like other unionists, Godbout saw sovereignty as a means to end the cultural division of labour which he had experienced in his formative years as a mine worker in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. "Je tiens à bâtir un véritable pays pour mes enfants," Godbout declared. "Je ne veux pas qu'ils aient à vivre ce que j'ai vécu."²⁸ According to Godbout, sovereignty and social democracy were interconnected. "Nous sommes tous d'accord," he noted,

²⁴ Archives nationales du Québec, Montréal (henceforth: ANQ), USWA Collection, P 144, 1A, 1, 42, J. Gérin-Lajoie to I.W. Abel, 22 January 1970, 2.

²⁵ Jean Gérin-Lajoie, "Je me rejouis de la liberté de parole ...," *Métallo* (June 1972), 7.

²⁶ On the language debate: Richard Jones, "Politics and the Reinforcement of the French Language in Canada and Quebec, 1960-1986," in Michael Behiels, ed. *Quebec Since 1945: Selected Readings* (Toronto 1987), 228-230. On Trudeau's centralism: Kenneth McRoberts, *Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity* (Toronto 1997), 55-148. On the October Crisis: Jean-François Cardin, *Comprendre Octobre 1970: la FLQ, la crise et le syndicalisme* (Montréal 1990).

²⁷ Graham Fraser, *PQ: René Lévesque and the PQ in Power* (Toronto 1984), 59.

²⁸ Pierre Richard, "Le syndicat des métallos opte pour l'indépendance," *Devoir*, 14 January 1972, 3.

"que le capital est essentiel au développement et à l'évolution d'un peuple. Cependant, sur ce capital, un contrôle doit être exercé, de façon à organiser une planification nécessaire à tout peuple, et cette planification économique se fait par des dirigeants gouvernementaux compétents et forts." The federal government was unwilling, however, and the Québec government unable to provide competent economic leadership. In this situation, Godbout concluded, only sovereignty would enable the Québec government to pursue the economic development policies so desperately needed.²⁹

Godbout professed not to fear the possible economic repercussions of sovereignty. When members of a QcUSWA local at International Harvester aired their concern that the company might transfer production outside Québec in case of a PQ election victory, Godbout replied that companies made decisions about production transfers solely on the basis of business considerations. Companies would stay or move out of Québec if doing so would increase their profit margin, regardless of the constitutional status of Québec.³⁰ Antonio Bruno, another QcUSWA staff member and former mine worker who ran for the PQ in 1973, put it more bluntly: "Tant aux investissements étrangers," he said, "il y en aura aussi longtemps qu'il y aura des profits à faire au Québec et Dieu sait combien les ressources sont énormes, et ça peu importe que le Québec soit indépendant ou non. Les Américains investissent en Espagne fasciste, en Yougoslavie communiste et au Canada capitaliste. Les investisseurs se foutent éperdument du genre de régime dont un peuple se veut doter. Ça leur est complètement égal le genre de régime que nous installons au Québec."³¹

While Bruno's line of argumentation seemed to reflect an opinion widely held among the more politicized QcUSWA unionists, it appeared to be at odds with the outlook of many less politicized rank-and-file members. At the 1972 convention of the QcUSWA the overwhelming majority of delegates adopted a pro-sovereignty resolution, thus making QcUSWA the first FTQ affiliate to go on record in favour of sovereignty. The same delegates who had backed the resolution, also indicated that only about 43 per cent of the workers whom they personally knew supported sovereignty.³² Internal QcUSWA estimates made after the 1973 provincial elections revealed that in the urban centres of the St. Lawrence valley the PQ was only slightly

²⁹ ANQ, USWA Collection, P 144, 1A, 2, 754, Clément Godbout, "Option Québec, 14 June 1973," 4.

³⁰ Pierre Richard, "Le syndicat des métallos opte pour l'indépendance," *Devoir*, 14 January 1972, 3.

³¹ ANQ, USWA Collection, P 144, 1A, 1, 83, A. Bruno to PQ members in Abitibi-est, June 1973.

³² "L'Assemblée annuelle des syndicats locaux," *Métallo* (December 1972), 13-14; ANQ, USWA Collection, P 144, 1A, 2, 263, untitled collation of votes taken, 3.

more popular than the Liberal Party. Only in the mining towns did the PQ enjoy support levels that put it clearly ahead of the Liberals.³³

In the absence of any polls or internal estimates, it is difficult to assess the degree of popularity which sovereignty attained within the FTQ as a whole during the early and mid-1970s. Given the QcUSWA estimates, it is unlikely that rank-and-file support for sovereignty across the FTQ exceeded forty per cent. The majority of the central's executive, including president Laberge, still opposed sovereignty for economic reasons.³⁴ Support for the PQ, however, was more widespread than support for sovereignty, because even federalist FTQ unionists were attracted to the PQ's social-democratic program.³⁵ In 1975, the FTQ convention adopted a resolution endorsing the PQ. The resolution noted that the PQ did not constitute a workers' party, but emphasized that it was the party closest to organized labour.³⁶ Most convention delegates agreed. About 80 per cent of the delegates polled indicated their preference for the PQ over other parties.³⁷ The 1975 FTQ convention sealed a rapprochement with the PQ that had been in the making since 1968.

The CSN, the CSQ, and the Rise of Socialist Sovereignism, 1970-1976

While the PQ's social-democratic programme elicited favourable responses among some unionists, in particular in the private sector, it met with suspicion among others, in particular in the public sector. By the early 1970s, the CSN and the CSQ underwent a radicalization process whereby both centrals adopted anti-capitalist positions which became increasingly incompatible with social-democratic reformism. As a result of the radicalization process, by 1972-1973, the leadership of both centrals became dominated by socialists. Most of these socialists opted for sovereignty. They did so because they saw it as an essential component of national liberation and because they believed that pan-Canadian solidarity did not constitute a viable option to achieve socialism. As the CSN's Montréal regional council argued in a 1972 position paper, progressive movements born in English-speaking Canada were doomed to fail in Québec, while progressive movements born in Québec were consigned to the same fate in the rest of Canada. "Dans un pays comme le Canada," the paper stated, "l'impérialisme et le capitalisme n'ont pas à diviser pour régner, vu que les divisions sont déjà inscrites dans la géographie, les cultures, l'histoire, les traditions, les mentalités et les intérêts particuliers entre le Québec d'une part

³³ ANQ, USWA Collection, P 144, 1A, 1, 83, 48 sheets with USWA staff member's estimates of QcUSWA members' voting behaviour in 1973 provincial elections.

³⁴ Fournier, *Louis Laberge*, 238.

³⁵ ANQ, USWA Collection, P 144, 1A, 2, 200, R. Lemoine to J.M. Carle, 25 September 1972, 3; Louis Fournier, "Changer le régime ... avec le PQ!" - Louis Laberge," *Québec-Press* 27 May 1973, 11; Rob Bull, "New steel union chief defends his PQ ties," *Toronto Star*, 26 February 1977, B4; Cyr and Roy, *Éléments d'histoire de la FTQ*, 134, 138.

³⁶ Fournier, *Histoire de la FTQ*, 119-22.

³⁷ "Les délégués au congrès de la FTQ: Qui sont-ils?" *Monde ouvrier* (January 1976), 3.

et les provinces anglophones d'autre part."³⁸ In short, national liberation and social emancipation were two sides of the same coin.

The CSN's and CSQ's socialist sovereigntists took their cue not from the PQ, but from ideas that had been diffused during the mid-1960s in left-wing journals such as *Parti pris* and *Révolution québécoise*. The left-wing contributors to these journals had claimed that national liberation was meaningless without social emancipation and called for the creation of an independent and socialist Québec. While one group of writers affirmed that independence constituted a first step toward the creation of a socialist society in Québec,³⁹ another group declared that independence and socialism must come about simultaneously.⁴⁰ Adherents of the two-step model argued that Québec's working class lacked political consciousness and, thus, was incapable of leading the struggle for national liberation. Partisans of the one-step model retorted that neither the petty bourgeoisie nor the bourgeoisie, but only the working class, could be counted upon to bring about national liberation. Despite lengthy debates, the two groups did not arrive at a consensus. Although their discourse had led a marginal existence in the shadows of mainstream sovereigntism, as propagated by the RIN and the PQ, it attracted a sizeable following among young intellectuals. During the second half of the 1960s many of them joined public-sector unions or began to work for CSN and CSQ suborganizations.

By the early 1970s, several CSN and CSQ subgroups and decision-making bodies adopted positions inspired by anti-capitalist sovereigntism. Some espoused the two-step model. In 1971, for instance, the convention of the CSN's federation of salaried professionals endorsed a position paper which stated: "La CSN et le PQ sont des outils de politisation. A l'heure actuelle, la libération nationale prime; mais elle doit être suivie de la libération sociale."⁴¹ Others, however, followed the one-step model. The 1972 CSQ convention, for example, rejected a motion, which called for independence and instead adopted one in favour of, "l'indépendance du Québec réalisée avec la participation active et critique de la classe laborieuse, pour autant qu'elle se réalise au bénéfice de la classe laborieuse." (The resolution did not constitute official CSQ policy, however, because the convention had not been mandated to take a stand in the matter.)⁴² In 1973, the CSN's Montréal regional council also embraced the notion that independence and socialism must come about simultaneously. In a position paper entitled *L'indépendance est plus sorcier qu'on pense*, the council argued that the PQ only defended the interests of Québec's bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. Québec's working class needed a political party

³⁸CCSNM, "Résolution pour l'indépendance du Québec, 14e congrès du CCSNM, avril 1972," in Louis LeBorgne, *La CSN et la question nationale depuis 1960* (Montréal 1975), 197.

³⁹"Manifeste 64-65," *Parti pris* (September 1964), 14.

⁴⁰Gilles Bourque and Gilles Dostaler, *Socialisme et Indépendance* (Montréal 1980).

⁴¹Archives de la CSN, Montréal (henceforth: ACSN), Fonds S-44, FPPSCQ, Procès-verbal du congrès fédéral de 1971, 13.

⁴²ACEQ, Procès-verbal du congrès de 1972, 140-1.

of its own, which would advocate both independence and socialism. This new party should aim at eclipsing the PQ as the major pro-sovereignty force in the province and thereby weaken, "l'hégémonie politique de la petite et moyenne bourgeoisie dans la lutte nationale."⁴³ Like the intellectuals of the 1960s, labour's socialist sovereigntists did not arrive at a consensus on the strategy to be chosen. For the next few years, they engaged in heated debates over the respective virtues of the one-step and two-step models.

Although socialist sovereigntists dominated the CSN and CSQ executives by the mid-1970s, they remained a minority in their respective organizations. An internal CSQ poll conducted in 1973 suggests that about 42 per cent of the central's members supported sovereignty-association. About twelve per cent opted for independence without economic association. Without doubt, the level of support for sovereignty in the CSQ exceeded that in the CSN. CSQ members possessed higher employment security than many CSN members, and thus tended to be less moved by considerations of sovereignty's potentially adverse economic repercussions. Moreover, as noted previously, CSQ members had a direct stake in the status of French as the dominant language. As the poll revealed, almost all of those in favour of sovereignty-association or independence were convinced that sovereignty would be beneficial for the maintenance and development of Québec's distinct cultural identity centered around the French language. Only a minority of them were persuaded that sovereignty would ameliorate the situation of the working class. In short, most CSQ unionists were swayed by mainstream sovereignty ideas as propagated by the PQ rather than by socialist sovereigntists.⁴⁴

CSN and CSQ leaders staunchly believed in the need to create a workers' party to the left of the PQ. Since there was little support for such a project among the rank-and-file, the leaders of the two centrals decided to stick to their organizations' traditional neutrality regarding party politics. Unable to nudge along the process of creating a workers' party, they were caught in a vicious circle. Although they resented the PQ, for the time being they had nowhere else to go. Among the major parties in the province only the PQ advocated a progressive program and stood a chance of toppling the Liberal government, which the CSN and CSQ leaders loathed. "S'il est important de donner une leçon au Parti libéral," the CSN executive stated prior to the 1976 provincial elections, "il faut être bien conscient qu'au lendemain de l'élection, même si le PQ prenait le pouvoir, nous serions placés devant une autre gouvernement qui, de gré ou de force, serait asservi à la classe dominante."

⁴³CCSNM/Centre de formation populaire, *L'Indépendance c'est plus sorcier qu'on pense* (Montréal 1973), 4.

⁴⁴Ralph P. Gützel, "The Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec and Quebec Separatist Nationalism, 1960-80," *Canadian Historical Review* 80:1 (March 1999), 73-4.

Paradoxically, on the eve of the 1976 provincial elections, the CSN and CSQ both hoped for and feared a PQ victory.⁴⁵

The FTQ and the First Referendum on Sovereignty, 1976-1980

In 1976 the Lévesque-led PQ won the provincial elections with about 40 per cent of the popular vote and, thus, came to power a mere eight years after its creation. Having promised to hold a referendum on sovereignty-association, preparing the referendum constituted one of the priorities of the Lévesque administration. In the meantime, the new government also implemented various reforms in areas of direct concern to organized labour. In 1977, the government adopted Bill 101, which strengthened the status of French in Québec. The bill contained a stipulation, which gave workers the right to work in French in all enterprises, with at least 50 employees. In the same year, the PQ government also revamped key aspects of the provincial labour code. The new labour code simplified certification procedures, increased union security, and limited employers' rights to hire strike breakers. In 1979, the government passed an industrial health and safety bill, which introduced improved health and safety standards in the workplace and set up a system by which employers and employees became jointly responsible for putting the new standards into practice. Although the reforms addressed long-held union grievances, they did not meet with uniform approval among the three centrals.⁴⁶

The FTQ warmly applauded the government's reforms and maintained a cordial relationship with the Lévesque administration. As FTQ president Laberge said in retrospect, "Le PQ a formé un bon gouvernement, le meilleur qu'on ait jamais eu. Un gouvernement fort, travaillant, qui a respecté ses promesses durant son premier mandat. On n'avait jamais vu des politiciens faire de la belle ouvrage comme ça."⁴⁷ Reactions were more lukewarm on the part of the CSN and the CSQ. Both centrals welcomed Bill 101, but rejected the reform of the labour code and the health and safety bill as too sympathetic to the interests of business. Unlike the FTQ, both the CSN and the CSQ eschewed a cooperative type of relationship with the Lévesque administration. Two reasons accounted for this approach. First, the socialists who dominated the federations wished for the emergence of a socialist workers' party. Such a party, however, could get off the ground only if a sufficient number of PQ sympathizers would switch allegiances. Thus, criticizing the PQ government was

⁴⁵Louis Fournier, "La CSN: du PQ à un 'socialisme d'ici,'" *Jour*, 27 May 1977, 15-16; Pierre Vennat, "La base répond NON à l'exécutif de la CSN," *Presse*, 3 June 1978, A9; Vincent Price, "Pas de parti des travailleurs," *Presse*, 6 June 1978, A4; Rouillard, *Histoire du syndicalisme au Québec*, 424-425; Güntzel, "The Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec," 71. For quotation: ACSN, CSN, Procès-verbal, bureau confédéral, 31 October 1976, 34.

⁴⁶On Bill 101: McRoberts, *Quebec*, 277-280. On the reform of the labour code and the health and safety bill: Rouillard, *Histoire du syndicalisme au Québec*, 424-5.

⁴⁷Fournier, *Louis Laberge*, 281.

the first step toward the creation of a political alternative to its left. Second, since most CSN and CSQ members worked in the public sector, both federations perceived the Lévesque administration not only as the provincial government but also — and perhaps most importantly — as the employer and, hence, antagonist. To cooperate with the employer might well have meant to weaken one's bargaining position. An attack on the PQ government's shortcomings, in contrast, constituted a promising build-up for the 1979 public-sector negotiations.⁴⁸

The same attitudes that guided the three centrals' policies in relation to the PQ government's reformism, also coloured the positions they adopted in view of the impending referendum on sovereignty-association. At the November 1979 FTQ convention the executive presented a working paper which noted that, "ni Ottawa, ni Québec ne possèdent aujourd'hui les pouvoirs suffisants pour adopter une politique économique collective, s'ils en avaient envie. Cette division des pouvoirs incite à la démission des pouvoirs face à l'entreprise privée, domestique ou étrangère." The parallel jurisdiction of the governments in Ottawa and Québec City in economic matters translated into a waste of resources and the absence of an effective economic development policy in Québec, the working paper argued. Thus, a concentration of powers either in Ottawa or in Québec City was necessary. The federal government could not be trusted to make the right decisions for Québec, the paper claimed, since it had traditionally given priority to the industrial development of southern Ontario and the agricultural development of the Prairie provinces. Having thereby ruled Ottawa out, the paper concluded that Québec needed complete jurisdiction over economic policies and manpower training.⁴⁹ Since the working paper stopped short of endorsing sovereigntism without, however, rejecting sovereignty, it met with approval among both sovereigntists and federalists.⁵⁰

In December 1979, the PQ government announced that the referendum question would ask for a mandate to negotiate sovereignty-association. Given the content of the referendum question, consensus-building for an official FTQ position in view of the referendum became an easy task. Obviously, partisans of sovereignty were only too willing to recommend a "yes" vote in the referendum. Federalists, too, rallied around a recommendation to vote "yes." To endorse a "yes" vote meant to avoid alienating FTQ sovereigntists and the Lévesque administration without actually having to endorse sovereignty. Moreover, given their penchant for a special status for and a massive transfer of powers to Québec, FTQ federalists had reason to see negotiations *d'égal à égal* as the most promising means to bring about the change which they aspired to. The FTQ organ *Monde ouvrier* explained this reasoning in the following terms:

⁴⁸Güntzel, "Le Confédération des syndicats nationaux," 166-167; Güntzel, "Le Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec," 75.

⁴⁹Archives de la FTQ, Montréal (henceforth: AFTQ), FTQ, *La FTQ et la question nationale. Congrès tenu à Québec du 26 au 30 novembre 1979* (Montréal 1979). Quotation, 16.

⁵⁰AFTQ, FTQ, Procès-verbal, congrès, 1979, 34-5.

Les Québécois sont sur le point de négocier 'leur convention collective' avec Ottawa et le reste du Canada. Nous avons déjà un syndicat dûment accrédité et un comité de négociation élu: le gouvernement actuel du Québec. Il s'agit maintenant de lui donner un mandat de négocier une nouvelle convention; le [jour du référendum], nous devons nous prononcer sur notre projet de convention collective. Ce n'est pas parce que nous voterons ce projet, qu'il s'appliquera automatiquement; il faut d'abord le négocier. Et, comme tout comité de négociation, le gouvernement québécois reviendra devant les membres, tous les Québécois, pour rendre compte des résultats des négociations. Ce sera alors le temps d'accepter l'entente de principe s'il y a une, de re-mandater notre comité de négociation ou bien de voter la grève.⁵¹

At a special convention held in April 1980, the FTQ officially went on record in favour of a "yes" vote in the referendum, which was to take place on May 20, 1980.⁵² In his convention speech, Laberge stressed that Québec workers had all the more reason to vote "yes," because capital was solidly behind a "no" vote. "Il suffit de regarder qui se retrouvent dans le camp du 'non'," Laberge said,

pour nous apercevoir qu'il s'agit là d'un regroupement sans précédent dans l'histoire du Québec des 'forces de la réaction' Il est significatif de retrouver côte à côte le Parti libéral du Québec, le Parti libéral du Canada, le Parti conservateur, le Conseil du patronat du Québec, les principaux porte-parole des milieux financiers, les représentants de Power Corporation, de Bell Canada, de ITT, de l'Alcan, de l'Iron Ore Il est évident que le principal intérêt de ces forces réactionnaires est de maintenir le Québec dans un état de dépendance qui leur a largement profité et d'étouffer tout mouvement vers un changement quel qu'il soit. Il aurait été pour le moins indécent pour le mouvement syndical de penser s'aligner avec ce 'club des exploitateurs.'⁵³

The FTQ, though, was not content to merely recommend a "yes" vote. Rather, the federation undertook great efforts to convince as many of its members as possible to vote "yes." At the end of the special convention Laberge called on his troops to give their best. "D'ici le 20 mai vous n'avez plus le droit d'être fatigués ou malades, tout le monde à l'ouvrage." Following the convention, the FTQ embarked on a full-fledged internal propaganda campaign. Numerous union meetings were devoted to convincing the undecided; FTQ officers toured the province; *Monde ouvrier*

⁵¹"Le Québec veut négocier une nouvelle convention collective," *Monde ouvrier* (May 1980), 8.

⁵²"Le congrès extraordinaire de la FTQ se prononce à 90% en faveur du OUI," *Devoir*, 21 April 1980, 6; "Un mandat clair pour le 'oui,'" *Monde ouvrier* (May 1980), 2.

⁵³AFTQ, Louis Laberge, *Discours inaugural de Louis Laberge, Président de la FTQ, Question nationale - Réponse syndicale, 2e congrès extraordinaire de la FTQ, Québec, le samedi 19 avril 1980* (Montréal 1980), 7.

devoted its pages to the referendum; and FTQ affiliates set up a "Regroupements des travailleurs pour le oui" and urged workers to sign lists in support of a "yes."⁵⁴

The CSN, the CSQ, and the First Referendum on Sovereignty, 1976-1980

Referendum-related debates in the CSN and the CSQ differed markedly from those in the FTQ. At the CSN's special convention in 1979, the central's enlarged executive presented a working paper on the national question, which was largely devoted to designing a socialist vision of society. The position paper charged that the federal government was responsible for Québec's economic underdevelopment relative to Ontario, because it had favoured southern Ontario to the detriment of Québec. The paper also accused the federalists of wanting to perpetuate Québec's national oppression and dismissed sovereignty-association as insufficient, since it did not envisage complete liberation from the federal stranglehold. In order to end Québec's national oppression, the paper argued, the people of Québec needed to create a regime, that would wrestle the strategic sectors of the economy from the hands of foreign capitalists. All essential industries must be nationalized and savings be centralized in a public capital fund, which would then become the centre-piece of a new industrial development policy. Publicly owned enterprises and the central capital fund would have to be controlled and administered "[par] la classe ouvrière en fonction des intérêts des travailleurs."⁵⁵

Subsequent to the reading of the working paper, the convention debated whether or not to go on record in favour of independence. The motion to endorse independence failed to get the support of CSN president Norbert Rodrigue and most other high-ranking CSN officers. Despite being favourable to independence, Rodrigue and his associates feared that such a stand might lead to internal divisions. Many CSN members remained opposed to sovereignty. Sovereignists were divided between PQ sympathizers and socialist sovereignists, who were split between moderates advocating the two-stage model and radicals promoting the one-step model. Fear of internal strife was not the only reason that motivated Rodrigue and his lieutenants. Like many public-sector unionists they felt that an endorsement of independence might strengthen the hand of the government in the approaching public-sector negotiations. In the absence of support from the central's most prominent leaders, the motion in favour of independence failed.⁵⁶ Instead, the convention resolved to endorse the following position: "Pour lutter efficacement contre l'oppression nationale et ses diverses manifestations, la CSN s'inscrit dans

⁵⁴"Créer un 'regroupement pour le oui' dans chaque milieu de travail, *Monde ouvrier* (May 1980), 3; "Selon la direction de la FTQ, 70% des membres de cette centrale diront Oui," *Devoir*, 15 May 8. For quotation: "Le congrès extraordinaire de la FTQ se prononce à 90% en faveur du OUI," *Devoir*, 21 April 1980, 6.

⁵⁵CSN, *Procès-verbal, congrès special, 1979* (Montréal 1979), 74-5.

⁵⁶Güntzel, "The Confédération des syndicats nationaux," 167-9.

une démarche d'appropriation par le peuple québécois des pouvoirs et institutions politiques, économiques et culturels.⁵⁷

After further internal debates, the confederal council, the CSN's highest decision-making body between conventions, met in April 1980 to decide whether or not to recommend a "yes" in the referendum. This time, all high-ranking CSN officers were in agreement. As Rodrigue told the council members, a victory of the 'yes' side would improve the chances of success in the struggle for a socialist society. Since the CSN had sufficiently established its critical distance to the Lévesque administration, a CSN recommendation to vote "yes" could not be interpreted as an endorsement of either the PQ or its vision of society.⁵⁸ After some debate, the CSN confederal council adopted the following resolution:

Le projet de souveraineté-association ... tend à rapprocher les lieux du pouvoir Un oui au référendum créerait de meilleures conditions pour la lutte démocratique visant à accroître l'emprise des travailleurs et classes populaires sur toutes les dimensions de leur vie La CSN, dans le respect de l'opinion de chacun de ses membres, et tout en conservant son autonomie, considère qu'il est dans l'intérêt des travailleurs et des couches populaires de voter oui au référendum.⁵⁹

Unlike the FTQ, the CSN did not try to mobilize its members for a victory of the "yes" forces. As the referendum campaign unfolded, the CSN looked on from the sidelines. The CSQ remained similarly aloof, albeit for different reasons.

At the 1978 CSQ convention, the executive presented a position paper, which argued that the Québec government needed to obtain more powers to redress Québec's weak economic structure and to defend and promote the French language. The CSQ executive also recommended that the central "se prononce en faveur de l'indépendance du Québec et considère que la lutte pour l'indépendance est indissociable de la lutte pour une société que les travailleurs québécois ont à définir et à bâtir sur les plans économique, social, culturel et politique, en fonction de leurs intérêts."⁶⁰ The convention resolved that the CSQ take a stand only after an internal referendum on Québec's constitutional status. There was severe disagreement, however, over the question to be asked in the internal referendum. PQ sympathizers wanted a question which offered a choice between independence as defined by the CSQ executive, sovereignty-association, and federalism. The socialists insisted that the question be limited to either accepting or rejecting the recommendation of the CSQ executive. After acrimonious debate, the socialists' proposal carried the day.⁶¹

⁵⁷CSN, *Procès-verbal, congrès special, 1979*, 147.

⁵⁸Güntzel, "The Confédération des syndicats nationaux," 169.

⁵⁹Conseil confédéral de la CSN, "Résolution générale," *Travail* (April 1980), supplément sur la question nationale, 7-8; Laval LeBorgne, "Le conseil confédéral de la CSN vote OUI," *Presse*, 12 April 1980, A2.

⁶⁰ACEQ, CEQ, *Procès-verbal, congrès, 1978*, annexe, 80.

⁶¹Güntzel, "The Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec," 77-78.

In March 1979, all CSQ members received a questionnaire which asked them whether the central should participate in Québec's referendum debate and promote independence as a means of building a workers' society.⁶² Many CSQ social democrats were irate. They supported sovereignty but opposed socialism. Their wish to be able to choose the former without having to endorse the latter had been repeatedly ignored. In this situation, the leaders of several CSQ affiliates decided to strike back against the CSQ's socialist executive. "Nous n'acceptons pas," they stated in a joint declaration to the media, "que le débat [interne] soit mené de telle façon que le oui à l'indépendance soit associé automatiquement à un oui inconscient à une vision marxiste de la société québécoise." Thus, they decided to oppose any participation of the CSQ in Québec's referendum debate.⁶³ During the following weeks the front of rejection broadened. In the end, almost two thirds of those who returned the questionnaire rejected a participation of the CSQ in Québec's referendum debate. Only 17.4 per cent had followed the CSQ executive and endorsed independence and socialism. In accordance with these results, the CSQ's special convention in June 1979 resolved non-intervention of the central in the referendum debate.⁶⁴

The May 1980 referendum dealt the sovereigntist movement a severe blow as almost 60 per cent of the voters voted "no." There are no data indicating the voting behaviour of unionized workers in the referendum. Laberge subsequently estimated that about two thirds of the FTQ membership voted "yes."⁶⁵ While this may be a somewhat exaggerated estimate, it is probable that more than half of the members of the three centrals voted "yes." Most likely, support for the "yes" option was highest among QcUSWA miners and CSQ members. Irrespective of the voting pattern among unionized workers, the referendum outcome ended debates on sovereignty in all three centrals as well as within Québec society in general. Québec sovereigntism went into a prolonged decline.

The Three Centrals and the Decline of Sovereigntism, 1980-1985

Soon after the defeat of sovereigntism, the Trudeau-led federal government instigated negotiations on constitutional reform. After much acrimony, in November 1981 these talks resulted in agreement between the federal government and all provincial governments except Québec. The Québec government judged the constitutional revisions as unacceptable for Québec and refused to endorse them. Thus, when the British North America Act was officially replaced by the Constitution Act in July 1982, Québec remained outside the Canadian constitutional family (although the revised constitution did apply to Québec). Rather than having made

⁶²Güntzel, "The Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec," 79.

⁶³Paule des Rivières, "Trois syndicats d'enseignants contestent l'analyse marxiste de la CEQ," *Devoir*, 12 April 1979, 9.

⁶⁴Güntzel, "The Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec," 79-80.

⁶⁵Fourmier, *Louis Laberge*, 300.

Canadian federalism more attractive to Québec, the reform of 1981-82 enlarged the gulf between Québec and the rest of the country. The imposition of the Constitution Act further disillusioned Québécois who had been frustrated by the referendum defeat.⁶⁶

The decline of sovereigntism and the imposition of constitutional reform coincided with other developments, which left Québec labour morose. Against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis, both the CSQ and the CSN began to undergo a political-ideological de-radicalization. The economic and political developments of the mid- and late-1980s further forced labour on the defensive. Like unions elsewhere, Québec labour found it difficult to come to terms with new issues such as privatization, deregulation, globalization, and free trade. Moreover, despite all consciousness-raising efforts during the 1970s, the creation of a socialist society remained as utopian and remote as ever. In this context, the CSN discontinued its socialist discourse by the mid-1980s. The CSQ had already ended its anti-capitalist rhetoric a few years earlier, as a direct result of the stalemate between reformists and radicals, which ensued from the referendum debate. By the end of the decade, both centrals had watered down their visions of social change and joined the FTQ in promoting social-democratic reformism. Since the mid-1980s, factional strife within the CSN and the CSQ no longer focused on ideological issues, but rather on questions of leadership personnel and militancy in relation to the employers. To a certain extent, the militant factions in both centrals derived their motivation from the anguish and bitterness of the confrontation with the PQ government in 1982-83.⁶⁷

The crisis of the early 1980s increased unemployment and put increasing pressures on the provincial budget. In this situation the PQ government, which had been reelected in 1981, decided to cut expenses in the public sector. In April 1982, the government asked the public-sector unions to give up wage increases, which had been negotiated in 1979, for the period from August to December 1982. After the unions' refusal, in June 1982 the government legislated severe wage cuts for the first three months of 1983. In the fall of 1983 the government and the public-sector unions began negotiations for a new collective agreement. As the negotiations dragged on and a consensus remained elusive, the government legislated wages and working conditions in the public sector for the period from 1982 to 1985. The unions retaliated by going on strike in January 1983. The government passed back-to-work legislation and succeeded in splitting the common front of public-sector workers. By February 1983, the epic struggle came to an end when the CSQ, which had been the last part of the common front to hold out, agreed to a

⁶⁶Fraser, *PQ*, 279-301.

⁶⁷Roch Denis and Serge Denis, *Les syndicats face au pouvoir: Syndicalisme et politique au Québec de 1960 à 1992* (Ottawa 1992), 86-89, 150-156; Pierre Vennat, *Une révolution non tranquille: Le syndicalisme au Québec de 1960 à l'an 2000* (Montréal 1992), 37-129; Fournier, *Histoire de la FTQ*, 179-261.

conciliation process. The conciliation verdict improved the government's terms only marginally.⁶⁸

After the events of 1982-1983, relations between the PQ and organized labour reached a low point. The government's treatment of public-sector workers left so much bitterness that even the FTQ, which had long been the PQ's ally in the labour movement and which was dominated by private-sector workers, did not endorse the PQ in the 1985 provincial elections.⁶⁹ The elections resulted in a return to power of the Liberal Party under Robert Bourassa. In an ironic twist of fate, the Liberal reign during the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s resulted not only in a rapprochement between the PQ and the three centrals but also a resurgence of sovereigntism.

The Three Centrals and the Resurgence of Sovereigntism, 1985-1995

During the mid-1980s, the PQ undertook little to recuperate the social-democratic credentials it had lost in 1982-83. Under the leadership of Pierre-Marc Johnson, who had taken over from Lévesque as PQ president in 1985, it even shelved sovereignty in favour of autonomist nationalism, which it referred to as "national affirmation." In 1988, however, Jacques Parizeau, one of Lévesque's former lieutenants, succeeded Johnson as PQ leader. Under Parizeau the PQ once again stressed its social-democratic aspirations and reintroduced sovereignty as the centre-piece of its program. Prior to the 1989 provincial elections, Parizeau expressed his regret and apologies for the imposition of the wage and salary cuts in 1983. Shortly thereafter the FTQ returned to its tradition of recommending to vote for the PQ. As Laberge noted, "malgré les graves erreurs du Parti québécois dans le passé, il faut reconnaître que c'est le programme de cette formation qui se rapproche le plus du projet de société que met de l'avant la FTQ Le programme que le PQ propose à l'électorat rejoint la plupart des grands objectifs de la centrale. C'est le cas, notamment, de la politique de plein emploi, du rôle accordé à l'Etat dans la conduite de l'économie, de l'autodétermination du Québec, de la francisation, de la législation syndicale et de la protection de l'environnement." Although it lost the 1989 provincial elections, the PQ managed to recuperate some of the labour vote that had deserted the party in 1985.⁷⁰

The resurgence of sovereigntism was intimately tied to the demise of the Meech Lake Accord. Signed by the first ministers in 1987, the accord was meant to make the constitution acceptable to Québec by adding several amendments including, most notably, a clause which recognized Québec as a "distinct society." The recognition of Québec's distinctiveness initially appeared as a significant

⁶⁸Rouillard, *Histoire du syndicalisme au Québec*, 388-93.

⁶⁹Fournier, *Louis Laberge*, 328-30.

⁷⁰Graham Fraser, "PQ elated over wins in semi-final," *Globe and Mail*, 27 September 1989, A7; Fournier, *Louis Laberge*, 348-349. Quotation in: Martin Pelchat, "FTQ: la direction recommande un 'soutien critique' au PQ," *Devoir*, 23 August 1989, 2.

victory for Bourassa, who had been one of the prime movers in the negotiations which had led to the accord. By 1989-1990, however, the ratification process of the amendment got bogged down. At the same time, public opinion polls revealed that more and more English-speaking Canadians opposed the notion that Québec constituted a distinct society. In the months before the expiration of the ratification deadline in June 1990, controversy intensified. When the deadline finally arrived, not all provinces had ratified the amendment and the accord became defunct. At that point, English-Canadian unwillingness to recognize Québec as a distinct society had risen to a groundswell. In several instances, well covered by the media, this unwillingness translated into anti-Québec demonstrations and desecrations of the Québec flag. As a result, Québécois were left with the impression that English Canada rejected Québec's distinctiveness.⁷¹

In Québec, the demise of the Meech Lake Accord revived old fears about cultural survival and increased skepticism about the capacity of the Canadian federal system to accommodate Québec. More importantly, it imbued many francophone Québécois with a strong urge to reassert their sense of group worth in the face of massive disparagement and rejection. In this situation, support for sovereignty quickly soared to the 60 per cent mark.⁷² Economic considerations no longer acted as an effective counterweight, since Québec's economy had made great strides in the course of the 1980s. "The economic arguments used by the business community in 1980 don't hold true anymore," Ghislain Dufour, a staunch federalist and head of the Conseil du Patronat, told the *Globe and Mail* in October 1989. "The Quebec economy is strong; our entrepreneurs are successful."⁷³ In the spring of 1990 even corporate institutions such as Merrill Lynch, a US investment firm, and the Bank of Montreal, predicted that sovereignty would not entail economic turbulence.⁷⁴ By the summer of 1990, more Québécois than ever jumped on the sovereigntist bandwagon.

The developments convinced labour leaders that the time had come to commit their organizations to the promotion of sovereignty. Many leading unionists, such as CSN president Gérald Larose, had already supported sovereignty in the debates of the 1970s and 1980. Others, such as FTQ president Laberge, had joined the sovereigntist camp subsequent to the 1980 referendum.⁷⁵ For some time the leaders of the three centrals had regarded sovereignty as an important strategic goal which

⁷¹ Andrew Cohen, *A Deal Undone: The Making and Breaking of the Meech Lake Accord* (Vancouver 1990); Patrick Monahan, *Meech Lake: The Inside Story* (Toronto 1991).

⁷² Edouard Cloutier, Jean H. Guay, and Daniel Latouche, *Le Virage: l'évolution de l'opinion politique au Québec depuis 1960* (Montréal 1992), 45.

⁷³ Barrie McKenna, "Québec's powerful Caisse driving force behind nationalist economy," *Globe and Mail*, 31 October 1989, A3.

⁷⁴ Robert Winters, "Bank plays down Quebec independence," (Montréal) *Gazette*, 13 March 1990, A1.

⁷⁵ Fournier, *Louis Laberge*, 338, 362-3.

remained beyond reach. Yet, by 1990, sovereignty no longer appeared as elusive as it had during the 1980s. Unlike in the late 1970s and 1980, in 1990 there were no major internal obstacles that made it difficult or undesirable for the centrals to endorse sovereignty. A decade earlier, some leaders and many rank-and-file members had opposed sovereignty. In contrast, by 1990, re-alcitrant leaders and rank-and-file members had either espoused sovereignty in the course of the 1980s or became infected with the sovereigntist spirit that spread like wildfire through Québec society in 1990. Moreover, the differences between the sovereigntist factions, which had shaken the CSN and temporarily paralysed the CSQ a decade earlier, faded as a result of the two centrals' de-radicalization. Thus, the fear of internal factionism no longer prevented the centrals from taking the next step in their sovereigntist evolution.

At its convention in early May 1990, the CSN became the first of the three centrals to endorse independence and commit itself to promoting sovereigntism.⁷⁶ In mid-May, Laberge informed the media that the FTQ would begin to actively promote sovereignty on 24 June, Québec's national holiday.⁷⁷ A few weeks later, the CSQ followed suit. In the wake of an internal poll revealing that 74 per cent of the central's members supported sovereignty, the CSQ convention adopted a resolution which committed the CSQ to struggle for Québec independence.⁷⁸ The sovereigntist pamphlets and memoranda, which the centrals produced in the summer and fall of 1990, stressed four points; First, Québec must attain sovereign nation-state status, because it is natural for nations to do so. "We want Québec to be a country rather than a province," the FTQ stated, "because it is normal for a people to have a country and Canada will always be the country of others"; Second, a sovereign Québec would be in a better position to safeguard the distinct character of Québec society; Third, Canadian federalism constituted a burden without which Québec could conduct more efficient economic development policies; Fourth, sovereignty would democratize Québec society. Sovereignty, the CSN declared, "will strengthen the people's capacity to influence those who make the decisions. It will help democracy to grow and function." Hence, the CSN concluded, "sovereignty will bring about more favorable conditions for fulfilling many demands of the unions and mass organizations."⁷⁹

⁷⁶François Berger, "La CSN s'engage à promouvoir l'indépendance," *Presse*, 9 May 1990, A4; Josée Boileau, "Vote massif des délégués de la CSN pour le principe de l'indépendance du Québec," *Devoir*, 9 May 1990, 3.

⁷⁷Marie-Claude Lortic, "Plus souverainiste que jamais, la FTQ promet de mobiliser dès le 24 juin," *Presse*, 19 May 1990, G3.

⁷⁸François Berger, "La CEQ en faveur de l'indépendance du Québec," *Presse*, 26 May 1990, A20; Lia Lévesque, "Le congrès de la CEQ appelé à se prononcer en faveur de l'indépendance," *Devoir*, 26 May 1990, A12; Lia Lévesque, "Les trois grandes centrales syndicales s'engagent à promouvoir la souveraineté," *Devoir*, 3 July 1990, 2.

⁷⁹Richard Fiedler, *Canada, Adieu? Quebec Debates its Future* (Lantzville, British Columbia 1991), 122-150. For FTQ quotation, 123. For CSN quotations, 134.

In order to back up their sovereigntist discourse, the centrals became involved in several important political battles fought in Québec during the first half of the 1990s. After a renewed round of constitutional negotiations with first ministers from the rest of Canada, the Bourassa administration agreed to the Charlottetown Accord of August 1992. The accord included a watered-down version of the distinct-society clause which had played such a prominent role in the Meech Lake Accord.⁸⁰ On 26 October 1992, the Charlottetown Accord was put to a referendum vote in all parts of Canada. During the referendum campaign, the three centrals vociferously opposed the accord.⁸¹ Their efforts were rewarded as more than 55 per cent of voters in Québec voted "no." Having met with rejection in most other parts of Canada as well, the Charlottetown Accord became defunct.⁸² The FTQ also supported the Bloc québécois (BQ) which had been created in 1990 by a group of independent members of the House of Commons previously belonging to the Progressive Conservative Party. Led by Lucien Bouchard, a former Tory cabinet minister, the BQ espoused sovereignty and, thus, became the federal wing of the sovereigntist movement. In the 1993 federal elections, the FTQ urged its members to vote BQ. Bound by their traditional neutrality regarding party politics, the CSN and the CSQ refrained from following the example of the FTQ. They both, however, supported individual BQ candidates. Again, the centrals' efforts were rewarded as the BQ won the vast majority of Québec ridings.⁸³

The centrals also became involved in the 1994 provincial elections. Once again, the FTQ supported the PQ, while the CSN and the CSQ stopped short of officially endorsing the PQ. Their formal neutrality barely veiled their sympathies for the PQ. "Du côté de la CSN et de la CSQ," one observer commented, "on s'en tient à une vieille tradition de 'neutralité', mais cette abstention officielle ne fait guère illusion: les directions des deux centrales souhaitent ardemment le victoire du PQ."⁸⁴ CSN and CSQ leaders severely criticized the Liberals and categorically

⁸⁰ André Picard, "Deal will bring era of security, Bourassa says," *Globe and Mail*, 23 September 1992, A5; Graham Fraser, "Parizeau says deal ensures decline," *Globe and Mail*, 26 September 1992, A5.

⁸¹ "Pour bien des raisons la CEQ invite ses membres à voter NON," *Devoir*, 9 September 1992, A2; Clément Trudel, "Congrès extraordinaire de la FTQ pour préciser son NON à l'entente," *Devoir*, 17 September 1992, A2; Carole Montpetit, "Les centrales louent la lucidité des Québécois," *Devoir*, 27 October 1992, A6.

⁸² J.M. Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples* (Toronto 1998), 387.

⁸³ Josée Boileau, "La CSN travaillera à l'élection du souverainiste Gilles Duceppe dans Laurier/Sainte-Marie," *Devoir*, 14 July 1990, 2; Josée Boileau, "Les syndicats investissent le Bloc québécois," *Devoir*, 11 April 1993, A1, A12; Serge Truffaut, "Le Bloc québécois plutôt que le NPD," *Devoir*, 20 September 1993, A1, A8; Pierre O'Neill, "Une première: la CEQ se mouille," *Devoir*, 24 September 1993, A5.

⁸⁴ Louis Fournier, "Les camarades et les candidats," *Devoir*, 18 August 1994, A7.

declared that the Liberal government must not be re-elected.⁸⁵ It was thus with great satisfaction that the three centrals greeted the PQ election victory in 1994.⁸⁶ The coming to power of the PQ headed by Parizeau also set the stage for the second referendum on sovereignty. The referendum took place on 30 October 1995, and asked Québécois to agree that Québec become sovereign after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership.⁸⁷

During the months preceding the referendum, the three centrals once again engaged in a major propaganda effort. Besides reiterating earlier arguments in favour of sovereignty, they contrasted the social and collective nature of Québec's political culture with the liberal values of English-speaking Canada. "Ici, nous sommes davantage syndicalisés que partout ailleurs en Amérique du Nord," CSN president Larose remarked. "Ici, l'intervention de l'État a toujours été plus importante que partout ailleurs en Amérique du Nord. Pourquoi? Essentiellement parce que pour vivre, pour survivre, le peuple québécois a été obligé de compter sur ses forces collectives."⁸⁸ To strengthen Québec, the argument implied, meant to strengthen a political culture incompatible with the cold-blooded, neo-liberalism that had become popular in English-speaking Canada. The centrals also attacked the federalists' negative propaganda. Larose, for instance, dismissed statements by federal finance minister Paul Martin, who declared that the federal government would not negotiate a new partnership with Québec following a sovereigntist referendum victory. The rest of Canada would undoubtedly negotiate a new partnership with Québec, Larose said, "parce que de l'autre côté, il y a autant de capitalistes que de ce côté-ci. Et on les connaît. Ni foi, ni loi, l'argent n'a pas d'odeur; s'il y a une piastre à faire, on va venir le faire."⁸⁹

Labour's finely tuned propaganda machine temporarily sputtered when the CSN's federation of health and social service workers went on record against sovereignty to protest against planned cuts in public health services. At its convention in May 1995, the federation, which had traditionally been one of the more

⁸⁵Paul Cauchon, "Johnson est un démolisseur, estime Lorraine Pagé," *Devoir*, 28 June 1994, A2; Stéphane Baillargeon, "Le dilemme CSN," *Devoir*, 3 May 1994, A1, A10; Suzanne Colpron, "Larose tire à bulets rouges sur le gouvernement Johnson," *Presse*, 10 May 1994, A5; Suzanne Colpron, "Trois des quatre présidents de centrales syndicales appuient le PQ," *Presse*, 20 August 1994, F15; CSN Executive Committee, "Un constat d'échec," *Devoir*, 8 September 1994, A7.

⁸⁶Clément Godbout and Henri Massé, "FTQ-PQ en neuf engagements," *Devoir*, 10 October 1994, A11; Lia Lévesque, "Les syndicats sont emballés, le patronat reste sur sa faim," *Devoir*, 30 November 1994, A4; Paul Cauchon, "Une rupture avec le discours néolibéral," *Devoir*, 2 December 1994, A2.

⁸⁷Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples*, 421-2.

⁸⁸Gérald Larose, "Le Québec qu'il nous faut," *Devoir*, 16 October 1995, A9.

⁸⁹Mario Fontaine, "'Je n'ai jamais vu de peuple se libérer parla force de ses hommes d'affaires' - Gérald Larose," *Presse*, 28 September 1995 B7. For quotation: Michel Venne, "Larose parlera franc," *Devoir*, 14 September 1995, A4.

militant segments of the CSN, resolved to take a stand "contre le projet souverainiste du Parti québécois, et ce tant et aussi longtemps que ses politiques sociales actuelles et sa façon d'agir concernant les services publics et parapublics du Québec seront maintenus."⁹⁰ Somewhat embarrassed, Larose was quick to note that the federation's resolution constituted a tactic to force the government to rethink planned hospital closures, rather than a rejection of sovereignty. Even the federation's president Louis Roy conceded, "[c]'est un retrait temporaire du projet péquiste. Nos membres demeurent souverainistes"⁹¹ Still, the incident pointed to a neuralgic spot in the relationship between the Québec labour movement and the PQ. Whenever the PQ won political power, the two sides immediately became opponents in the struggle for wages and working conditions in the public sector. In this struggle the temptation to strike-out against sovereignty was high, since an attack against sovereignty would hit the PQ government at its most vulnerable point and, thus, potentially constituted a major bargaining chip. At the same time, such an attack carried enormous risks as it jeopardized labour's political strategy and credibility. While the CSN stopped short of disavowing the federation's resolution, both the FTQ and the CSQ declared that their sovereigntist position constituted a strategic choice, which was not contingent on public-sector negotiations or specific government policies. "[L]a FTQ ne mêlerait pas la souveraineté et les négociations du secteur public," FTQ secretary general Henri Massé declared. "La souveraineté est trop importante."⁹²

Despite the propaganda efforts of the three centrals and their allies, the referendum campaign got off to a poor start. For the first few weeks of the campaign, the sovereigntist camp trailed by a large margin in public opinion polls. The momentum shifted though, a few weeks before the referendum, when Parizeau stepped to the side to make room for Bouchard. Once he had taken the helm of the sovereigntist campaign effort, Bouchard infused his troops with new energy and optimism. Drawing on his tremendous popularity with Québécois and stressing the need for self-respect and reparation for the humiliations of the past, Bouchard almost succeeded in turning a disastrous campaign into a triumph. When millions of Québécois and Canadians turned on their television sets, on the evening of 30 October 1995, the outcome of the vote remained very much in doubt. In the end, the sovereigntists garnered 49.4 per cent of the vote. Some 50.6 of the voters voted "no." The difference between the two camps was less than 55 000 votes out of a total of almost 4.7 million voters.⁹³ Like their sovereigntist allies, the three centrals shrugged off the narrow defeat and renewed their commitment to promoting sovereignty.⁹⁴

⁹⁰Mario Fontaine, "La FAS rejette le projet de souveraineté," *Presse*, 24 May 1995, B1.

⁹¹Mario Fontaine, "Souveraineté: la FAS se défend de faire du chantage," *Presse*, 25 May 1995, B5.

⁹²Denis Lessard, "Quoi qu'il advienne, les centrales diront Oui," *Presse*, 26 May 1995, B1.

⁹³Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples*, 422-3.

⁹⁴www.cam.org/_poursouv/presentation.html

Recent Developments and Prospects for the Future

As was the case after the first referendum on sovereignty, the 1995 referendum ushered in a period of public disinterest in the sovereignty option. Despite their efforts to the contrary, Québec sovereigntists have so far failed to recreate the enthusiasm for sovereignty that preceded the second referendum. While Québec's constitutional status has been relegated to the backburner, organized labour and the PQ government have focused on fiscal policies and their impact on the public sector.

In February 1996, Bouchard took over from Parizeau as Québec Premier. In this function, Bouchard promised to work toward building the conditions under which the sovereigntists could win the next referendum on sovereignty. Bouchard saw elimination of the deficit as one of the winning conditions. Soon after his inauguration, the new Premier declared that eradicating the deficit was unavoidable if Québec did not want to run the risk of losing potential investors to Ontario or New Brunswick, where governments pursued pro-business fiscal policies. According to Bouchard, the drastic treatment he envisaged was inspired by pragmatism, not neo-liberalism. As one observer summarized Bouchard's position: "Pour le premier ministre, pas question de mettre de côté les principes sociaux-démocrates du PQ, la compassion nécessaire du gouvernement, mais ils devront pour l'instant s'accommoder des choix imposés par l'état inquiétant des finances publiques."⁹⁵ Not surprisingly, the government's austere policies met with disapproval among organized labour.

While labour leaders had initially welcomed Bouchard's arrival at the helm of the PQ government,⁹⁶ they lost much of their enthusiasm when confronted with Bouchard's deficit-elimination plan. By 1997-98, relations between organized labour and the government deteriorated, as the centrals tried in vain to shield the public sector from government cuts. Frustrated by the cuts, CSN and CSQ leaders accused the PQ government of pursuing neo-liberal policies. Yet, while labour's anti-government discourse became increasingly accusatory, it did not reach the hostility reserved for the oppositional Liberal Party, which the centrals' denounced for wanting to return to the savage capitalism of the 19th century.⁹⁷ Relations between the Bouchard administration and the three centrals improved somewhat

⁹⁵Denis Lessard, "L'option sociale-démocrate péquiste mise en veilleuse," *Presse*, 26 February 1996, A1, A2; quotation on A2.

⁹⁶Philippe Cantin, "'Nous sommes en danger d'opération dévastatrice,' selon Gérald Larose," *Presse*, 30 November 1995, B1.

⁹⁷Mario Cloutier, "Larose s'oppose à Bouchard," *Devoir*, 22 February 1997; Denis Lessard, "Les négociations ont refroidi l'ardeur syndicale pour le Bloc," *Presse*, 23 April 1997, B5; Mario Fontaine, "Le Bloc paie pour le pots cassés par le PQ: la FTQ ne l'appuiera pas," *Presse*, 10 May 1997, B10; François Normand, "La CEQ adopte la ligne dure," *Devoir*, 30 June 1997, A1, A8; Marie-Andrée Chouinard, "La CEQ promet un vent de changement," *Devoir*, 2 July 1997, A3; Claude-V. Marsolais, "La CSN s'éloigne du PQ," *Presse*, 31 March 1998, A7; Marie-Claude Ducas, "La CSN exerce de la pression sur les partis," *Devoir*, 30

after the government balanced Québec's budget in 1998. The 1999 budget met with muted criticism rather than vociferous denunciation. The FTQ and the CSN admonished the government for injecting insufficient resources into the health and education sectors. CSQ president Lorraine Pagé, however, declared that she found the budget satisfactory, because it favoured public services. She also commended the PQ government for having resisted the neo-liberal temptation of reducing taxes.⁹⁸ In December 1999, after a year and a half of negotiations, the presidents of the three centrals and the government concluded a collective agreement for Québec's public-sector workers, which satisfied both sides. The agreement diminished the tensions that had accompanied the long, drawn-out negotiations.⁹⁹

Despite the temporary return to a certain degree of cordiality between organized labour and the government, both sides remain apart on social and economic issues. Organized labour continues to adhere to social democracy, while the PQ government combines pro-business policies with social-democratic elements. In all likelihood, there will be more conflicts over resource allocation between labour and the PQ government. Still, as long as the PQ will remain somewhere to the left of the Liberals, these conflicts will not cause labour to turn its back on sovereignty. Although not entirely unconnected to the PQ's degree of progressivism, labour's support for sovereignty rests on more fundamental arguments. As Larose pointed out in May 2000, labour sees Québec society as more community oriented and Québec political culture as more social than the society and political culture of English-speaking Canada. Thus, sovereignty would diminish the influence English-speaking Canada's individualist social values and liberal, political-culture exercise on Québec via the federal government. In short, Québec sovereignty would create better conditions for implementing social-democratic policies. Political realignment in a sovereign Québec might even entail the creation of a workers' party, which would be a more faithful ally of organized labour than the PQ has been.¹⁰⁰

As long as labour continues to be inspired by its analysis of the fundamental differences between Québec and English-speaking Canada, it will pursue its sovereigntist orientation. Only a fundamental change in Québec's political culture may put this analysis into question. The PQ's recent cutbacks did not constitute such a change, especially if viewed in the context of the austere policies pursued by

October 1998, A2; Paule des Rivières, "La CSN égratigne tous les partis," *Devoir*, 11 November 1998, A2; Claude-V. Marsolais, "La CSN adopte un plan de campagne timoré," *Presse*, 10 November 1998, B4.

⁹⁸François Normand, "Les syndicats donnent une note de passage avec réserve," *Devoir*, electronic edition [www.ledevoir.com], 10 March 1999.

⁹⁹Norman Deslisle, "Les négociations 1999 dans le secteur public: un exemple à suivre," <http://pressecan.infinet/Nationales/991230/N123001U.html> [30 December 1999].

¹⁰⁰Pierre O'Neill, "Gérald Larose au Devoir: l'heure n'est pas venue pour la gauche," *Devoir*, electronic edition [www.ledevoir.com], 27 May 2000.

various governments in English-speaking Canada. Yet, even if Québec's social values and political culture, as well as the PQ's programme, were to take a turn to the right, Québec labour might hesitate to embrace federalism. After all, the political influence of the three centrals is limited to Québec. Since extension of this influence to Ottawa does not constitute a viable option, it is a much more rational strategy to demand increased powers for the government that Québec labour *can* influence. Thus, there are good reasons to expect that Québec labour will continue to support sovereigntism for some time to come.

REVIEW

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