

Grève Générale!

The 1972 Rebellion in Quebec

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“Not since the days of the Industrial Workers of the World, since the days of Joe Hill and the battle for the eight-hour day, has a North American union movement been so dedicated to the tradition of revolutionary syndicalism.” — Marcel Pepin (jailed President of the Confederation of National Trade Unions, 1972)

Thirty-two years ago one of the largest working class rebellions in North American history exploded in Quebec. 300,000 workers participated in North America’s largest general strike to that date, radio stations were seized, factories were occupied, and entire towns were brought under workers’ control. What made the rebellion possible was not only an explosive mix of economic exploitation, national oppression, and government repression, but was also a strong, young, and radicalized rank and file of the Quebec trade union movement.

La Presse

While the workers’ uprising occurred in May 1972, it is necessary to go back to 1971 to find the catalyst: a strike at the newspaper La Presse. The paper had recently been bought out by Paul Desmarais, who wanted to transform it into a federalist and capitalist propaganda machine and fire the journalists who didn’t agree with his ideology. Typographical workers were locked out in an attempt to provoke an illegal strike from the unionized, separatist, and socialist journalists who were struggling against the editorial clampdown and for more worker control over what was published.

“I don’t think they were after us,” explained Alan Héritage of the international typographers union, “they wanted the journalists. If we had put up a picket line we would have been dead because the journalists would have respected it and lost their jobs.”

On October 29th, 1971, after five months of being locked out, the union movement held a mass demonstration in support of the locked out La Presse workers. The company and the Montreal police seized upon this as an opportunity to attack. The company ceased publishing, fortified the building, and pronounced that the unionists were responsible for “waves of violence.”

In fact, the most ‘violent’ act the workers held on the picket line was one of holding a meeting at a nearby church, creating a vehicle blockade around the building when they parked their cars. For this the government banned more than eight workers from gathering near the building.

The next day Montreal Mayor Jean Drapeau, in consultation with Premier Bourassa passed his anti-demonstration bylaw. A no-protest zone of fifty blocks around the La Presse building was declared.

Over 15,000 workers showed up to march. Carrying placards with such slogans as “Capitalism equals unemployment, Socialism equals work.” The march was corralled by police into a “sort of two-edged cul-de-sac formed by police barricades.”

The Police charged, brutally clubbing anyone they could. Street-fighting flared between workers and police, even continuing at the hospital that both sides brought their injured to. Hundreds were injured and one woman, a young college student and left-wing activist named Michèle Gauthier, lay dead.

It’s often said that few things are more radicalizing than the end of a police baton, and on Oct. 29, 1971, the end of the baton — clearly and deliberately wielded by the state — was felt by the entire working class of Quebec.

Critically, the strike at La Presse created a working model of a “Common Front” between usually competitive and divisive union centrals that represented workers at La Presse during the strike. The common front model combined with the radicalization in the La Presse strike foreshadowed a far greater possibility, that of a common front representing hundreds of thousands of public service workers against their employer — the state.

The Common Front

Founded in late 1971 and cemented by the shared experience of the La Presse police riot, a common front between the three largest union organizations was formed to negotiate with the provincial government over the upcoming contract of Quebec’s public service workers. The Common Front represented 210,000 workers out of a total of 250,000 public employees.

The Front’s demands centered around an eight percent raise to match inflation, job security, a say in working conditions in order to bring public services closer to the people, a \$100 per week minimum wage, and equal pay for equal work regardless of region, sector, or sex.

The March 28th General Strike

On March 28, 1972, after months of fruitless negotiation, the Common Front held a one-day general strike. Despite being offered an increase of 0.4 percent of the original offer by the state, the state refused to budge on the issue of the \$100 per week minimum wage. In response the Common Front decided to go on an all-out, unlimited general strike on April 11th.

The April 11th General Strike

On April 11, over 210,000 public sector workers struck against the government, and Quebec grounded to a halt.

The state chose to target the hospital workers, placing injunctions on 61 union hospitals. However, hospital workers defied the injunctions, stating that management was capable of providing essential services. The corporate media whipped up stories of patients being forced to sleep in their own urine.

“They could write stories like that about general hospital conditions without a strike.” one unfazed striker commented. “The government doesn’t represent us,” said one court clerk, “It represents Bay Street, St. James Street, Wall Street, but not us. Our union is the only thing that represents us.”

Jailed

On April 19, nine days into the general strike, 13 low-paid hospital workers were jailed 6 months and fined \$5000 (about a year’s pay) for ignoring the injunctions. Their union was fined \$70,600. A total 103 workers would be sentenced a total of 24 years and fined half a million dollars in the course of a few days.

“When the law is ignored and the authority of the courts is openly defied, there is reason to fear a situation which could degenerate into anarchy,” said the judgment

Yvon Charbonneau, the teachers’ leader, was furious, “The union movement may have to go into the resistance in the historic sense of the word. The day may come when we will have to drop our pencils and chalk. This government won’t compromise except in the face of arms, maybe there’s a lesson to be learned,”

Back to Work

On April 21, the government passed Bill 19 into law. Bill 19 in effect forced the unionized workers back to work, and banned fundamental trade union rights for a period of two years.

After an initial pledge of civil disobedience, and a hurried vote that over half of the workers didn’t participate in, the trade union leadership of the common front recommended that their members return to work. The general strike was over.

“St. James Street,” declared one St. Jerome worker, “wants to keep Quebec as a source of cheap labor. They won’t let Bou-Bou give us a decent wage.”

Revenge

“We’ll go to the court and I’ll plead guilty with pride.” — Louis Labarge, president of the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ).

The fact that bill 19 had defeated the general strike and made union action all but illegal wasn’t enough for the state, they wanted revenge and to make an example of the trade union leadership.

After announcing that the hospital workers shouldn’t have to be the only ones to face jail, Louis Labarge, Marcel Pepin, and Yvon Charbonneau, the leaders of the three unions confederations that formed the common front, were sentenced to a year in jail, as they had all urged them to disobey the injunctions.

“That’s the justice of the system,” said Labarge, “while big corporations are fined \$75 or \$500 for polluting our rivers, killing people or breaking the law, we — the criminals — must go to jail for exercising a right — the right to strike.”

Revolt!

Within hours of the beginning of jail time for the ‘big three’ workers spontaneously started downing their tools and organizing their fellow workers in what became a full-fledged revolt by the working class.

The longshore workers were the first to walk off the job in Montreal, Quebec City and Trois-Rivieres, joined an hour later by 5000 teachers in Joliette, the Gaspé, Chicoutimi, l’Estrée, Sorel, Mont Laurier and the Mille Iles. CUPE maintenance workers set up picket lines, nurses and other hospital workers joined them on the picket lines.

That night in the town of Sept-Iles, on Quebec’s isolated north shore, police tried to break up a workers’ protest in front of the local courthouse and a fierce battle ensued — the revolt had begun.

One 52-year-old Sept-Iles steelworker had tears in his eyes as he told a reporter: "They put Louis in jail. They can't do this. If we let them, they can put us all in jail, anyone of us."

Mass meetings were held late in the night and early in the morning, the workers' of Sept-Iles called a general strike idling all industry in the iron-ore port, taking control of the town, and seizing the local radio station.

"It's probably the outlying areas that are going to provoke the real changes in Quebec," explained Pierre Mercille of the CNTU's Laurentian Central Council.

"For years, the ideas came from Montreal, but the most radical actions came from outside the metropolis: Cabano, Mont Laurier, and now the massive walkouts of Sept-Iles, St. Jerome, and Sorel. In Montreal, it's so big and anonymous, it's difficult to have co-ordinated action. But in the little towns, the workers understand fast, they know themselves and they act."

In St. Jerome, an industrial area north of Montreal, 400 textile workers walked off the job and soon found themselves joined by bus drivers, metal plant workers, teachers, and white-collar workers. At the behest of unionized workers at the CKJL radio station the strike committee seized the airwaves and broadcast union statements and revolutionary music.

Jean Labelle, a 28 year-old factory worker in St. Jerome offered a New York Times reporter a simple explanation: "What's our complaint? I guess the answer is that we're tired of being pushed around, and now, finally, we're pushing back. If we can show them, we're capable of anything."

By the next day 80,000 building trades workers were on strike; Mines at Thetford Mines, Asbestos, and Black Lake were struck; Workers shut down factories all across the province, including 23 at the St. Jerome Industrial Park alone.

The popularity of the strike, and the speed at which it spread without any union organization shows the vital importance of a combative rank and file, the same rank and file that was pushing the union leadership found itself in the driver's seat as the union officials found themselves being 'passed on the left' by a confident and angry working class. At the height of the week-long strike it was estimated that over 300,000 workers were participating.

At FTQ headquarters in Montreal, one top official said that many of the union staff "Had underestimated the base, the rank and file." Even the outspoken president of the FTQ was shocked, "Louis Laberge called from jail saying he was expecting protests but nothing on this scale."

The general strikes were spontaneous and self-organized. For example, the strike at the Thetford mine started when a small group of workers walked off the job. Word spread through the mine and within two hours the strike was total.

In Chibougamau an angry group of women, some of them teachers and hospital workers, marched to one of the mines and pulled their husbands off the job.

At the General Motors plant in Ste. Therese, autoworkers asked a few dozen workers from St. Jerome to set up picket lines at the plant during lunch hour. When they returned they refused to cross the St. Jerome pickets and never went back to work.

Workers seized control of 22 radio stations across the province while forcing the anti-union capitalist newspapers to cease publishing. The battle for control of information was important, and the workers' showed astuteness, creativity and militancy in this fight. As the news from the striking workers spread, so did the strike itself.

Over 300,000 rank and file workers had self-organized the largest general strike in North American history. The revolt was so widespread that the Quebec police knew they could not contain or repress it, and took a position of non-intervention in order not to provoke a decisive clash that they predicted they would lose.

In the end the Government decided to negotiate a truce by releasing the jailed trade unionists and in return the three trade union centres agreed to tell their members to return to work.

However, just because they returned to work doesn't mean that the workers considered themselves defeated. Clement Godbout a Spet-Illes steelworker summed it up, "The future? I see it as all right, because the workers have decided to stop fighting just for more money and have decided to fight for a new society...what kind of new society? Well, I talk the way I do for a reason — I'm a socialist."

La lutte continue

The working class, feeling victorious in forcing the unionists' release, but not enough to provoke a decisive struggle against the forces of the state returned to work ending the general strike, but not forgetting it and the workers' power they had briefly tasted.

The 1972 May revolt was a turning point in the workers' movement, not only in Quebec but one that was felt throughout Canada, that continues to echo to this day.

Quebec workers were the force behind the largest general strike in North America's history, the 1976 Canada wide general strike against wage controls by the federal government. Over 1.2 million workers from across Canada participated in the 1976 general strike putting to rest nationalist claims that workers in Quebec and English Canada could not join forces due to Anglo-chauvinism.

Today the labor movement in Quebec is in a familiar situation. A new (neo)-Liberal government in power is systematically dismantling the social programs, trade union rights, and other gains made by the workers' movement. The Quebec government is only the latest in a series of neo-liberal governments in the past 10 years have ravaged the working class across Canada.

However, the Quebec union movement offers the last best hope for a serious fight-back since the 1996 "days of action" strikes that the Ontario labour and NDP leadership repressed before it could generalize into an Ontario-wide general strike.

If there is hope for an effective fight-back today it will start with rank and file Quebec workers taking control of their union movement and pushing it to general strikes once again.

Things are already moving in this direction, with both the FTQ and CSN discussing the option of an unlimited province-wide general strike and putting the question to their membership in late February 2004.

However, as history has shown us, the real strength of the workers' movement lies not with official calls for action by union leaders, but by a militant, self-organized, and radicalized rank and file.

Fortunately this is not completely absent. In February 2004, workers at an Alluminum-works in Jonquière that was slated for downsizing occupied the plant and ran it at full capacity under workers' control for almost a month.

When we are able to spread the spirit of revolt throughout the working class in Canada and the United States we will have the beginnings of a true revolutionary movement capable of not

only fighting the state and the bosses, but indeed of getting rid of them altogether and replacing it with the new society the workers of Quebec spoke of in '72.

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