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# MAPPING THE CANADIAN LEFT

Sovereignty and Solidarity in the 21st Century

By Andrea Levy and Corvin Russell

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**Editors:** Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
**Address:** 275 Madison Avenue, Suite 2114, New York, NY 10016  
**Email:** info@rosalux-nyc.org; **Phone:** +1 (917) 409-1040

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## Fighting the Powers That Be

Canada has an international reputation for being friendly. Its foreign policy seems to be rooted in cooperation and human rights while social-democratic policies and values reign at home. This reputation may have something to do with the long shadow cast by its decidedly less friendly neighbor to the south, but history reveals a more complicated reality. From its treatment of the First Nations and migrant workers to its addiction to the extraction of natural resources at home and abroad, Canada hasn't always been so friendly for all its inhabitants or for the earth we share.

Stephen Harper's nine long years as prime minister added a new chapter of destruction and suffering to the country's history and marked a notable shift rightward. The election of Justin Trudeau—the boyish and mediagenic scion of Canada's most famous Liberal dynasty—has obscured this passage for many international observers. And while Trudeau does represent a kinder neoliberalism—particularly around issues of gender and sexuality—his recent decision to approve two major pipeline projects leaves little doubt about the extent to which his administration is continuing business-as-usual.

Canadian politics is not, however, limited to Liberals and Tories. At the electoral level, the New Democratic Party (NDP), while not in its best moment, nonetheless represents a social-democratic alternative to centrist and right-wing neoliberal parties while Québec Solidaire is a small yet vibrant pluralist socialist party intent on pushing the framework of what is possible in Québécois politics.

Outside the electoral realm, the Maple Spring student protests of 2012 were among the most prominent recent battles against austerity. And across this vast country, First Nation resistance to extractivism and pipeline construction has become a model and inspiration around the world. Trade unionism, while in decline, retains much greater power than in the US, and brilliant, creative intellectuals still find homes in progressive universities throughout the country.

In this study, Andrea Levy and Corvin Russell, coordinating editors of *Canadian Dimension* magazine—living, respectively, in Montreal and Toronto—explore the terrain of the contemporary Canadian left. Where is it strong, where is it weak? Where do fissures exist in the neoliberal, extractivist state that can be exploited by the left? And crucially, where is there common ground to come together across great geographical and linguistic divides? Indeed, the question of sovereignty for Québec and the First Nations is crucial to understanding the history of Canadian politics and courses through this in-depth examination of the state of the left.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg*  
Co-Directors of New York Office, February 2017

# Mapping the Canadian Left

## Sovereignty and Solidarity in the 21st Century

By Andrea Levy and Corvin Russell

If there is a single theme that has distinguished left politics in Canada and Québec at least since the 1960s, it is the aspiration to national sovereignty. For both the social-democratic and radical left in Québec, the pursuit of social justice is inextricably bound up with national liberation and the creation of a sovereign state emancipated from the colonial chokehold of the Canadian federation. Meanwhile, a considerable part of the left in English Canada for decades similarly conceived the liberation of the Canadian economy and foreign policy from domination by the superpower to the south as the starting point of any viable left project. And today the renewed struggle for self-determination of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and Québec is slowly changing the character of left politics across the country, as the long overdue reckoning with the brutal historic dispossession of the original inhabitants of the places we call Canada and Québec “unsettles” our ways of seeing, putting the concept of settler-colonialism in the centre of much contemporary left analysis and activism.

It is perhaps an irony but not an accident of history that these parallel and sometimes conflicting nationalisms have asserted themselves most forcefully in an era of accelerating capitalist globalization when the real scope of national sovereignty is being progressively narrowed in practice by a wired interdependent world, increasingly far-reaching corporate trade agreements, and a global ecological endgame which calls for strategies that lie beyond the purview of national states.

The colonialism built into the bedrock of the Canadian state has bequeathed deep fractures and wounds which are, naturally, reflected in some of the tropes and tensions of left politics, broadly conceived. Historically, the Canadian social-democratic left has been indifferent at best and hostile at worst to the project and prospect of Québec independence. And while the radical left has been, on the whole, more sympathetic to left nationalism in Québec, dialogue in both cases is impeded by the linguistic divide: there are people on the left in Canada and Québec who literally cannot understand one another.

Even within English Canada, the left is fragmented regionally. In the world’s second-largest country, geography is almost as much an obstacle to communication and unity as ideology. Distances are vast and national face-to-face meetings costly and difficult to arrange. Consequently, there are regional left cultures that often know little about one another. Few people on the left in Nova Scotia are conversant with the composition and activities of the left in British Columbia. The challenges for organizing are enormous.

In addition to the strains attendant on the particularities of Canada as a territorial state are the disputes and divisions more or less common to the left across the global North. There is the conflict, for instance, between an increasingly pallid Third Way social democracy, embodied by the New Democratic Party at the federal and provincial levels, and a small anti-capitalist left that is intellectually vigorous but largely devoid of any political or organizational structure. The type of

inclusive party of the contemporary radical left that has been built in Europe, such as Syriza, Die Linke, or Podemos, has yet to emerge in Canada, although Québec has witnessed the birth of Québec Solidaire on the model of the coalition party, replete with organized tendencies.

The left in Canada and Québec is also marked by the tension between the politics of redistribution, at the heart of the traditional left endeavour in both its reformist and radical guises, and the politics of representation, which animates many of today's progressive movements, from contemporary feminist politics to transgender rights. This disjuncture intersects with a generation gap when it comes to political priorities—particularly within the social movement left and radical left in English Canada—between those who came of age politically before 1980 and those who were politicized after. In the political analysis and practice of the latter cohorts, the structural oppression of marginalized minorities often occupies centre stage, and in particular the issue of structural racism and white privilege. There is a perception, particularly widespread among younger women and activists of colour, that traditional left culture has an unacknowledged, specifically white male bias that creates an inhospitable climate for them. They often see left organizations as environments that reproduce their marginalization, whether it is through ignorance of their issues or neglect of their analysis of those issues; a lack of sensitivity to important differences in collective experience and knowledge; or the resilient belief in class struggle as the primary struggle. This has proved a challenge for some, rooted

in older left traditions, who view the frame of identity as one that elides or downplays class analysis and aligns with liberal-individualist concepts of emancipation. Those who argue for the primacy of class, however, have not always put forward their own productive frameworks for engaging movements organized around race, gender, sexual orientation, and indigeneity, and their lack of sure-footedness in navigating the issues has rendered more traditional left analysis suspect among many young progressives.

If internal divisions were not enough of a challenge to the unity and coherence of progressive forces, a decade of relentless right-wing policy taxed the strength and resources of many left organizations. In the fall of 2015, Canada emerged from ten years of the most reactionary government in the country's modern history, during which time organized labour, social programs, the legislative protections afforded the environment, the practices of representative democracy, and the right of dissent were all under siege. Even science was a target of repression under the Conservative regime of Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Under these circumstances, the left in all its manifestations has primarily fought a rearguard action to protect past gains from the steady incursions of economic neoliberalism and social conservatism. Notwithstanding the rocky ground, the landscape of the left in Canada and Québec has not been arid, however. A number of notable moments, movements, and even parties of opposition have made their mark. This brief survey offers an aerial view of contemporary left struggles, setbacks, and successes.

## **The Parliamentary Scene**

### **The NDP**

Unlike its counterparts in Europe and Aus-

tralia, Canada's social-democratic party has never acceded to power at the federal level, although its provincial wings have formed many



governments since the New Democratic Party (NDP) was founded in 1961. The country's first-past-the-post electoral system, which the NDP traditionally defended until a recent decision to endorse mixed-member proportional representation, at least formally, has helped to ensure the alternation of political rule between Canada's Liberal and Conservative parties, both beholden to big capital and committed, since the 1970s, to its neoliberal agenda. Another reason for the NDP's exclusion from the corridors of power was its apparent terminal unelectability in Québec, due mainly to its historic hostility to nationalist aspirations there, in spite of the "Sherbrooke Declaration," adopted by the party over a decade ago, in which it pledged to recognize a simple majority decision in any eventual Québec referendum on sovereignty. But the NDP was correctly perceived by progressive voters in Québec, a majority of which also support the goal of independence, as viscerally opposed to any rupture of the Canadian federation. Consequently, it seemed condemned to wander in Québec's political wilderness, having won only two seats in the province in the half century from its founding to the 2011 federal election.

The NDP's fortunes took two unlikely turns in the new millennium. In 2011, its centre of gravity shifted overwhelmingly to Québec, where, against all odds, the party succeeded in capturing sixty percent of its seats, becoming the Official Opposition in the House of Commons for the first time in its history. (For an in-depth analysis of the NDP's success in 2011, see Murray Cooke and Dennis Pilon, *Left Turn in Canada? The NDP Breakthrough and the Future of Canadian Politics*, New York: RLS-NYC, 2012.) A constellation of factors aligned to produce that anomalous outcome, including mounting discontent among Québec voters with the Bloc Québécois (a party committed to Québec independence favoured by Québec nationalist voters for decades) and a widespread antipathy to the Harper Conservatives. The wild card of personality

also figured in the mix: in this instance, a singularly uncharismatic Liberal candidate for prime minister in the person of Michael Ignatieff and an affable native Quebecker at the helm of the NDP in the person of Jack Layton, who led the party from 2003 to 2011. (Layton's popularity redoubled when it became known that he was stricken with cancer, and prior to his untimely death in 2011 he yielded the leadership of the party to Thomas Mulcair, another Quebecker.) But the NDP's turnaround in Québec was offset by a stagnant showing in the rest of the country where the party's modest gains in the popular vote translated into only a handful of additional seats.

Although the NDP was certainly viewed by the majority of citizens in Canada and Québec as to the left of the Liberals, that was not the case in the subsequent federal election, when, in an overdose of misconceived electoralism, the party chose to wage the campaign on a platform scarcely distinguishable from the (victorious) Liberals under the leadership of the famously photogenic Justin Trudeau (scion of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Canadian prime minister from the late 1960s to the mid-80s), whose party excels at campaigning vaguely centre-left and governing decidedly centre-right. NDP leader Thomas Mulcair in particular was widely seen by many left critics to have squandered the NDP's first genuine fighting chance of winning power.

This historic defeat at the federal level was offset somewhat by an unpredictable win at the provincial level: the election of an NDP government that same year in Alberta, which had cleaved unwaveringly to Conservative politics for 44 years. But the victory coincided with plummeting oil prices in a province where the economy has long revolved around fossil fuel extraction and export, putting the new government of Rachel Notley in the unenviable position of presiding over the province's inevitable economic downturn.

Over the decades and through all of its electoral ups and downs, the NDP has remained a fairly standard Third Way social-democratic party, steadily shedding whatever remained of its socialist heritage and embracing “neoliberal-lite” policies, including free trade. At the same time, the NDP has grown steadily more remote from its membership base in a process of professionalization that has seen the party rely increasingly on organizers-for-hire and public relations managers taking their cues from opinion polls.

In power at the provincial level, NDP governments have echoed neoliberal nostrums about “fiscal responsibility” and the dangers of deficits; they have presided over cuts to public services and even privatization, as in the case of the Saskatchewan government of Roy Romanow in the 1990s. There have been exceptions, however; notably the Manitoba NDP government of Howard Pawley in the 1980s which bucked the neoliberal trend with its commitment to fighting inequality through state spending. At the federal level, although Jack Layton shepherded the party’s formal renunciation of socialism in the new millennium, along with its historic opposition to Canadian participation in NATO, he also firmly opposed Canadian participation in the war in Iraq, echoing a widely held sentiment that precipitated demonstrations in cities across Canada, and particularly in Québec. The NDP’s traditions and programs, including the persistence of a Socialist Caucus formed in 1988, have continued to demarcate it as the most progressive actor on the Canadian parliamentary scene. This made it all the more difficult for many on the left to swallow when, in 2015, Thomas Mulcair promised that an NDP government would deliver balanced budgets and refrain from raising taxes on the wealthy, even though marginal tax rates on Canada’s elite have declined significantly in the last fifty years, along with corporate tax rates, and in spite of gathering revelations in Canada as elsewhere about the staggering scale of tax avoidance.

Against the grain of these historic trends, which are by no means unique to Canadian social democracy, there have been various bids over the decades to pull, push, and prod the party to the left. The most momentous of these took place in the late 1960s, not even a decade after the NDP’s founding, with the creation by a group of socialist academics of the “Waffle,” a splinter group whose explicitly anti-capitalist and left nationalist platform propounded economic emancipation from US dominance for Canada as well as independence for Québec. Expelled from the party in 1971, with the backing of the trade union movement, the Waffle saw something of a successor in the New Politics Initiative (NPI) that emerged at the turn of the millennium. But whereas the Waffle was explicitly socialist and focused on economic policy, the NPI was rooted in the politics of new social movements and sought to open the NDP up politically and organizationally to gender, sexual orientation, and race-based movements as well as environmental and anti-globalization currents. It envisioned a more inclusive member-based party functioning on principles of participatory democracy and less fixated on election campaigns. Absent a mass social movement to anchor the party on the left, however, the moderating forces of organized labour prevailed, along with electoralist logic, and the NDP continued to chase after votes by seeking to position itself as the champion of the middle class, drifting rightward even under the leadership of the charismatic Jack Layton, who lent the party a fresher, more ecumenical, more urban and urbane cast, but supported the purging of the word “socialism” from the party’s constitution.

The latest effort to pull the NDP to the left is currently underway with the Leap Manifesto, an initiative spearheaded by Montreal-born author Naomi Klein and her Toronto-native husband Avi Lewis, himself an heir to two generations of NDP political leaders. Denounced as wildly radical by the mainstream media, the

Leap Manifesto articulates a broad red-green vision of a shift to renewable energy, liberating the country from dependency on fossil fuels; it calls for a moratorium on pipelines, support for Indigenous rights, opposition to trade agreements that vitiate national and local efforts to regulate the economy, a commitment to preserve public services against the pressures of privatization, and a proposal to entertain the concept of a guaranteed annual income. That the document was intended in part as a provocative invitation to the NDP to leap leftward was evident in the controversial decision to attempt to wrangle an endorsement of the Manifesto by the party's 2016 convention, and even in the very choice of the word "Manifesto," an allusion to the 1933 Regina Manifesto—the program of one of the NDP's original cofounding parties, which called for the abolition of capitalism and the creation of a socialist economy—and also the Waffle's "Manifesto for an Independent Socialist Canada."

Whether the Leap Manifesto will prove the catalyst for left renewal within the NDP that many progressives hope for remains to be seen. While the delegates to the party convention voted to debate the Leap's policy proposals, the Manifesto was quickly and predictably repudiated by the newly elected provincial NDP in Alberta, where any talk of limiting the exploitation of the environmentally catastrophic tar sands elicits the ire of local business elites. The federal NDP's own position on combating climate change has been tepid over the last decade, and the centrepiece of its current plan is a cap-and-trade system.

### **A Distinctive Landmark: The Advent of Québec Solidaire**

For more promising left renewal in the arena of parliamentary politics one has to look to Québec, where the kind of non-sectarian, social-movement based, feminist, environmen-

tally enlightened party envisioned by some left dissenters in the NDP has taken shape in the form of Québec Solidaire (QS), one of the most inspiring developments in left politics in decades. QS evolved gradually in the new millennium, gathering momentum from a defection of supporters of the nearly 50-year old Parti Québécois, the party that had its roots in Québec's Quiet Revolution and that, by the 1990s, was being recognized by a significant fraction of the left as a bourgeois nationalist organization willing to sacrifice the social question in a narrowly conceived quest for political independence. After two failed referendums on sovereignty in the province, the second one defeated by a hair's breadth, the PQ appeared in practice to abandon even that goal to an increasingly undisguised electoralism, which reached its nadir with the brief accession to the party's helm of Pierre Karl Péladeau, a sovereigntist business mogul renowned for his union-busting tactics.

The emergence of Québec Solidaire mirrored the model of other contemporary new left parties in eschewing sectarianism and in gathering some disparate radical currents and organizations – in this instance from the labour movement, the feminist movement, the peace movement, and the anti-globalization movement together with some small social-democratic and radical left parties – around a broadly progressive platform wedding Québec independence to a societal project decidedly to the left of the federal NDP's. It includes free lifelong education, free public transportation, progressive taxation, the extension of social benefits to precarious workers, expanded rights for temporary foreign workers, environmental protection and meaningful targets for greenhouse gas emissions, and so on.

The pivotal moment in the evolution of QS was the merger of the Union des Forces Progressistes, a very small political party formed



from the fusion of a number of far-left parties, led by Amir Khadir, with Option Citoyenne, a feminist movement led by well-known activist Françoise David. Wary of the trap of electoralism, QS was conceived in principle as “a party of the streets and the ballot box,” although in practice fighting elections and parliamentary politics absorbs much of the party’s energies.

While QS is committed to achieving independence for Québec through the democratic process of a constituent assembly, it has so far been unwilling to bow to pressure to join some form of nationalist unity coalition with the Parti Québécois. It has also been critical of the ethnic nationalist and xenophobic tendencies evident, for example, in the campaign by the PQ government of Pauline Maurois to

adopt the Charter of Values, which sought to ban the display of religious symbols by government employees, essentially targeting the various forms of head coverings worn by some Muslim women.

To date, QS has elected only three members of the Assemblée Nationale, Québec’s provincial parliament, but the high-calibre of their interventions in debates has been such that even the mainstream media has accorded them a degree of coverage beyond what the party’s electoral strength might warrant. Province-wide it has not exceeded eight percent of the popular vote, and its support remains concentrated in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Montreal, with little traction to date in other parts of Québec.

## The Terrain of Organized Labour

“The era of combative unionism is over”—with these words, the president of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), the labour federation in Québec most identified with militant trade unionism, summed up the predicament of labour not only in Québec, but in the country as a whole. In English Canada, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) was for decades the largest and most muscular private sector union, having emerged out of the forceful CIO-driven auto strikes of the 1930s in the United States. The CAW ultimately split from its US parent in the 1980s over how to respond to the crisis in the North American auto industry—the Canadians favoured militancy and saw the weakness of the industry as an opportunity to make gains; the Americans thought concessions were the only option. Under their first president, Bob White, the CAW gained a reputation for fearlessness. In every round of bargaining with the “Big Three” auto companies, they struck at least

once. After White’s departure in 1992 the CAW only struck once again against the Big Three in 1996, and eventually embraced concession bargaining. These two unions are not unique: Canada today is in an almost strike-free era of “industrial peace.” Person-days lost to strikes and lock-outs declined by almost 87 percent between 1980 and 2010. Yet peace has punished labour. Rather than making ambitious new demands of capital, Canadian labour has accepted structural concessions and is engaged in a long defensive battle to slow erosion of its institutions and the gains of the past.

The secular decline of the labour movement in Canada and Québec follows the pattern common to the global North under neoliberalism. Attacks on trade unionism are part and parcel of the bid to maximize labour market “flexibility” and transfer a greater share of income from labour to capital. Yet labour’s malaise predates

neoliberalism; its roots lie in the post-war period of the grand compromise between capital and labour. One of the forms this took in Canada was the Rand formula, which required workers in unionized workplaces to pay dues whether they were members of the union or not. At the same time, prohibitive legal penalties on political or wildcat strikes were imposed. Combined with the peak of anti-communism in the 1950s, this ushered in a period of increasingly collaborative industrial relations and the slow demise of labour militancy, virtually ending the political strike as a tactic in labour's toolkit. Although legal strikes continued, their goal was mostly confined to negotiating improved material conditions for union members under capitalism rather than aiming to transcend the status quo with demands for worker ownership and democratic control of workplaces and capital. The post-World War II boom decades across the global North were not destined to last, however.

Already in that golden age, in Canada as elsewhere, capital was moving towards free trade, deregulation, and privatization. Recognizing that liberalization threatened its core bargaining power and the welfare of its members, organized labour proved an intractable obstacle. But having abandoned the political strike and the ambitious demands that could provide an alternative political direction, it had neither the tools nor the vision to challenge the fundamental premises of neoliberal capitalism. A slow defensive struggle against market liberalization ensued. While union density dwindled across the global North, the Canadian and Québec labour movements have experienced slower decline, particularly in comparison to the US. Unionization rates in Canada stand at roughly 28 percent overall, with a very significant disparity between public sector workers, nearly three quarters of whom are unionized, and private sector workers.

In part, the discrepancy between Canada and the US is due to much friendlier legal regimes

in Canada, where collective bargaining obligations continue even if a firm is sold to a new owner. Canadian courts have interpreted constitutional protections of freedom of association much more broadly as protecting collective bargaining rights. In five provinces, including Québec, a secret ballot is not required for union certification; a union is automatically certified once a specified majority of cards have been signed. The legal regime is generally friendliest to unions in Québec, where union density is at 36 percent.

### **Social Unionism**

Unions in both Canada and Québec have tended to be more engaged in social and political struggle than their American cousins. Throughout the early decades of neoliberalism, they played key roles in the defining social struggles of the day. Early on, women trade unionists waged battles inside the unions that eventually led the unions themselves to become champions of women's issues in political life. This also reflected the shifting gender balance within the labour movement, as women gradually came to make up the majority of unionized workers. This contributed to major victories for the women's movement such as reproductive rights and pay equity. Likewise, the sovereignty movement in Québec was reflected in the internal struggles and structures of the labour movement, leading ultimately to binational unionism as a political solution. Trade unions in Québec have themselves played a major role inside the nationalist movement, and there have been close ties since the 1970s between the main union federations and the sovereignist Parti Québécois.

In the battle against free trade, unions were at the forefront of major national and international coalitions such as the Action Canada Network, the Common Front against the WTO, and many provincial and national coalitions to

defend public healthcare, energy, and education. In Québec, for instance, the mobilization against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in 2001 culminated in the organization of an impressive People's Summit in Québec City, bringing together unions, community groups, and environmental organizations. Such coalitions have been more prominent in the political life of Canada and Québec than in the United States (although, of late, labour movement mobilization against new trade deals like the CETA and the TPP has been surprisingly feeble). Unions have also played an important role in educating their members and the public on matters ranging from LGBT rights to Indigenous issues.

Yet coalition politics itself has been declining in Canada, and outside of formal coalitions, where labour has been able to set the agenda to a large degree, relations are often uneasy between unions and major social movements. Historically, centrist social democracy has been hegemonic within both the Canadian Labour Congress and the Fédération des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Québec, which view electoral politics as the primary site of struggle. Organized labour has always been hesitant about supporting social struggles it cannot control. As labour's resources have shrunk because of dues contraction, even small donations to social movement groups have shrivelled, beyond a few left-leaning labour councils and smaller unions. But rhetorical and political support has also been in short supply, as evidenced most dramatically by the near-total lack of engagement with the two genuinely mass social movements of the last decade, the Québec Student Strike of 2012 and Idle No More (see below). In relation to one of the critical issues of our time, climate change and Canada's resource extractivism, the labour movement has been, on the whole, unable to enact a visionary politics of solidarity and industrial transformation to escape the logic of defending existing jobs in oil, gas, and auto. The logic of jobs at any cost has seen Canada's

largest private sector union, Unifor, supporting arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

Nor has this general abandonment of social unionism been offset by success at the bargaining table. Increasingly, in a short-term survival strategy, unions have been ready to accept structural concessions in order to preserve jobs and modest wage gains. Pensions and health care benefits have been reduced across the board. In the auto sector, unions accepted two-tiering of the workforce so that new workers are paid less and have less job security than workers under the old regime. A similar issue was at the core of a major recent labour conflict at Canada Post, the crown corporation that handles postal service and whose future is at risk from the partisans of privatization. In that case, the left-oriented Canadian Union of Postal Workers successfully resisted the proposed two-tiering, leveraging the desire of the post office's government masters to avoid a high-profile strike. Unions have largely lost the battle against contracting out to precarious workers, with the inevitable ratcheting down of pay and benefits, as well as smaller bargaining units, and lower dues revenues, all of which threatens to further delegitimize, shrink, and weaken unions in the future.

Although unions are intensely aware of the downward spiral in overall membership and dues revenues, this has not produced a radical shift in strategy or orientation. Instead, various rearguard shoring-up strategies have been adopted, the most high-profile of which was the 2013 merger of two of the largest private sector unions, the Canadian Auto Workers (which represented workers in auto, aerospace, rail, and a range of services) and the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers (which represented oil, gas, pulp and paper, print and TV media, and telecommunications workers) to form Unifor. Both of these unions were facing huge cost pressures in their core operations

due to declining dues revenues. In Québec, raiding has been a basic zero-sum strategy to address the same pressures.

Many unions have also tried to revive organizing in unorganized sectors, but because these tend to be low wage they do not promise significant dues revenues; further, organizing tends to stop after certification of the new unions and there has been a pattern of poor servicing of such low-wage sectors in comparison to high-wage union members, so it is doubtful that such organizing will form the core of a renewed union movement. In the public sector, socialists have emphasized the need to build solidarity through campaigns for better public services for all. By and large, however, public sector unions tend to engage only in brief pre-bargaining publicity which appears self-serving and has little impact on public attitudes. This has led to disastrous results like the Toronto transit strike of 2008 and the Toronto city workers strike of 2009, which were widely seen as discrediting labour and helping right-wing populist Rob Ford to win the next mayoral election.

The structural challenges to reforming organized labour are daunting. In practice, trade union democracy has weakened and members have little engagement with the running of most unions. At the national and regional levels, unions are top-heavy with very highly paid staff, most of whom could not earn similar wages anywhere else. This creates a powerful disincentive to rocking the boat. Union leadership uses the possibility of staff positions and other privileges as incentives to control activists inside the unions. With the exception of a few militant unions like the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, few labour leaders come out of radical traditions and few articulate a political vision beyond supporting the electoral machines of the New Democratic Party (or in Québec, the Parti Québécois). When unions have moved away from supporting so-

cial-democratic parties, as with the Canadian Auto Workers in 2006, it has been to support the Liberal party, which in spite of its neoliberal agenda remains socially enlightened relative to the Conservatives, and is sometimes considered the “only alternative” to that avowedly right-wing party on strategic grounds. In the absence of mass left organizations outside the labour movement, left-wing labour militancy has all but disappeared as an organized force.

In the wake of a global financial crisis, never-ending cuts to public services, and relentless attacks on organized labour by the Harper government, the union movement might have been expected to mobilize against austerity on a large scale. However, while trade unions in both Québec and Ontario have been involved in anti-austerity coalitions, these have failed to gain a critical mass, with the possible exception of the Coalition main rouge, an alliance of unions and anti-poverty groups formed in 2009 to combat privatization of public services and the imposition of user fees, and the short-lived Québec general strike of 2015, the largest since the 1972 Common Front.

In short, the labour movement has failed to respond strategically to a fundamental crisis of secular decline. What has been missing until now is a sense that there comes a point when the institutions of labour must be risked if they are to be strengthened. A desire to preserve everything that labour has won in the past is leading to ever deeper losses in the future. Yet for the moment, in the absence of a broader organized left inside and outside organized labour that is capable of developing alternative visions and strategies, and pressuring the union movement from within, it is not clear where a fundamental shift in vision, strategy, and direction will come from.

There are signs of discontent among the rank and file that could augur a change of course. As of this writing, the Oakville, Ontario local of

Unifor representing workers at Ford's Oakville plant is engaged in an unprecedented fight with the national union over resistance to two-tiering in the workforce, with the local wanting an aggressive rollback of previous concessions. Canadian auto workers have traditionally practised pattern bargaining, choosing the most vulnerable of the big three automakers as the first strike target to set the pattern; in this round, the national union chose GM, the toughest target, as part of a strategy to undermine the more militant Oakville local. The Oakville local has threatened to break the pattern agreement

for the first time in the history of the union; if they strike, it will effectively be a strike against both the company and the national union. In Québec, the creation of Profs Contre la Hausse (professors against the tuition fee hikes) was also an interesting development, insofar as the network was formed by college and university teachers outside their union structures in order to actively support the 2012 student strike toward which the union movement in Québec had taken an ambivalent stance. But encouraging as such bottom-up initiatives are, they remain few and far between.

## Shifting Ground: Social Movements

### Indigenous Resistance

Perhaps the most significant emancipatory social movement to have arisen in Canada in the last half century is one that neither grew out of nor explicitly identifies with left politics. Yet the movement of Indigenous Peoples seeking justice, meaningful control of their land, and self-determination is currently the movement with the greatest anti-capitalist potential. While some of the leadership of Indigenous communities, largely dependent on state funding, is willing to strike bargains with extractivist industries to foster economic development even at the expense of preserving and protecting Indigenous lands, there are also powerful currents opposed to ecologically unsound and socially destructive development which seek to preserve traditional economies that remain at least partly outside the all-consuming capitalist economy. Even the partial fulfilment of the goals of Indigenous sovereignty movements would demand a dramatic reorientation of the Canadian state, demoting private interests, incorporating ecological values as fundamental and enshrining a principle of popular control of resources for the common good.

This challenge to the Canadian state helps to account for the refusal by successive governments to effectively recognize Indigenous title and rights. In 2007, when the United Nations finally adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), enshrining the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination and to free, prior, and informed consent in all decisions affecting their status – including decisions about economic use of their traditional lands – Canada was one of only four states to vote against it.

In some ways, Canada's opposition to UNDRIP under the previous Conservative government of Stephen Harper represents a high-water mark in the hostility of the Canadian state towards the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Harper's mentor Tom Flanagan wrote a book about the need to abolish Aboriginal collective rights and replace them with fee-simple property rights. Flanagan argued openly for an assimilation agenda that the Canadian state had in any case been implementing covertly for decades.

For Indigenous Peoples in Canada, who make up just over four percent of the population,



the vote against the Declaration was bitterly disappointing, but not surprising. The central flashpoint between the Canadian state and Indigenous Peoples has always been control of the land. A regime of Indigenous Rights that entrenches the right to say no to development, as UNDRIP does, challenges the economic model that has underpinned the Canadian state and economy since Confederation in 1867: an economy of intensive resource extraction that is today dominated by oil, mining, and forestry companies. In order to facilitate these activities in the face of Indigenous Peoples' continued presence on their homelands, Canada has developed a refined and bureaucratic variety of brutal colonialism. Adept at mouthing respect for the traditions and rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Canadian state's actions belie its conciliatory rhetoric.

While Canada as a whole consistently ranks in the top 10 of the UN Human Development Index, the reality for status Indians<sup>1</sup> living on reserve in Canada, who comprise nearly half of Canada's Indigenous Peoples, is one of crushing poverty and poor health. In a country with seven percent of the world's renewable fresh water, 150 First Nations are subject to boil water advisories on any given day because of unsafe drinking water. Cut off from access to a healthy traditional diet, and also cut off from benefits of the cash economy profiting from their land, First Nations have become dependent on out-

side food imports to survive, yet despite poverty on reserve, food can cost up to five times what it does in the city. Poor diet-related illnesses like diabetes are at epidemic levels among Canada's Indigenous populations. Housing on-reserve is in constant short supply, and generally of poor quality, suffering from mould and other issues.

Many Indigenous Canadians have migrated out of their home communities, mostly to cities, of necessity more often than choice. Here too, poverty, high unemployment, and housing shortages are the norm, as well as intense racism, especially in the smaller cities of the Prairies and the mid-north.

A history of violent colonialism, racism, and dim prospects in the dominant economy, as well as alienation from traditional culture, have given rise to widespread substance abuse issues on reserve, along with higher rates of HIV transmission. The incarceration rate of Indigenous adults in Canada is ten times higher than non-Indigenous Canadians. Indigenous women in Canada are at much greater risk than non-Indigenous women of being murdered.

One response to crises in Indian Country has been the repeated creation of wide-ranging commissions of inquiry. The most recent example was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created in 2006 as part of a settlement between the government and victims of the residential schools system. For over a century, Indigenous children had been forcibly removed from their families and boarded in religious schools far from home, barred from speaking their language or practicing their customs, and very often severely abused. Many children died in residential schools. Ironically, the settlement process itself was launched in part because of a previous commission, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the largest such undertaking in Canadian history, whose radical recommendations in its sweeping 1996 report were otherwise entirely ignored. The

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1 Indigenous Peoples in Canada have historically been divided into three categories: Indians; Métis, who are of mixed Indian and European ancestry with their own distinct traditions and culture; and Inuit, the non-Indian Indigenous Peoples of the Canadian arctic (formerly known as Eskimos—a name which the Inuit reject as derogatory). Indians are now normally referred to as "First Nations" in Canada; and in government and legal language, "Aboriginal" refers to Indians, Inuit, and Métis collectively. Today the words "Indian" and "Native" are generally deprecated by Indigenous activists in favour of the specific names used by Indigenous Peoples for themselves, or the word "Indigenous" as a catch-all political term. However, "Indian" continues to have specific legal, historical, and cultural meanings that make it unavoidable.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in turn, reached largely the same conclusions as its predecessor, and summarized the whole rationale of Canada's Indigenous Policies with the sentence: "The Canadian government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources."

Indigenous poverty is not the accidental by-product of government policies; it is one of the central pressure tactics adopted by the Canadian state since Confederation to corral Indians into assimilation, as unearthed policy memos of decades past make explicit. It is not that the money is not there: governments collect royalties from extraction of resources, largely from territories to which Indigenous Peoples have a territorial claim, totaling about \$26 billion per year (all amounts in Canadian dollars); yet the total federal budget for Indians is less than half of that annually. Corporations extract vastly more in profits.

The Ojibwe community of Attawapiskat in northern Ontario serves as an example. Since 2008, De Beers has operated a diamond mine on its territory. The mine earns De Beers \$400 million annually; it has paid the province \$40 million so far in royalties, and expects to pay tens of millions more; but it pays Attawapiskat First Nation \$2 million a year. The reserve, meanwhile, is plagued by unsanitary and squalid living conditions.

To protest against the ongoing neglect of her community's urgent social needs while an international mining giant extracts riches from their land, Attawapiskat's Chief Theresa Spence launched a high profile hunger strike in Ottawa in the winter of 2012. This served as one of the catalysts for Idle No More, an Indigenous social movement that spread like prairie fire in late 2012. Idle No More began in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta, largely

led by urban-based Indigenous women. Fuelled by anger over legislation passed by the Harper government in 2011 aimed at gutting environmental protection, and kindled by resentment for rights aggressively infringed and grievances long ignored, protests sprang up all over Canada, on reserves and rural highways, but crucially also in cities, including everyday venues like shopping malls and downtown shopping districts where protest is unusual.

This has been unsettling in a deep sense of that word, reasserting and reinserting the ancient presence of Indigenous Peoples across this land. "Nation-to-nation," the spirit of coexistence and respect that has undergirded Indigenous Peoples' understanding of treaties since the Two Row Wampum Treaty of 1613, became the dominant slogan of the movement. At the same time, Idle No More advanced a systemic analysis that connected the dots between the problems of poverty, alienation from the land, destruction of Indigenous economies and governance systems, addiction and despair, male violence, police brutality, criminalization and incarceration, and racist indifference to Indigenous people.

As the movement has inevitably contracted and consolidated, Idle No More has developed on a decentralized model, with both a national media and organizing apparatus, and decentralized, autonomous chapters across Canada and beyond.

Specific social developments facilitated the resurgence of mass Indigenous resistance in Canada. For one, the inadequacy of established First Nations organizations collided with a generation of young urban Indigenous people adept at navigating the dominant cultures and a growing assertiveness of university-educated Indigenous professionals and intellectuals who still maintain ties to their home communities and play a vital networking and advocacy role. Another crucial factor is the spread of social media in Indian country. While many remote

communities still do not have safe drinking water, food security, adequate housing or adequate medical services, the government has hooked even remote communities up to high speed internet.

One unintended consequence of this has been that communities previously isolated from each other since the demise of the old canoe routes, who otherwise can only visit neighbouring communities easily during the brief winter road season, are now connected across the country. This has resulted in strong online networks supporting political and social consciousness. Finally, the base of support for Indigenous rights among non-Indigenous communities, which includes but is not limited to the political left, has expanded in recent decades owing to growing awareness of the history of colonialism, and a general shift in perception such that many urban non-Natives no longer view their economic interests as at odds with the claims of Indigenous Peoples.

While Idle No More has been the largest and most visible movement of Indigenous self-defence, it has not been the sole expression of resistance. The new activism exists alongside older modes of resistance, especially reliance on the courts. For decades the principal site of struggle for Indigenous Peoples seeking to defend their traditional rights was the legal system. In 1982, Aboriginal and Treaty rights were enshrined in the Canadian constitution after determined pressure by First Nations. While the interpretation of that guarantee has been hotly disputed, First Nations have won many important partial victories recognizing their rights in the courts. Those contests continue, but they are now coupled with grassroots protests and direct action.

Nor is the new cycle of struggle all of a piece. For instance, the Indigenous Nationhood Movement, a network of academics and artists, many associated with the Indigenous Governance program led by Taiaiake Alfred at the Univer-

sity of Victoria, self-consciously distinguished itself from Idle No More by promoting an uncompromising sovereigntist line that has been influential in intellectual circles. Defenders of the Land emerged in 2008 in the wake of an unprecedented meeting of grassroots, rural First Nations land defenders from across the country. It has played a crucial role in developing and disseminating a critical analysis of the government's heavily coded land policies. In its early years it organized an influential yearly series of week-long educational events in cities across Canada, bringing together Native and non-Native activists and audiences and showcasing Indigenous expertise on a wide range of social and political issues.

The issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women, who now number in the thousands, has also been the focus of mounting protest since the 1990s. Organized by a range of grassroots groups including relatives of missing women, and by Indigenous women's advocacy groups that have developed outside the male-dominated chiefs' organizations, this movement has successfully brought to public attention the ongoing violence against Indigenous women.

Despite these gathering winds of Indigenous struggle, the movements have remained largely unsuccessful in forcing systemic change. Even at its height, Idle No More was unable to reverse the repeal of environmental protections that had spurred it to action, although it did play a vital role in stopping a pernicious bill reforming First Nations' education. For isolated communities fighting for land rights in conditions of government-induced poverty, the odds are staggering. Battles to determine what happens on Indigenous territories regularly erupt into blockades and other challenges to the state, but rarely spread beyond the local level.

The traditional institutions and cultures of the left, meanwhile, have found themselves largely outside, and irrelevant to, these developments,

partly owing to a historic record of problematic relations. With a few exceptions, those on the radical left have come late to recognizing settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance to it as fundamental to the nature of the capitalist state in Canada. Until recently, too large a part of the social-democratic left partook of dominant liberal capitalist attitudes to Indigenous struggles, participating in the “disappearing Indian” myth. It is unsurprising therefore that with few exceptions, such as the late Rodney Bobiwash, notable Indigenous leaders in Canada have not aligned themselves overtly with the anti-capitalist left.

The current moment in Indigenous organizing looks to be one of demobilization. Not only chiefs’ organizations but even many Indigenous activists greeted the election of Justin Trudeau with expectant optimism. Inevitably, the hopes have already been disappointed as Trudeau has hastened to reassure capital by sending a clear signal on Indian policy: one of his first acts was to appoint as Clerk of the Privy Council a bureaucrat who had overseen Canada’s plan to terminate Indigenous nations, strip them of title and Indian status, and turn them into municipalities one by one. Trudeau has also used Canada’s first Indigenous justice minister, Jody Wilson-Raybould, whose previous career was a long record of collaboration with government, to deliver the message to chiefs that it is not realistic—no matter what the government promised—to expect implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Canadian colonialism will continue to fester as an unhealed wound in Canadian society, and thus remain a burning political question, so long as a just solution based on respect for Aboriginal title and rights is not achieved. Now that there exist effective national networks and a burgeoning political consciousness among Indigenous people both in Indian country and in the city, as well as a broad base of support, the challenge will be to create a movement capable of sustained and strategic action. At the same

time, the challenge for the left remains to remedy its ignorance and demonstrate that it can practice a useful and informed solidarity with Indigenous struggles.

## **No Pasarán: Protesting Pipelines**

The resurgence of Indigenous resistance across the country has intersected in the last few years with germinating protest in non-Indigenous communities throughout Canada and Québec against pipelines and other corporate-driven energy development projects, which are supported, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by all three of Canada’s political parties as the building blocks of a longstanding internal extractivist economic strategy that is at loggerheads with Indigenous rights and sovereignty.

As both federal and provincial governments have failed to consult in good faith with First Nations on plans for pipelines, hydraulic fracturation, oil exploration, and dams destructive to their lands (Keystone XL, Northern Gateway, TransMountain, Energy East, the Site C dam, and the Pacific Northwest LNG terminal, to name a few), a number of Indigenous communities have added direct action to the legal battles they are waging in defence of their traditional territories. The extractivist projects are also lightning rods for environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, for climate justice advocates, and for local communities who fear the environmental damage to land and water that such projects invariably beget. A mutual stake in opposing these projects, as well as gestures of genuine political solidarity on the part of some Anglo-Canadian and Québec activists with Indigenous rights and claims, has given rise to some tentative but promising alliances, including civil disobedience—what Naomi Klein dubs “blockadia.”

Of course, Indigenous peoples are by no means monolithic in their opposition to such projects,

which are seen by some Indigenous leaders as the price to be paid for a share, albeit unequal, in what passes as economic development in Canada, and so the landscape of pipeline protest is uneven within Indian country just as it is outside. There are even divisions within First Nations. But there are also many encouraging examples of First Nation-settler solidarity and cooperation in the fight against ill-conceived fossil fuel extraction, such as the support in New Brunswick and throughout Canada for the Elsipogtog First Nation's resistance to a shale gas exploration project, which culminated in a blockade to prevent seismic testing.

Even prior to that, a province-wide movement against shale gas development had gained momentum in Québec, scoring a real victory in 2011 when the Parti Québécois government introduced a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing (lifted by the Liberal government in December 2016). Opposition to pipelines has also galvanized in Québec, where the dangers of oil transportation were driven home by the rail disaster in Lac-Mégantic in the province's Eastern Townships—an avoidable accident that left 47 people dead and tragically amplified the message of *Coulez pas chez nous!* (No spills on our turf!), an organization dedicated to building awareness of the risks to people and ecosystems associated with the movement of petroleum products.

The opposition has intensified with the announcement of the Energy East project, the largest pipeline project to date, that aims to bring bitumen from the Alberta tar sands thousands of kilometres across the country, snaking through parts of Ontario and Québec to arrive at refineries in eastern Canada and ultimately at a marine terminal in New Brunswick, from whence the bulk of it would be shipped by sea to international markets. The plan has aroused the ire of many in eastern Canada, from municipal mayors to the Mohawk nations whose lands lie on the projected route.

Most of the proposed pipelines—and also the broadest and most successful pipeline resistance to date—have been in British Columbia, where the Northern Gateway, a major new oil pipeline from Alberta to Prince Rupert, and a threefold expansion of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline from Alberta to the Vancouver area, have both met with fierce opposition from First Nations and environmentalists. Both pipelines aim to bring tar sands oil to deep water to fetch international prices for the resource. A raft of liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipelines proposed for northern BC, including the 462 km Pacific Trails pipeline, are supported by the provincial government and have met with less broad-based resistance, however, they are fiercely opposed by grassroots Indigenous activists on whose territory they will run.

While the social-democratic left has been predictably tepid in its opposition to resource extraction projects, the anti-extractivist movement, which is objectively a radical movement insofar as it threatens the life blood of the Canadian capitalist economy, has mobilized support from intellectuals, celebrities, and ordinary citizens, as evidenced by initiatives such as Québec's *Élan Global* manifesto and the Leap Manifesto mentioned earlier, both of which envision collective emancipation from fossil fuels. Among Canadians and Quebecers this attests not only to legitimate fear of the real and immediate risks of environmentally devastating accidents associated with pipelines and fracking, but also to a growing awareness of the dire implications of climate change for people and planet, as well as recognition of the exorbitant price paid by Indigenous peoples for dirty energy projects.

### **Solidarity across Borders**

Pipelines have also been the focus of some promising cross-border organizing efforts. The



Keystone XL Pipeline, which would have delivered Alberta tar sands oil to refineries and deep water in Texas, was contested by First Nations and Native American tribal groups, as well as ranchers and environmental activists in both Canada and the United States. The concerted opposition finally induced the Obama administration to deny approval for the final phase of the pipeline in November of 2015. Most recently, the Dakota Access Pipeline, which would transport crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois, has become a major site of struggle, with the largest Native American direct action in defense of traditional territorial rights in decades, and a large continent-wide movement in support, including First Nations in Canada.

Arguably this new era of cross-border struggle opened in 2011, with the Occupy movement. Indeed it was a Canadian publication—the slick culture-jamming magazine *Adbusters*—that in July 2011 launched the call to occupy Wall Street. (For an in-depth analysis of this movement, see Ethan Earle, *A Brief History of Occupy Wall Street*, New York: RLS-NYC, 2012.) The peaceable protest that began in Zuccotti Park in New York reverberated across the global North, including Canada and Québec, exerting a powerful influence on political discourse, with its slogan “we are the 99%” and bringing explicit talk of class, income inequality, and the need for systemic change and solidarity into the frame of mainstream politics for the first time in decades. While the nature of the Canadian banking system cushioned the country from the worst economic consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, Canada was not immune from the recessionary effects of the crisis, and the longer term trends towards spiralling inequality of wealth and income have been plainly in evidence here, confirmed by a number of reports showing Canada to have had one of the highest rates of growth in income disparity in the OECD over the three decades from the early 1980s to the late 2000s. The themes of Occupy thus resonated particularly among young people in Canada.

Encampments sprang up in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal: thousands of people set up tents in the downtown core, replicating the slogans of Occupy Wall Street. The political culture also replicated itself, in part disseminated by internet video, media reporting, and activist visits to New York: assemblies with consensus decision-making, an open speaking platform, and iconic cultural tropes like the people’s microphone. In Canada and Québec the occupations were largely the enterprise of experienced anarchist-leaning activists; they received some material support from the union movement, at least in Toronto. Unlike New York, the Occupy movements in Canada tended also to focus on Indigenous solidarity and environmental concerns, although these were sources of tension in the assemblies. Eventually, the occupations were broken up by city authorities. Assemblies continued for a time, but the completely open process led to grueling meetings, and the best organizers drifted away. Unlike the US experience, where Occupy continued to reinvent itself through Occupy Sandy and other creative organizational ventures, the Occupy movements in Canada, while they had an impact on political discourse, appear to have left few traces.

More recently, the Black Lives Matter movement, which arose in 2013 to mobilize against indiscriminate police shootings of Black men in the United States, has spread to Canada, and particularly Toronto, where a similar pattern of police targeting of young Black men has gone unchecked. (Elsewhere in Canada, Indigenous men and women bear the brunt of racist policing.)

Migrant justice struggles in Canada have also found inspiration in the US, where there is a longer history of migrant justice organizing, particularly among farm workers. In Canada, which has so far refused to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, migrant workers comprise a steadily rising proportion of the workforce under such labour

import mechanisms as the Temporary Foreign Worker program. Working conditions are typically harsh and migrant workers have virtually no legal protections for their rights; they can be shipped home at the first sign of trouble.

There have been long-running grassroots organizing efforts among migrant workers, like *Migrante* in British Columbia, *Justicia* in Ontario, and the Immigrant Workers' Centre in Québec; they occasionally receive support from organized labour. Unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers have also sponsored their own organizing efforts among migrant workers. At the same time, over the last 15 years migrant justice groups have sprung up in urban centres under the banner of "No One Is Illegal," inspired by the 1990s German migrant solidarity slogan, "*Kein Mensch ist illegal*," and influenced by a younger, more radical migrant justice politics in the US. While promoting a radical vision of open borders, these groups, made up mostly of urban middle class people of colour, have tended to be most effective when pushing for more reformist demands, like "don't ask, don't tell" policies for undocumented people accessing public services, or an end to indefinite immigration detention.

Also in the realm of labour rights, the "Fight for 15" has gained momentum north of the US border. On the model of a campaign that began in the US, the labour movement launched a national drive in 2015 for a \$15 minimum wage, which recently scored a victory in Alberta. The Québec unions and Québec Solidaire have also joined the Fight for \$15, making this a rare cross-country campaign.

### **Women: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back**

By the standards of the global North, the ongoing struggle for the equality of women in Can-

ada and Québec has made uneven progress since the 1990s, when Canada led the world in gender equality. Into the new millennium, however, the country could no longer boast such an enviable status, even within the OECD, in matters of pay equity, violence against women, female poverty, or political representation. In 2015 Canada ranked 23rd on the UN's Gender Inequality Index. The Harper decade helped set the clock back some: the cause of women's rights was stymied by the Conservative government's selective austerity agenda, which encompassed quite a massive defunding of dozens of women's advocacy organizations. It suffered too from the government's stubborn refusal to address the endemic problem of violence against Indigenous women, and the fight for gender equality took another blow with the government's deliberate effort to scuttle the foundations and forestall the creation of a national child care program, an objective that has united feminists from the left and the labour movement with liberal women's rights activists since the 1960s.

In this area, the women's movement in English Canada has looked with justified envy to the Québec model of affordable daycare established by the Parti Québécois government in 1997. That universally subsidized non-profit daycare program, which was launched with a \$5-a-day flat fee, was a signal achievement for Québec's feminist movement—the cornerstone of which is the half-century old *Fédération des femmes de Québec*—as well as for anti-poverty groups. The program has unfortunately been among the many victims of the ongoing neoliberal assault on public services by successive provincial Liberal governments, which have raised per-diem rates, promoted for-profit daycare providers, and replaced universality with a sliding scale based on income. Nevertheless, daycare remains more accessible in Québec than in the rest of Canada, where it is out of reach for working class and precariously employed women and families.

There is one area in which the women's movement in Canada and Québec achieved a tremendous victory that has thus far proven unassailable: abortion rights. In 1988, after years of legal and political struggle, Canada's Supreme Court struck down the section of the criminal code dealing with abortion on the grounds that it violated the right of women to "life, liberty and security of person" under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Canada remains one of very few countries in the world where the voluntary termination of pregnancy is not regulated by law.

A complex battle against paternalist restrictions on abortion culminated in this win for women's never-ending fight for unrestricted control of their own bodies. The battle was spearheaded by abortion doctor Henry Morgentaler, and the pro-choice activists in the Canadian Association for the Repeal of the Abortion Law (later the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League), and its first victories were scored in Montreal, Québec, where Morgentaler, who operated an abortion clinic there, was tried and acquitted three separate times between 1973 to 1975 in an astonishing pattern of jury nullification – particularly in a province that had only recently albeit definitively emancipated itself from the repressive authority of the Catholic Church. In 1976 the newly elected Parti Québécois government announced that it would decline to prosecute Morgentaler. The struggle persisted for the next 12 years, with the axis shifting to Ontario but mobilizing women across the country.

Since the historic Supreme Court ruling there have been some forty bills and motions put forward by (predominantly male) politicians aimed in one fashion or another at recriminalizing abortion, but they have run aground on a reef of public support for abortion rights that renders outright attacks on a woman's right to choose politically explosive. The pro-choice movement remains vigilant, however. And al-

though abortion is legally unrestricted, access is uneven in practice and remains an issue of contention.

### **Red Squares, Maple Spring: the Québec Student Strike**

Of the many youth-led social movements to spark the radical imagination in the new millennium, from the Indignados to Occupy Wall Street, the Québec student strike of 2012 stands out as one of the most auspicious developments on the North American continent. If the spirit of combative labour unionism has ebbed, that of combative student unionism surged in Québec, at least for a time, providing an instructive example of the power of collective action. The Québec student movement mobilized roughly three-quarters of college and university students and staged some of the largest demonstrations in Canadian history; it resisted severe and mounting repression replete with police brutality and a special law restricting freedom of assembly and expression; and it spurred an outpouring of popular support that precipitated the fall of a government.

Arising in response to a plan to jack up university tuition fees by 75 percent over five years, Québec's *Printemps érable* (Maple Spring), as the period of protest was dubbed, did not erupt *ex nihilo*. Education in Canada is a provincial jurisdiction and Québec university students have a decades-long tradition of militant resistance to tuition fee increases that has been pivotal in maintaining accessibility of higher education in the province in a country where average undergraduate tuition fees are now among the highest in the OECD, despite Canada's predominantly public university system. In Québec, average tuition fees have roughly tripled in the last 30-odd years, from a sum in the neighbourhood of \$900 in the 1990s to more than \$2800 today. The determination to ensure affordable secular French-language ed-

education can be traced back to the 1960s' Quiet Revolution, with its quest by the Québécois for control of their own economic and social affairs and revolt against the Church's iron grip on education.

Although focusing on the immediate issue of tuition fee increases, the striking students, led by a common front of student associations, deliberately drew the connection between the attack on access to education and the neoliberal assault on public services more generally, as encapsulated in the slogan "*La grève est étudiante, la lutte est populaire*" (student strike, people's struggle). The young intellectuals of the movement, including Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the spokesperson for the most radical of the student associations, the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSÉ), and then for the coalition of groups that formed to wage the strike, also publicized a critique of the increasing corporatization of higher education and put forward arguments for free education as a long-term goal.

While organized labour disappointed the students with its relatively flaccid support for the protest, quelling hopes of a "social strike" against austerity, the student movement got an unexpected boost from a spontaneous and sustained show of solidarity from a segment of the citizenry in Montréal as people gathered night after night in many neighbourhoods for "casse-rolé" demonstrations, banging pots and pans up and down the street in defiance of an emergency law which required demonstrators to give the police advance notice of their trajectory. In spite of this encouragement, majority public opinion in Québec, shaped by a mainstream media overwhelmingly hostile to the students, supported both the tuition fee hikes and the government's repressive legislation. Hoping to capitalize on that disapproval, the provincial Liberal government called an early election five months into the seven-month long strike. It miscalculated its popularity, losing to the Parti

Québécois (which was seen as more sympathetic to the students), only to be re-elected six months later with a new leader and an unprecedentedly vicious austerity agenda.

The Québec student strike resonated with progressive students throughout the global North, as evidenced by the propagation from Paris to Cleveland of the movement's iconic little red square, said to symbolize the tuition hikes that put students "squarely in the red." Closer to home, however, the spirit of resistance disappointingly failed to spread to English Canada, even though tuition fees are substantially higher there than in Québec and in spite of the prevailing neoliberal policies making life difficult for youth all over the country, with the proliferation of precarious work and levels of youth unemployment nearly two and a half times higher than the adult rate.

A new political generation was forged in Québec in 2012 in the crucible of neoliberalism, auguring well for the renewal of the Québec left, notwithstanding the waning of the cycle of protest for the time being. However, while the student resistance there elicited interest and some expressions of solidarity among students in the rest of Canada, to date at least, it has failed to inspire any major upswing in activism.

## **Allyship**

Meanwhile, in English Canada, since the decline of the anti-globalization movement, youth radicalism on campuses has primarily found expression in Palestinian solidarity and migrant justice struggles, Indigenous solidarity, environmental justice organizing, and most recently, Black Lives Matter. Within the universities, the development of critical politics by young people is most often the result of exposure to feminism, critical race, queer theory, post-colonial studies, and Indigenous and settler-colonial studies.

The reflex of these developments in student activist practice has been the creation of identity-centred political groupings and the development of a culture of “allyship,” whereby relatively privileged individuals and groups endeavour to support the actions and objectives of oppressed minorities. For several decades now, anti-oppression training to raise consciousness of privilege and the oppressive behaviours and attitudes associated with it has been a distinguishing feature of many activist groups in English Canada, as well as certain non-profit organizations. Because such training by its nature focuses on individual behaviour and taking personal responsibility for systemic issues, it has been amenable to liberal cooptation and is now even offered by

corporations, although usually relabeled as “diversity training.”

Inside the social movement left, allyship has assumed particular importance in relation to Indigenous struggles. Virtually all left groups now articulate an explicit anti-colonial politics of solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, including those who organize on other issues - even when this may seem in tension with a group’s core politics, as with the case of the migrant justice group No One Is Illegal, which calls for open borders while also supporting Indigenous sovereignty as part of its core practice. The culture of support for Indigenous sovereignty has been particularly strong among young leftists with an anarchist bent.

## Cultivating Critical Thinking

While investigations into the state of media concentration in Canada are something of a national pastime, the ensuing handwringing and recommendations have done nothing to stem the steady pace of concentration of ownership over the last sixty years. Canada now has the dubious distinction of having one of the highest levels of media consolidation among G8 countries, with predictable results for the range of political opinion represented in the press and broadcast media. To underscore just one unwelcome development, labour reporters went the way of the dodo well before mainstream newspapers began shedding journalistic staff en masse. That the country’s newspapers overwhelmingly endorsed the Harper government in the last two federal elections is a crude indication.

Of national newspapers, only the *Toronto Star* (founded in 1892 by striking printers and journalists and currently Canada’s largest daily) regularly offers a liberal and occasionally left-

of-centre perspective, providing a broad platform in recent decades for several columnists who could be counted on to challenge the status quo such as Linda McQuaig and Thomas Walkom. In Québec, the long history of critical journalism at *Le Devoir*, the province’s only independent daily, is far less in evidence today. The same is true for the CBC, the country’s eighty-year old public radio and TV broadcaster, and its French-language counterpart Radio Canada. Originally established thanks to pressures from below in the form of the 1930s Canadian Radio League, which lobbied for the creation of a public broadcaster autonomous from the market and un beholden to US commercial interests, the CBC, which was once dependable for a measure of liberal commentary and programming, has suffered increasingly crippling cuts in the last forty years, especially at the hands of Conservative governments, that have sapped its strength and rendered it more pliant to power.



Faced with a paucity of progressive sources of news and information, the left in Canada and Québec continues to create and support a variety of publications, publishing houses and research institutes, operating in English and French, which nourish and promote a critical outlook on national and international affairs, a task that has been facilitated in the last few decades by the Web and social media.

A few of these are sufficiently established to qualify as institutions of the Canadian left: the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), for example, which conducts a wide range of social, economic, and environmental policy studies on everything from trade agreements to taxation, education to healthcare, precarious employment to pipelines. The think tank also produces an alternative federal budget each year as an exercise to demonstrate the possibilities of an economy governed by principles other than private profit. The CCPA has a counterpart in Québec, the Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques (IRIS), founded in 2000 and staffed by a group of young social scientists who, like the CCPA scholars, seek to lay bare the ideological underpinnings of federal and provincial neoliberal policy orientations for a wide audience. The University of Alberta-based Parkland Institute is another research centre with a broadly left approach to regional and national questions pertaining to democracy and social and economic justice.

Of the dozens of English-language left-wing magazines, among the most notable are *Canadian Dimension* (CD) and *Briarpatch*, both based in the Prairie Provinces. Founded in 1963 as a voice of the 1960s New Left, CD has gone on through the decades to deliver radical left analysis and commentary on every issue of relevance to the left in Canada. While explicitly anti-capitalist, the magazine remains independent of any party line or theoretical orientation. CD's junior by a decade, *Briarpatch* is likewise a radical and nonsectarian periodical with a younger

and more diverse editorial board, stable of contributors, and readership.

These publications provide critical analysis of specifically Canadian developments almost entirely absent from the mainstream media. And the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed the creation of a variety of other left periodicals aimed at an educated lay public, some of which endure, such as *This Magazine* (founded in 1966), which offers a progressive perspective particularly on arts and culture, and *The Dominion* (founded in 2003), published by a network of progressive local media co-operatives, and others that have folded, like the broadly anarchist *Our Generation* (1961-1994). In spite of a successful track record of producing intelligent, inspiring, and provocative content, often under difficult conditions, English-language left print publications taken together probably cannot boast a circulation surpassing tens of thousands of readers. The advent of the internet, however, has allowed for the launch of a number of exclusively online free-access magazines which have vastly greater reach and the ability to report on issues and engage debate in a much more timely fashion: these include *Rabble*, the British Columbia-based *The Tyee*, and the newly founded *Ricochet*, as well as more theoretically oriented print and digital offerings, such as the journal *Upping the Anti* and the Socialist Project website, home to the electronic bulletin *The Bulletin* and the growing collection of video presentations under the rubric *Left Streamed*.

Notwithstanding the relatively high rate of unionization in Canada and Québec, there is no labour press, only a variety of trade union newsletters. Consequently, save for major stories the day-to-day news of the labour movement goes largely unreported and un-commented. Two independent labour left publications endeavour to fill the gap in English: *Our Times* and the more recent *Rank and File*, which is promoting trade union renewal "from below," and is currently active in cross-border

campaigns such as the migrant justice movement and the fight for a \$15 minimum wage, among other labour-related campaigns.

The longest lived progressive publication in the country, the French-language bimonthly magazine *Relations*, was originally founded in 1941 by Jesuits, who finance it to this day. Since the late 1950s it has continued to promote the values of social and economic justice and has lately incorporated a focus on the ecological crisis. The nationalist ferment of the 1960s and 70s gave birth to several progressive journals including *Parti Pris* and *Les Cahiers du socialisme*, forerunner of the current socialist quarterly *Nouveaux cahiers du socialisme*, which treads the middle ground between academic and journalistic writing, as do other recent purveyors of left news and views, such as the journals *Possibles* and *Liberté*. The more popularly oriented print magazine *À Babord* and the online weekly *Presse-toi-à gauche* round out the left media landscape in Québec.

In the effort to develop a common understanding of the issues and challenges facing the left in Canada, provide a space for debate and dialogue, publicize and analyze the activities of social movements, and generally wage a counterhegemonic war of position, this left fourth estate is indispensable. And given the difficulty of communing face-to-face across vast geographical distances, it has played an essential role in simply keeping people abreast of goings-on in other provinces and creating a sense of common struggle, although that function has been largely rendered obsolete by social media. Yet the organizations that sustain left publications are mostly precarious, operating on shoe-string budgets with negligible access to advertising revenues and forced to compete for scarce government, union, and private funding. Few have the resources required to pay contributors more than nominal fees for their work, much less fund ongoing investigative journalism.

In addition to periodicals, there exists a small but intrepid independent book publishing industry committed to disseminating the work of homegrown radical scholars and journalists and other dissenting voices which would not even be considered by corporate houses. Fernwood and *Between the Lines* in Canada and *Luxe* and *Les éditions Ecosociété* in Québec stand out as examples. But the difficulties of operating in a capitalist market economy cannot be underestimated. Beyond the political challenge of expanding the public for books that challenge the status quo, there are the practical constraints, such as the disappearance of so many independent bookstores in recent decades, which has constricted the retail market for these presses.

Finally, there are several longstanding independent left academic journals which have served as vital outlets for Canadian socialist scholarship including *Studies in Political Economy*, the bilingual *Labour/Le Travail* and *Alternate Route* (and notable also here is the *Socialist Register* which, while very much an international affair, is currently co-edited by two of Canada's most distinguished left scholars, Leo Panitch and Greg Albo). Here too funding is insecure in a neoliberal era when the country's universities, almost entirely publicly-funded institutions, have all but completed the transition to the corporate model where the criteria of profitability and marketability hold sway. Moreover, and with admittedly many stellar exceptions, there is too little engagement in left movements and parties by a nominally radical professoriat more inclined than ever before to ponder ethereal theoretical questions in arcane language for consumption exclusively by fellow scholars, but this is hardly a uniquely Canadian conundrum.

Although not avowedly left in political orientation, there is also a burgeoning Indigenous media devoted to coverage of First Nations and Inuit communities, which has historically been woefully lacking in the mainstream media apart from certain moments of crisis—and

when Indigenous issues are addressed at all, they are too often refracted through the lenses of colonialism and racism. Until recently even left media was mostly spotty in its treatment. This is changing, however, as the diverse components of the left in Canada and Québec begin to make Indigenous rights and claims a central part of their prescriptions for social and political change. But only media that enable Indigenous people to speak in their own voices and nurture their languages and cultures can begin to offer any real remedy to their historic silencing and exclusion. In addition to the successful creation of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in 1999 and a variety of

barebones community newspapers and radio stations, projects such as the now defunct for lack of funding multimedia Redwire, an Indigenous youth media project, and the TV, radio, and print communication services provided by the Wawatay Native Communications Society of the *Nishnawbe Aski Nation* in Northern Ontario are two notable examples of grassroots Indigenous media initiatives. Most recently, a new Indigenous youth magazine, *Red Rising*, has appeared on the scene. Published out of Winnipeg, it reflects a range of contemporary Indigenous activism, thinking, and culture, and relates consciously to currents of left thinking and activism.

## Building Bridges

As we have endeavoured to show, the landscape of the left in Canada and Québec, while far from barren, remains uneven and fragmented, contributing to an unfavourable balance of forces for movements seeking any significant measure of social justice, let alone the democratization or demolition of the capitalist state.

In a recent editorial for the *New Left Review* (March/April 2016) devoted to surveying the forces of left opposition in Europe and North America, Susan Watkins singled out Canada as one of the few countries in the global North where “there has been no renewal of the left.” Watkins chose to focus on the realm of parliamentary politics at the national level so she neglected to consider the fledgling Québec *Solidaire*, which certainly fits her model of a revitalized broadly left opposition. It is true, however, that at the federal level Canada has brought forth no charismatic progressive leaders in the vein of Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders, and no new parties to contest the hegemony of the NDP. Certainly, the same underlying discontent that has powered Sanders and Corbyn ex-

ists here, and may yet find an incarnation with mass appeal.

Perhaps the principal dilemma of the left in Canada is the absence of radical organizations with mass character capable of strategic action, fostering democratic and intellectual capacities of ordinary people, and developing an ambitious alternative worldview with credibility. Yet for much of the left, the issues of mass organization, convergence, or effective cross-movement strategy have scarcely been on the table.

As a September 2016 statement by Canada’s most progressive union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers/Syndicat des travailleurs et travailleuses des postes, put the problem:

*We live in tumultuous times. The threats posed by climate change, institutional oppressions, xenophobia, and unfettered capitalism are not challenges that can be tackled individually. The need for systemic transformation has never been more apparent. The only thing that is missing is a broad-based organization that can unite these struggles into one and mobilize the people of this*

*country to make the changes that we all know are necessary. So what are we waiting for?*

It's a good question, and one that is increasingly part of the conversation on the left in Canada, although any prospect of a genuine pan-Canadian political project is contingent on an admittedly daunting bridge-building effort between the respective lefts in Canada and Québec. Hopes for greater left strategic cooperation and convergence were spurred by the Peoples' Social Forum held in Ottawa in the summer of 2014. A seminal initiative conceived with a view to fostering a convergence of progressive forces and "building a broad strategic alliance against neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies in Canada," the Forum was unprecedented in gathering the disparate forces working across the land in various places and spaces on a project of social (and also in some instances socialist) transformation. The goal was to facilitate face-to-face exchange among people and peoples who rarely if ever have an opportunity to assemble in the same location. The Forum succeeded in bringing together activists and intellectuals from Québec, Indigenous communities, and English Canada to share ideas and experiences and confront some of the historic problems and tensions that remain unresolved for many on the left, particularly the issue of national self-determination for Québec and Indigenous Peoples.

Out of that galvanizing three-day summit emerged tentative discussions of left renewal that have so far revolved around four distinct if still inchoate projects. The first, touched on earlier, pins its hopes on a left turn within the New Democratic Party, inspired, for instance, by the radical vision of the Leap Manifesto. Whether it is realistic or desirable to expect substantive change from an NDP already shorn of its socialist heritage and bereft of any convincing left leadership is a matter of intense dispute within the broad family of the left—and for the anti-capitalist left the answer is clearly no.

Of course, it is not entirely outside the realm of possibility that, having spent the last decade wandering in the wastelands of neoliberalism, the NDP, thin on progressive imagination and up against a crowd-pleasing Liberal prime minister, will seek purpose and distinction by embracing the Leap Manifesto, or an equivalent left turn, in a bid to avoid dooming itself to irrelevance. It could be that the election of a Liberal government capable of seducing voters into believing that it represents a real change from the Conservatives will ultimately nudge the NDP back to its roots as Canada's social-democratic parliamentary option.

In the absence of any encouraging signs of such a scenario, there are respected left intellectuals who favour the formation of a pan-Canadian socialist party. This would buck the trend towards more ideologically diffuse, broadly progressive coalition-style parties that has marked the character of left renewal in the new millennium. And although socialism is certainly undergoing something of a rehabilitation in the Anglo-American sphere in part thanks to the campaigns of Sanders and Corbyn, which rescued the term, if not in its fullest sense, from the contempt in which it languished among the wider public, it is questionable whether the requisite base for an explicitly socialist anti-capitalist membership-based national party exists in Canada and Québec today to assure it a life beyond that of yet another sectarian outfit.

For some, left energies would more productively be invested in creating a new broadly progressive party to the left of the NDP; in one iteration of this idea, rather than attempt to straddle the complex Canada-Québec divide, such a party would be exclusive to English Canada, a "Solidarity Canada" party that could work in parallel and perhaps in fraternal alliance with Québec Solidaire.

The statement by the postal workers union mentioned above represents another pole

of thinking about convergence: it calls for the creation of a kind of labour-social movement popular front, a “solidarity coalition” that could bring people out of their silos and break down barriers between organizations to facilitate common work. A local model of this type of coalition exists in Nova Scotia in the membership-based organization Solidarity Halifax. Fledgling efforts to emulate this model are taking shape in other provinces and there is an emerging will among these and other small left groups to create a formal mechanism for continuous communication and collaboration.

What may come of this initiative is hard to predict. Even if a left network or solidarity coalition can be forged on the basis of shared principles and priorities, what are its chances of gaining real traction among a majority of people who do not automatically or easily make the links between private troubles and public issues, to recall C.Wright Mills’ phrase, and for whom

the connection between capitalism and climate change or between colonialism and poverty among First Nations is far from self-evident? Unlike southern Europe, Canada and Québec do not have astronomical rates of youth unemployment; unlike the United States, citizens do not wind up bankrupt for requiring medical treatment – neoliberalism in Canada is not yet so advanced that it has succeeded in destroying universal healthcare or making higher education inaccessible. In the current conjuncture, then, what we can realistically strive for is a regrouping of existing movements and left formations in a network of solidarity that can forge new relations, coordinate actions, and undertake the political and intellectual work of bridging the many divides that act as barriers to strengthening left power in Canada. If the initiative to create a coast-to coast left solidarity network coalesces, it will be the most auspicious development on the left that this country has seen in a long time.

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