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Socialist Voice #69, November 7, 2005

## **PQ's Rightward Shift Opens Space for New Left Party in Quebec**

by **Richard Fidler**

*Editors Note: This article was first published in The Bullet, an on-line bulletin of the Ontario-based Socialist Project. The article looks ahead to the founding conference of a new left-wing and pro-independence party in Quebec, to be held in January, 2006. The conference is jointly organized by the Union des forces progressistes (Union of Progressive Forces) and Option citoyenne (Citizens' Choice). Together, these two parties number several thousand members.*

*The pro-sovereignty Parti Québécois has governed the province of Quebec for 18 of the past 30 years. It is presently the main opposition party in the National Assembly; later this month its members will elect a new leader to replace former premier Bernard Landry.*

November 2, 2005. Ten years after the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty, with its razor-thin victory for the No side, and 25 years since the first referendum, mass media and academics alike have been immersed lately in speculation on the likely result of a third such vote, which could occur as early as 2007. This is not an easy exercise. For Quebec's political situation today is characterized by a number of paradoxes. Not the least of these is the contrast between popular support for Quebec sovereignty and the relative lack of enthusiasm for the main sovereigntist standard-bearer, the Parti Québécois.

Public opinion polls and surveys indicate that support for Quebec sovereignty is at the 1995 level, if not greater, with at least one recent poll indicating that more than 40% of Quebecers would support an "independent Quebec" unqualified by "association" or "partnership" with Canada.

This nationalist sentiment is much stronger now among the 18-24 age cohort, who didn't vote ten years ago, than it was among their counterparts in 1995. It holds firm among the Francophone working-class voters between the ages of 25 and 54, who opted by a substantial majority for sovereignty in 1995.

And support for sovereignty has increased substantially among the néo-Québécois “allophones”; it now stands at 27% among those in the labour force, according to a recent study.[1]

### **Political impasse**

Behind these demographic patterns there is the ongoing political impasse in Canadian federalism. Jean Charest’s efforts to forge some new version of cooperative federalism more respectful of Quebec’s constitutional jurisdictions have been rebuffed repeatedly, first by Chrétien and now by Martin. Bolstered by its huge budget surpluses, Ottawa keeps trying to impose “national standards” in areas of social policy that fall within provincial jurisdiction.

Most recently, the Supreme Court of Canada has reinforced the federal government position in a judgment overthrowing Quebec’s attempt to spend employment insurance funds on its own parental leave program.

Quebec and federal ministers constantly wrangle in high-profile conflicts over issues ranging from responsibility for environmental policy to representation at international conferences. Ottawa turns a deaf ear to Quebec’s objections to the perceived “fiscal imbalance” between the provinces and the central government. It resists any suggestion for constitutional change to accommodate Quebec’s concerns, even from some Quebec federalists.

The Gomery revelations have stoked Québécois anger over the federal “sponsorship” program, Ottawa’s “plan A” response to the 1995 referendum results. Although the Gomery commission’s focus was on misappropriation of public funds, mainly to the Liberal party, the program itself was motivated by the contemptuous belief that Quebec’s national grievances could be countered by giving the federal flag greater prominence in the province, and an arrogant mindset that viewed the fate of the federal state as being inextricably bound up with the fortunes of the federal Liberal party.

The Clarity Bill, “plan B”, which proclaims Ottawa’s right to shape a future referendum question and to ignore the popular verdict if it wishes, remains a festering issue.

Heading the best-seller charts in Quebec these days is Robin Philpot’s new book, *Le Référendum volé*, an exposé of how the feds blatantly violated Quebec’s election law through massive illegal spending on the No side and such tactics as fast-tracking Canadian citizenship to tens of thousands of immigrants who could be counted on to vote for the No side. The evidence is mounting that in 1995 Ottawa “stole” the referendum, as Philpot documents, through money and ethnic vote manipulation. Sounds familiar?

### **Lacklustre PQ campaign**

Yet notwithstanding the mass support for a new constitutional setup, the campaign for the leadership of the Parti Québécois has evoked little popular interest and still less enthusiasm. The reasons for this indifference are not hard to find. After a total of 18 years in office, the PQ is burdened by its past — a past marked by some progressive reforms, it is true, but above all by its failure to convince a majority of Quebecers that a sovereign Quebec under its leadership would be worth the sweat, toil and tears its achievement would entail.

Only its support for Quebec sovereignty distinguishes the PQ from the other capitalist parties, Charest's Liberals and Dumont's ADQ. Yet those who look to sovereignty as a framework for resolving the growing inequalities and injustices in Quebec society increasingly see the PQ as part of the problem, not the solution.

Significantly, support for sovereignty dipped temporarily to its lowest level over the last 10 years between 2001 and 2003, when the socially devastating results of Lucien Bouchard's "zero-deficit" policy of austerity and cutbacks were becoming clear, and rebounded following the PQ's defeat.

And although the PQ now registers far ahead of Charest's PLQ in the polls, the party's support ranks well behind the popular support for sovereignty, prompting this comment by a candidate in the party's current leadership contest: "Thirty years ago, René Lévesque was more popular than the Parti québécois. The party was more popular than the option [sovereignty-association]. Today, the pyramid has reversed. The option is more popular than the party."

The PQ appears trapped by its neoliberal perspectives, which would allow very little leeway for a sovereign Quebec to carve out a distinctly progressive path amidst capitalist globalization. Its federal counterpart, the Bloc Québécois, has underscored the fundamentally pro-imperialist orientation of these sovereigntists, voting in convention in late October to support NATO membership, an EU free-trade (and investment) agreement, and the development of a Quebec army and air force that would participate actively in international "peacekeeping", as in Canada's occupation of Haiti.

The Bloc's support in the polls remains close to all-time highs, largely thanks to the unpopularity of the federal Liberals. But this doesn't necessarily translate into support for the PQ; the Bloc is not a contender for government and is viewed more as Quebec's insurance policy in Ottawa now that the illusions of "French power" fostered by Trudeau have dissipated.

The PQ is an ageing party; the majority of its members are more than 50 years old. Its feeble attempt at policy renewal, "La Saison des Idées", launched in the wake of its election defeat, produced little in the way of creative thinking.

PQ leaders are usually chosen by consensus; Lévesque, Parizeau, Bouchard and Landry were all acclaimed. This time the party's malaise is expressed in the presence of nine candidates, although most (judging from polls of the party members, each of whom has a vote) are far behind the leading contenders, former cabinet ministers André Boisclair (64% support) and Pauline Marois (18%).

Boisclair is campaigning on a platform that barely distinguishes him from the right-wing ADQ. (Although the revelations of Boisclair's consumption of cocaine while a cabinet minister could reverse this lead, there is no evidence of this so far.)

The major difference that has emerged among most of the candidates concerns the timing of the next referendum, which all have pledged to hold at some point if elected premier. However, Boisclair in particular has come under fire for his apparent reluctance to put Quebec sovereignty at the centre of his program.

One candidate, Pierre Dubuc, editor of the left-wing newspaper L'aut'journal and founder of Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre (SPQ-Libre), now a recognized "club" of "progressives" and a few trade-unionists within the PQ, has tried to inject some support for more radical policies into the campaign, but without notable success. He is credited with the support of 2% of the members.

SPQ-Libre, launched with great fanfare in 2004, boasts only 500 members in a party with a current membership of close to 150,000. Its call for progressives and especially trade union members to join the PQ to form a broad pro-sovereignty coalition has met with little response among the unions, although both the TCA (the Quebec CAW) and the Montréal blue-collar civic employees are openly pro-PQ and pro-BQ.

Do Boisclair's ascendancy, Dubuc's rebuff, indicate that Quebec sovereignty is becoming a refuge for the Right? I think not. The conflicting trends within Quebec politics today were illustrated in a striking way by two recent events occurring within a few days of each other.

### **Conflicting trends**

The first was the publication, on October 19, of a right-wing manifesto Pour un Québec lucide (For a clear-eyed vision of Quebec), by former PQ premier Bouchard and some other prominent péquistes but also by equally prominent Liberals. (See [www.pourunquebeclucide.com](http://www.pourunquebeclucide.com) for the text.) It castigates "big unions" and calls for lifting the freeze on university tuition fees, raising electricity rates and consumption taxes, focusing on debt reduction, opening the doors further to private sector investment in public infrastructures and ending the "unhealthy suspicion of private business that has developed in some sectors".

Quebec society, it says, is obsessed with "resisting change" in the face of declining demographics and increasing global competition from Asia. Yet these are the important challenges facing Quebecers, not sovereignty, it proclaims.

Although its release was clearly timed to influence the PQ leadership race, neither André Boisclair nor Pauline Marois has expressed any criticism of this much publicized manifesto. In fact, Boisclair has indicated he agrees with it.

In a contrasting development on the left, on October 22, just three days after publication of the "lucides" manifesto, the 300 delegates at the convention of a new left-wing organization, Option citoyenne, voted overwhelmingly to support Quebec sovereignty and unanimously to join with the Union des forces progressistes (UFP) to form a new pro-sovereignty party.

These votes culminated a year-long process of negotiations between the two groups and a lengthy internal consultation on the national question among OC members, many of whom had originally been ambivalent about making Quebec independence a part of their program. "While not a guarantee, sovereignty represents one of the means to provide Quebec with the tools it needs to implement a progressive political and social agenda," the OC resolution states.

The OC's turn to sovereignty removed the major obstacle to unity with the UFP, which has been independentist since its founding in 2002.

The merger next January of the two groups will result in the formation of a new pro-sovereignty party with an initial membership of between three and four thousand. (For background on the UFP-OC fusion, see “Quebec: Toward a New Left Party in 2005?” in Relay, [www.socialistproject.ca/relay](http://www.socialistproject.ca/relay).)

Thus, while the traditional pro-sovereignty parties are shifting further to the right and some prominent péquistes, like Bouchard and perhaps Boisclair, are retreating from their previous commitment to a sovereigntist perspective, there is a perceptible trend developing in the opposite direction on the left, which now tends overwhelmingly to see a sovereign Quebec as the framework for its social agenda.

### **Major challenges ahead**

In the past, the PQ’s support for sovereignty gave it a radical image. Deprived of direct support by big capital, which is unanimously opposed to Quebec independence, the PQ had to pitch its appeal to the unions and popular movements. Today, notwithstanding the hopes of Dubuc’s SPQ-Libre, the unions, while generally sympathetic to sovereignty, are much more diffident about the PQ. This offers some important possibilities for the new left party, although there is little indication so far of movement within the labour movement toward a clear break with the PQ.

However, most of the Quebec left, including both OC and (to a lesser degree) the UFP, does not conceive of politics in class terms. Political debate is expressed in terms of conflicting “values”, not class conflict. A current example of this is the Manifeste pour un Québec solidaire, a response to the Bouchard manifesto initiated by UFP and OC leaders, which was published November 1 under the signatures of a wide range of personalities including some PQ and BQ parliamentarians. (See [www.pourunquebecsolidaire.org/index.php?manifeste](http://www.pourunquebecsolidaire.org/index.php?manifeste) for the text.)

While offering a compelling point-by-point rebuttal of each of the hot-button demands in the Bouchard manifesto, it does not explain the class basis of the program of the “lucides” or present a clear anticapitalist alternative perspective. Its acknowledged inspiration is Scandinavian social-democracy, not socialism. Our vision of Quebec, it says, is “humanist, watchful of the environment and sustainable development, the common good and collective rights”. It sees the central economic issue as one of distribution of wealth, not control of its production.

It is noteworthy, however, that the manifestoes of both the “lucides” and the “solidaires”, as they are being referred to in the media, present their case in a uniquely Quebec context, without reference to Canada and the federal state. This is now the common terrain of political discourse in Quebec, where the interests of the Quebec nation are the overriding consideration and the various social classes present their differing perspectives within that conceptual framework.

The national question, in fact, gives a populist cast to left politics in Quebec and no working-class politics can emerge in the province that ignores the need to address, front and centre, Quebec’s status as a distinct national social formation.

At the same time, the focus on reaching agreement on the independence question as the basis for unity in the UFP-OC negotiations has tended to preclude a needed debate on the social content of the new party's program and the class forces which it should address.

But the party will soon be confronted with the need to go beyond trite expressions of "values" and to flesh out a program and strategic perspective that will ultimately enable it to build a strong militant presence in the labour movement and the working class as a whole.

Moreover, without a clear understanding of the need to ground support for Quebec independence within an anticapitalist perspective, the new party will have great difficulty resisting the siren calls for an electoral alliance with the PQ in the next election.

However, the PQ's rightward trend and its declining ability to retain the universal allegiance of the sovereigntist milieu present the new left party that will emerge in January with some promising openings to build, as it anticipates, a mass party that can point the way forward to truly progressive social change in Quebec.

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[1] Gilles Gagné and Simon Langlois, "Les jeunes appuient la souveraineté et les souverainistes le demeurent en vieillissant", Institut du Nouveau Monde, October 2005 (study prepared for L'Annuaire du Québec 2006).

Socialist Voice #70, November 11, 2005

## **Marxism and the Venezuelan Revolution**

Alan Woods. *The Venezuelan Revolution: A Marxist Perspective*. London: Wellred Books, 2005.

**reviewed by John Riddell**

TORONTO, CANADA – Can a small Marxist current hope to influence the course of events in times of a revolutionary uprising, or are they condemned to an existence of sideline critics, never to influence the broader working class movement?

A new book by British Marxist Alan Woods puts that question to the test in a most challenging way — in the midst of the unfolding Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. *The Venezuelan Revolution: A Marxist Perspective* consists of 14 articles written by Woods between the failed pro-imperialist coup of April 2002 and the Bolivarians' turn to socialism in early 2005. Published earlier this year, the book has much to teach us about the role of Marxists in a revolutionary upsurge.

Many revolutionary-minded groups or parties in the world have been skeptical and standoffish toward Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution. It confounds their self-conceived truths: much of the Bolivarian leadership came unexpectedly from the officer corps; the Bolivarian program was not openly socialist in its beginning stages; its course of action corresponded to no one's blueprint. President Hugo Chávez was pegged by most of them as a radical bourgeois figure.

By contrast, the current led by Alan Woods, the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) ([www.marxist.com](http://www.marxist.com)), grasped the importance of the Venezuelan uprising soon after the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. It has devoted considerable resources to building an international solidarity campaign, Hands Off Venezuela ([www.handsoffvenezuela.org](http://www.handsoffvenezuela.org)).

The IMT understood early that Marxists in Venezuela should support the Bolivarian movement and be part of it, rather than stand back and criticize it from the sidelines. They have worked with energy and some success to influence the Bolivarians, gaining favorable mentions from Chávez himself.

### **Expropriate capitalist property**

Alan Woods' main point, reflected in each of his articles, is that the Venezuelan revolution cannot stop half way, leaving the U.S.-backed right-wing oligarchy in control of decisive sectors of the economy and state apparatus. "The counterrevolutionary forces are not reconciled to defeat," Woods states. "They are increasingly desperate ... determined and violent."

Venezuelan working people must expropriate capitalist property and lay the basis for socialism, he argues. "Either the greatest of victories or the most terrible of defeats." (Pages 110, 133)

This basic premise of Marxism, confirmed at each stage of the Venezuelan struggle, has won an increasing hearing among the Bolivarians. Chávez now ridicules the notion that Venezuela can find liberation within capitalism.

### **Learning from Chávez**

Another key lesson is not stated explicitly, and may be unintended. Woods articles show how Marxists can learn from a living revolution.

In the opening chapters, written from London and Buenos Aires just after the 2002 coup attempt, Woods is close to dismissive of Bolivarian leader Hugo Chávez. At that time, Woods wrote that Chávez is “inclined to be inconsistent” and has “often displayed indecision.” He “temporized and attempted to conciliate the counter-revolutionaries” which was “a fatal mistake.” (Pages 16, 20, 43)

The book then breaks off: there is a gap of 16 months before the next article.

Then, in April 2004, Woods attended an international conference in Caracas in which Chávez, displaying his characteristic cordial generosity, set out to forge a link with Woods, one of the most prominent international solidarity activists. Woods learned that Chávez was not only keenly interested in Marxism but was familiar with the British Marxist’s own writings. “He told me he was not a Marxist because he had not read enough Marxist books,” Woods commented. “But he is reading them now.” (Page 62)

The next part of the book is a treasure: two slashing polemics against sectarian attitudes toward the Venezuelan movement.

“For the sectarian mentality, a revolution must conform to a pre-established scheme,” Woods writes. The sectarian “establishes an ideal norm and rejects anything ... that does not conform.”

Woods ridicules those who would build the revolutionary party by proclamation. “Three men and ... a drunken parrot gather in a café in Caracas and proclaim the Revolutionary Party.” And if the masses do not join, the sectarian says, “Well, that’s *their* problem.” (Pages 65, 83) These ideas are not new, but coming to us from the battlefields of a living revolution, they ring with great authority.

In the pages that follow, Woods writes with warm respect of Chávez, “the man who inspired this magnificent movement and provided it with a leadership and a banner.” (Page 162)

### **Crucial omissions**

Nevertheless, the Marxism advanced in Alan Woods’ book remains incomplete.

**Cuba:** *The Venezuelan Revolution* condemns U.S. attacks on Cuba, but not a word can be found in this book of Cuba’s role in the Venezuelan revolution. Yet Cuba’s revolutionary leaders have had a much stronger influence on Venezuela’s Bolivarians than all the smaller Marxist currents put together.

The political alliance of Hugo Chávez with the Cuban Marxists began a few months after Chávez was released from prison in 1994, when he went to Cuba for discussions with Fidel Castro. Since Chávez’ first election to president in 1998, Cuba has contributed tens of thousands of volunteers to deliver health, educational, and recreational services to Venezuelan working people. The two governments have a close diplomatic, economic, and political alliance. The book’s silence on this important alliance creates a highly misleading picture of the Bolivarian revolutionary

process. It raises a crucial question: does the author view Cuba's role in Venezuela as positive or negative?

**Anti-imperialist alliance:** And what about ALBA? The Bolivarian Agreement for the Americas (ALBA) is the Venezuelan government's proposal for non-exploitative economic cooperation among Latin American countries. It was advanced in 2003 as an alternative to imperialist-directed "Free Trade of the Americas" fraud. Cuba endorsed ALBA in its December 2004 treaty with Venezuela.

ALBA's appeal and relevance was made astonishingly clear at the recent summit meeting in Argentina of political leaders of the Americas. The imperialist "free trade" proposition was proclaimed dead on arrival by the masses who rallied there and, not coincidentally, gave Chávez a hero's welcome.

Woods does not mention ALBA. Does he perhaps have it in mind when he warns Venezuela against relying on "friendly relations" with Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba. (Page 119) The international, anti-imperialist dimension of the Venezuelan revolution is simply disregarded throughout the book

**Democratic tasks:** Woods does not take up the ongoing democratic tasks of the Venezuelan process. Such struggles as that of Venezuela's people of color for equality; that of women pressing into political life and demanding their rights; that of workers in the "informal sector" striving for a secure livelihood; that of the oppressed indigenous peoples to which the Bolivarians have given such close attention — all are neglected. Nor does Woods acknowledge Chávez's role as a defender of the world's ecology against capitalist devastation.

Woods also fails to give clear support to the struggles of peasants who wish to divide up the great estates, arguing instead that the estates should operate as collective farms. (Page 172)

All these questions are crucial to forging the revolutionary alliance necessary to overturning capitalism in Venezuela. By omitting them, the book displays a limited understanding of the complex dynamics of the Venezuelan revolution.

**Nationalizing capitalist property:** Woods presents the need to nationalize capitalist property in a purely administrative way. "For the immediate expropriation of the property of the imperialists and the Venezuelan bourgeoisie.... An emergency decree to this effect must be put to the National Assembly," Woods wrote soon after the failed coup in 2002. (Page 17)

But working-class nationalization — as opposed to a capitalist transfer of formal ownership — can only be carried out by a mass movement of working people who have become convinced through experience that there is no alternative and who are ready to assume management responsibility. Provided the workers are not forced into premature action, they must prepare for the challenge of managing production. Otherwise, for example, their expropriation of foreign-owned companies may lead to their immediate shutdown for lack of raw materials, technical inputs, and customers.

There is a sameness in *The Venezuelan Revolution*: the articles span three years but advocate an identical course of action — immediate expropriation — at every turn. The book displays no

sense of tactics, no sense of when to advance, when to pause, when to sound out the enemy's willingness to compromise, when to form alliances.

On all these points, *The Venezuelan Revolution* fails to convey key lessons of the Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia, lessons that are well understood by Cuba's revolutionary leadership.

Woods sees in Venezuela a dichotomy between two currents: on the one hand, petty-bourgeois revolutionary democracy, led by Chávez; and on the other, Marxism, represented in his view above all by the IMT's own Revolutionary Marxist Current. (Page 93)

But on the key challenges facing the Venezuela revolution, the record of the Chávez leadership is stronger than the course proposed by *The Venezuelan Revolution*. The Bolivarians' course has led not to defeat, as Woods warned, but to victory after victory.

### **Toward a revolutionary party**

Judging by this book alone, the political line of Alan Woods and the International Marxist Tendency is inflexible, one-sided, and veers off course. Yet the IMT, as Chávez himself has acknowledged, has made an undeniable contribution to the broader Bolivarian movement of which it is part.

Surely there is a lesson here for all of us in the splintered and fragmented international socialist movement.

The revolutionary party for which we strive will be built through living processes like those we see in Venezuela today or in Cuba before it. Under the impact of an upsurge of struggles, new leadership forces will converge with the best forces in existing currents to form a unified movement. All existing currents will be challenged to subordinate their prized separateness to a broader purpose.

It is to the credit of Alan Woods that he and his current have been able to travel at least a part of that road together with Venezuela's revolutionary Bolivarians.

Socialist Voice #71, November 23, 2005

## **The Crisis in Kashechewan: Water Contamination Exposes Canada's Brutal Policies Against Indigenous People**

**By Mike Krebs**

*Mike Krebs is a Native rights activist in Vancouver, Canada and member of the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) union.*

VANCOUVER BC—The crisis on the Kashechewan Native reserve in northern Ontario has once again placed the brutal social and living conditions of indigenous people in Canada onto the center stage of politics.

On October 14th, Health Canada alerted the reserve that their drinking water supply had tested positive for the deadly e. coli bacteria. At the time, over half the 2,000 residents were suffering numerous water-related illnesses, including diarrhea and painful stomach cramps, or they were suffering from horrific skin diseases such as scabies and impetigo caused by other contaminants in the water.

Television images and newspaper photos showing residents' bodies covered in rashes and scars made headline news across Canada, provoking shock and anger throughout the country. The minority Liberal Party government, already weakened by political scandal and unpopularity, was thrown onto the defensive and into a panicked response.

The mainstream capitalist media tried to frame the issue as one of 'mismanagement' or a 'confusion over jurisdiction' between the federal and provincial governments. But the crisis in Kashechewan is not new, and it is not limited to clean water. With rare exceptions, similar or worse conditions prevail in every indigenous community within the borders of what is now 'Canada.' They are a result of the suppression of the right of indigenous people to self-determination—a result of several centuries of British, French, and Canadian colonialism, and in the most recent period, deepening neo-liberal attacks by the federal government and employers.

### **What happened in Kashechewan?**

*"Paul Martin Was Here." — A slogan, along with a skull and crossbones, written on the water treatment plant in Kashechewan*

Kashechewan is a reserve inhabited by James Bay Cree people and is located on the shore of James Bay in the province of Ontario. It is only accessible by boat or plane. The community has been on a boil-water advisory from Health Canada for over 2 years, and numerous such advisories have been in place for decades. Since April of this year alone, the Canadian government had shipped over \$250,000 worth of bottled water into Kashechewan.

According to Dr. Murray Trussler, a doctor who went to the reserve shortly after the e. coli contamination was discovered, the widespread presence of skin disease is largely due to a lack of clean bathing water. When shock levels of chlorine are fed into the water system in an attempt to kill the e. coli, this aggravates skin rashes and diseases.

The immediate cause of the water contamination is that the intake for the reserve's drinking water supply is 135 meters *downstream* from the community's sewage lagoon. Federal government officials refused to heed the community's concerns over the choice of location of the water treatment plant, built just over ten years ago. Thus, even when the water treatment plant is fully functioning, the water supply intake is contaminated by sewage.

To further complicate matters, the tide from James Bay regularly pushes sewage back up the river from where it flows.

But the explanation of the tragedy doesn't stop there. The Kashechewan reserve was built on a flood plain on a spot chosen by the Canadian government at the beginning of the 20th century. The area where the houses of the reserve are now located was built in 1957. In both cases, the elders of the community insisted these were bad locations. Both times they were ignored.

Almost every springtime, the reserve faces flooding problems, despite a large dike surrounding the community built by the federal government to 'protect' it. In addition to contributing to the contamination of the water supply, this flooding has caused severe mould problems in almost every single house and building on the reserve.

The federal government (which has exclusive constitutional responsibility for providing services on Canada's Native reserves) never provided adequate training for operating the reserve's water treatment plant. Numerous reports in the hands of both the federal and Ontario governments predicted that water contamination of Kashechewan was inevitable unless measures were taken to remedy the problem.

### **Problems Beyond Clean Water, Problems Beyond Kashechewan**

*"I never had a problem with the water. It's the unemployment and boredom that are killing me." — An indigenous youth living on Kashechewan reserve*

The contaminated water is only one of many problems facing the indigenous people of Kashechewan. Social problems are unavoidable as a result of the catastrophic economic situation on the reserve. Unemployment is as high as 87%, a legacy of an historic federal government policy that isolated indigenous people on remote reserves and denied us the opportunities for economic and social development. It was, in the final analysis, a policy of forced assimilation and cultural genocide.

Unemployment rates such as that of Kashechewan are common on virtually every one of the several hundred indigenous reserves in Canada. On average, unemployment and poverty rates in Canada are three times higher for indigenous people than for non-indigenous people.

More than 100 indigenous reserves within the borders of what is now called 'Canada' are under boil water advisories from Health Canada. Fifty of these are within the province of Ontario. A 2001 study by the Canadian government found that almost 75% of the water systems on reserves posed a threat to drinking water. The Kwicksutaineuk reserve, for example, located on Gilford Island off the coast of British Columbia, has lived with a boil water advisory for 9 years straight, and every single house on the reserve has been condemned because of mould problems.

A report published by the Canadian Population Health Collective in 2004, titled 'Improving the Health of Canadians', gives a general idea of what type of life an indigenous person born in Canada can expect. According to the report:

- More than one-third of indigenous people live in homes that do not meet the most basic government standards of acceptability.
- Average life expectancy for indigenous people is ten years less than that of the Canadian average.
- Indigenous children die at three times the rate of non-indigenous children, and are more likely to be born with severe birth defects and conditions like fetal alcohol syndrome.
- The suicide rate of indigenous people is six times higher than the Canada-wide average.
- Tuberculosis rates are 16 times higher in indigenous communities than the rest of the population, and HIV and AIDS infection is growing fastest among indigenous people.

For indigenous people, who comprise roughly four percent of the 31.4 million people within Canada, such statistics are more than representations or symbols. They are everyday reality. Humiliation, theft of dignity, and frustration at being forced to survive in such conditions in what is supposedly one of the wealthiest first-world countries in the world – these are the realities of life for indigenous people in Canada.

### **Canadian Colonialism Directly Responsible for Kashechewan Crisis**

The problems of water quality in Kashechewan, including the original locations of the reserve and of its water treatment system, are not a matter of 'oversight' or 'engineering mistakes'. They are a result of the colonial relationship that exists between indigenous people and the Canadian government.

The indigenous people living in what is now Kashechewan were forced to live there as a part of the process of the Canadian government occupying Cree territory, destroying their traditional economies, and forcing them onto reservations. The government of the time explained unconvincingly to the elders back in 1912, that the location was 'great' because it was a traditional hunting ground. Considering, however, that by this time the Cree of the area had been squeezed out of their hunting and fur-trading economy by the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in the area, this was pure nonsense.

As with the subjugation of other indigenous nations by the British, French, and then Canadian colonial powers, this was how the suppression of the Cree nation's right to self-determination played out in real life. The Canadian government stole Cree lands and resources in the interest of promoting the hegemony of Canadian capitalism while suppressing any independent political, economic, or cultural development.

The problems facing the indigenous people in Kashechewan flow directly from this process of occupying and oppressing indigenous nations. This was, and continues to be, an inherent aspect of Canada's development as a nation-state. The suppression of the right of indigenous nations to

self-determination became fundamental to Canada's eventual growth into a wealthy imperialist country.

### **'Fix' Our Problems? No Thanks!**

One of the federal government's first responses to the crisis was a massive 'emergency' airlift of over half the community to towns and cities throughout Ontario in order to receive medical care. Then it announced a plan to 'rebuild' the entire reserve over the next ten years, including over 300 million dollars in funding for new houses and expanded drug and alcohol counseling programs.

At best, these are temporary measures to cool things down until the widespread anger generated across Canada within indigenous communities and their supporters dies down. At worst, it is an attempt to yet again forcibly displace an indigenous community in an attempt to break its spirit. On the surface, these might sound like great plans, but after more than a century of false promises from the same government, most indigenous people aren't going to fall for these cheap tricks. It will take more than a few new houses and a 'better' location to deal with the real problems facing any indigenous reserve in Canada.

Just ask the Innu youth of Davis Inlet, Labrador. They were forcibly removed in late 2002 to Natuashish, a new 'community' built by the federal government at a cost of over \$200 million, only to have all the same problems with gas-sniffing and breathtaking suicide rates arise again.

Because of the inherently colonial and oppressive nature of the Canadian government, no 'solution' that it puts forward for the water crisis in Kashechewan can truly be in the interest of the indigenous people living there.

### **The Importance of Indigenous Self-Determination in Building a Revolutionary Movement in Canada**

The quick response of the Canadian government to the Kashechewan crisis (once it hit the news, that is) is a result of the fear by the Canadian ruling class of the fight of indigenous people for self-determination. Militant struggles in recent years—by Mohawk communities in Quebec in 1990, at Ipperwash, Ontario in 1995, Gustafsen Lake in British Columbia in 1996, and Burnt Church, New Brunswick in 2000—serve as reminders to the rulers that their hegemony over land, resources and labour is perhaps but a fleeting condition.

Indigenous people have rights to our land that have never been ceded. These self-determination rights loom large for the Canadian ruling class because they challenge the very foundations of its legitimacy, and that of its nation-state. Is it any coincidence that the two major crises facing the current federal government—Kashechewan and the so-called "sponsorship scandal"—both involve the self-determination of oppressed nations within Canada, in one case that of indigenous people, and in the other of the Quebecois?

The wealthy classes around the world are engaged in ever-sharper competition with each other as their economic order teeters on the edge of a sharp decline. They are fighting over access to markets, cheap labor and natural resources. They are also driven to attack the salaries, social conditions and democratic rights of the people in their own countries.

Canada's rulers are part and parcel of this declining order. They will continue to carry out fresh attacks against indigenous people. As a result, we cannot trust promises to improve the conditions of peoples living in conditions like those on Kashechewan and Natuashish, just as the residents of New Orleans are learning through bitter experience that U.S. government promises to improve their shattered lives are worthless. The only improvements we can expect are those we fight for.

The recent youth rebellion in France, the growing antiwar consciousness of people in the United States, and the decision of the people of Kashechewan to go public with their crisis and shame the federal government into action are encouraging signs of growing resistance to this declining international order.

So long as our right to self-determination is suppressed, indigenous people will face more Kashechewans, more poverty, and more humiliation. Only by fighting for the right to govern ourselves, to decide where and how we will live on our lands, what type of economic development will truly serve our communities, can we find away out of this generations-long nightmare that has been brought down on us by 'great' Canada.

For other peoples in Canada who also seek social justice and an end to the evils of capitalism, support to the right of indigenous people to self-determination is essential.

It is crucial for building a united movement of all the oppressed in Canadian society. The same is true in other imperialist countries, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, where the struggle of oppressed nationalities contains a similar dynamic and importance.

The working class in Canada has the potential to make revolutionary change due to its relationship to the means of production. Workers have the power to take control of society because we produce its wealth. The significant growth in the numbers of indigenous peoples in the labor force in Canada, particularly within the major cities, creates a front of potential unity that is crucial to forge.

Another front of revolutionary struggle arises from indigenous peoples' relationship to the *land*, because this struggle for the land puts indigenous people into direct conflict with the capitalist rulers.

A society free of injustice and discrimination will be achieved within Canada when those who are the victims of the current order succeed in creating unity and forging an alliance for political power. That new power can succeed only if it champions the right of indigenous people to a just equality and true sovereignty in the building of a new society.