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Socialist Voice #222, December 3, 2007

## **Ecosocialism and the Fight Against Global Warming**

### **An Interview with Ian Angus**

*The reports issued this year by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change prove conclusively that climate change is real, that the pace of global warming is accelerating, and that it is caused by human activity. If greenhouse gas emissions are not reduced quickly, climate change will have catastrophic impacts on human, animal, and plant life everywhere.*

*An International Day of Climate Action has been called for December 8, midway through the climate talks in Bali, Indonesia. Demonstrations and other actions will be held in some 70 countries, and in over 30 Canadian cities in ten provinces. The December 8 day of action may be the largest day of climate protest to date.*

*In many countries, the participants in these actions will include supporters of the recently-formed Ecosocialist International Network (EIN). Socialist Voice Managing Editor Ian Angus is a founder and coordinating committee member of the EIN. He also edits the web journal *Climate and Capitalism*.*

*He was interviewed by the Greek socialist newspaper *Kokkino (Red)*.*

### **Let's begin with a large question — what is ecosocialism?**

**Angus:** Ecosocialism has grown out of two parallel political trends — the spread of Marxist ideas in the green movement and the spread of ecological ideas in the Marxist left. The result is a set of social and political goals, a growing body of ideas, and a global movement.

Ecosocialism's goal is to replace capitalism with a society in which common ownership of the means of production has replaced capitalist ownership, and in which the preservation and restoration of ecosystems will be central to all activity.

As a body of ideas, ecosocialism argues that ecological destruction is not an accidental feature of capitalism, it is built into the system's DNA. The system's insatiable need to increase profits — what's been called "the ecological tyranny of the bottom line" — cannot be reformed away.

With that said, it is important to realize ecosocialist thought is not monolithic — it embodies many different views about theory and practice. For example, there is an ongoing debate about the view, advanced by some ecosocialist writers, that social movements have replaced the working class as the engine of social change.

Finally, ecosocialism is an anti-capitalist movement that varies a great deal from place to place. In the imperialist countries, it is a current within existing socialist and green-left movements, seeking to win ecology activists to socialism and to convince socialists of the vital importance of ecological issues and struggles. We might say that in the global north ecosocialism today focuses on making the Greens more Red and the Reds more Green.

In the Third World, by contrast, global warming is already a matter of life and death. People there are fighting environmental destruction — and the environmental destroyers — on a daily basis. The fights take many forms, including land occupations, road blockades, and sabotage as well as more traditional actions such as petitions, rallies, demonstrations. Such protests occur daily in dozens of countries.

What we see there is a growing mass pro-ecology movement that incorporates socialist ideas — that's especially true in Latin America, where anti-imperialist governments headed by Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Fidel Castro in Cuba, are pressing for strong anticapitalist, pro-environment measures.

A recent letter from Evo Morales to the United Nations illustrates that point and another — that in the fight to save the earth, a vanguard role is being played by indigenous peoples. As Morales said:

“[W]e — the indigenous peoples and humble and honest inhabitants of this planet — believe that the time has come to put a stop to this, in order to rediscover our roots, with respect for Mother Earth; with the Pachamama as we call it in the Andes. Today, the indigenous peoples of Latin America and the world have been called upon by history to convert ourselves into the vanguard of the struggle to defend nature and life.”

And he suggested a global political organization to combat global warming:

“We need to create a World Environment Organisation which is binding, and which can discipline the World Trade Organisation, which is propelling us towards barbarism.”

That's not just a clever turn of phrase. In that one sentence, Morales says that the environment must be given legal priority over capitalist profits and the neoliberal policies that protect them. That's a profound idea that the left worldwide should adopt and defend.

**What is the Ecosocialist International Network?**

**Angus:** The Ecosocialist International Network was formed in October 2007, at a meeting in Paris that was attended by ecosocialists from 13 countries. Its main goals are to improve communication and coordination among ecosocialists worldwide, and to organize a major ecosocialist conference in Brazil in January 2009, in conjunction with the World Social Forum.

The EIN is a very loose and open organization. Its only organizational structure is a steering committee to plan the Brazil conference. Anyone who supports the broad goals of the ecosocialism is welcome to participate — more information is available on our website.

**How do you respond to socialists who argue that there is no need for specifically “ecosocialist” ideas or activity?**

**Angus:** In a certain sense they are correct. Marxism embodies a wealth of profound ecological thought, far more than many green activists realize.

But while concern for ecology was a fundamental part of Marx’s thought, and the Bolsheviks were certainly aware of the issue, the sad fact is that the Marxist left ignored this issue for many decades. It’s important to correct that — and to do so publicly and explicitly.

Using the word “ecosocialism” is a way of signalling loud and clear that we consider climate change not just as another stick to bash capitalism with, but as a critically important issue, one of the principal problems facing humanity in this century.

But there is more involved. Marxism is not a fixed set of eternal truths — it is a living body of thought, a method of understanding society and a tool for social change. Socialists whose views don’t evolve to incorporate new social and scientific insights become irrelevant sectarians — we’ve seen that happen to many individuals and groups over the years.

Just as Marx and Engels studied and adopted ideas from the scientists of their day — Liebig on soil fertility, Morgan on early societies, Darwin on evolution, and many others — so Marxists today must learn from today’s scientists, especially about the biggest issues of the day. Ecosocialism aims to do just that.

**Can capitalism solve global warming?**

**Angus:** That depends on what you mean by “solve.”

Dealing with global warming includes two components — mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation means reducing greenhouse gas emissions so that global warming slows down and eventually reverses. Adaptation means making changes that will enable people to survive in a world where some climate change is inevitable, and where climate chaos is increasingly likely.

In my opinion, capitalism’s insatiable need for growth, combined with its massive dependence on fossil fuels as the dominant energy source, means that it is very unlikely that we will see an effective mitigation program from any major capitalist country.

Scientists say that if the average temperature rises more than 2 degrees, dangerous climate change becomes very probable. There is no sign that any of the industrialized countries will

implement measures sufficient to stop such a temperature increase — anything they do will be too little, too late.

But if we do not succeed in bringing this system to an end, capitalism will undoubtedly adapt to the new climate. It will do what capitalism always does — it will impose the greatest burdens on the most vulnerable, on poor people and poor nations. Climate refugees will multiply and millions will die. The imperialist powers will fight against the global south, and amongst themselves, to control the world's resources, including not just fuel but also food and other essentials. The most barbaric forms of capitalism will intensify and spread.

In short — yes, capitalism can “solve” global warming, but a capitalist solution will be catastrophic for the great majority of the world's people.

Socialist Voice #223, December 7, 2007

## **After Referendum Defeat, Chávez Pledges to Continue the Struggle**

*A Report from Caracas*

**By John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss**

*John Riddell and Suzanne Weiss traveled to Venezuela at the end of November, as participants in a tour organized by the Australia-Venezuela Solidarity Network.*

Responding to what he termed a “photo finish” defeat in Venezuela’s December 2 constitutional referendum, President Hugo Chávez pledged to continue the struggle for the measures that were presented to voters.

Announcing the results on national TV, he accepted “the decision made by the people” and thanked all voters, both those who voted “yes” and those in the “no” camp. But he called for his movement to stay on course. “I do not withdraw a single comma from the proposal,” he added. “The proposal is still on the table.”

Chávez also recalled the words he used after the failure of the Bolivarian movement’s initial bid for power: “As I said on February 4, 1992, we could not do it – for now.” On that occasion, the Venezuelan masses seized on the words “for now” (*por ahora*) as a commitment to fight on until victory was won.

Chávez closed by saying that a major proposal in the constitutional reform project, the expansion of social security to include workers in the informal economy and housewives, does not require a constitutional amendment and would be carried out as soon as possible.

The right-wing victory in the vote was paper-thin: 51% to 49%. The “no” camp increased its vote only marginally (about 2%) from the opposition’s score in last year’s presidential elections. The big change was the abstention of more than a third (38%) of those who voted for Chávez last year. Unconvinced of the reform proposals but unwilling to associate themselves with the opposition, they chose this time to stay at home.

### **Profile of the Reform**

Chavez announced plans to reform Venezuela’s 1999 constitution shortly after his reelection in December 2006, as a way to open the road for the country’s advance to socialism. On August 15, 2007, he proposed amendments to 33 articles of the constitution. This triggered an extensive public debate in all parts of the country.

Following this discussion, on November 2, the National Assembly adopted a package that included not just Chavez’s amendments, but others affecting another 36 articles. The referendum followed automatically 30 days later.

The reform’s main provisions can be grouped under six headings:

*Popular power:* Creation of a new level of government consisting of communal and other councils that would receive at least 5% of the national budget and would take decisions not through elected representatives but through assemblies of all members.

*Non-capitalist economic development:* Provisions for new forms of collective, social, and public property alongside private ownership; subjection of the central bank to government direction; stronger measures for land reform and against capitalist speculation.

*Deepening social inclusion:* A variety of measures to counter discrimination, democratize higher education, and move towards a 36-hour work week.

*New territorial divisions:* New presidential powers to channel resources to designated regions with special needs.

*A stronger presidency.* Removal of the two-term limit on a president's time in office; provision for suspension of freedom of information during a state of emergency (a response to the capitalist media's role in organizing the unsuccessful 2002 military coup); and other measures.

*Socialism as the goal.* The amendments proclaimed a socialist society as Venezuela's goal, without specifying what that would mean in practice.

### **The view from the streets**

When we arrived in Caracas, 12 days before the vote, the streets in downtown and working-class areas were lined with banners, posters, and graffiti calling for a "yes" vote ("*Sí con Chávez*"). The "no" campaign conceded the streets, relying instead on its vise-grip on the media—the strongest instrument of political control.

We saw little evidence of public discussion. Efforts were being made to circulate the text of the reforms, which filled several dozen pages of legalistic prose. But at first, we saw these distributions only close by the National Assembly. Not until the last few days did we see "red points"—with tables, banners, and music—carrying out the distributions across the city. In the last week, a "dual-column" version was also distributed. We spent time pouring over it, trying to grasp the changes, but it was slow going.

Only in the final few days before the vote did we see flyers that attempted to summarize the changes. Just back from a lengthy trip abroad, Chávez spoke stirringly during the final week in defense of the reform.

Nonetheless, on the whole, we did not see any concerted effort to explain *why the changes were necessary*.

### **A loaded debate**

Most of criticisms we heard from "no" supporters were based on obvious distortions of the reform, including claims that the changes would abolish private property, end free bargaining for employment contracts, make Chávez president for life, abolish elections, and end free speech.

Other charges were even more fanciful: the government was arming criminal gangs and promoting incursions of Colombian paramilitaries, planning to take children from their parents, and preparing to convert Venezuela into a “totalitarian” state like Cuba or North Korea.

Such accusations were usually delivered in a scattergun style that made reasoned response difficult.

The whole debate was loaded against the Chávez supporters — to vote “yes,” you had to support a wide range of proposals which were individually and collectively difficult to understand. But to vote “no” or abstain, you only needed to object to a single proposal, or just feel uneasy or uncertain. The capitalist media made certain that everyone heard plenty of reasons for unease and uncertainty.

### **The ‘yes’ campaign**

During our two-week stay, we talked to many hundreds of “yes” supporters. In the two mass demonstrations we attended, we carried a banner reading, in Spanish, “Canadians in support of the Bolivarian revolution.” Marchers crowded round to greet us, talk to us, and express their internationalist convictions.

Given the complexity of the issues, it was striking how well and thoroughly these “yes” supporters understood the reform. Whenever we asked, “Which change is the most important?” we got specific and thoughtful responses, often quoting the constitutional paragraph number, and often taking up complex topics remote from the speaker’s immediate experience.

Partisans of the “yes” often overestimated our knowledge of the changes. On a voting lineup in the “23 de Enero” district of western Caracas, a “yes” supporter, asked which change was the most important, replied, “Well, I’d say article 115, but also articles...” and he reeled off a series of article numbers, far too quickly for us to jot down.

We took part in a pro-reform student demonstration of more than 60,000 – the largest such action so far – and a campaign windup that mobilized some 750,000 in downtown Caracas. Both actions were far larger than anything the “no” forces managed. At both events the mood was confident, joyous, and militant.

And as Chávez points out, the vote of 4.3 million for reforms that endorsed a course toward socialism is a historic achievement.

The impact of our discussions with “yes” supporters was overwhelming and is hard to convey to those who have not witnessed revolution. Here we have a revolutionary vanguard of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions—experienced in struggle, wise, passionate, and determined—that has several times rallied a decisive majority to beat down attacks of the imperialist foe.

### **Defections from the Bolivarian camp**

Yet again and again, “yes” activists told us that support for the reform in their milieus was noticeably less than support for Chávez in the presidential elections last year. This uncertainty in

the progressive camp was reinforced by a series of much publicized defections, including the Podemos party (which scored 8% in last year's vote) and former defense minister and army chief Raúl Baduel. Many Bolivarian activists told us that the reform faced possible defeat.

In this context, it seemed to us that the revolutionary forces urgently needed to organize an intensive dialogue with those in Bolivarian rank-and-file who were uncertain about the reform. We expected to see efforts to canvass working-class areas similar to what took place earlier this year, when five million signed up to support the project of a new unified socialist party (the PSUV). But we saw no such initiative.

A PSUV meeting we attended in the Catia district of Caracas, a week before the vote, concerned itself with the organizing of scrutineers at polling places – a crucial and complex task – rather than with organizing discussions with voters in its region and getting out the “yes” vote. For the newly formed party branch we visited, just getting the scrutineers in place and provided with logistical backup was a major challenge. The party shows great promise, but did not play a strong visible role in the campaign.

### **Hammer of counterrevolution**

The opposition campaign proceeded along two parallel tracks. On one hand, “no” spokespersons – with Baduel and Podemos in the lead – cloaked themselves in the mantle of the 1999 constitution, an early Bolivarian achievement, claiming they merely wanted to defend the movement's original goals (although in fact, the opposition at that time had bitterly opposed that progressive document).

At the same time, the opposition readied its “Plan B.” Opposition groups engaged in repeated violent provocations against “yes” supporters, including three wanton killings of Chávez supporters. Elements of the right-wing student movement that is strong in the country's traditional upper-class universities were prominent in the disorders. There was talk of insurrection if “yes” forces won.

Opposition leaders did little to disavow and prevent such actions. During the campaign they did not pledge to accept a “yes” victory. All this reinforced fears about voting.

In the aftermath of the vote, some opposition leaders made conciliatory gestures, clearly seeking to build a bridge to more conservative forces within the government. Yet the entire course of the opposition since Chávez's election in 1999 has aimed not just at halting the Bolivarian process but at forcibly destroying the revolution root and branch and fully restoring U.S. domination and oligarchic rule. In view of Venezuela's oil wealth and world political influence, the opposition's masters in Washington can settle for nothing less.

If the opposition can preserve its control of Venezuela's most powerful social institutions, starting with the private economy and the media, it has good reason to hope that over time they can divide, grind down, and crush the revolution.



This fact was a central motivation for the constitutional reform proposals. The Bolivarian movement's socialist course is not a change from its original goals, which included national sovereignty, a break from neo-liberalism, endogenous development, popular democracy, equality, and the well-being of the working masses. Rather, as Chávez has stated, these goals can be achieved only through a fundamental re-organization of society along socialist lines.

However, many supporters of the Bolivarian cause preferred to stand pat on the social achievements of their movement, rather than risking an uncertain advance toward socialism. The dynamics of elections under capitalism, which isolate working people from each other while maximizing the impact of hostile media, reinforce such conservative impulses.

Yet the revolutionary process has as yet been able only to slightly alleviate the grinding poverty of the Venezuelan masses. Society has only begun to recover from the devastation of neo-liberalism. A still-dominant capitalist class conspires to heighten instability, while seizing on it to discredit the government.

The revolution cannot stand pat. It must advance – or ultimately lose all.

That choice will be made not in parliament but in the arena of mass social struggles, where the multi-millioned Bolivarian vanguard, if successfully deployed, has decisive political weight.

The referendum's outcome is a serious setback. But the resolute response of President Chávez, plus the vigor and determination of the Bolivarian ranks, provide good reason to believe that the revolution will resume its forward march.

Socialist Voice #224, December 17, 2007

## **Quebec's Debate on 'Reasonable Accommodation' — A Socialist View**

*Reprinted, with permission, from Richard Fidler's blog, [Life on the Left](#).*

*The article by Benoit Renaud, a member of the [International Socialists](#) and Québec solidaire, was originally published in French the November 2007 issue of Résistance, an IS publication. The translation and Introduction are by Richard Fidler.*

### **Introduction**

In recent months Quebec has been immersed in a collective debate on its “national identity”. It erupted in 2006 when the mass media began making a fuss about a few incidents in which members of minority “cultural communities” — mainly Muslims, but also Jews, Sikhs and others — had requested and in some cases obtained measures to accommodate their particular religious beliefs.

Some Muslim students, pursuant to a complaint to Quebec's human rights commission, had been allocated prayer space in an engineering school. A community health clinic had organized women-only prenatal classes for some Muslims. A school's ruling that a Sikh student could not wear his kirpan, or ceremonial dagger, because it was a “weapon” was overturned by the Supreme Court, which recognized the kirpan as a religious artefact. Hassidic Jews had requested, and paid for, the frosting of the windows of a YMCA gym to shield teenage males at their neighbouring school from the sight of females working out.

These and similar incidents — all equally banal — were given greater weight when Mario Dumont, the leader of the right-wing Action démocratique party (ADQ), seized on them to campaign in opposition to “unreasonable accommodation” of such practices and in defence of “Quebec values and identity”. His message resonated in some circles. In one notorious incident, the council in Hérouxville, a small town north of Trois-Rivières, posted a “code of conduct” instructing prospective immigrants that they would not tolerate certain practices such as “the stoning of women”.

The opposition to “accommodation” of minorities was clearly motivated in part by the climate of fear of “others” generated by the “war on terror”, and the media attention was not unrelated to the Islamophobia that is part and parcel of the campaign in support of Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan. But it soon became clear that this xenophobia — or “heterophobia” as some call it — also reflected some deeper concerns and insecurities about the status and future of the French language and culture within the native Francophone population, an 80% majority within Quebec but a 20% minority within Canada.

At first, the governing Liberals and (then) official opposition Parti québécois did little to resist Dumont's demagoguery. But the campaign raged on, and in February of this year, on the eve of the

Quebec election campaign, Premier Jean Charest appointed a commission of inquiry to examine the issue of reasonable accommodation.

The Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (commonly referred to as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, after its co-chairmen, Professors Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor) was instructed to “formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to Québec’s values as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society,” and to deliver its report by March 31, 2008. Bouchard and Taylor commissioned various research reports and this fall held public hearings throughout Quebec.

In all, some 3,300 persons attended the hearings, and 764 of them made presentations to the commissioners. More than 960 written briefs were presented; many of them are posted on the commission’s web site.

The hearings were given wide media coverage. The commission heard many presentations that were racist and xenophobic, especially in rural areas far from Montréal, where most of Quebec’s minority “cultural communities” are located. But when the hearings moved to Montréal, near the end, there were many strong and often moving presentations made by minority representatives themselves explaining the importance to them of their religious beliefs and providing much-needed context to the recent events.

The public debate tended to raise many issues that went far beyond the concept of “reasonable accommodation”, a legal concept that has traditionally referred primarily to special measures taken to aid pregnant women (special leave, lighter duties) or the handicapped and other disadvantaged persons (ramps, special education classes, etc.) and facilitate their participation with equal rights, if not equal circumstances, in society. At issue now were important questions addressed to the fundamental values and concepts identified with Quebec citizenship, and more specifically how immigrants and other non-native Francophone communities could be welcomed and integrated within Quebec’s predominantly French-speaking society. And the debate highlighted, once again, some important differences pertaining to these issues not only within Quebec but between prevailing conceptions of Quebec nationhood in Quebec and conflicting conceptions of Canadian citizenship promoted by the federal government.

(The Commission specifically excluded from its consideration the “rights and prerogatives” already accorded to Quebec’s English-speaking community, and “the political and legal status of the aboriginal peoples”, eleven of which are recognized as distinct “nations” in Quebec law.)

I’ll have much more to say in subsequent posts about this vast “débat de société”, which sheds some much-needed light on key issues relating to the Quebec national question. But readers will benefit greatly from considering what some Québécois themselves have to say on these questions. And in particular, what the socialists have to contribute to the debate.

A valuable contribution is an article by Benoit Renaud, a leader of the International Socialists, a recognized “collective” or political current within Québec solidaire (QS), the new party of the left. Renaud was involved in drafting the QS brief to the Bouchard-Taylor commission, and his

article was published in mid-November as part of that process. The QS brief, which was presented to the commission on December 11, is now available (in French only) on the party's web site. I will comment on it later.

Renaud's article appears in the November issue of the journal *Résistance!*. Here it is, my translation. – RF

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## **Issues facing the Bouchard-Taylor Commission**

**By Benoit Renaud**

(November 16, 2007) This commission was established by the Charest government just before the elections last March, in the wake of a campaign led by the ADQ and relayed by the media to the effect that “unreasonable” accommodations of religious and cultural minorities were becoming so numerous as to constitute a threat to “Québécois values and identity”.

The reaction of the government (and the PQ) was initially to refuse to address the issue; they said the ADQ was exaggerating and that these questions should be left to be settled by mutual agreement or through the courts. But the increasing number of “cases”, which for the most part had nothing to do with reasonable accommodation in the strict sense (a legal decision based on the Charters and designed to avoid situations of indirect discrimination), ended up drawing the PQ, and the government, onto the minefield laid by the sensationalist media and fueled by ADQ leader Mario Dumont's statements.

The ADQ positioned itself as the party that defended Quebec identity and culture against the threat represented by immigration and minorities. The other two big parties ended up adopting variable doses of the same medicine, combined with some empty liberal phrases against the dangers of racism. But no one stated clearly that this was a campaign about looking for scapegoats to blame for the very real crisis of the Quebec national project, the primary responsibility for which lies with the major political parties and our elites.

### **Islamophobia, immigration and sovereignty**

Six years of “war against terrorism”, coming on top of a long history of colonialism in the Middle East, have fueled every possible prejudice toward Muslims and the peoples associated with them in the western imagination (including Arabs of Christian or atheist persuasion, Sikhs, Orthodox Jews, etc.). When the municipal council members in Hérouxville adopted their “code of life”, it was because it had been hammered into them for some years — in the mass media and through the mouths of political leaders like Stephen Harper and Tony Blair — that the evil fundamentalist terrorists are “against our way of life” and that we are in a “war of civilizations”.

The presence of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan is based on this colonialist ideology, which holds that women and children in the Muslim countries need the protection of Christian white men against the irrational and violent men of their own society. It is necessary, therefore, to escape this logic of war as fast as possible and make Quebec a place of welcome for those men

and women who are fleeing imperialism, whether they are Iraqi or Afghan refugees or U.S. soldiers who refuse to go and fight for the wealth and power of their leaders.

In all Western societies, immigration is used in the interests of economic growth without much thought being given to the genuine social, cultural and political integration of these new people. The effect is to reinforce tendencies to ghettoization on the one side and xenophobia on the other — irrespective of one's theoretical model of citizenship, whether it is the French concept of *jus soli* or right of the soil, the U.S. concept of the “melting pot”, or Canadian multiculturalism.

There is no alternative but to break with the neoliberal logic in its entirety if we are to develop a vision of immigration that is based on both the rights and needs of immigrants and the collective aspirations of the host society.

The sovereigntist project, which for forty years was embodied in the Parti québécois, has been undermined from within by the PQ's enthusiastic embrace of neoliberalism and its strategy of accommodation with imperialism as a means of facilitating recognition of a sovereign Quebec following a referendum victory. But the very idea of national independence becomes meaningless if such a victory does not allow Quebec society to defend itself against the effects of globalization and to withdraw from the criminal military alliances led by the United States.

What we tend to forget is that the “renewed federalism” defended by the Liberal party of Robert Bourassa and Claude Ryan until the Charlottetown Accord has likewise failed. What has carried the day, in practice, is the centralizing federalism defended by Trudeau and Chrétien. While the Quebec Liberal party (PLQ) of Jean Charest embodies acceptance of this defeat (hence its declining popularity among Francophones), the ADQ has attempted to resuscitate the project in alliance with the federal Conservatives. But the credibility of this autonomist option is extremely limited and suffers from its association with the right-wing, militarist Harper regime.

### **Tolerance or struggle against oppression?**

The weakness of the liberal response to the xenophobic wave has been amply demonstrated by the hearings of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. You cannot respond to a people who are in profound disarray, overwrought and continually assailed by discourses based on fear by simply saying that we must be kind and that diversity and openness are better values than homogeneity and withdrawal into a collective autism.

The kinds of questions that are now being put to the B-T Commission are all caught between the two poles of liberal tolerance and conservative intolerance. No one is talking in terms of oppression, whether of Quebec or of its racialized minorities, or of a struggle (ideally, a common struggle) against these oppressions. Very few people evoke, even in passing, the context of the “war against terrorism” and its ideological consequences, or its effects on our society and the way in which it has managed immigration through 25 years of neoliberalism. No one dares to refer to the two referendum defeats, the two counter-offensives of the federal state that ensued (the Constitution Act, 1982, and the “Clarity” Act), or the strategic impasse in which the sovereigntist movement now finds itself. There is talk of “laïcité” or secularism in terms of

individual behaviour or the exclusion of this or that type of clothing or accessory in certain public places. But no one denounces the fact that our government is massively subsidizing faith-based schools.

The logical political consequence of the present polarization would be the election of a majority ADQ government in the next general election (probably next spring) and the election of a majority of Conservative MPs from Quebec in the next federal election. In fact, the conservative, narrow defence of identity has become the alternative to the disoriented sovereigntist project, and the rise of intolerance weakens the determination of the Québécois to oppose the war in Afghanistan and Harper's militarist regime. The disarray of the centre-right parties (PQ, Canadian and Quebec Liberals, Bloc Québécois) is benefiting almost exclusively the hard right (ADQ and federal Tories).

### **The response of Québec solidaire**

Québec solidaire (QS) had the right idea in denouncing this demagoguery based on fear of others. But until now we have maintained a certain ambiguity on the question of accommodations, strictly speaking, and on what is or is not reasonable. This ambiguity was necessary in part so as not to presume the result of our internal discussion process on the topic. But in doing so, we have in fact occupied a position that is simply a bit more liberal (in terms of political theory) than the one held by PQ leader Pauline Marois or Premier Charest, and this has served to keep the debate on the continuum of "reasonableness".

The tabling of the QS brief to the B-T Commission will be a golden opportunity to stake out a distinct position for our party within the political landscape. But to do so, Québec solidaire's intervention must be based on clear statements and bold proposals.

In the first place, it will be necessary to make the link between this debate and the context of the "war against terrorism" and to denounce the irrationality of Islamophobia. Secondly, we must try to clarify the discussion by distinguishing what is truly reasonable accommodation (a legal concept based on rejection of adverse discrimination) from private arrangements (which should not even be matters for discussion), and from policies for the management of cultural and religious diversity in the public sphere, including the workplace.

Reasonable accommodation, strictly speaking, is an application of the individual rights, including freedom of religion, enshrined in the Charters. Challenging this reality would mean abandoning any notion of rights in order to impose the wishes of the majority without regard for individual freedoms. An about-face of this nature would effectively amount to the abandonment of one of the foundations of what we propose as a democratic society.

As for public policies, it would be appropriate to establish some guidelines for the protection of the rights of each and every one, including freedom of religion and expression, without creating any hierarchy among these rights. We ought to define more precisely our model of "laïcité" or secularism on the basis of the orientations already adopted by Quebec in matters of education, language and management of cultural diversity.

For example, for the schools (which were the central issue in the most recent election campaign in Ontario), Quebec might establish a single secular public school system within which the various religions and cultures could coexist. There is nothing to prevent a public school from providing hallal or kosher (or vegetarian) menus, offering optional courses in Hebrew, Arabic or Greek, or allowing young people to wear clothing or accessories associated with their particular religion or culture. But within this public and secular school, everyone would learn together about the history of Quebec, the sciences, arts and the foundations of all the great religions and philosophies of humanity. Quebec could become a society in which the world's diversity not only coexists (and is tolerated) but meets, within a perspective of creating something new, right here, and in French!

### **What resolution for this crisis?**

A satisfactory and lasting solution for the problems at the origin of the present debates over accommodation must therefore include (1) Quebec's withdrawal from any participation in the supposed war on terror, (2) a set of policies of resistance to neoliberalism and in defence of social rights and public services, (3) a language policy capable of advancing French as the language of work and the language of adoption of immigrants, and (4) an immigration policy based on recognition of the rights and aspirations of the newcomers and their genuine economic, social and cultural integration in a Quebec society that is in constant evolution.

These policies are conceivable only in a sovereign Quebec. Indeed, foreign and military policy is within Ottawa's jurisdiction. So also are the major issues of economic policy and international trade. And the Canadian Constitution of 1982 is a major legal obstacle to any strengthening of our language legislation. Finally, the federal government itself is a major employer, especially in the Outaouais region, and its language of work is generally English, even in the Ottawa-Gatineau area.

It is the continuation of Quebec's minority status within Canada that precludes the success of the inclusive and pluralist national project that emerged in the 1960s, was affirmed in the Charter of the French Language (Law 101) and has now entered into crisis as a result of the failure of the two referendums and the embrace of imperialism by the major sovereigntist parties. The political struggle of the future in Quebec will be between the conservative fallback on "identity" represented by the ADQ and the renewal of the struggle against national oppression in solidarity with the struggles against imperialism abroad and against racism at home. It is on this terrain that Québec solidaire must take its stand.

Socialist Voice #225, December 27, 2007

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Socialist Voice #226, December 29, 2007

## **Report from Pakistan: Benazir Bhutto assassination sparks mass protests**

**By Farooq Tariq**

*Farooq Tariq is General Secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan and Secretary of the Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee (Peasant Coordination Committee). The following article on the December 27 murder of Benazir Bhutto, chair of the Pakistan People's Party, was posted on Left Click. Subheads are by Socialist Voice.*

December 29, 2007 (7am)—Pakistan has never seen so many people protesting in streets all over as been the case during the last two days. They were all united across Pakistan to condemn the brutal murder of Benazir Bhutto. The news was heard with a great shock and there was an immediate mass anger erupted in all parts of Pakistan. December 28 was the first day of a general strike called by many groups ranging from political parties to various professional groups. Most of elections posters, banners, flags and billboards of Pakistan Muslim League (PMLQ) were the first victim of the mass anger. PMLQ is a General Musharaf creation after 1999; a major split from the Pakistan Muslim League. The rest is headed by Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister. PMLQ has shared power with General Musharaf since 2002 and is comprised of the most corrupt feudalists, capitalists, former army generals and black marketeers.

### **Mass Reaction**

PMLQ had spent billions on these advertising materials, and all that was gone within few hours of mass reaction. It was very proudly claiming that it has done the homework. The work to remove all this anti-people election material was done with utmost sophistication. None of Pakistan Peoples Party or Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz election material was removed.

Then it was the banks, mainly in Sind. They were attacked, and the buildings were burned in many cities of Sind. Most of ATM machines were destroyed. In some places, people were lucky to bring some money home. Banks had made unprecedented profits during the last few years. There was no free banking any more as had been the case earlier from sixties.

Hundreds of private buses were burned in all parts of the country. The fares had gone too high during Musharaf's eight years of rule. There were no more public buses. Most of PMLQ government ministers had their own bus companies and were making huge gains out of mass poverty.

There were also incidents of burning of railway trains in Sind. According to *Daily Jang*, 28 railway stations, 13 railway engines, and seven trains have been burnt, resulting in over three billion rupees [\$50 million] loss. The rail fares were increased by many folds by Musharaf regime in a bid to reduce the railway losses. It has been partly privatized as well. The whole rail

system has collapsed since the night of December 27. Thousands of passengers are on the railway stations waiting for restoration. There is no sign of restoration for some days. Pakistan International Airlines PIA and two private airlines, Air Blue and Shaheen Air, have cancelled all their domestic flights on the name of “rescheduling.” The staff did not turn up.

Thousands of private cars have been damaged all over Pakistan by the angry mob, mainly youth. They were showing their anger on the car companies’ (mainly Toyota, Suzuki and Honda) unprecedented profits during the last few years. Many leasing companies have robbed the growing middle classes by offering cars with abnormal prices, while the massive majority of population have no more subsidized public transport.

The houses and offices of PMLQ politicians, local government’s mayors and administration are the other victims of the mass reaction. They have either been burnt or damaged.

Over 100 people have so far died in the incidents relation to mass protest, either by police or by cross firing of different groups during the last 40 hours.

### **Slogans against Musharaf and Washington**

Thousands and thousands have raised slogans against Musharaf regime and American imperialism after the death of Benazir Bhutto. The anger was accumulated during the last eight years and was manifested after this unthinkable incident. This was a response of the masses to the strict implementation of neoliberal agenda, which resulted in unprecedented price hike, unemployment and poverty. The anger that was to be shown in boycotting or participating in the elections has come out early after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

There is a great anti-Musharaf consciousness all over. It is been shown in different ways in different part of the country in different degree. The so-called capitalist economic growth under Musharaf has left millions in absolute poverty. There was no “Pakistan shining” as was propagated by the dictatorship all the times.

The 2007 has been a year of mass awakening. It started with advocate [lawyer] movement after the removal of chief justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan. The chief justice Iftikhar Choudry said a big “No” to resigning under pressure by the Generals. He was removed only to be reinstated on July 20 after a massive movement of 80,000 lawyer’s community. They were joined by political activists from almost all political parties but not by the masses. The masses only welcomed the chief justice from the side roads and did not participate in the movement in real terms.

Musharaf got himself elected as president for the second five-year term in a “democratic manner” by a parliament elected for one five-year term. He was still wearing a military uniform when elected as “civilian” president. His theme was “elect me president for the second term and I will take off uniform after taking oath as civilian president.”

### **Lawyer’s movement**

The November imposition of martial law on the name of emergency was used to remove the rather independent top judges of Pakistan. It put restrictions on the media, and over 10,000 were arrested. Musharaf got himself duly “elected president” and took off his uniform after removing the top judges. His hand-picked judges gave him all the necessary backing. He was helped in this process by Benazir Bhutto, who was forced into (in Tariq Ali’s word) a “forced arranged marriage” by U.S. and British imperialism. In this unholy alliance, every one was cheating everyone with utmost honesty.

The general elections were announced for January 8 and the emergency lifted after the large-scale repression and removal of independent judiciary. The regime was happy that everything is going according to “plan.” The Pakistan Peoples Party of Benazir Bhutto and Muslim League Nawaz and Quid Azam (PMLQ), the three major parties, had agreed to participate in these fraudulent elections. The religious fundamentalist political alliance MMA had split on the question of participation in elections. One major part of MMA had gone to contest elections.

The campaign for and boycott the election had started when the religious fundamentalists struck and killed Benazir Bhutto on December 27 evening. The “plan” was shattered into pieces. It was big blow to agreed terms and conditions of various participating parties in the elections. It was not a bump on the road but a total destruction of the road of conciliations and compromises.

The murder of Benazir Bhutto is a double-edged sword. While it is big blow to the plans of British and American imperialism, it will also be no celebration for the religious fundamentalist forces. The initial anger has gone against the military regime and its crony politicians. It can go against the both. No party will be able to celebrate the shocking killings.

But Musharaf regime has understood this clearly and now is trying consciously to put the direction of the movement against the religious fundamentalists. Last night on December 28, in a two-hour press conference, a military brigadier representing the government named Baitullah Mehsud, an Al-Qaeda associate in tribal areas of Pakistan, as the one who carried out the attack.

Foolishly he tried his best to prove that Benazir Bhutto was not killed by a bullet but by the lever of sun roof of the bullet proof car while Benazir Bhutto was waving to crowds outside after the bomb blast. What difference it makes, if it is proved that Benazir Bhutto is killed not by the bullet but by another way? Not much.

The military brigadier’s explanation did not satisfy the angry journalists who asked him again and again about the connections of secret intelligence agencies of Pakistan with Abdullah Mahsood. The question of why Mahsood released quietly over 200 Pakistan army men on the day of imposition of emergency, who were kidnapped by his group a week earlier, went unanswered. The military Inter Services Intelligence ISI has a long-time relationship with the religious fundamentalist groups dating back to eighties, when imperialists and fundamentalists were close friends.

**Volatile, dangerous and capricious**

It is very volatile, unstable, unpredictable, explosive, dangerous, impulsive, fickle and capricious political situation. It never happened before in many years that mass reaction has erupted to this degree.

The general strike was a total success. All roads were empty. No traffic at all. All shops were closed. All industrial and other institutions were completely shut down.

After the initial inhibition to curb the strike, the regime has now issued strict orders to kill anyone on the spot if it is "looting" anything. It has called the regular army in 16 districts of Sind and paramilitary forces elsewhere in Pakistan.

The regime has so far not postponed the scheduled elections but it is very difficult to hold elections in this situation. Muslim League Nawaz and several other political parties have already announced to boycott the fraudulent elections.

Labour Party Pakistan is demanding an immediate resignation of the Musharaf dictatorship and formation of an interim government comprising of civil society organizations, trade unions and peasant organizations. This is to hold free and fair general elections under an independent election commission. It is demanding an immediate restoration of top judges and investigations of the murder of Benazir and others in this and previous bomb blasts by these top judges. As part of All Parties Democratic Movement, LPP is supporting a three-day general strike and linking it to the overthrow of the military dictatorship. It is asking all parties to reject the general elections fraud on January 8 and to not participate in these elections.