

SOLIDARITY IS BUILT ON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Now more than ever solidarity between progressive people in Quebec and the rest of Canada is needed to defeat the corporate agenda. An alliance between workers in Quebec and Ontario is essential to any strategy to counter the Harper government's aggressive tactics and regressive policies.

Many organizations have learned that the key to solidarity is recognizing that Canada is a multinational country. The Canadian Labour Congress and many unions recognize the national character of Quebec and have adopted internal structures that reflect Quebec's status as the home of a distinct national community. Progressive people in Quebec and the rest of Canada also recognize the right to self-government as advocated by aboriginal organizations.

What does it mean to say that Canada is a multinational country? It means that within Canada's borders there is more than one community whose experience of a shared history, and a common language, culture and shared social, legal, economic and political institutions is so strong that members of that community see themselves as having a common national identity. In the case of the Quebecois, a shared history dates to the early 1600s. In the case of aboriginal communities this history goes back many thousands of years. A community whose common language is English grew up alongside the already existing French and aboriginal societies after Britain replaced France as the dominant power in what is now Canada.

Canadians outside of Quebec have difficulty understanding why Quebecers and aboriginal peoples want political structures that reflect their distinct national status. This lack of understanding can lead to a prejudice that needs to be combated, along with all other types of prejudice.

Can a country be both multicultural and multinational? Opportunist politicians often contrast the desire of Quebecers for national recognition to the hopes of recent immigrant communities for equality within Canada. The reality is that both Quebec, and Canada outside of Quebec are multicultural societies and progressive people in both fight against racism and ethnic prejudice. The fight is the same, even though it is conducted in French in Quebec, and English in the rest of the country.

Is recognizing the national status of Quebecers and of aboriginal peoples the same thing as promoting independence or separation? The answer is no. Different national communities can exist within the framework of one state. Living side by side, they can develop a shared history and shared social, economic and political projects, even while keeping their distinct identities and institutions. But the relationship between national communities living within one state must be voluntary and based on mutual respect. That is why the principle of self-determination of peoples and nations is so important.

This principle recognizes that members of a national community have the right to choose to leave a particular state. The reality is that virtually all Quebec labour and other progressive organizations support Quebec's right to independence. This view must be respected. In the years ahead, corporate Canada and their political allies will try to divide workers in many different ways. We should all commit to building the understanding and respect needed for labour solidarity that will be so crucial to defeating our common enemies.