

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article646>



Globalisation

Quebec City 2001: 'An Ascending Movement'

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV332 - June 2001 -

Publication date: Sunday 3 June 2001

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

What happened during the Summit of the Americas meeting in Quebec City in April was big - anywhere between 40,000 to 60,000 people at its' biggest.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ftaa2-2.jpg>] Quebec City - 30,000 protesters march

This makes QC2001 as big as, or bigger than, Seattle or Washington. But besides huge numbers of people deciding to go to Quebec City - despite the police and media barrage warning of violent protesters - what else happened in Quebec City?

We all saw it

The mobilisation for Quebec City was not only large; it was also incredibly diverse in terms of who participated and in what ways. The Peoples' Summit, an international education and activist forum, ran for the whole week.

A series of protest marches were also organised by different groups, representing very different constituencies. These began with a candlelight vigil on Thursday 19 April. The next day activists organised the Carnival Against Capitalism-a forum for diverse direct action tactics, ranging from street theatre to tearing down the "wall of shame".

The mobilising culminated on Saturday 21 April in a massive labour-and NGO-led march away from the fence. This march was joined by another organised by Operation Quebec Printemps 2001 (OQP 2001), a Quebec City-based coalition of student associations, union locals, NGOs, and other political activists, and the Quebec public service union, SFPQ.

A smaller, more militant breakaway rally organised by the Anti-Capitalist Convergence (CLAC) and the Summit of the Americas Welcoming Committee (CASA) attracted about 5,000 people who were committed to confronting the authorities at the wall.

Throughout the weekend there were protracted street battles occurring near the "wall of shame" - the fence erected to protect the Summit participants from viewing dissent.

Initially, police tactics (which included tear gas and rubber bullets) indicated that a decision had been made to avoid direct physical confrontation. However, in reality, their tactics were not only more violent, they also affected all the protesters, whether or not they were involved in direct action.

Leading activists, including Jaggi Singh, were subject to street abductions by undercover police. Others sustained injuries from flying tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and police beatings. Some of the injuries were very serious. And by the end of the weekend there had been up to 500 arrests.

Although the media focused primarily on those characterised as young anarchists, and as "a small but highly organized band of professional agitators ... and Marxist criminals" (Ottawa Sun, April 22,) the number of people who did direct action in Quebec City (around 8,000) was significant.

The tactics of those who "went to the fence" were definitely more militant and oppositional than at previous protests.

Quebec City saw much more than blockades of streets. The hours of intense street battles over Friday and Saturday that continued late into the night demonstrated the "no retreat" stance of thousands of activists.

What Have We Gained

The Quebec City mobilisation clearly pushed the politics of protest further to the left - particularly into an explicit opposition to neo-liberalism and the corporate agenda. This was clearly demonstrated in the labour-NGO march on Saturday.

Although this was organised under the slogan of 'The FTAA that we want' (which essentially focused on the integration of social, environmental and labour clauses into the free trade agreement), banners demonstrating this position were largely invisible. Anti-FTAA political messages prevailed. The People's Summit also closed articulating a far more explicit anti-FTAA message than it had proposed initially [see [IV No. 331, May 2001](#) - ed.].

There was a greater anti-capitalist presence in Quebec City than was evident in Seattle or Washington. The CLAC-CASA march of 5,000 was under an anti-capitalist banner. There were many anti-capitalist flags and banners in the OQP march. The OQP march, while not explicitly anti-capitalist, was nonetheless staunchly in opposition to the FTAA.

At the same time, Quebec demonstrated the need to strengthen anti-capitalist politics and organisation within the global justice movement. Anti-capitalist forces had a very limited capacity to intervene in the labour-dominated march and the socialist left even less so.

But anti-globalisation, anti-corporate and anti-neo-liberalism politics should not be equated with anti-capitalism. We also should not assume that militant tactics are necessarily accompanied by a clear and agreed upon radical politics.

It is difficult to determine the politics of the people at the fence and the diversity of tactics used in Quebec reflects a diversity of politics. But it would be a mistake to characterise their actions as apolitical acts of hooliganism. This argument is found not only in the mainstream media but also to some degree within left circles attempting to grapple with the significance of the tactics used in Quebec.

There were thousands of people who went to the perimeter. Many probably did not go to the fence because they have a unified or comprehensive political project. But their analysis had brought them all to the point where they recognised that these meetings of international corporate and political elites are significant. Many have an in-depth analysis of the issues of the day, including the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

The people who went to the fence were united by the immediate goal of witnessing, supporting or participating directly in shutting the meetings down. Even actions characterised as vandalism or random acts of violence, for example, breaking windows at the Shell gas station, were in reality targeted actions politically motivated by an anti-corporate analysis.

Debating Direct Action

A lot of public and private discussion post-Quebec has focused on the pros and cons of the diversity of tactics

evident throughout the protests. It is difficult to gauge the impact of the mainstream media coverage on the amount of public support for direct action of any kind, but it is important to remember that those who engage in this type of action are not doing it for the media or for the casual observer.

Much of the direct action was organised through affinity groups [small, self-defined, self-organised collectives-ed.] and in spokescouncil meetings [general assemblies with delegated representatives from affinity groups-ed.]. The direct action model, which attempts to be collective and non-hierarchical, stands in opposition to the ways our workplaces and political systems are structured. This is the first challenge direct action activists make to the status quo.

Direct action provides opportunities to, on the one hand, disrupt, and sometimes stop, meetings of the political and corporate elite. On the other, it provides opportunities to act in solidarity with other activists in ways that build militancy, partly out of the feelings of collective power that is palpable during actions such as Quebec City.

One of the challenges for future mass protests is how to develop the affinity group model so that it can produce a more coordinated response, and is less a small group means of tactical expression.

Quebec City witnessed some small degree of bridging the gulf between direct action, and labour and community groups through the stream of people who left the labour march to go to the perimeter. On a smaller scale, it was bridged as the direct action activists became a pole of attraction for a small number of militant labour activists who came to direct action groups to learn and work together.

Pressure From Below

Leading figures such as Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians [left-nationalist citizen's movement-ed.] and Sid Ryan, head of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario also took important political stances that reflect a radicalising pressure from below.

Barlow publicly supported the right of people to fight back when their livelihoods are threatened (note, not just when they are attacked by police) and Ryan sent out a press release that announced his intention to march to the fence. He did and was tear-gassed along with everyone else there.

Quebec exposed the limits of positions that make a principle of peaceful protest or that force a disjuncture between violent and peaceful protesters. First, the police made no such distinctions with their indiscriminate, massive tear-gassing. This made an impact on both the residents of Quebec City and those who consider themselves "peaceful".

Second, it is clear from Quebec that those practicing direct action are not just youth radicals but also social justice activists, students and members of unions. The sheer creativity and diversity of expression suggests that there is lots of room for this movement against globalisation to grow. The question is who and what politics will shape and push this growth?

In the debate about tactics, one thing is clear. The nature of the protests and the aftermath would have been profoundly different had the fence not been breached. Militant self-organisation by protesters exposed the conservatism of the union and NGO leadership and in some cases forced them to the left.

What happened in Quebec has opened up possibilities for the movement to continue to radicalise and to grow. Within the labour movement, discussions generated by the widespread criticism of labour leaders could open up opportunities for talking about the politics of tactics: labour marshals attempted to block marchers from joining protesters at the fence and the labour leadership agreed with the police to march away from the fence.

Where do we go from here?

For many of the protesters, seeing, hearing and being a part of the large mobilisation in Quebec City means that they cannot look at the world in the same way.

The politics of this experience may not be clear and well defined but, for socialists committed to building an anti-capitalist current, there are more opportunities to talk to and act with more people than before Quebec City.

The growing global justice movement will be shaped and defined by those who went to the fence, those who wish they did, and those who could not get to Quebec but were politicised and uplifted by the resistance they witnessed.

The events in Quebec demonstrate that a new movement is ascending but important challenges remain. Sections of the global justice movement remain predominantly white and inaccessible to people with little or no financial security.

This issue is particularly relevant for those mobilised around direct action, as was graphically demonstrated by the comparatively diverse labour march. Organised activists need to look at the ways issues are made a priority, how we organise, and how accessible our organising spaces are.

For anti-capitalism to become a stronger and more explicit force within the movement, it needs to become a more significant force within the labour movement. Activists inside and outside labour need to focus on the ways trade agreements and other tools of capitalism make an impact domestically.

The anti-FTAA protests in Quebec City are important because they raise opportunities to link local struggles to the capitalist system in both practical and theoretical ways. An analysis that makes these links may increase the numbers of people who participate in these demonstrations, as well as the potential gains.

Protesting at summits will not bring about the kind of radical systemic change required (although organising and participating in these kinds of protests does provoke change in individuals and activist groups).

Quebec has opened up space for activists within their locals to push for more labour engagement in struggles occurring on the ground locally, for example, through supporting and encouraging the development of flying squads which support picket lines and direct actions.

In Toronto, unions can be pushed to commit to work with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) in its provincial campaign against the neo-liberal agenda of Mike Harris' government. The protests in Quebec have strengthened the militancy, advanced the solidarity and increased the numbers of people who are prepared to engage in this kind of work.

► This article appears in the May/June issue of New Socialist magazine.