

CHC2P Unit 4: 1960s-1980s: A Nation's Challenges

Activity 3: Quebec Nationalism

Overview

In this activity, you will learn how nationalism grew in Quebec due to the discontent of its population. Students will also learn how unions worked for social change and supported the working class.

Lesson

Foreign Investment and Preservation



Maurice Duplessis and his Union Nationale Party ruled in the province of Quebec for most of the 1940s and 1950s.

Duplessis invited the United States' investments into Quebec, while attempting to preserve the province as a conservative, rural, and Catholic region.

The Asbestos Strike of 1949 demonstrated discontent with Duplessis' policies. The 142-day strike against an American-owned company highlighted the fact that Francophones could stand up for their rights. This feeling of French

Canadian togetherness and pride can be described as French Canadian nationalism.

The Strike of Asbestos Workers in Quebec in 1949



Asbestos is a fibrous and non-combustible mineral found in the Eastern Townships of the province of Quebec. The largest asbestos mining company in the world in 1949 was a Canadian company: Johns-Manville (CJM), a branch of an American-owned multi-national firm. The 9000 people who lived in the company town of Asbestos depended on the company for their livelihood. In 1949, 2100 persons were employed by CJM.

Among the requests of the workers were the following: elimination of the disease-causing asbestos dust in work areas, a 15-cent increase in pay to \$1.00 an hour, the Rand Formula (the rule that a worker in a union workplace will have union dues deducted from his/her pay cheque), and increased pay for overtime work. The workers argued that the company was making healthy profits while the workers' wages were lower than those in comparable industries.

CJM offered the workers an increase of 5 cents an hour. As a result, in February 1949, the Asbestos workers went on strike.

Trouble Makers or the Victims of Tyranny?

The provincial government of Premier Maurice Duplessis called the strike illegal and condemned the union leaders as “trouble-makers.” Duplessis sent one hundred provincial police officers to Asbestos to guard the company’s property.

CJM refused to negotiate until the workers returned from their “illegal strike.” The company brought hundreds of strike-breakers into the plant and gave them a ten-cent-an-hour wage increase, and it threatened to evict hundreds of strikers from company-owned homes. The strikers tried to prevent the strike-breakers from entering the mine and the provincial police responded by arresting and intimidating some of the strikers.

Public and newspaper opinion favoured the striking workers. A number of Catholic religious authorities had made statements of sympathy and support for the workers. Archbishop Joseph Charbonneau of Montreal declared that “it is the duty of the Church to intervene and speak out against tyranny” and called for Sunday collections to aid the strikers. Archbishop Roy of Quebec City made a similar appeal. Many other unions in Quebec sent food and money to the strikers and their families.

Better Wages and a New Perspective



In early May, Asbestos attracted worldwide attention as violence between the police and strikers escalated. Two hundred strikers, including four leaders, were arrested.

With the help of Archbishop Roy, a settlement was finally reached on July 1, 1949, almost five months after the beginning of the strike. The strikers received a ten-cent-an-hour increase and four paid holidays a year. But the company retained the strike-breakers and not all of the strikers were rehired. An arbitration board ruling later in the year gave the union the Rand formula and two more annual paid holidays.

The workers gained a large psychological victory for themselves and their supporters in Quebec. The strike showed that Francophones could bring about changes themselves. It showed that Francophones could stand up to the “foreign” control of their industries. It showed that there was more to the Quebec economy than agriculture.

Lesage and Levesque

Maurice Duplessis died in 1959, and in 1960, the provincial Liberals swept to power. With the election of Jean Lesage (1960-1966), Quebec underwent the “Quiet Revolution”. This meant that, through changes in laws, there were large changes in Quebec society. The government reformed education, pension, and labour laws. Quebec’s economy shifted from its agricultural base and the influence of the Catholic Church declined.

During the Quiet Revolution, Quebec’s separatist movement grew - and became less and less quiet. The Separatists believed that Quebec should separate from Canada and become an independent country. In

1963, the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) formed underground to fight for Quebec independence. It used increasingly violent terrorist tactics - bombings, robberies, kidnappings, killings - against Federal and British targets.



In the 1960's, journalist René Lévesque became an outspoken leader for independence. Unlike the FLQ, Lévesque and his followers planned to achieve independence by peaceful means. In 1968, they formed a new provincial party - the Parti Québécois (PQ). The goal of this party was to achieve Quebec sovereignty or independence by means of majority vote.

Reasons for Discontent in French Canada

- Most businesses (80%) were owned by Anglophones (people whose first language is English).
- Francophones (people whose first language is French) were forced to speak English at work.
- The unemployment rate in Quebec was one of the highest in the country.
- The wealthiest people in the province of Quebec were Anglophones.
- Among all ethnic groups in Quebec, francophone workers were among the lowest paid.
- Infant mortality rates (number of children per 1000 who die before the age of 2) were higher in Quebec than the rest of the country.
- As the birth rate in Quebec dropped in the 1960's, fear increased about the continuing existence of the French language and culture.

Assignment

1. What were the other demands of the unions in the Asbestos Strike?
2. Explain why the Asbestos Strike of 1949 was important in the history of French Canada.
3. Parts of the Canadian economy are unionized today. In your opinion, are there other parts of the Canadian economy (retail sales workers, restaurant workers) that deserve unions? Explain your answer.
4. List four reasons for discontent in French Canada in the 1960's.