

Memories of Michel Chartrand (1916-2010)

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Michel Chartrand, an outstanding leader of the Quebec labour, nationalist, socialist and social justice movements, died on April 12 at the age of 93.

A multitude of Québécois worked with Michel in the causes that marked his long life, and the Quebec media this week are full of tributes to his contributions. Translated below is an older tribute by 110 well-known activists, published on the occasion of his 90th birthday, that summarizes some of the key events of his life. It is followed by some personal memories of my own. — Richard Fidler.

In Praise of a Passionate Defender of the Workers

Le Devoir, November 18, 2006

Next December 20, Michel Chartrand will celebrate his 90th birthday. One of the very few public personalities to have never deviated from his ideals, this exceptional fighter has for 70 years participated in all the memorable events in Quebec's history. He has become an integral part of those events since he has been on the line of fire in all the major social and political battles, starting in the mid-1930s. For example, during the Fifties, in the "Grande Noirceur" [the dark days of Duplessis], he acted as a spearhead of the trade-union movement, which was the real opposition to Duplessism and opened the way to the Quiet Revolution. Chartrand personally paid the price, being jailed no fewer than seven times in the course of the hard-fought conflicts that marked that period, the best known of which were those in Asbestos and Murdochville.

The fate he suffered then gave a foretaste of the troubles he would later have with the legal system and the many further jailings - including his detention for four months under the War Measures Act decreed by the Trudeau government during the October Crisis of 1970. His trial - like that of all the 300 or so other persons unjustly jailed at that time - ended in a dismissal of the charges.

A Political Man

Michel has been predominantly a political man. Throughout his life, he has concerned himself with public issues and spoken abundantly about them. "Everything is political," he loves to say. But this patriarch of the Quebec left has consistently scorned the traditional parties, which in his view seek only power without real change.

In the first part of his public life, he was deeply involved in the adventure of the reformist nationalist parties of the Thirties and Forties – Action Libérale Nationale and the Bloc Populaire – precursors of the contemporary sovereigntist formations, the Parti Québécois and Bloc Québécois.

As his thinking radicalized he opted for more marginal parties. In the Fifties he succeeded Thérèse Casgrain as leader of the Parti Social-Démocrate, the Quebec wing of Tommy Douglas’s Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). And in the early Sixties he was the founding president of the Parti Socialiste du Québec (PSQ), while Jean Lesage’s “Equipe du tonnerre” [“thunder team,” the All-Star Liberal cabinet] ruled in Quebec City.

Michel was an independentist from the very beginning, but he never supported the Parti Québécois, criticizing it as overly centrist for his taste and denouncing some of its neoliberal policies. However, that did not prevent him from occasionally supporting progressive PQ candidates.

Pillar of the Trade-Union Movement

Driven out of the CTCC, the CSN’s predecessor,[1] by its then secretary general, Jean Marchand – one of the three “doves” who, with Trudeau and Gérard Pelletier headed off to Ottawa in 1965 to “put Quebec back in its place” – Chartrand went back to practicing his trade as a printer for ten years.

But it was as president of the Montréal Central Council of the CSN, from 1968 to 1978, that Michel gave his full measure as a man of action and an orator. He became one of the pillars of the Quebec union movement, which he helped to transform into an instrument of struggle.

He was also the keenest enthusiast of the innovative orientation adopted by the union central, which sought to add to the traditional mission of trade-unionism – the negotiation of collective agreements, referred to as the “first front” – a “second front.” This was expressed, for example, in the Central Council’s involvement in various social and political causes, such as:

- the defense of the rights of tenants and assistance to injured workers;

- the founding of a popular newspaper, the weekly Québec-Presse;

- the establishment of superstore food co-operatives (Cooprix);

- support to the Front d’Action Politique (FRAP), the first progressive party to oppose Jean Drapeau, the autocratic mayor of Montréal;

- the successful campaign to abolish the private hunting and fishing clubs, which earned Chartrand yet another stay behind bars;

- and, above all, the practice of international solidarity with the Centre international de solidarité ouvrière (CISO), founded by the late Roberto Quévillon, and the Québec-Palestine and Québec-Chile committees.

Return to the Co-Operative Movement

Following his withdrawal from full-time union activity, in the late Seventies, Chartrand

returned to one of his first loves, the co-operative movement, and he devoted himself primarily to his duties as chairman of the board of directors of the Caisse populaire des syndicats nationaux [the CSN's credit union].

Still tireless, in the mid-1980s he established the FATA [Foundation to assist injured workers], where he spent several years working with such valued collaborators as Roch Banville, Émile Boudreau and Claude Pételle, all of them now deceased.

When he was over 80 years old, Michel launched a campaign in favour of establishing a "citizenship income." For several months he criss-crossed Quebec holding dozens of meetings to publicize the manifesto he had written on this topic. He even made a lengthy stop-over in Jonquière, during the 1998 elections, to run against the then premier Lucien Bouchard, as a spokesperson for the Rassemblement pour l'alternative progressiste (RAP - Coalition for a progressive alternative), one of the predecessors of Québec solidaire. His slogan was "Zero poverty through a citizenship income," which contrasted with the controversial "Zero Deficit" of the PQ government.

Sixty years after his activism in Catholic Action movements (following a spell as a Trappist monk at Oka), he was smitten with the same ideal of social justice, and had the same horror at injustice. Paradoxically, he became a nationalist while he was a monk. "Nationalism," he explains, "is the precondition to an opening toward the world."

The Idealist

In 1993, after 51 years of marriage, Michel suffered the painful loss of his companion Simonne Monet. Canon Lionel Groulx, who married them and baptized their seven children, described them in 1942 as "two young idealists whose fates will be joined forever." He could not have said it better. Even if, in their quest for greater social justice, Simonne and Michel chose the difficult road of financial insecurity and adversities of all kinds, they always supported each other as two inseparable accomplices.

This very incomplete overview will, we hope, have the merit of acquainting the younger generation of some of the accomplishments of an exceptional personality, thirsting for justice, who has devoted his life to the defense of the most disadvantaged in our society.

Some have been overly critical of his mood swings, his aggressiveness, his verbal violence, his utopian projects; but no one has ever been able to dispute his loyalty to the people, his idealism, his authenticity, his patriotism and his attachment to the French language. His many friends, among whom we wish to include ourselves, have had the privilege of discovering what lies hidden beneath the armour of the public figure. They can testify to the generosity and sensitivity of the man, his literary culture, his love of art, his profound humanism and even . . . his insolent language.

On the eve of his 90 years, therefore, we express the wish that this majestic oak will prolong for several years yet his peaceful retirement in the family home in Richelieu with his companion Colette Legendre. Long live Michel Chartrand, our young ninety-year-old!

[The list of the 110 signatories can be found at the conclusion of the [French text](#).]

Notes

1. CTCC – Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada; CSN – Confédération des syndicats nationaux.

My Memories of Michel

Richard Fidler

As a high school student in Toronto who had joined the CCF in 1958, I was vaguely aware of Michel Chartrand as the leader of the Quebec wing of the party. He seemed a lonely but heroic figure, combatting the forces of darkness in what most of Canada saw as “priest-ridden Quebec.”

But he had a major impact at the founding convention of the New Democratic Party in Ottawa in 1961, which occurred just as Quebec’s Quiet Revolution was getting under way. There, along with Gérard Picard of the CTCC, Michel headed a delegation of some 300 from Quebec who were inspired by the effort to build a new party of the left in Canada, more solidly based in the labour movement than the CCF. They fought successfully to get the new labour party to recognize, as part of its founding program, that Quebec was a distinct nation with the right of self-determination. It was not an easy victory; in a widely publicized gesture, Eugene Forsey, then research director of the Canadian Labour Congress, quit the NDP on the floor of the convention in anger at this decision. (Trudeau later made Forsey a Liberal senator.)

These differences persisted after the convention, and in 1962 the new party forces in Quebec split, most of the Anglophone leaders – such as philosopher Charles Taylor and Professor Michael Oliver (who was federal NDP President) – refusing to accept the majority decision at the new party’s orientation convention to build the party in Quebec as an autonomous Québécois partner of the Canadian NDP. The largely Francophone component went on to found the Parti socialiste du Québec (PSQ), independent of the NDP but not running against it in federal elections. In November 1963, as a student recently arrived in Montréal, I attended the PSQ’s founding convention in Quebec City, where Michel Chartrand was elected president of the party.

The PSQ, as it turned out, was somewhat ahead of its time. Although it was sympathetic to Quebec independence – its 1966 program called for an “État Libre du Québec,” a free Quebec, in “association with Anglophone Canada” – it was outflanked in the growing nationalist milieu by the Rassemblement pour l’indépendance nationale (RIN). In 1967 dissident Liberal cabinet minister René Lévesque adopted the associate-states formula and went on to found the Parti québécois shortly thereafter. The RIN dissolved into the PQ. These developments effectively undercut the PSQ and – lacking significant support in the unions – it soon disappeared.

Michel’s involvement with the CCF, NDP and PSQ reflected his profound conviction that the workers’ movement could not confine itself to collective bargaining and on-the-job representation but must strive to replace capitalism with a socialist society, through working to achieve a government of and for the working people. Thus it jarred me this week to read, in the CSN leadership’s tribute to Michel, the statement: “With the death of this outstanding trade-unionist, there comes to an end an entire epoch during which union action was inspired by anarcho-syndicalism.” Michel was anything but an anarchist. The CSN statement reflects not his views but the narrow concept of trade unionism as little more than economic struggle over wages and “benefits” that is held by the union bureaucracy.

Michel's Québécois nationalism was internationalist to the core, informed by a profound sense of solidarity with the oppressed everywhere. He was an "altermondialiste" – an opponent of capitalist globalization – long before the term became fashionable in progressive circles. In 1964, shortly after the founding of the PSQ, he spent almost a month touring revolutionary Cuba. When I [interviewed him](#) upon his return, he told me Cuba had "a government which works for the people," and he discussed frankly and sympathetically the difficulties confronted by the Cubans and their innovative efforts to overcome them. The interview also illustrates Michel's appreciation of artistic accomplishment as he observed it in Cuba, as well as his sense of humour and his keen anti-imperialism. In later years he was active in building solidarity with Allende's Chile and the Palestinians.

Although best known as a trade-union activist and politician, Michel was self-educated as a typographer. After he was fired as a CTCC organizer by Jean Marchand, he built a sizeable printshop, managed as a worker-owned cooperative, in the basement of the large A-frame house he and his wife Simonne Monet-Chartrand inhabited with their seven children. One evening, the Cuban consul in Montréal, Julia Gonzalez, and I visited them at their home in Longeuil, a suburb of Montréal on the south shore of the St. Lawrence river, and Michel took great pride in demonstrating to us the modern typesetting and printing equipment in the shop. His shop, Les presses sociales, was where many of the left and labour publications were printed during the 1960s, each bearing the CSN union label.

Around that time, the League for Socialist Action, a Trotskyist organization headquartered in Toronto, decided to establish its own printshop. Ross Dowson, the LSA's national secretary, asked if I could enlist Michel's help in checking out the operational capability of a second-hand Verityper for sale in Montréal. Michel readily agreed and one of his workers spent an entire afternoon with me putting this equipment through its paces; she recommended its purchase.

A further encounter with Michel was in 1971, when I was living in Toronto. It was shortly after the War Measures crisis. He came to Toronto along with his lawyer Robert Lemieux – both had been arrested during the army occupation of Quebec – and spoke eloquently, in English, to a huge and appreciative audience at the University of Toronto's Convocation Hall about the repression and the situation in Quebec. Later that year, Michel was active in the Front Commun pour la Défense de la Langue Française, a broad coalition of nationalist and left organizations that organized some mass demonstrations in favour of making French the official language of Quebec; this was the beginning of the radicalizing wave of actions that swept through Quebec not long after the Trudeau government's war measures.

Michel was an enthusiastic supporter of left regroupment and initiatives to build a new left party in Quebec. Although in his mid 80s, he attended the 2003 founding convention of the Union des forces progressistes (UFP), a forerunner of Québec solidaire. And at the recent convention of Québec solidaire, in late November 2009, we listened attentively as Paul Cliche, a founder of the FRAP in 1970, brought Michel's greetings to the delegates.

Michel Chartrand was best known to many as a colourful speaker – "un homme de parole." His speeches were powerful because they spoke to real injustice, and many are collected in a volume published by his biographer Fernand Foisy.[1] He had a remarkable ability to arouse an audience with both anger and humour in denunciations of capitalist exploitation and oppression, while articulating an alternative vision of another, possible Quebec of solidarity and emancipation. He fought with courage and principle. He shall long be remembered with affection and gratitude for his remarkable contribution to our struggles.

Richard Fidler is a Socialist Voice Contributing Editor and an Ottawa member of the Socialist Project. He writes the blog [Life on the Left](#) where this article first appeared.

Notes

1. Michel Chartrand: Les Dires d'un Homme de Parole (Lanctôt Éditeur, 1997). See also Michel Chartrand: Les Voies d'un Homme de Parole (Lanctôt Éditeur, 1999) and Michel Chartrand: La Colère du Juste (Lanctôt Éditeur, 2003), also by Fernand Foisy, the latter being a biography of Chartrand's life between 1968 and 2003.

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