

National news

Pot legalization movement picks up steam

By Micheal Dobie & Sharon Ashaiek

MONTREAL (CUP) - The movement pushing for the legalization of marijuana is gaining strength as a nascent pro-pot political party gets ready to run candidates in the upcoming Quebec election while Torontonians are being invited on the Can-Abyss train.

The Bloc Pot is being organized by 28-year-old Montreal musician Marc St. Maurice, a six-year veteran of marijuana activism.

He has collected the nearly 1,000 signatures needed to get official party status and is looking for 10 people to run for office. St. Maurice says lots of people have stepped forward, adding that it only remains to work out who will run in what riding.

One of those who has thrown his hat into the ring is Larry Duprey, who owns a pot paraphernalia store in Montreal.

By putting pot on the political agenda, Duprey says activists are looking for a gradual change in official attitudes towards marijuana.

"We've got to look at the edges of this law. We have to dance around it till we get to the centre," he said.

Charlie McKenzie, former chief janitor of the Parti Rhinoceros who now does human rights research for a United Nations agency, is a consultant for the Bloc Pot.

"Bloc Pot will engage at the provincial level because enforcement is a provincial jurisdiction. Bloc Pot can have an effect because of the polarization of politics in Quebec," he said.

St. Maurice says that electoral races are so close in Quebec that any percentage lost is a threat to the main parties. This will ensure, he adds, that marijuana will be an issue in the next provincial election.

"I'm confident we'll get a man in somewhere," St. Maurice said.

According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, the number of people arrested for marijuana-related offences has steadily risen over the past several years. The number increased to 29,562 in 1996 from 27,662 in 1994, reports Now, an alternative Toronto weekly. And those being caught by the long arm of the law for marijuana offences are facing stiffer penalties

because of tougher anti-drug legislation which the federal government brought into effect earlier this year.

There are also efforts in Ontario to raise awareness about the need to take a different legal approach to marijuana. Every Thursday night this fall at the Comfort Zone, a Toronto club, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws has been spreading the word about the

legalization of marijuana.

"The Can-Abyss train is going to go through that abyss, hopefully pick everybody up, and arrive at destination legalization, whereby we remove the criminal records from these people," Umberto Iorfida, president of the organization, said. He adds that 1.2 million Canadians have a police record for possession of marijuana.

Iorfida says drugs are a health issue and the government's criminal approach has backfired. "We're treating [marijuana] as a criminal substance [when] we should be treating it as a drug," he said. "We should be sending people who mess up on marijuana or any drug, for that matter, to doctors."

He adds that he foresees the legalization of marijuana by the year 2000 due to government cutbacks.

"It will come because the country can no longer afford the so-called war on drugs, Iorfida said.

The Can-Abyss campaign is also raising awareness about the hemp plant, which is essentially the marijuana plant grown without the active ingredient which gets users high. There are, according to Iorfida, over 30,000 commercial uses for this plant, and most are more environmentally friendly than materials and processes already in use.

CUP Briefs

Ontario gov't employees tattle on Tories as profits reaped on student debts

By Shauna Hemingway

TORONTO (CUP) - Ontario government employees and students are demanding an explanation from the education minister over the government's deliberate refusal to collect outstanding loans.

Last week, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) announced that some of its members were advised by the government in May 1996 not to collect more than \$300-million in defaulted loans.

This coincided with the developmental stages of the government's plan to privatize the collection of outstanding loans.

In a \$320-million deal that could be signed with three private collection agencies as early as December, these agencies would take a 20 per cent commission off the amount they collect for the government.

Six major private collection agencies are currently in the running for the government contract, including EquiFax Accounts Receivables, who contributed to the 1995 Conservative election campaign, say OPSEU representatives.

Protestor roughed up at Nike demonstration

By Chris Anderson

BURNABY (CUP) - A protest against Nike's labour practices turned ugly for one of the Vancouver participants joining in an international day of protest against the sportswear manufacturer.

The worldwide protest, held Oct. 18, targeted Nike's use of low wage labour in developing countries.

The Vancouver protest began when approximately 40 people gathered outside a downtown sports store. After several hours, a smaller group of protestors broke off and headed to a nearby shopping centre, where they continued the protest outside a Foot Locker store which had a large selection of Nike merchandise.

After about 10 minutes, the protestors were asked to leave by shopping centre security guards. Protestor Jaggi Singh refused to do so until he spoke with a police officer.

Singh says police arrived after about 20 minutes and arrested him under the charge "assault by trespass." He ended up spending the night in jail after he was booked, finger-printed, photographed and strip-searched. While in jail, he says he was visited by one of the arresting officers, who told him that he was also going to be charged with resisting arrest.

Singh was released the next morning, all charges against him dropped.

Singh says he is considering filing a complaint with the Vancouver Police Department and also laying assault charges against the shopping centre security guards.

The American group Campaign for Labor Rights has collected reports from 20 of the protests in Canada, the United States and New Zealand, many of which occurred in shopping malls. The Vancouver protest was the only one at which violence was reported.