

# Mass social disaffection reflected in electoral rout of Quebec separatists

By Keith Jones  
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With 46 percent of the popular vote, the Quebec Liberal Party won a large majority of the seats in Monday's provincial election and ended nine years of rule by the pro- *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ).

Although strongly supported by the trade union bureaucracy, the outgoing PQ government was the most right-wing since the authoritarian Union Nationale regime that governed Quebec in the 1950s. Under premiers Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry, the PQ imposed massive public and social spending cuts, expanded workfare and used a battery of antiunion laws to quell working class dissent.

Because of the union bureaucracy's suppression of the class struggle, Quebecers' disaffection with the PQ's anti-social agenda and more generally with the growth of corporate power, social inequality and economic insecurity has only found intermittent and often times politically confused expression. Nevertheless, the rout of the PQ—it polled its lowest share of the popular vote since 1973—the large increase in the abstention rate, and the plummet in support for the ultra right-wing Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) all point to widespread, if inchoate, popular dissatisfaction.

The Liberal campaign made a muted appeal to popular discontent over Quebec's rapidly deteriorating public health care and education systems. The Liberals have pledged to significantly increase spending in both areas and to make eliminating emergency ward overcrowding and lengthy waiting lists for potentially life-saving procedures the new government's top priority.

The thrust of the Liberal program, however, is sharply to the right. Many of its planks are modelled after policies implemented by the Ontario Tory and British Columbia Liberal governments—the provincial regimes that have spearheaded the dismantling of public services, privatization and deregulation.

Quebec's and Canada's business and political elites

have warmly welcomed the Liberal victory and not only because it removes the threat of another referendum on Quebec's secession from Canada. They expect and will demand that the new government intensify the big business offensive against the working class.

Significantly, in their election night speeches, both the premier-elect, Liberal leader Jean Charest, and the outgoing premier, PQ leader Bernard Landry, lauded the ultra-right-wing ADQ for having stimulated public debate by championing a flat tax, charter schools and a two-tier health system. ADQ leader Mario Dumont, affirmed Charest, can “hold his head very high, having made a very big contribution to Quebec's democratic life.”

The Liberals intend to use the ADQ as a right-wing foil, claiming that their plans to hand over management of much of the health care system to big business, expand private sector involvement in the provision of “non-essential” health services, and eliminate legal restrictions on companies using contracting-out to escape from union contracts are “centrist” when compared to the policy prescriptions of Dumont and his ADQ.

Big business, for its part, concluded that the ADQ, which before last year had only ever held one seat, was too weak and politically untested to be trusted with power. It will continue to use the ADQ to prod the PQ and the Liberals—the rival pro-independence and pro-federalist parties that have dominated Quebec politics since 1970—sharply to the right.

According to the corporate media, Quebecers had a choice last Monday between three starkly different parties. This claim only indicates the extent to which official politics have lurched to the right during the past quarter century. The PQ, Liberals, and ADQ are all beholden to big business. All are committed to a balanced budget, cutting corporate taxes and taxes on the rich, and “rethinking” or “reinventing” government—euphemisms for further cuts to public services and the removal of

regulatory restraints on capital.

Perceiving that none of the parties articulated their interests, a large part of the electorate failed to vote. Voter turnout was down almost 10 percentage points from the 1998 election and, at 70.5 percent, was the lowest in any Quebec election since 1927.

That this is due not to political disinterest, but rather the alienation of growing layers of working people from a political system that is increasingly insensitive to their needs and aspirations is underscored by the fact that Quebec has recently witnessed a massive and unprecedented popular mobilization against the war on Iraq. Such was the depth and breadth of popular antiwar sentiment, all three parties felt it wise to claim that they opposed the US-British invasion of Iraq.

Although the media has termed the Liberal victory a sweep, the Liberals in fact won 15,000 votes less than they did in the last election in 1998. And while the Liberals now have an unassailable majority in the Quebec National Assembly, with 76 of the 125 seats, they actually polled the votes of only 32 percent of all potential electors.

The PQ, meanwhile, saw its total vote fall by 475,000 votes or more than a quarter to 1,268,000.

The ADQ won four seats and saw its share of the popular vote increase from 12 to 18 percent, but this was a far cry from the 30 percent plus support it was receiving in opinion polls last fall. Clearly the more Quebecers learned about the ADQ's free-market program the less they liked. Four of the ADQ's five sitting MNAs lost their seats and none of its star recruits, including former Montreal Mayor Pierre Bourque were elected.

The Union des Forces Progressistes (UFP)—a coalition of social-democrats, dissident union bureaucrats and ex-radicals—stood 73 candidates and polled just over 40,000 votes, for a 1 percent share of the popular vote. That UFP spokesman are blaming their showing on the PQ's purported success at recasting itself as a "left" bulwark against the ADQ says far more about the nature of the UDF than it does about the PQ campaign. Whilst the UDF purports to be a working class alternative to the PQ, its orientation is toward pressuring the PQ to the "left" and lending a progressive coloring to the program of Quebec independence.

The working class will soon come into bitter conflict with the Charest Liberal government. The Liberals have promised to freeze government spending outside of the Health and Education Ministries for the next five years—a promise that can only mean major cuts in public and

social services, especially, if as is likely, the US economy goes into a second recession.

Outside the ranks of the Liberal Party it is more or less accepted as a given that the Liberals' budgetary projections are a fiction—that it will be impossible for the Liberals to maintain a balanced budget, while increasing health and education spending and reducing personal income taxes by \$15 billion, or \$1 billion per year in each of the next five years. In other words, cuts far deeper than those indicated by the Liberals are all but guaranteed

While venturing some muted criticisms of the Liberals' right-wing agenda, the union bureaucracy has offered to work closely with the new government. Prior to the election, it invoked the threat of an ADQ victory both to muster support for its traditional PQ allies and open new channels to the Liberals. "We were very satisfied with the balance sheet of the PQ government," declared Quebec Federation of Labor General-Secretary René Roy the night of the elections. "Now we have to work with the Liberal Party and what we were able to do in the past [work with Liberal governments], we should be able to do in the future."

The massive antiwar mobilizations and the elections bespeak a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the rightward trajectory of official politics. But if workers in Quebec are not to suffer yet another round of reversals and defeats, they must consciously repudiate the decades-long alliance between the union bureaucracy and the PQ and make socialist internationalism the axis of their struggles. Workers have no interest in supporting a faction of the Quebec bourgeoisie in the reactionary project of establishing an independent capitalist Quebec. Rather big business's global war on jobs, wages and social rights must be answered through the struggle to mobilize workers in Canada—English, French and immigrant—alongside their brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world in a common struggle against the profit system.

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