

Media magnate Péladeau seeks Parti Québécois leadership

By Laurent Lafrance
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Press magnate and billionaire Pierre-Karl Péladeau has officially entered the race for Parti Québécois (PQ) leader, which will be determined by a membership vote in May.

Presenting himself as the “sovereignty candidate,” Péladeau is focusing his campaign around the claim that independence is the best vehicle to strengthen big business and enrich the Quebec ruling class.

The PQ National Assembly deputy for Saint-Jérôme, a city north of Montreal, Péladeau is clearly the candidate to beat, enjoying massive media attention and the support of much of the PQ’s old guard.

In an open letter to the media, 18 former PQ deputies and ministers have given him their support, lauding in particular his “unshakeable faith in our project for national independence.”

Péladeau also enjoys the backing of many current PQ legislators and the last two PQ premiers of Quebec, Bernard Landry and Pauline Marois, both of whom presided over sweeping social spending cuts. Péladeau, declared Landry recently, “has an impressive résumé. His corporations have been able to adapt to contemporary technology. If he can do that in a business, he can do it at the head of a government.”

Through his media empire Quebecor, which he still controls, Péladeau has for years demanded wholesale attacks on the working class and the unions, while promoting tax cuts for big business and the rich. Péladeau has personally presided over sweeping attacks on Quebecor’s workforce, imposing 14 lockouts in 15 years to force workers to accept drastic job and wage cuts.

Péladeau’s tabloids have been in the forefront of whipping up Quebec chauvinism. In 2007 they conducted an anti-immigrant, anti-minority campaign, denouncing the provincial government for purportedly discriminating against the Québécois majority through its policy of “reasonable accommodation” of religious and cultural differences. Péladeau’s *Journal de Montréal* and *Journal de Québec* were also major promoters of the Marois government’s anti-democratic Charter of Quebec Values, which would have made it illegal for public sector workers

to wear “ostentatious” religious symbols and head coverings, like the hijab, but not “discreet” crucifixes.

The fact that this ultra-rich businessman has become the favorite in the race for the leadership of the PQ underscores the true nature of this big business party. Far from being a “progressive” party “with a favorable prejudice to the workers,” as its supporters, including the union bureaucrats, have long claimed, the PQ, since its formation in 1968, has been one of the two government parties of the Quebec bourgeoisie. When in office, the PQ has come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing the biggest cuts in public and social services in the history of the province, first in 1982-83 and again in 1996-98.

Péladeau’s fervent support for Quebec sovereignty also demonstrates the real nature of the project for Quebec’s secession from the Canadian federal state. It is the reactionary scheme of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie, supported by a layer of the privileged middle classes, for the creation of a capitalist *République du Québec* that would be an integral part of NATO and NAFTA.

Since the beginning of his leadership campaign, Péladeau has tried to rally the union bureaucracy and elements of the middle class on the basis of a ferocious chauvinism and economic nationalism. “Gaining control of the economy,” Péladeau intoned in front of several hundred sovereignty activists, “is to become master of oneself, to gain control of one’s own fate.”

In one of his many speeches, Péladeau claimed that an independent Québec would be better able to advance the imperialist ambitions of the Quebec ruling elite. “We must persuade [young people] to see sovereignty not as a form of withdrawal but as the best means of throwing ourselves into the conquest of the world,” he affirmed.

The arrival of Pierre-Karl Péladeau—a notorious right-winger and union-buster—in the ranks of the PQ last spring generated something of a crisis within the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left, exposing as it did the criminal character of their long-standing alliance with this bourgeois party.

In the name of opposing Péladeau and “saving” the PQ, much of the union bureaucracy is now urging their supporters who are not already members of the PQ to enter its ranks.

The SPQ-Libre (Unionists and Progressives for an Independent Quebec), an unrecognized political club within the Parti Québécois that speaks for the union bureaucracy, is currently campaigning alongside the Quebec Federation to Labour (QFL), the province’s biggest labour federation, to “prevent a PKP victory.” The SPQ-Libre has called on “all the other candidates to undertake a massive sign-up campaign for new members so as to dilute the advantage that PKP seems to currently have.”

The SPQ-Libre has called on more than 220 union groups to do the same: “Union organizations can make all the difference. As the biggest mass organizations, they could allow progressive candidates to sign up likely supporters by letting them set up information booths at their meetings.”

Indicating support for such a campaign, QFL President Daniel Boyer has said that “something must be done. Pierre Karl Péladeau must not be allowed to become the leader of the Parti Québécois.”

This campaign notwithstanding, it can be anticipated that if Péladeau should win the PQ leadership much of the union bureaucracy will quickly try to mend fences with him. Indeed, prominent figures in the bureaucracy reacted favorably to his entry into official politics and declaration for the PQ last March.

At that time the president of SPQ-Libre, Marc Laviolette, declared that he disapproved of “the way Pierre-Karl Péladeau has conducted his labor relations,” but that “our struggle is a national liberation struggle ... and this involves, by its very nature, different social classes and groups in a united front.”

Péladeau’s relations with the unions remain fairly tense because for years he has pressed for the curtailment and even elimination of some of their corporatist privileges, such as control of the QFL’s \$9 billion investment fund, the Solidarity Fund. Under a Péladeau-led PQ, the bureaucracy fears that they will lose their political influence in the PQ, their preferred access to the corridors of power.

However, none of that has stopped the unions from giving financial support to some of Quebecor’s commercial undertakings. In 2009, for instance, the QFL Solidarity Fund joined Péladeau in an unsuccessful attempt to buy the Montreal Canadiens hockey club.

For decades the pro-capitalist unions have systematically torpedoed every struggle of the working class and politically subordinated workers to the PQ. Péladeau’s success in imposing concessions on the workers at Québecor Media and Vidéotron Cable is due to the unions refusing to

mobilize the working class out of fear that their good relations with big business and the government would be undermined.

The pseudo-left Québec Solidaire (QS) has responded angrily to Péladeau’s emergence as the PQ’s prospective leader. This is because it complicates their efforts to pass off the PQ’s politics as “progressive” and to work alongside it as the “left wing” of the sovereignty movement. At the same time, the QS is hoping to take advantage of disaffection among a layer of PQ activists and is openly calling on “progressive” Péquistes to rally to the QS.

The Communist Party of Quebec (PCQ), a rump of the Stalinist Communist Party of Canada and one of the numerous pseudo-Marxist groups active in Québec Solidaire, has reacted to the crisis of the Parti Québécois by relinquishing its status as a recognized tendency in QS to allow its members to join the PQ. “We already have members who also belong to the Parti Québécois,” said PCQ leader André Parizeau in explaining the move.

In 2014, Parizeau stated that Péladeau’s leap into the political arena had “indisputably contributed to restore some credibility to the sovereignty project.” He added: “That fits well with another aspect of our program—pushing for the broadest possible alliance of all the sovereignty forces.”

Under conditions of a rapid intensification of the class struggle, the so-called left in Quebec, above all the unions and QS, are working to revive the reactionary and ever-more discredited *indépendantiste* project, seeking to chain the working class to big business and divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and around the world.

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