

Québec Solidaire welcomes suppression of anti-austerity struggle

By Louis Girard and Laurent Lafrance
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Québec Solidaire has endorsed the unions' suppression of the struggle Quebec's public sector workers have mounted against the Couillard Liberal government's concession demands and ravaging of health care, education and other vital social services.

Québec Solidaire (QS) spokesperson Françoise David issued a press release last month that lauded the inter-union Common Front for "snatching" "valuable concessions" from the government in an agreement reached in a December negotiating "blitz."

In reality the tentative agreement that the unions accepted December 17 will impoverish workers and reduce pensions, while serving as a green light for the ruling class to continue with the dismantling of what remains of public services.

QS's support for the unions' betrayal exposes the bogus nature of its claims to oppose capitalist austerity. Since the beginning of the conflict between the more than 500,000 Quebec public and para-public workers and the provincial Liberal government, QS has provided support and political cover for the union bureaucracy and its manoeuvres to prevent a working class challenge to the government.

The public sector workers' struggle had the potential to become the catalyst for a counteroffensive of the Quebec and Canadian working class against the austerity agenda of the entire ruling elite. Because of this, QS adopted the same line as the unions: isolating their contract struggle from any broader mobilization of the working class in Quebec and across Canada against the dismantling of public services; dissipating the combative energy of the rank and file in a series of rotating strikes; and promoting the legitimacy of negotiations conducted within the budgetary framework set by the government.

Throughout the year-long conflict, QS supported the manoeuvres of the Common Front to demobilize workers, including their months-long silence on the government's plans to use an emergency law to legalize job action and impose concessionary contracts by decree. And QS issued not a word of criticism when the union bureaucrats subsequently invoked the threat of an emergency law to

browbeat workers into accepting the sellout agreement they had reached with the government.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an article published last fall: The unions "are deliberately keeping workers in the dark about the government's preparations ... because they fear the rank-and-file will respond to the threat of an emergency law by pressing for the full mobilization of public sector workers and the entire working class—the last thing the union leaders want.

"Rather, they intend to present workers with a fait accompli. Terrified of the consequences of a genuine working class challenge to the government and its austerity agenda, in the event of a strikebreaking law the unions will tell workers that there is nothing to do but return to work and make futile appeals to the courts or other capitalist institutions like the Parti Québécois."

Significantly, QS's ostensible left wing also joined in the promotion of the unions' December 17 sellout agreement. For three weeks the *Presse-toi-à-gauche* website featured the Common Front press release promoting the agreement as a victory at the top of its opening page and did not voice any criticisms of it until mid-January, long after the eruption of rank-and-file opposition.

QS's support for the union bureaucracy's suppression of the public sector workers' struggle flows from its class position. Born in 2006 from an amalgamation of community organizations and feminist and pseudo-Marxist groups, Québec Solidaire is neither *of* nor *for* the working class. It articulates the views and interests of the petty bourgeoisie and affluent middle class—professionals, trade union bureaucrats, small businesspeople who hope to benefit from "buying local," "Green entrepreneurs" and identity-politics activists.

While it falsely describes itself as "left," QS fittingly does not claim to be a workers' party or to be fighting for socialism. Rather it promotes itself as an environmentalist, feminist, pro-Quebec independence party of "citizens" that aims to "democratize" Quebec.

Like pseudo-left organizations around the world, QS has

moved sharply to the right over the past decade. In the context of the gravest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression and under conditions where the pro-austerity and pro-war social-democratic parties and unions are largely discredited, these forces are playing an increasingly significant and open role in politically suffocating the working class—in blocking the emergence of an independent working-class challenge to capitalism.

As part of this process, “new left” parties like QS are more and more frequently supporting, if not joining, bourgeois governments.

Last fall, senior QS officials conducted a “regional tour” with the express goal of meeting local entrepreneurs, including chambers of commerce, so as to promote QS, which currently has three seats in the Quebec legislature, as “a credible and innovative party economically,” that is to say, one that does not threaten the profit system and can be trusted with a role in government.

This desire to integrate into the establishment is shared by the party’s supposed left wing. Under the pretext of opposing the richest 1 percent of the population, it is openly urging QS to orientate towards less well-endowed sections of the ruling elite that are frustrated at having to cede power and privilege to those in this exclusive club.

In an article published in December 2014, Benoît Renaud, a former QS general-secretary and long-time associate of the International Socialists (the Canadian co-thinkers of the US-based ISO) called on the “political and social left” to orientate toward those who “live in considerable comfort,” which he defined as the “9 percent” (the portion immediately below the 1 percent at the top of the social pyramid). Renaud enthused about the possibility of the “mayor of a major city, a socially responsible businessman or a manager in the education sector” making the “leap” to stand as a Québec Solidaire candidate in the next Quebec election, slated to be held in 2018.

In courting businessmen and Chambers of Commerce, QS is implementing its fundamentally pro-capitalist, nationalist agenda, which hitherto has found its consummate expression through its longstanding ties with the big business Parti Québécois. Like the PQ, QS advocates the creation of a new capitalist *République du Québec*, through the reshuffling of the borders of the imperialist states of North America. This is the reactionary project of a faction of Quebec’s ruling elite and a section of the middle classes who see independence as a way to enrich themselves at the expense of the working class, by becoming “maîtres chez-nous” (masters in our own home).

In a context where the PQ has been widely discredited by the brutal austerity policies it has implemented whenever it has held office, QS has given itself the particularly

pernicious task of attempting to reignite the “independence torch” and providing it a “progressive” veneer.

The promotion of Quebec nationalism inevitably involves the promotion of chauvinism, like the campaign the PQ waged around its anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim “Charter of Values” in 2013-14. Québec Solidaire welcomed the PQ’s Charter as a “necessary debate” and continues to support legally prohibiting veiled Muslim women from receiving public services.

To promote the independence project, QS is forced to maintain a certain facade of autonomy in relation to the Parti Québécois. That, however, has not stopped it from repeatedly seeking a political alliance with this big bourgeois party, now led by the wealthy press tycoon and notorious strikebreaker Pierre Karl Péladeau. Late last month, at a debate organized by the pro-independence newspaper *Le Devoir* around the question “QS, PQ: Is the left condemned to remain in opposition?” QS co-leader Françoise David said that if the PQ had introduced proportional representation when they were in office, “Maybe now we would be in power together.”

The model of Québec Solidaire is Syriza—the party of the Greek pseudo-left that took power in Greece in January 2015 promising to end the brutal austerity measures that have impoverished the country’s working people. However, no sooner did it come to power than Syriza made an alliance with the right-wing nationalists (Independent Greeks) and complied with the European Union’s austerity diktats. Hostile to any struggle to mobilize the European working class against austerity, Syriza has renounced all its election promises and agreed to social cuts and privatizations that go far beyond those implemented by its predecessors.

Workers must take the measure of QS, its support of the unions’ suppression of the public sector workers’ struggle and its courting of business and manoeuvres with the PQ: If Québec Solidaire were ever to come to power—whether in a coalition with the PQ as David suggested or in its own right—it, too, would not hesitate to impose the dictates of the economic and financial elite on the working class by slashing public services, jobs and pensions.

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