

Québec Solidaire congress prepares alliance with Parti Québécois

By Richard Dufour
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Québec Solidaire (QS)—an ostensibly left-wing, pro-Quebec independence party that has had representation in the Quebec legislature since 2008—is holding its twelfth congress this weekend. Two interrelated questions will be the principal focus of debate: whether QS should form an electoral alliance with the big business Parti Québécois (PQ) and whether it should merge with Option National, a small right-wing nationalist party that is itself a split-off from the PQ.

On the first question, QS is divided, but the disagreements are purely tactical. All the factions embrace Quebec nationalism and separatism, differing only on how best to promote them, and more specifically the precise character of Québec Solidaire’s relations with the other members of the larger “family” of pro-Quebec independence organizations and parties, above all the PQ.

Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism articulates the interests and aspirations of a section of the ruling class that want greater autonomy for the capitalist Quebec state—even to the point of secession from Canada. This faction calculates it can better pursue its global economic and geostrategic interests, including striking its own deals with Washington, if it is not tied to Ottawa and its rivals in English Canada. Moreover, it views the reorganization of the state apparatus that separation would necessarily entail as a golden opportunity to create a more “competitive” Quebec—that is to intensify the assault on public services and workers’ social and democratic rights.

The flagship and standard bearer of the Quebec independence movement for the past half-century, the PQ has been rocked by the hemorrhaging of its electoral base among workers and youth since it held office from 1994–2003. This is not only because the PQ has implemented devastating social cuts every time it has formed Quebec’s government, but also because of its “tourant identitaire,” that is its promotion of a virulent Quebec chauvinism that targets immigrants and religious minorities, especially Muslims. The PQ and its sister party in the federal parliament, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), have also enthusiastically supported Canada’s military interventions in North Africa and the Middle East and, more broadly, Canadian imperialism’s turn to a more aggressive and militarist foreign policy.

The PQ’s call for “convergence” with Québec Solidaire

Since its formation in 2006, Québec Solidaire’s principal political role has been to seek to revive the PQ’s largely discredited project of an independent capitalist Quebec, by giving

it a progressive gloss. This explains its long-standing orientation to the PQ, to which QS has repeatedly made offers of an electoral alliance, and why its relations with the PQ will again take center stage at this weekend’s party congress.

The difference this time is that the crisis of the capitalist order, in Canada and around the world, has reached an unprecedented level of intensity, as epitomized by the emergence of the autocrat billionaire Donald Trump as US president.

In Quebec, the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard is rightfully hated among workers because of its all-out assault on public services, pensions and other worker social rights. But the PQ, as demonstrated by its near-record low standing in the opinion polls, has proven incapable of capitalizing on this, because of its own rightwing record.

Moreover, the trade unions, which for decades have served as the principal promoters of the PQ and Quebec nationalism within the working class, have been increasingly exposed as appendages of the corporate bosses. They have systematically suppressed the class struggle, as in the case of the 2012 Quebec student strike, and helped big business and their political hirelings in Ottawa and Quebec City to impose social-spending, wage and job cuts.

With the union bureaucracy largely discredited, the PQ has come to rely ever more on the QS to give it and the Quebec independence movement “left” cover. Under media tycoon Pierre-Karl Péladeau and now its current leader, Jean-François Lisée, the PQ has actively pursued the “convergence” of sovereignist (i.e., pro-independence) forces.

The QS, for its part, eagerly accepts the role of PQ ally and ginger group. It depicts the PQ as a “lesser evil,” if not a “progressive” force, while formally joining hands with this right-wing, big business party in the official pro-sovereignty coalition, “Oui Québec.”

The QS leadership’s push for a bloc with the PQ, and their opponents

At this weekend’s congress, the QS leadership is proposing that the party strike a formal alliance with the PQ to jointly contest the next provincial election, slated for October 2018. Option B, one of three rival congress resolutions on a possible QS-PQ alliance, insists that the “political necessity of the hour,” which it describes as defeating the Liberal government and its “detrimental policies,” “imposes the decision to open negotiations with the Parti Québécois in order to negotiate an electoral pact.”

Although QS has a long record of promoting the lie that the PQ is “better” than the Liberals and refrains from all but the most occasional and timid criticism of the pro-PQ unions, the QS leadership’s Option B tries to shift responsibility for their pursuit of an alliance with the PQ onto working people. “Despite our repeated appeals,” laments the resolution, “the vast majority of the electorate that opposes the Quebec Liberals is not convinced ... that the PQ is tantamount to the Liberals” and still believes that the PQ “remains a fundamentally social-democratic party that represents a valid alternative to the Liberal disaster.”

No one should be taken in by this. With their Option B, the QS leadership is seeking sanction to partner with, and promote the “progressive” bona fides of, the PQ—a proven enforcer of capitalist austerity, advocate of anti-immigrant chauvinism, and supporter of imperialist war—and join it in government. This is spelled out in Option B’s call for QS to fight for the “defeat of the PLQ (Liberal) government and the election of a government that marks a break with neoliberal austerity policies,” that is to say a PQ government supported by QS.

Another QS faction—led by its purported “left wing” and including various pseudo-Trotskyists, including the faction’s designated spokesperson, Gauche Socialiste (Socialist Left) leader André Frappier—opposes Option B, because it fears too close an association with the PQ will damage QS and further discredit Quebec independence.

Its resolution, Option A, warns the electoral “maneuvers” advocated by the leadership “could lead to discrediting QS for a fairly long time.” Option A makes various criticisms of the PQ, including that it has applied the “logic of austerity imposed by the ruling class,” initiated the “demolition of the public sector under [PQ Premier] Lucien Bouchard” and implemented “austerity” measures “similar to, if not worse than, those of the Liberals” when it formed the government for 18 months in 2012-14.

The writers of Option A verbally acknowledge what has become more and more evident to workers and young people: that the PQ is a bourgeois party entirely devoted to capitalist austerity. But this admission is made only so as to uphold and boost illusions in the political program with which the PQ has historically been associated: the creation of a *République du Québec* as a new imperialist state in North America.

The nationalist “popular bloc” advocated in Option A would serve to politically straitjacket the working class. Such a bloc would be expressly aimed at dividing Quebec workers from workers in the rest of Canada and internationally, while masking the bitter class divisions within Quebec, the better to politically subordinate the working class to the Quebec bourgeoisie. This is demonstrated by the program assigned to such a bloc, namely, “an anti-austerity, anti-free trade program” as part of a “step towards independence.”

The model envisaged by the pseudo-left elements who authored this resolution is Syriza, Greece’s so-called Radical Coalition of the Left. Syriza was propelled to power on the basis of a commitment to put an end to the brutal capitalist austerity, but it immediately allied with the right-wing Independent Greeks and rapidly discarded its “anti-austerity program.” Rejecting any appeal to the workers of Europe for a common struggle against

European capitalism, Syriza capitulated to the demands of the European oligarchy. After the EU and the banks spurned their appeals for debt renegotiation, Syriza imposed mass poverty and a vicious crackdown on refugees.

There is also an Option C before this weekend’s QS congress. It stipulates QS postpone its decision on an electoral alliance with the PQ until a QS National Council meeting scheduled for November. This option was immediately criticized by PQ leader Jean-François Lisée, who argues that if an alliance is to be effective, including reaching a satisfactory division of electoral seats, the QS needs to commit to it now. Nonetheless, Option C could still garner substantial support at the QS congress as a temporary compromise to the party’s unprincipled, increasingly fractious factional struggle.

A second proposal designed to bring the factions together is also on the agenda: a possible merger with Option Nationale. For months the QS leadership has been in negotiations with ON, which was founded and continues to be led behind the scenes by the ex-PQ legislator and investment banker Jean-Martin Aussant.

Unlike QS, ON makes no pretense to being a left-wing party. It has long criticized QS for placing too great an emphasis on “social questions,” reputedly to the detriment of pressing for Quebec independence.

Aussant’s political mentor was none other than Jacques Parizeau. The scion of one of Quebec’s wealthiest families, Parizeau, until his death in 2015, was viewed as the leader of the PQ’s “hardline” faction. As PQ premier, Parizeau called the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty and created a “rainbow” pro-independence coalition that united the right-wing populist Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) with the unions, and various elements of the pseudo-left (including the future founders of Québec Solidaire) behind the PQ and independence.

Preparations by QS for a merger with Option National are similarly aimed at subordinating the working class to the pro-Quebec independence faction of the ruling class. Such a merger would serve as a bridge to future electoral and governmental alliances with the PQ, including as outlined in Option B for the next provincial election.

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