

Parti Québécois makes “left” feint in hopes of averting electoral disaster

By Laurent Lafrance
17 August 2018

With Quebec’s October 1 provincial election less than a month-and-a-half away, opinion polls continue to show the Parti Québécois (PQ)—the big business, pro-independence party that has alternated with the Liberals in forming Quebec’s government since 1970—facing an unprecedented electoral debacle.

For months, the PQ has been polling around 20 percent support, meaning it could end up with half-a-dozen seats or less in the 125-member National Assembly and lose official party status in the Quebec legislature.

At the last election, held in 2014, not only was a minority PQ government ousted after just 18 months in office, the party barely won 25 percent of the vote and 30 seats, its worst ever result, apart from its first-ever election in 1970.

The PQ is incapable of benefiting from the intense popular anger with the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard, because it is rightly seen by many workers as yet another establishment party, dedicated to capitalist austerity, and increasingly based on appeals to anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism.

The right-wing politics of the trade union-backed, ostensibly “social-democratic” PQ has paved the way for the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ-Coalition for Quebec’s Future) to masquerade as the true representative of “change.” Led by former PQ cabinet minister, multi-millionaire businessman, and recent federalist-convert François Legault, the CAQ currently enjoys a strong lead in the polls.

In a desperate attempt to avert an electoral disaster, the PQ is trying to give itself a “progressive” makeover, by putting rhetorical distance between itself and its governmental record and by making a handful of promises of increased social spending. These include: increased funding for public schools after years of cuts; the gradual abolition of university tuition fees; and the reinstatement of a universal, \$8 per-day fee for children enrolled in early childhood centers (CPEs) and other government-subsidized daycares.

The capitalist media has been quick to proclaim this transparent “left” feint a major change in political

orientation.

In reality, the PQ has no intention of introducing any significant reforms. It is as devoted a servant of big business as ever; one, moreover, with a long record of using emergency laws to criminalize worker opposition.

The hollowness of its promises of increased social spending is underscored by its pledge not to raise taxes on business and the rich. Thus even were a PQ government to invest more funds in education, this would be offset by increased cuts to other public services and infrastructure.

Because of the lack of popular support for another referendum on Quebec independence, the PQ is committed to waiting until after the 2022 election before initiating another campaign to secede from the Canadian federal state. But its election platform contains promises of “robust economic nationalism,” including steps to maintain “head offices in Quebec,” aimed at demonstrating that independence will strengthen the Quebec bourgeoisie against its rivals in English Canada and internationally. Toward the same end, the PQ champions using Quebec’s hydro-electric resources to become a leader in “green” industries, while pledging to oppose the western Canadian-based oil industry.

The rightwing character of the PQ is exemplified by its staunch support for Canadian imperialism’s involvement in US-led wars, and by its continuing efforts to fan chauvinism against immigrants and religious minorities. The PQ election platform revives proposals put forward in its infamous 2013 “Charter of Quebec Values” to ban state employees from wearing “ostentatious religious symbols,” like the hijab or Sikh turban, while continuing to allow the wearing of “discreet” crucifixes and the identification of the state with Roman Catholicism in the name of celebrating “Quebec’s heritage.”

According to its election platform, the PQ’s ban on wearing religious symbols would apply to all state employees in a “position of authority,” among whom it includes early childhood center teachers and employees.

The PQ has also taken the lead in trying to foment a

right-wing backlash against refugee claimants fleeing the Trump administration's anti-immigrant witch-hunt. Last year, party leader Jean François-Lis e sought to counterpose the supposedly "generous" benefits given refugees with the deplorable care given seniors in Quebec government nursing homes, and earlier this spring he called for the principal route whereby refugees have been entering Quebec to be fenced off.

The "progressive" promises of the PQ are a sham. Every time it has held office, from 1976 to 1985, 1994 to 2003, and 2012 to 2014, it has imposed massive social spending cuts and imposed strikebreaking laws to counter worker resistance. The Parizeau-Bouchard-Landry government (1994-2003), like the contemporaneous governments of its federalist opponents—the national Liberal government of Chr tien-Martin and Mike Harris' Ontario Conservative government—took the axe to social spending in the name of eliminating budget deficits, then slashed taxes for big business and the rich.

In the case of the PQ, it won the endorsement of its union allies for cutting billions from public services in the late 1990s and abolishing 40,000 jobs in health care and education.

Since implementing this class war agenda, the PQ and the entire pro-Quebec independence or sovereignty movement have gone from crisis to crisis. In 2003, the PQ fell from power and in the 2007 election it was reduced to third-party status, as the Action d mocratique du Qu bec (ADQ), the forerunner of the CAQ, narrowly lost to the Liberals.

In the past fifteen years, the PQ has held power for only 18 months between 2012 and 2014. Its 2012 success was bound up with the political crisis engendered by the 2012 Quebec student strike, which at its height in May 2012 threatened to become the catalyst for a mass working-class challenge to the austerity agenda of the Quebec and Canadian big business. But the unions, at the ruling elite's behest, and working in alliance with the pseudo-left Quebec Solidaire and the student associations, channeled the mass opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the campaign for the election of a PQ government. Predictably, the PQ pivoted back to austerity within months of assuming the reins of power in September 2012, then whipped up chauvinism with its Quebec Charter of Values and criminalized a province-wide construction strike.

The Bloc Qu b cois, the sister organization of the PQ at the federal level, is also experiencing an existential crisis. It has never recovered from its virtual annihilation in the 2011 federal election and has since faced repeated internal rifts. Seven of the Bloc's 10 MPs quit the party last February to challenge the leadership of Martine Ouellet. In June, Ouellet stepped down as party leader after winning a humiliating 32

percent in a party-wide confidence vote.

It is a searing indictment of the pro-capitalist trade unions that the right-wing populist CAQ, which hitherto has been an also-ran in most parts of Quebec, can now posture as the "real agent of change." For the past half-century, the unions have promoted the PQ as a "progressive" party, while systematically isolating the militant struggles of Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in Canada and internationally.

There is a parallel between developments in Quebec and those elsewhere in Canada and around the world. In the recent Ontario election, after 15 years of power, the union-backed Liberal Party suffered a historic defeat at the hands of Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives. Ford is a wealthy businessman, who like Trump made a demagogic appeal to social discontent, posturing as the spokesmen of the "forgotten," while railing against the establishment and "government waste."

In its cynical efforts to refurbish its tattered progressive credentials, the PQ can count on the trade union bureaucracy. The unions are vehemently opposed to any independent political mobilization of the working class, as was demonstrated once again in 2015-16 when they torpedoed an incipient rebellion of public sector workers against the Couillard government's sweeping social spending cuts.

In recent weeks, some of Quebec's largest unions, including the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the United Steelworkers (USW) and Machinists (IAM), have mounted a pre-election campaign to denounce the Liberals and CAQ as twins. That their aim is to muster votes for the pro-war, pro-austerity, and chauvinist PQ is openly admitted by campaign organizers.

Meanwhile, Qu b c Solidaire, a party of well-to-do sections of the middle class, plays the role of "left" flank for the PQ-led "sovereignist family." QS sometimes throws barbs at the PQ for this or that openly right-wing policy. But it joins the unions in promoting the lie that the PQ is less beholden to big business and the ruling class than the Liberals and CAQ, and—as underscored by its recent merger with Option Nationale, a PQ split-off—remains orientated to a rapprochement with the big business PQ, especially if it recommits to prioritizing independence.

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