

Quebec: Right-wing populist CAQ exploits disaffection with traditional parties

By Laurent Lafrance
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With Quebec's October 1 provincial election less than two weeks away, opinion polls continue to show the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ, Coalition for Quebec's Future) poised to win a majority, or at least a plurality, of the seats in the Quebec National Assembly.

Led by former Air Transat boss and onetime PQ cabinet minister, François Legault, the CAQ combines calls for tax cuts, privatization, deregulation and other pro-big business measures, with phony promises of improved public services and rank right-wing nationalist appeals. Most prominent of the latter are its calls for a 20 percent cut in the number of immigrants Quebec receives annually, and a vow to expel immigrants who fail French-language and "Quebec values" tests after three years' residence in Quebec.

The CAQ, which was founded in 2011, has never finished better than third or won more than 27 percent of the vote in a Quebec general election. But it is currently the undeserved beneficiary of widespread popular hostility to the parties that have alternated as Quebec's government since 1970, the federalist Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) and the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ).

Polls at the beginning of the campaign indicated that both the PLQ and PQ were headed for their lowest ever share of the popular vote. The PLQ—which under Premier Philippe Couillard currently forms the government and has held power in Quebec City for all but 18 months of the last 15 years—is at risk of garnering less than 30 percent of the vote for the first time since its formation in 1867.

The PQ began the campaign with the support of just 18 percent of the electorate. It is now polling in the low 20s. Nevertheless, the PQ is still on course to win its smallest number of National Assembly seats since the first election it ever contested in 1970.

Mass anger against the ruling elite's agenda of austerity, rearmament, and war has fueled a succession of explosive social struggles in Quebec over the past six years. These include the six-month 2012 Quebec student strike, a wave of public sector strikes in 2015 that involved up to a half-million workers, and province-wide construction strikes in 2013 and 2017.

The critical political question raised by the elections is: given the mass opposition to austerity and the deep disaffection with the traditional government parties, how is it that the CAQ, a right-wing Quebec nationalist party led by a multi-millionaire ex-businessman, is able to posture as the "party of change" and

now stands on the threshold of power?

The answer to this is to be found in the politics of Quebec's "official left," that is the pro-capitalist trade unions and Québec Solidaire (QS), the pseudo-left party that held three seats in the outgoing National Assembly.

For decades, the unions have isolated and suppressed the struggles of Quebec workers while politically subordinating them to the big business PQ. They are fervent promoters of Quebec nationalism—the lie that Quebec workers have more in common with French-speaking capitalists like Quebecor boss and former PQ leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau than with workers in Canada or around the globe.

The unions' attitude to a genuine working class challenge to austerity was exemplified by their derailing of the 2012 student strike. When the strike threatened to become the catalyst for a broader working-class upsurge, the unions went into overdrive to shut it down. Under the watchword "From the streets, to the ballot box," they worked to divert the opposition to the Liberals' austerity program behind the PQ. Meanwhile, the unions ordered their members at the province's universities and CEGEPs (junior colleges) to implement the government's anti-strike law, Bill 78, to the letter, and instructed unions in English Canada, in the name of "Quebec's self-determination," to give the striking students no support.

Ultimately the unions succeeded in their double-objective of politically asphyxiating the student strike and securing a PQ victory in the September 2012 election.

Led by Pauline Marois, the union-backed PQ minority government did not take long to reveal its true face. It slashed social-welfare spending, imposed annual hikes in university tuition fees, and criminalized a strike by 75,000 construction workers. Moreover, to divert attention from its austerity agenda and split the working class, it brought forward a chauvinist Charter of Quebec Values, that in the name of secularism threatened teachers, nurses and other public sector workers who wore the hijab or other "ostentatious religious symbols" with firing, while protecting Quebec's Roman Catholic "heritage."

Québec Solidaire's *raison d'être* is to revive illusions in the PQ's discredited program for an independent capitalist Quebec and to second the union bureaucracy's efforts to suppress the class struggle. During the student strike, it assisted the unions' attempts to promote the PQ as a "progressive" alternative to the Liberals. It publicly urged the PQ to join it in an electoral alliance in June

2012 and, in the final days of the election campaign, announced it would give unconditional support to a PQ minority government for at least a year.

In 2015, QS supported the public sector unions in straightjacketing the struggle against the Couillard government's brutal austerity measures within the framework of a collective bargaining negotiation, although it was evident from the outset that workers faced a political struggle that would require mobilizing the working class as a whole in defence of public services. Then when the unions signed contracts that left the cuts in services in place and imposed concessions on their members, QS hailed them as a "victory."

Unions stump once again for big business PQ

In the current election campaign, the unions are once again stumping for the PQ. In the run-up to last month's formal launching of the election campaign, major unions like the United Steelworkers (USW), Canadian Unions of Public Employees (CUPE), and Machinists (IAM) mounted a media campaign, focussed on electoral districts where the PQ is in a tight race, aimed at portraying the Liberals and CAQ as pro-austerity twins.

The PQ's poll numbers, however, indicate that after the experience of PQ governments in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s that imposed sweeping social spending cuts and used a battery of anti-worker laws to criminalize strikes, large sections of the working class have come to the conclusion the union-backed PQ is just another right-wing establishment party.

A party of professionals, petty union bureaucrats and other upper middle-class layers, the ostensibly left-wing Québec Solidaire is mounting an election campaign aimed at demonstrating to the elite that it is a "fiscally responsible" party that can be trusted with a share of power. It is advancing a series of modest reform proposals, such as a dental insurance program and a \$15 per hour minimum wage, all of them "costed" to show they are entirely compatible with the current social order.

QS is at pains to demonstrate its readiness to work with the parties of the Quebec elite to advance "Quebec's interests." In the middle of the campaign its candidate for premier, Manon Massé, held a joint press conference with Couillard and PQ leader Jean-François Lisée to oppose any weakening of Canada's supply-marketing system as part of the NAFTA renegotiation.

Earlier Massé said that in the event of a hung parliament the QS could prop up a minority PQ government or possibly even one led by the CAQ. This is entirely in keeping with the insidious role Québec Solidaire has played over the past decade in the reactionary "debate" over the reputed threat that immigrants and religious minorities constitute to "Quebec values." Rather than unequivocally denounce these claims, QS has repeatedly termed the "accommodation" debate legitimate and, like all the other parties, supports a ban on Muslim women who wear the niqab or burqa receiving public services.

Given all this, it is not surprising QS has failed to find much traction within the working class. Opinion polls currently show it making modest gains on its 7.5 percent share of the vote in the 2014 election.

The erosion, if not outright collapse of support for the traditional

parties of the bourgeois establishment is an international phenomenon. This collapse is rooted in growing frustration and anger over rampant social inequality and mounting economic insecurity. But to date, it is largely right-wing populist and neo-fascist parties that have benefited from this electorally.

Because the working class has been politically smothered by the unions and establishment "left" parties and prevented from advancing its own socialist solution to the capitalist crisis, ultra-right forces like Trump or the AfD in Germany have been able to come to the fore. They are drawing on the support of powerful sections of the ruling elite, who see them as useful for shifting politics far to the right and spearheading a break with bourgeois-democratic forms of rule.

Under conditions where there has been a vast erosion of support for the Liberals and PQ, much of the Quebec elite is now ready to "normalize" the CAQ. Toward this end, the corporate media is claiming the CAQ is far different from the New Right in Europe or Trump in the US.

The same was said about Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who big business propelled to power in Ontario last June. Yet now he is pushing through a hard-right agenda, including by invoking the "notwithstanding clause" to annul democratic rights and scapegoating refugees for the social crisis.

The CAQ's populism is cynical and reactionary. Should the October 1 election bring it to power, its real role as a tool of big business for intensifying the assault on public services and workers' social rights will be quickly exposed, setting it on a collision course with the working class.

Workers in Quebec, as across Canada and around the world, urgently need a new political orientation. In opposition to the unions and their nationalist pro-capitalist perspective, they must join with workers in Canada and internationally in the fight for workers' political power and the radical reorganization of socio-economic life so as to make social needs, not capitalist profit, the animating principle.

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