

Quebec: Right-wing populist CAQ exploits mass disaffection to win office

By Keith Jones
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The right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec’s Future) won a solid parliamentary majority in Monday’s Quebec election, unseating the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard and shattering the duopoly that the federalist Liberals and pro- *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ) have exercised over Quebec’s government for the past half century.

The Liberals and PQ, which have jointly presided over decades of austerity, both polled their lowest-ever share of the popular vote, 24.8 and 17.1 percent respectively. With just nine seats, the PQ will not even have official party status in the Quebec National Assembly.

The CAQ, led by former Air Transat boss and PQ cabinet minister François Legault, cynically promoted itself as the agent of change, although it is committed to an even more right-wing variant of the big business agenda that all Liberal and PQ governments have pursued since the 1980s.

To its own surprise, Québec Solidaire, a self-avowed left nationalist party, emerged during the five-and-a-half week campaign as a pole of attraction for working people, especially youth, seeking a means to fight capitalist austerity.

Québec Solidaire won 16.1 percent of the popular vote, more than double the 7.63 percent share it garnered in the 2014 election, and took 10 seats, as compared with three seats four years ago, making it the second largest opposition party after the Liberals.

Media claims of a CAQ sweep are a deliberate attempt to intimidate working-class opposition to an incoming government committed to expanding for-profit health care, slashing public sector jobs, gutting regulatory restraints on big business, and implementing chauvinist measures attacking immigrants and religious minorities.

Benefiting from the many three and four-way electoral races, the CAQ was able to capture 72 of the 125 National Assembly seats with only 37.4 percent of the vote. When the third of the electorate that didn’t vote is factored in, the CAQ won the support of just one in every four Quebecers.

The CAQ and the rise of an explicitly right-wing Quebec nationalism

That said, there is no question that with the CAQ’s rise to power, official Quebec politics have swung still further right.

The CAQ was created by Legault and billionaire businessman Charles Sirois in 2012 with the aim of exploiting the already

manifest mass popular disaffection with the Liberals and PQ to push Quebec politics sharply further right.

A key tenet of the CAQ at its founding was an appeal for Quebec’s elite to put aside the question of Quebec’s constitutional status for a generation, so that federalists and sovereignists (supporters of Quebec independence) could unite in building a more “entrepreneurial” and “competitive” Quebec. Or, stripped of the buzzwords, so that both factions of the ruling establishment could concentrate on slashing and privatizing public services and forcing through other regressive big business “reforms” in the face of mass working-class opposition.

At the CAQ’s launch, Legault was joined by a handful of sitting and former PQ MNAs and by what remained of the right-wing populist Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ)—which, after years of being an also-ran in Quebec politics, had briefly risen to be the Official Opposition in 2007, having whipped up, along with the tabloid press, a furor over so-called “excessive accommodations” to Muslims and other religious minorities.

Quebec chauvinist appeals remain central to the CAQ, which now defines itself as a Quebec nationalist and autonomist party seeking more powers for the Quebec state within the Canadian federal system.

In the just concluded election campaign, Legault brazenly lied about his big business agenda, promising to reinvest in Quebec’s dilapidated public health care and education systems, while slashing taxes and making Quebec a magnet for investors.

He also gave front and centre to chauvinist appeals, fanning a new explicitly right-wing Quebec nationalism that all four parties, including Québec Solidaire, have helped incubate over the past decade through the reactionary “accommodation debate,” and their various proposals to ban some or all public employees from wearing religious symbols and deny public services to Muslim women who choose to wear religious face coverings.

Insinuating that immigrants are a threat, Legault pledged a CAQ government would slash the province’s annual intake of immigrants by 20 percent and expel immigrants who fail French-language and “Quebec values” tests after three years’ residence in the province. Asked by a CAQ supporter in the final days of the campaign whether he would “fight for us” against immigrants who are “effacing us,” Legault exclaimed, “Yes, of course ... It is a question of protecting who we are as Quebecers.”

There is no question but that the working class will come into bitter conflict with the Legault-led CAQ government.

Ten years after the 2008 global financial implosion, world capitalism is mired in a systemic breakdown, characterized by trade war, surging geopolitical tensions, rearmament, the spread of imperialist violence, and intensifying class struggle. Everywhere the ruling class is demanding the elimination of what remains of the social rights the working class wrenched from it through the mass and revolutionary struggles of the last century, so it can increase “competitiveness” and prevail in the global struggle for markets and profits.

The unions, Québec Solidaire and the struggle against capitalist austerity

To prepare for the coming struggles, workers and youth urgently need to draw a political balance sheet of the repeated challenges workers in Quebec and across Canada have mounted to the ruling class agenda of austerity and war and their derailing by the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Just to take Quebec. Mass social opposition has erupted repeatedly during the past six years, including in the six-month 2012 province-wide student strike, the 2013 and 2017 construction strikes, the protests against the Couillard government’s slashing of municipal workers’ pensions, and the movement for a province-wide public sector workers’ general strike in 2015.

At every point, the union bureaucracy isolated and suppressed these struggles, quarantining them within Quebec and straitjacketing them within the province’s reactionary labour laws, while vehemently opposing their transformation into a working-class political challenge to the state-employer class-war assault.

This was demonstrated most graphically in the 2012 Quebec student strike. When workers in their hundreds of thousands took to the streets to oppose the Charest Liberal government’s draconian anti-strike law (Bill 78), underscoring the potential for the strike to become the catalyst for a mass working-class challenge to austerity, the unions redoubled their efforts to shut it down and divert the opposition to Charest behind the big business PQ. Declaring the strike over, the Quebec Federation of Labour advanced the slogan “From the streets, to the ballot box.”

Workers and young people who have turned to Québec Solidaire (QS) believing it can serve as an instrument for opposing capitalist austerity, environmental devastation, and war should beware.

QS has assisted the union bureaucracy in derailing the class struggle, thereby creating the conditions where the right-wing populist CAQ could come to power exploiting the inchoate opposition of sections of the working class to the ruling elite’s traditional parties of government.

When the union campaign to shut down the 2012 student strike was in high gear, QS assisted the unions’ efforts to burnish the badly frayed “progressive” credentials of the PQ, by offering to join it in an electoral alliance. Similarly, QS supported the unions’ betrayal of the 2015 public sector workers’ struggle, hailing as a “victory” concessionary contracts that slashed pensions and left all Couillard’s budget cuts in place.

Québec Solidaire is a pseudo-left party that voices the grievances of sections of the upper middle class—professionals, trade union bureaucrats and small business people—over the

distribution of wealth between the capitalist oligarchy and the “next 9 percent.” Wedded to the capitalist social order, these privileged layers are adamantly opposed to the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

During the just completed election campaign, QS combined calls for limited reforms—such as free university education, a 50 percent cut in public transit fares, and dental insurance—with steps aimed at integrating itself more fully into the political establishment and gaining a share in administering Quebec capitalism.

This included an address by QS co-leader and candidate for premier Manon Massé to the Montreal Chamber of Commerce, in which she pooh-poohed the party program’s call for selective nationalizations and reiterated that the private sector would have a vital role to play in a QS-led Quebec. It also saw Québec Solidaire forge a “common front,” in the name of “defending Quebec’s interests,” with Premier Couillard and PQ leader Jean-François Lisée to oppose any changes to Canada’s supply-management agricultural system in pursuit of a NAFTA deal with the US.

Speaking Monday evening at the QS post-election rally, Massé denounced the newly-revised NAFTA pact in reactionary nationalist terms, not as a trade-war bloc aimed at the North American working class and Canadian and US imperialism’s rivals overseas, but as the “dumping of Quebec’s farmers” for the benefit of “Ontario’s auto industry.”

Massé also went out of her way to make an overture to the politically shattered big business PQ, which, in the final days of the campaign, mounted a vicious red-baiting campaign against QS, accusing it of “extremism” and being led by a secret “Politburo.”

Affirming Québec Solidaire’s affinity with the PQ, which came to prominence in the late 1960s spouting left nationalist rhetoric not all that different from the QS of today, Massé claimed that the QS and PQ share a “beautiful project.” In fact that project, as has been demonstrated by the entire 50-year history of the PQ, is a sham and a trap for the working class.

The answer to the social and political crisis lies in the mobilization of the international working class on an international socialist program, not the reshuffling of the borders of North America to create a capitalist *République du Québec*.

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