Quebec elections

Separatist PQ and federalist Liberals vie for big business's blessing

Keith Jones
10 November 1998

The Quebec provincial elections, which are to be held Monday, November 30, pit the separatist Parti Québècois (PQ), which currently forms Quebec's provincial government, against the federalist Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ).

If the capitalist media is to be believed, the clash between the PQ and PLQ is a titanic struggle, rooted in radically divergent visions of Quebec's future. In fact, the two parties' socioeconomic platforms have never been more similar. Both the PQ and PLQ are vying for big business's support by claiming to be the party of fiscal responsibility. Both promise tax cuts and other policies aimed at making Quebec 'investor friendly.' Both insist that what remains of the welfare state programs of the 1960s and 1970s must be dismantled.

The common right-wing, pro-big business agenda of the PQ and their Liberal adversaries is personified in the parties' respective leaders. A decade ago, PQ leader and Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard and Jean Charest, the PLQ leader, sat together in the cabinet of Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

This is not to say that there are not big stakes in the Quebec election--big stakes, that is, for the Quebec and Canadian ruling class. A PQ victory would place in question Quebec's continued participation in Confederation and indeed Canada's survival as a nation-state into the twenty-first century.

More than 49 percent of Quebecers voted in favor of Canada's only majority French-speaking province becoming a sovereign state in an October 1995 referendum. And the PQ is pledged to hold another referendum, although there is considerable ambiguity in the PQ program and in the pronouncements of Bouchard as to its timing and the separatists' readiness to link sovereignty to some form of new partnership with Canada.

Should the PQ be returned to office, as opinion polls currently suggest, it is highly likely that Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien will be forced to make a quick exit. The federal Liberal leader is held responsible by much of Canada's political and economic elite for the federalists' near-loss in 1995.

The struggle between the separatist and federalist wings of Quebec's political elite is a struggle over what is the best means to protect the interests of the Quebec bourgeoise and their servants in the adminstrative and managerial elite. Formed in 1968 out of a split-off from the Liberals, the PQ, with the assistance of the trade union bureaucracy, played a vital role in politically derailing a radical upsurge of the Quebec working class in the late 1960s and 1970s. Initially, the PQ claimed to have a 'favorable prejudice to the labour movement' and even called its program, which coupled increased social spending with state initiatives to bolster the position of Quebecois capital and secure more jobs for French-speaking administrators, socialist. But the PQ turned sharply to the right after losing a 1980 referendum on Quebec independence.

The biggest social spending cuts in Quebec history

In September 1994 the PQ was returned to power, after nine years of Liberal rule, by appealing to popular discontent over the deterioration of public services and chronic mass unemployment. (Quebec's unemployment rate fell below 10 percent last month for the first time this decade.)

Under Premier Jacques Parizeau, the scion of one of Quebec's wealthiest families, the PQ government promptly launched a program of hospital closures that saw seven Montreal-area hospitals shut down. But Parizeau concentrated his efforts on elaborating a big business program for Quebec independence. A sovereign Quebec, he argued, would be better positioned to provide state support for Quebec firms in the battle for world markets. Moreover, the reorganization of the state apparatus that secession would necessitate would provide a mechanism for massively reducing state expenditure.

Parizeau quit as Quebec Premier and PQ leader the day after the referendum defeat. In short order he was replaced by Lucien Bouchard, the leader of the PQ's sister party in the federal parliament, the Bloc Quebecois.

During the 1995 referendum campaign, Bouchard had appealed for support by claiming independence would be a bulwark 'against the right-wing wave' sweeping North America. On assuming the premiership, he made a sudden, albeit predictable, about-face and in the name of regaining Quebec's

© World Socialist Web Site

'financial independence' launched a veritable counterrevolution in social policy.

To eliminate Quebec's budget deficit by the year 2000, the Bouchard government has imposed the greatest social spending cuts in the province's history. The province's annual expenditure on health care has been cut by $2.3 billion, on education by $1.9 billion and transfers to municipalities have been reduced by $350 million per year. The PQ has also carried out a 'reform' of the welfare system, designed to provide pretexts for reducing benefits and at forcing the jobless into accepting cheap-labor jobs. Youth 18 to 24 must participate in a form of workfare and all welfare recipients now have to pay a share of their drug costs.

Two comparisons give some indication of the extent of the cuts imposed by the PQ. In March 1994 the average monthly welfare payment to individuals 'able to work' was $641. Today it is $550, which in 1994 terms is closer to $500. The Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris has in many respects spearheaded Canadian big business's assault on the working class. But the PQ government has imposed much larger spending cuts. In nominal terms--i.e., before taking inflation into account--Ontario government expenditures have increased 2 percent between 1994 and 1998; in Quebec they have fallen by 4.4 percent.

The role of the unions

The PQ would not have been able to impose these sweeping cuts were it not for the complicity of the trade unions. In 1996, the unions participated in two economic summits, the purpose of which were to lay the groundwork for the PQ's social spending cuts, and endorsed the government's 'zero deficit' objective.

When Bouchard demanded the unions agree to a 6 percent reduction in the province's public sector wage bill, the heads of the Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of National Trade Unions, and the Centrale de l'ensignement du Quebec (Quebec Teachers Federation) proposed an early retirement scheme, which enabled the government to sharply reduce its work force. As a result not only has the workload for nurses, hospital workers, teachers and other public sector workers been sharply increased; public services have been placed in dire jeopardy. Of 16,000 healthcare workers who took early retirement, just 10,000 were replaced. This has led to long delays for surgery, to say nothing of less urgent forms of care.

The union bureaucracy is a bulwark of PQ support. Bouchard, for his part, points to the extensive corporatist ties between the Quebec unions, the provincial government and big business as part of the 'Quebec advantage.' But such is the public anger over the cuts, the union leaders have been forced to distance themselves from the government and have not dared formally endorse the PQ.

According to CNTU President Gerald Larose, who in the past has consulted with Bouchard on at least a weekly basis, four years of savage public service cuts by Premier Lucien Bouchard have left the CNTU a 'political orphan.' Behind the scenes, however, the unions are working assiduously to assure the PQ's reelection. The day before Bouchard called the election, Larose and the heads of the QFL and CEQ announced a 'truce' in negotiations with the PQ on contracts for 350,000 public sector workers.

The need for a working class alternative

Neither the separatists nor their federalist opponents are united. Unlike his predecessor Parizeau, Bouchard has always tied the call for a 'sovereign' Quebec to a demand for a new deal with the rest of Canada.

The dominant sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie, based in central Canada, perceive Quebec's secession as highly detrimental to their interests, not least because the loss of a quarter of Canada's population and more than a fifth of its GNP would greatly diminsh Canada's stature on the world stage. In the past decade, however, a faction of the Anglo-Canadian bourgeoisie, centered in the West provinces and represented in the politica arena by what is now the Official Opposition in the federal parliament, the Reform Party, has taken an ambivalent attitude toward Quebec's continued participation in Confederation.

In the wake of the 1995 referendum the debate within Canada's ruling class has become more highly charged. Both the Chretien government and the Reform Party have brandished the threat that Quebec could be partitioned, with the western and northen parts of Quebec, where native and English speakers are concentrated, remaining in Canada after Quebec's secession.

The Quebec election campaign--with the rival parties vying for big business's blessing--has underscored that the rival camps in Canada's constitutional crisis represent different ruling class factions. Working people--French, English and immigrant--can defend their class interests only by opposing the federalist and separatist wings of big business, rejecting the ruling class ideologies of Canadian and Quebec nationalism, and joining with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and elsewhere in advancing a socialist alternative.

See Also:
Canada: Report documents staggering growth in social inequality
[4 November 1998]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site