

Quebec election notes

Keith Jones
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Popular anger over health cuts

The ruling Parti Québécois (PQ) and the opposition Liberals have cynically adapted to popular opposition to massive cuts in health care funding. A \$2 billion-per-year cut in Quebec's health budget, the elimination of 15,000 health care jobs, and the closure of hundreds of facilities have brought the public health care system to the point of collapse.

'Hospitals closed, nursing positions cut, malnutrition of seniors--we've been living a public health tragedy,' says Dr. Paul Saba of the Physicians for Social Justice. Shortages of personnel and equipment mean that there are long waiting lists for nonemergency operations at most Quebec hospitals and relatives are increasingly obliged to provide auxilliary care, in and out of hospitals.

Just in the Montreal region, four years of PQ cost-cutting have resulted in the closure of 7 hospitals, 186 of 551 nursing homes and long-term care centers, and 54 of 155 rehabilitation centers.

Cognizant that opinion polls show a majority of Quebecers view the health care crisis as the most important issue in the Quebec election, the rival big business parties have spent much of the election campaign disputing which will devote more resources to health care. The truth is, the separatist PQ and the federalist Liberals are equally complicit in the assault on public healthcare and both are, even while denying it, moving further down the road to the privatization.

On assuming office the PQ announced a health care 'reform,' the purported aim of which was to transfer resources from hospital to out-patient and home care. But it soon became clear that the PQ's 'virage ambulatoire' was nothing more than a trojan horse for massive budget cuts.

While demagogically denouncing some of the subsequent hospital closures, the Liberals joined with the PQ in insisting that the Quebec government's overriding priority be the elimination of its budget deficit. The federal Liberal government, meanwhile, has reduced the transfer payments it makes to the provinces to help fund healthcare, post-secondary education, and welfare by \$6 billion per year.

Quebec Premier and PQ leader Lucien Bouchard was brought face-to-face with the anger over the PQ health 'reform' when he visited his home constituency, the working class riding of Jonquière, in the second week of the election campaign. Some 2,000 demonstrators disrupted a Bouchard campaign stop in the center of Jonquière. Later the same day the premier had to delay the start of his own nomination meeting for three hours as he tried to convince doctors at the local hospital not to resign en masse to protest the transfer of vital hospital services, including pediatrics,

to a hospital in another city 15 kilometers away.

If the opposition to the healthcare cuts has not found expression in more and larger popular mobilizations, it is because the trade unions are suppressing it and channeling it behind the rival big business parties. On the eve of Bouchard's election call, the unions agreed to a truce on negotiations for new contracts for nurses and hospital workers, who have borne the brunt of much of the heathcare 'reform.'

Because of rank-and-file disgust with the PQ, Quebec's labor federations have found it politic not to officially endorse its reelection. But behind the scenes the union bureaucrats are working assiduously to bolster illusions in the PQ as somehow less beholden to big business. 'We don't think it will be good for us' to focus on the public sector negotiations during the election campaign, says Confederation of National Trade Unions President Gerald Larose, 'because we have an extreme right-wing alternative [the Liberals] and they are no alternative for us.'

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Conrad Black-owned daily gives PQ a conditional endorsement

The Quebec City daily *Le Soleil* has said it will call for the reelection of the Parti Québécois government if the PQ renounces its commitment to hold a referendum on Quebec's secession during a new mandate.

According to *Le Soleil*, the Bouchard PQ government has done an exemplary job in slashing public expenditures and must be lauded for its resolve to 'reform'--i.e., restric--welfare and other social programs in the face of fierce public opposition.

Although Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard laughed off *Le Soleil*'s referendum suggestion, the Quebec City daily's conditional endorsement is of some significance. *Le Soleil* is owned by Conrad Black, an Anglo-Canadian media baron infamous for his right-wing views and his tight control over his newspapers' editorial stance.

Of Black, whose holdings include the British *Telegraph* group and newspapers with more than half of all Canadian daily newspaper circulation, Margaret Thatcher is reputed to have said that he is the only person capable of making her feel as if she is a 'wet.' Just last month, Black launched a new cross-Canada daily, the *National Post*, which is championing the right-wing populist Reform Party's campaign to 'unite the right' so that the current federal Liberal regime can be replaced by one with a program

modeled after that of the Ontario Tories or the right-wing of the Republican Party in the US.

Another of Black's causes is the Quebec partition movement, which, in the event of secession, will press for Quebec to be partitioned along ostensibly federalist/separatist--but in reality--national-ethnic lines.

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Press boost for right-wing ADQ

The Action-Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which had but one member in the outgoing Quebec legislature, has suddenly become the object of much favorable press coverage. As a result, its support in opinion polls has almost doubled in a week, to 11 percent.

The big business media's boost for the ADQ is aimed at administering a rap on the knuckles to the Parti Québécois and the Liberals for pandering to public anger over massive cuts to public services and trading promises of increased social spending. The media's discontent with the main parties was typified in a lead editorial in Quebec's most influential daily, *La Presse*, which was entitled 'Le temps de bonbons,' literally 'Candy Time.'

The ADQ, which emerged out of a split-off from the Liberal Party, called for a 'yes' vote in the 1995 referendum on secession, although its program calls, not for separation, but rather greater powers for the Quebec provincial government. Like the right-wing populist Reform Party, the ADQ advocates sweeping tax cuts and the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state. In the current campaign, it has promised to slash a quarter of all provincial civil service jobs and devote any future budgetary surpluses to paying down the province's debt.

Key to the spurt in the ADQ's support has been its ability to appeal to the large segment of the population that is alienated from both the mainline parties. In the televised party leaders' debate, ADQ head Mario Dumont used his youth--he is just 28 years old--to paint himself as an outsider, even a non-politician. In fact, Dumont has been a political player for over a decade, serving his political apprenticeship as the head of the Liberal Party's youth wing.

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Bouchard and Charest vow to punish teachers for striking

Both Lucien Bouchard, the Quebec premier and Parti Québécois leader, and his main opponent, Liberal leader Jean Charest, have vowed to initiate legal action against teachers who participated in last week's one-day, province-wide strike.

Virtually all of Quebec's 80,000 public school teachers, French and English, walked off the job November 18 to support their demand for a significant wage adjustment under a provincial wage equity law. In striking, the teachers defied a ruling from the province's Essential Services Council that a walkout was illegal because insufficient notice had been given of their job action.

The teachers, affirmed Bouchard, 'are making a big mistake if they think that just because we are in an election that we will cave in.... We will not condone an illegal strike.' The premier pledged the teachers' action will have 'a sequel .. in the Attorney-General's office, where the appropriate measures will be taken.'

Charest feigned support for the teachers, saying their 'message ... has been clearly heard.' He then added, 'But the law is the same for everyone. We will act in consequence. The Essential Services Council has spoken and its view must be respected.'

Established 15 years ago by the PQ government of René Lévesque, the Essential Services Council has served as an arm of PQ and Liberal governments in imposing wage and budget cuts on public sector workers. Never before, however, has the council intervened in a dispute involving teachers, who, according to its terms of reference, do not even fall within the ambit of 'essential workers.'

Moreover, in its efforts to terrorize the teachers into remaining on the job, the council did not limit itself to a ruling that the strike would be in violation of the province's labor code. It filed its ruling with the provincial court, thus making individual teachers liable to be held in contempt of court, a crime carrying a maximum penalty of one year in prison or a \$5,000 fine.

In denouncing the teachers' action, Bouchard and Charest have signaled their support for the council's attempt to extend its jurisdiction and powers. That they have done so is clearly in anticipation of a major confrontation with the teachers and the more than 200,000 other provincial public sector workers--nurses, hospital workers, civil servants, college teachers and school support staff--who are currently renegotiating their contracts.

See Also:

In defiance of Essential Services Council and union 'truce'

Quebec teachers to stage one-day strike

[18 November 1998]

Quebec elections

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

[10 November 1998]



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