

Canadian Elections:

The Bloc Québécois—a trap for workers

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Although the Bloc Québécois (BQ) claims to be an ad hoc coalition, not a true political party, it is now contesting its third federal election. The federal alter ego of the Parti Québécois (PQ), the *pro-indépendentiste* party that forms Quebec's provincial government, the BQ is expected to capture the majority of Quebec's 75 House of Commons seats, but fall considerably short of winning a majority of Quebec's popular vote.

The BQ has intimate ties to and enjoys the support, open or tacit, of Quebec's three main labor federations. Party leader Gilles Duceppe, a one-time Maoist, was plucked from the trade union bureaucracy, to become the BQ's first-ever candidate and elected MP. The BQ's vice-president, Pierre Paquette, is a former vice-president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions.

The BQ uses the support of the trade unions to bolster its claim to be a left or social-democratic alternative to the governing federal Liberal Party and to promote the fiction that Quebec independence is an objective that transcends the class struggle.

In fact, the BQ was created in 1990-91 by renegade politicians from the traditional big business parties. Following the collapse of the Meech Lake constitutional accord, which was supposed to accommodate the demands of Quebec's political and economic elite for greater autonomy and power, a group of Quebec MPs—Liberal and Conservative—walked out of their respective parties and, under the leadership of former Tory cabinet minister Lucien Bouchard, formed the BQ to fight for Quebec “sovereignty.” In establishing the BQ, Bouchard, who is now Quebec's PQ Premier, had the backing not just of the PQ, but also of Quebec's then Liberal government, which wanted to maximize the pressure on Ottawa and the other provinces for constitutional change. (The Quebec Liberal Party or Parti Libéral du Québec has long been separate from the federal Liberal Party of Jean Chretien.)

Attacking democratic and workers' rights

The BQ's campaign for the November 27 federal election has underscored its right-wing character and provided further substantiation that its call for Quebec to become an independent, capitalist nation-state is a trap for workers.

Having no aspiration to federal office, the BQ has long enjoyed the luxury of making populist attacks on the Liberal government. In the past, the BQ has railed against the Liberals for social spending cuts, particularly cuts to unemployment benefits and transfers to the provinces, and denounced the federal government for failing to adopt anti-scab legislation.

In the current election campaign, however, Duceppe and the BQ have said little about socio-economic policy. Instead they have made the call for a federal anti-gang law and suggestions Prime Minister

Chretien is corrupt and a lackey of English Canada their main campaign themes. Echoing the law and order rhetoric of the right-wing Canadian Alliance, Duceppe has accused the Liberals of being soft on crime because they have heeded warnings from legal experts and civil libertarians that the BQ's proposed anti-gang law would violate constitutional guarantees of the right of association. Duceppe is demanding Ottawa make it impossible for the courts to strike down his anti-gang legislation as unconstitutional by invoking the “notwithstanding clause.” This almost never-used clause allows Canada's legislatures to pass laws that violate the guarantees in the country's constitutionally-entrenched Charter of Rights. “You know where I would like to stick the Hell's Angel's constitutional rights,” exclaims Duceppe.

The BQ isn't troubled about the workers' rights either. It has refused to criticize the PQ's plan to suspend the trade union rights of tens of thousands of municipal employees during the coming forced mergers of many Quebec municipalities. And the BQ maintained a studied silence, when in mid-campaign, the PQ government rallied to the support of trucking companies that were using scabs to break a strike at the Post of Montreal. Under an emergency PQ law, the strikers were threatened with massive fines, firings and the seizure of their trucks if they didn't immediately return to work.

If the BQ has chosen to downplay socio-economic policy, it is because to do otherwise would draw attention to the extent to which Quebec's pro-separatist provincial government is pursuing the same right-wing course as its federalist opponents.

In fact, Quebec Finance Minister Bernard Landry welcomed the federal Liberals' October mini-budget, which will that ensure the rich and super-rich appropriate a still greater share of the national wealth and the state lacks the resources to restore funding to public and social services. Landry's only complaints were that the Liberals should have tabled their \$100 billion tax cutting program earlier and had waited to do so in order to boost their election prospects. “The good news,” declared Landry, “is we have these tax cuts, the bad news is we should have had them many months ago. And all of this is to serve the electoral popularity of the Liberal Party of Canada ...”

The BQ platform outlines a fiscal plan that conforms to the same right-wing pattern as that of the Liberals and the Canadian Alliance: the bulk of the projected federal surpluses are given over to tax cuts and paying down the debt, while deficit-spending is forsworn.

The BQ's promises and the PQ record

Admittedly, the BQ's \$73 billion tax cut plan is less skewed in favor of the wealthy, but this is for show—a cynical stratagem to bolster the BQ's claims to be less beholden to big business and the wealthy than their Liberal opponents.

To know what the BQ's real program and class orientation is one has to examine the governmental record of its sister party, the PQ. Returned to power in 1994 after almost a decade in opposition, the PQ won accolades from big business when it launched a program of hospital closures and other social spending cuts in the name of fighting the deficit. In October 1995, it sought a mandate for secession, claiming independence would be a bulwark against the right-wing wave sweeping North America, while simultaneously appealing for big business backing by arguing that separation would be the best means to slash public expenditure and mobilize state resources behind corporate Quebec in the struggle for international markets. Following its narrow referendum defeat and Bouchard's accession to the premiership, the PQ imposed public and social services cuts comparable to those implemented by the federal Liberals and the Ontario Tory government. When nurses revolted against low-pay and over-work in the summer of 1999, the PQ government responded with savage strikebreaking legislation.

During the six years of PQ-rule, hospital waiting lists have mushroomed while post-secondary student debt-loads have soared. Welfare recipients have faced benefit cuts and other punitive measures aimed at forcing them to accept low-paying employment. Breaking a promise made at its Youth Summit last March, the PQ this month made participation in a workfare-type program mandatory for young welfare recipients. The PQ's most highly-touted "reform," a scheme to ensure all Quebecers have drug insurance, has imposed new financial burdens on welfare recipients, the aged and the working poor and, according to several well-documented studies, led mental patients and persons suffering life threatening conditions to forego their medication.

The lamentable state of public and social services notwithstanding, the PQ government, like the Chretien Liberals, has gone from making "deficit-fighting" the pivot of public policy to proclaiming tax-cutting its primary objective.

In so far as there is any difference in the approach of the two governments, it is that the PQ has placed greater emphasis on incorporating the trade unions in the assault on public and social services. The PQ secured the union bureaucracy's support for its spending cuts at two economic summits in 1996 and it was the unions that proposed the government slash public service jobs through an early retirement scheme.

The BQ and Quebec separation

The BQ is seeking to mobilize the petty bourgeois base of the Quebec separatist movement by saying that an increase in the number of BQ seats and the party's share of the popular vote will be a step toward independence. At the same time, the BQ seeks to woo Quebecers who do not favor or are skeptical of separation by arguing that the federal election will not decide Quebec's constitutional fate and that they should vote for the BQ as a protest against the Liberals and because the BQ will defend "Quebec's interests."

Such contradictory and hypocritical claims typify the BQ/PQ. To rally support from workers and youth, the separatists present independence as a radical option, which, will, to repeat the words of a 1995 referendum slogan, make anything possible. At the same time they seek to convince big business and the upper middle class that should Quebec become independent it will be "business as usual," indeed that separation is the best means for Quebec capital to organize the state apparatus and secure a union-policed, cooperative workforce for the global struggle for markets and profits.

In the 1970s, the PQ associated independence with the expansion of

the welfare state. Today its scheme for a sovereign Quebec is openly right-wing. A "sovereign" Quebec would be a full partner of NAFTA and NATO.

The BQ is urging Ottawa to consider scrapping the Canadian dollar and adopting the US dollar in its stead, because it sees the abolition of a separate Canadian currency as a further means of reducing Quebec capital's dependence on its Anglo-Canadian rivals and because it wants to prove its neo-liberal bonafides.

The reactionary character of the BQ and its separatist program is exemplified by its readiness to engage in political horse-trading with the Canadian Alliance, the spearhead of political reaction. While ruling out a formal coalition with Alliance, the BQ has indicated that were the opportunity to arise in a minority parliament it would help the Alliance unseat the Liberals and provide it with issue-based support. The western-based Alliance and the BQ share the aim of weakening the federal state. Says Duceppe, "We'd have to see if he [Stockwell Day] practices what he preaches." Although many sections of the ruling class, particularly those based in Ontario, oppose decentralization, others see it as providing a means to compete the dismantling of the welfare state.

The BQ is a trap for Quebec workers. Calls for the unity of Quebecers and the defence of Quebec interests have long served to subordinate the interests of working people to the needs of big business and divide Quebec workers from their brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and around the world. In the name of national solidarity, the union leaders participated in Bouchard's economic summits and endorsed his plan to eliminate the deficit through massive social spending cuts.

Quebec workers—French and English-speaking and immigrant—cannot defend their independent class interests by aligning with any of the ruling class factions in the dispute over the fate of the Canadian federal state. The creation of a sovereign capitalist Quebec, even were it not to spiral out of control into a reactionary ethnic conflict, would give rise to further attacks on democratic rights in both Quebec and English Canada and erect a new obstacle to the international unification of the working class. To defend their basic rights, Quebec workers should join with workers in the rest Canada to fight for a socialist internationalist program—a workers' government and the forging of the unity of the international working class against global capital.

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