

Quebec's indépendantiste government seeking to hijack antiwar movement

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With Quebec provincial elections imminent, the big business Parti Québécois (PQ) government is seeking to divert attention from the frontal assault it has waged for the last nine years on the social gains of the working class by posing as a supporter of the antiwar movement.

Speaking at a conference of the PQ's youth wing February 16—one day after more than 10 million people had demonstrated in cities across the world against US plans to invade and conquer Iraq—Quebec Premier Bernard Landry said the size of the antiwar protests in Quebec had filled him with pride.

Then he tried to appropriate the demonstrations to the PQ's reactionary political project of building an independent capitalist Quebec. According to Landry the fact that the 150,000-strong Montreal antiwar demonstration was bigger than similar antiwar protests in Toronto and other major cities in English Canada shows that "Quebecers constitute a nation." Recognition that antiwar sentiment is greater in Quebec would, claimed Landry, "lead people to draw ... the conclusion that Quebec must become sovereign."

Not content with this crude intent to impart a nationalist character to a mass movement, which, whatever its present political limitations, objectively represents the strivings of working people to develop a global and internationalist opposition to imperialist war, the Quebec premier urged the Québécois to take pride that "there is no country in the Western world relatively speaking which showed such a level of commitment to world peace as ours." One only had to watch the television broadcasts that very night to see the pettiness and stupidity of Landry's claims—reports showed demonstrations of 2 million in London, 2-3 million in Rome, half a million in Australia, etc.

At one level, Landry's statements and the attempts of

the PQ's sister party in the federal parliament—the Bloc Québécois (BQ)—to associate themselves with the antiwar movement are a patent attempt to hop onto a popular cause so as to draw attention away from their right-wing, big business government record and restore a bit of anti-establishment gloss to the tattered *indépendantiste* banner.

During its nine years in office, the PQ has carried out cuts to public and social services comparable to those implemented by its federalist "enemies" in the federal Liberal government and Ontario's avowedly right-wing Tory regime. Whilst the trade union bureaucracy continues to boost the PQ, its faces indifference and hostility from the majority of working people. Till just recently, opinion polls consistently showed the PQ trailing both the big business federalist Parti Libéral du Québec (Liberals), and the Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ) a new, far-right, Quebec nationalist party that has cast itself as the voice of the beleaguered middle class tax payer.

Fearing an electoral rout, the PQ has been oscillating between promising à la ADQ to "reinvent government" and implement major tax cuts and promoting itself as the only bulwark against the ADQ's calls for dismantling what remains of the welfare state.

But the *indépendantistes* attempt to hijack the antiwar movement is dictated by more than just electoral calculation. The principal service the PQ has historically provided the bourgeoisie has been its systematic efforts to divert any movement of popular opposition that threatens the existing order into the dead end of nationalism.

The antiwar stance of the PQ and BQ is completely hypocritical. Like the French and German governments, the Quebec separatists oppose a US invasion of Iraq that does not have United Nations Security Council

sanction. That is to say, if the US can cut a deal with the other great powers, a war of plunder against Iraq would be perfectly acceptable to them.

And when Landry was asked at a press conference whether a decision by the federal Liberal government to deploy Canadian military forces against Iraq would lead to a crisis with Quebec—a reference to the First and Second World Wars when much of the Quebec population resisted conscription—the PQ premier hastened to reply, “I don’t think it will end up in a crisis.” In other words, Landry’s and the PQ’s “opposition” to war would quickly dissipate at the decisive moment.

Whilst the PQ and the Quebec *indépendantiste* movement do occasionally protest some of the more outrageous actions of US imperialism, their orientation has long been to win Washington’s and Wall Street’s favor.

PQ founder René Lévesque met regularly with US diplomats and Chase Manhattan bank chief David Rockefeller in the 1970s, so as to assure them that the PQ represented no threat to American interests. The PQ was in the forefront of mobilizing support within Quebec for the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, believing that free trade would lessen Quebec business’s dependence on Canada’s Toronto-based financial establishment.

During the campaign for the 1995 referendum on granting the Quebec government a mandate to negotiate independence, the PQ/BQ explicitly linked the separation of Quebec to the conquest of international markets by Quebec corporations. An independent Quebec state would be better able to support corporate needs, claimed the *indépendantistes*, because it wouldn’t have to concern itself with the claims of rival sections of Canadian business and because the restructuring of the state necessitated by Quebec’s secession would facilitate the dismantling of public and social services. The first act of an independent Quebec, the PQ’s sovereignty bill proclaimed, would be to apply for membership in NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), NATO and NORAD, the Canada-US military alliance responsible for North American air defense.

The PQ-led Quebec government has since been at the forefront of the campaign by Washington to establish, at the expense of its European and Japanese rivals, a

protectionist and geopolitical bloc of the entire Americas, the so-called Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The PQ and BQ have also repeatedly called for the Canadian dollar to be abandoned in favor of the US dollar and have said an independent Quebec would adopt the greenback as its currency.

The reasons behind the Quebec separatists’ pro-US stance were mentioned by Landry in his speech to the PQ’s youth wing. “We are deeply North Americans”, he said, because “we want to do business in the world.” In today’s world of brutal competition for global markets and resources, sections of the Quebec elite believe that they can better defend their predatory interests by severing their historical ties to Canada and placing themselves more directly under the protective wing of Washington. Establishment politicians may argue about such a gamble’s chances of success, but that the Quebec ruling class and the PQ are cogs in the world imperialist system and enemies of the antiwar movement is indisputable.



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