

War overshadows Quebec election

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11 April 2003

Quebecers will vote in a provincial election Monday, April 14. But the campaign and the associated debate over Quebec's constitutional future have provoked little interest. This is not for want of political discussion. The election campaign has been overshadowed by public anger and anxiety over the US-British invasion of Iraq.

Over the past three months, Quebec has witnessed numerous antiwar protests, including three demonstrations in Montreal which each mobilized between 150,000 and a quarter-million people. What makes this all the more striking and significant is that the antiwar movement developed almost entirely outside the traditional political establishment, including the trade union officialdom.

Belatedly, the three parties with representatives in the Quebec National Assembly—the ruling Parti Québécois (PQ), the Liberals, and the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ)—have all proclaimed their opposition to the US-led war. The three party leaders have taken to sporting white peace ribbons on their jackets.

This is a cynical and patently obvious attempt to appeal to Quebec's antiwar majority. In the run-up to the US invasion, Quebec Premier Bernard Landry said he would welcome a war against Iraq if endorsed by the great powers on the UN Security Council. Quebec Liberal Party leader Jean Charest was a cabinet minister in the federal Tory government that led Canada into the first Gulf War. As for Mario Dumont, the “free-market” ideologue who leads the ADQ, he has been visibly ill at ease in feigning opposition to the Bush administration's assault on Iraq.

The opposition to the war has given form to a deep-rooted popular alienation from official politics—a sentiment born of growing economic insecurity, mounting social inequality, and ever-increasing corporate power. If this alienation has not otherwise found positive political expression, it is because the trade union bureaucracy in Quebec systematically subordinates the working class to the big business and pro-*indépendantiste* PQ.

The erosion in the popular base of the politics of the ruling elite has, however, found distorted expression over the past year in wild swings in support for the establishment parties.

Particularly dramatic have been the fluctuating fortunes of the ADQ, a Quebec nationalist split-off from the Quebec Liberal Party. In the spring and summer of 2002, the ADQ, which had hitherto never elected more than its leader, captured four by-elections and placed first in a spate of opinion polls. But as popular attention came to focus on the ADQ's right-wing platform—charter schools, a flat tax, and a two-tier health care system—its support faded and, in recent weeks, has plunged.

If the latest opinion polls are to be believed, only the two

longstanding parties have a legitimate shot at forming Quebec's government after April 14. A hung parliament, in which the Liberals and PQ vie for ADQ support, nonetheless remains a distinct possibility.

Six months ago, the PQ, which has ruled Quebec for the past nine years, appeared to be facing an electoral rout on the scale of that suffered by the federal Tories in 1993 or the British Columbia NDP in 2001. It has since won back some support by attacking the ADQ's ultra-right-wing policy prescriptions and casting itself as the party of the “left.”

The PQ used a similar ploy in the 1995 referendum on Quebec independence. It claimed a “yes” vote would be a bulwark against the “right-wing wave” sweeping North America. Then immediately following the referendum, it declared that the key to attaining Quebec “sovereignty” was to eliminate the provincial government's \$4 billion annual budget deficit and imposed massive cuts in social and public services. In per capita terms, these cuts were on a par with those implemented by the PQ's federalist adversaries, the federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Ontario's avowedly anti-working class Tory regime. And like the federal Liberals and Ontario Tories, the PQ government made cutting taxes its first priority once the “deficit fight” was won.

When Premier Landry goes before a business audience, he boasts that the PQ has reduced taxes by \$15 billion and that Quebec has one of the lowest corporate tax rates in North America. But recognizing that there is widespread anger over the deplorable state of public health care and education, the PQ is now promising a two-year pause in further tax cuts to allow for “reinvestment” in public services.

Even less convincing are the claims the claims of the PQ—which has implemented workfare and presided over a sharp reduction in the real value of welfare benefits—that it is spearheading the fight against poverty. With much fanfare, the PQ recently piloted an “anti-poverty” law through the National Assembly. But the budget it tabled just before calling the election provided a paltry \$50 million in additional funding for anti-poverty measures.

One PQ election promise that has attracted some popular attention is a proposal to force employers to accommodate any worker who has a child 12 years or younger and wants to work four days per week instead of five. To underline the PQ's new commitment to help families deal with work-related stress, Landry has proposed to rename the Labour Commission the “Commission of Labor and Reconciling Work and Family Life.” But if the PQ's four day workweek is ever implemented—business has condemned it as unworkable—it would only benefit the better-off, since there is

no provision to provide financial support for those who choose to work reduced hours.

As in most recent provincial elections, the PQ is not emphasizing its call for Quebec to become an independent state. Landry is himself a fervent supporter of independence. Moreover, he recognizes that the PQ's opposition to the existing federal order plays an important role in mobilizing the party's petty bourgeois cadre and in giving the PQ an anti-establishment gloss. But he also knows that the most powerful sections of Quebec capital, to say nothing of Canada's financial elite, remain adamantly opposed to separation.

At the beginning of the campaign, Landry boasted that his soft-peddling of independence had the support of former PQ leader Jacques Parizeau, the elder statesman of the party's hardline *indépendantiste* faction and a notorious Québécois chauvinist. But when Parizeau once again blamed immigrants for the PQ's 1995 referendum loss, Landry all but ordered him to drop his parallel campaign of pro-PQ rallies.

Apart from its advocacy of independence, the PQ differs from the Liberals and the ADQ in its readiness to provide grants and tax concessions to Quebec-based business and its support for corporatist arrangements in which the union bureaucracy is a given a measure of power and influence in return for its services in policing the working class.

Like the PQ, the Liberals are appealing, albeit timidly, to popular dissatisfaction over the state of the public services, while in fact preparing to intensify the assault on the working class.

Liberal leader Jean Charest has declared health care and specifically eliminating emergency room overcrowding and lengthy waiting lists for potentially living saving medical treatments his party's first priority. But the Liberals are coupling the promise of significant increases in spending on health care and public education, with plans to give the private sector a greater say in the managing of health care and the provision of "nonessential" health services and a pledge to freeze government spending in all other areas for the next five years. The latter measure would mean escalating spending cuts throughout the Liberals' first term in office.

Just as importantly, the Liberals have pledged to reduce personal income taxes by an additional \$1 billion per year, for a total of \$15 billion over the next five years. The vast majority of the tax savings will go to the better-off sections of the middle class, the rich and super-rich.

Both the PQ and ADQ have accused the Liberals of fiscal responsibility, arguing that the Liberals' promises to slash taxes while increasing spending on health care and education will lead to a fiscal crisis. While Charest has dismissed these concerns, claiming economic growth will swell government revenues, he has guaranteed that a Liberal government would never allow a budget deficit.

The Liberals have also pledged that they will eliminate labor code restrictions on small and medium-sized businesses using contracting-out to circumvent union contracts.

Charest, like the PQ, has used the far-right campaign of the ADQ as a foil, contrasting Dumont's tirades against the unions and union bosses, with his own offer to the union bureaucracy to work

with the Liberals to "re-invent" government and downsize public services.

Quebec big business, which last year rushed to embrace the ADQ, has concluded that at present it does not have the popular support or political experience to implement its ultra-right-wing program. But through the ADQ, the ruling class has prodded the PQ and Liberals further right. Boasted the *National Post*, "In attracting mainstream interest to legitimately conservative ideas, [ADQ leader Mario] Dumont gave the Liberals room to adopt similar—if more moderate—policies without being vilified."

For their part, the union bureaucrats have used the rise of the ADQ to justify their continued support for PQ and an offer of collaboration to the Liberals. Among workers, however, support for the PQ and its *indépendantiste* option has largely eroded.

Fearing that the unions support for the big business PQ has dangerously compromised them in the eyes of the rank and file, a small group of dissident union bureaucrats have joined various social-democratic and middle class groups in an electoral alliance, the Union des forces progressistes (UFP). In no way does the UFP represent a socialist alternative to the capitalist parties. It is oriented toward pressuring the big business PQ to the "left" and channeling the growing opposition to imperialist war and the assault on the social position of the working class into the blind alley of Quebec nationalism. Only a few weeks before the election was called, top officials of the UFP and PQ discussed the possibility of an electoral alliance.

The shrinking base of official politics and the rise of the antiwar movement indicate that whatever the results of the April 14 elections—elections in which the working class is effectively disenfranchised—we stand on the threshold of a new period of working class politicization and radicalization. The challenge facing socialists is to arm this movement with a socialist and internationalist program.



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