

Quebec premier baits unions

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Quebec Premier Jean Charest has issued a series of ringing denunciations of trade union “violence” and “intimidation” following a handful of boisterous protests during which union supporters reputedly committed acts of petty vandalism.

By painting opponents of his Liberal government as violent, Charest and the big business media hope to turn public attention away from the frontal assault that the Liberals are mounting on public services and workers’ rights and paint the growing popular opposition to the Liberals’ right-wing agenda as “antidemocratic.”

Although the Liberals were elected only last April, opinion polls show a majority of the electorate is dissatisfied with the Charest government. Last week saw two major demonstrations in Quebec City, the provincial capital. The first, organized by the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), was attended by 7,000. The second, called by the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), drew 30,000. Later this month, the CNTU and QFL are to hold separate “days of action,” during which workers will participate in study sessions and mount information picket lines. Such is the anti-government feeling, both the CNTU and QFL presidents have been forced to publicly muse about the possibility of a province-wide general strike in the new year.

On Tuesday, Charest demanded that union leaders condemn antigovernment protesters for overturning furniture and files in the riding office of a Liberal MNA (Member of the National Assembly) and bursting into Montreal’s Ste. Justine hospital, where Charest was scheduled to make a funding announcement. “The government,” declared Charest, “has no intention of giving in to intimidation or blackmail or vandalism.”

In fact, top union officials had already disassociated themselves from the previous day’s protests, deploring the acts of petty vandalism and appealing for “calm.”

Egged on by the corporate media, Charest has rejected these statements as inadequate. Union leaders, he claimed, could not escape responsibility for such “acts of intimidation and brutality,” because they have used “violent” rhetoric in condemning the government plans to “re-engineer” the state and have urged their members to do “battle” with the government.

Charest’s argument echoed the lead editorial in the Tuesday edition of *La Presse*. The “leaders of the union federations cannot so easily shrug off their responsibility,” declared Quebec’s most influential daily. “By engendering over the past few weeks a climate of crisis that nothing justifies, they opened the door to the disgraceful acts that they now pretend to denounce.”

Later Charest secured unanimous approval from the National Assembly for a resolution denouncing the protests. The Parti Québécois (PQ), the official opposition in the provincial legislature, supported the motion although Charest had tarred it with the same brush as the unions, saying it too had incited violence and law-breaking. “The Leader of the Opposition,” declared Charest, “freely uses language in the National Assembly that can be associated with the events that took place yesterday when he speaks of the demolition” of government services.

Subsequently, Charest sought to associate any attempt by the PQ to use parliamentary procedure to block speedy passage of Bill 31—legislation that gives employers a free hand to slash wages and roll back working conditions through the contracting out of work—with the hijacking of democracy. “Will the official opposition give us a guarantee today,” demanded the premier, “that it will not try to obstruct the democratically expressed will of the population of Quebec?”

The baiting of the unions by Charest and the big business press underscores that the working class is on

a collision course with the provincial Liberal government and must be taken as a warning that the government will seek to use the legislature, courts and police to intimidate and declare illegal the growing opposition movement. The Liberals program of privatization and deregulation, cuts to public and social services, tax cuts for big business and the well-to-do, workfare and dismantling of union rights will have a devastating impact on the most vulnerable sections of society. The elimination of the restrictions on contracting will mean hundreds of thousands of public and private sector workers will be threatened with the loss of their jobs or accepting wage cuts and the destruction of their working conditions.

Predictably the union leadership has responded to Charest's denunciations by appealing for dialogue with the government and by insisting that they mean neither to challenge his government's political legitimacy, nor threaten "social peace." This is in keeping with the unions' orientation over the past quarter century. As big business has mounted an ever broader attack on the working class, the unions have responded by integrating themselves into management, while politically subordinating the working class to the capitalist PQ.



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