

Quebec: A socialist perspective to defeat Charest government's plans for social demolition

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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In the name of “re-engineering the state,” Quebec’s Liberal government is seeking to dismantle decades-old social conquests of the working class so as to further enrich and empower big business and the owners of capital.

Between now and the tabling of the 2004-05 provincial budget, the Liberals have pledged to radically restructure the provincial government and the provision of public, social and municipal services, including education and health care, through privatization, contracting-out, and the imposition of user fees. Environmental, occupational health and safety and other workplace regulations are to be gutted. Welfare recipients are to face new coercive measures to force them into workfare or to accept cheap labor jobs.

As their first order of business, the Liberals have mounted a frontal assault on Article 45 of the labor code, which has impeded public and private sector employers from following the North American norm in using the contracting-out of jobs as a weapon to slash wages and working conditions and bust unions. If the president of the Conseil du Patronat (Quebec Employers’ Federation) has declared the Liberals’ promotion of contracting-out to be “music to his ears,” it is because under the new collective bargaining regime big business will take the offensive, threatening hundreds of thousands of workers with the loss of their jobs unless they accept massive wage and other rollbacks.

The Liberals’ anti-worker legislation and assault on public and social services goes hand-in-hand with their plan to reduce taxes by an additional one billion dollars per year, or a total of \$15 billion over the next five years. Charest has insisted his government will proceed with these tax cuts even though Quebec is facing a worsening fiscal crisis, including a projected \$3 billion budget deficit in 2004-05. Like the Bush administration in the US, the Liberals are plunging the state into a fiscal morass, so as to increase the pressure to drastically reduce social spending.

Should the Charest government succeed in imposing this unprecedented program of social regression, working people will be impoverished and stripped of virtually any protection from the destructive impact of the capitalist market, while an ever-greater share of society’s wealth flows to those at the top of the social pyramid.

An urgent question is thus posed: how to prevent this nightmare scenario from becoming reality?

The Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) welcome the growing popular opposition to the Liberal government, but we make this warning: the Charest government’s class war program will not be defeated through a series of demonstrations and protests, however vocal and militant, under the leadership of the Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL/FTQ), the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU/CSN) and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (Quebec Union

Federation).

The union apparatuses are fully committed to the defence of the existing social and political order, and, as such, have time and again over the past quarter century isolated and sabotaged militant worker struggles in the name of defending “social peace.” Their response to big business’ ever widening offensive against public and social services and workers’ rights has been to integrate the unions ever more completely into corporate management, through numerous corporatist and tri-partite government-union-management committees and “labor investment” funds like the QFL’s Solidarity Fund.

This process reached a new height in 1996-97, when the QFL, CNTU and CSQ all endorsed the former Parti Québécois regime’s making a “zero deficit” Quebec’s principal priority, thus supporting massive cuts in social spending. Then in the summer of 1999 when Quebec nurses defied the province’s anti-labor laws and went on strike for the defense of quality public healthcare, the principal labor federations came to the rescue of the PQ government, refusing—despite an enormous groundswell of popular support—to lift a finger to support the nurses and working instead behind the scenes to coerce the nurses back to work on the government’s terms and under the threat of punitive legal sanctions.

The Claudette Carbonneaus, Henri Massés and Cie. don’t consider the current Charest government as an irreconcilable enemy of working people, but as a negotiating partner. For them the current wave of protests is not the beginning of a political counter-offensive of the working class. Rather it is a means to dissipate the pressure from the rank and file for action and a plea to Charest not to dispense with many of the tripartite mechanisms developed over the past quarter century, which have given the union leaders a measure of influence—and not inconsiderable perks—in return for their role in policing the working class.

Earlier this week CNTU President Carbonneau pleaded with Charest to play what she called the premier’s traditional role of social “arbiter,” while making clear she is vehemently opposed to any challenge to his government’s right to rule—that is to impose the dictates of big business. “Of course, I don’t want him [Charest] to renounce legislating. No one has the right to have such aims.” Meanwhile, the QFL published an analysis in which it specifically warned against opposing the Liberal government’s agenda wholesale, claiming that to do so would make the public think the unions were engaged in a political power struggle.

The fundamental character of the attacks launched by the Charest government on all the social gains of the working class calls for a political response of an equally profound character. If workers have suffered defeat after defeat over the past two decades, it is not because of the intrinsic strength of capital, or even less any broad popular support for its reactionary program, but because the struggles of the working class have been animated by the false perspective that the needs of working people

can be reconciled with the profit system, with the power of the corporate elite to subordinate all of society to the pursuit of individual profit.

Quebec workers must turn to a new perspective, that of a conscious struggle for political power in order to put the wealth created by their own collective labor to the service of society as a whole. This requires the building of their own political party in concert with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and internationally, and dedicated to the goal of social equality.

The Charest government claims to have a popular mandate to carry out its plans of social demolition. In fact during last spring's election campaign, the Liberals appealed, on the one hand, to popular anger over the erosion of public services under the PQ and, on the other, to voters' revulsion at the neo-conservative agenda espoused by the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ). That Charest, once elected Premier of Quebec, moved to impose the ultra-right program of the ADQ is much more than simple hypocrisy.

It is above all the expression on the Quebec scene of an international phenomenon: a rapid shift to the right of the entire axis of official politics, a shift generated by an historic crisis of world capitalism, and marked by the malignant growth of social inequality, militarism and authoritarianism.

The recent political evolution of Canada is a prime example. Over the past eight years, first in Ontario with the election of Mike Harris' Tory government in 1995, then in British Columbia with the advent of the Liberal regime of Gordon Campbell and now in Quebec, Canada's three most populous provinces have seen the emergence of governments committed to dismantling what remains of the welfare state. In each case, these new governments intensified an anti-working class assault that was initiated by their supposedly progressive predecessor—in the case of Ontario and BC, the NDP; and in the case of the Charest Liberal government, the Parti Québécois.

On the national stage, the Liberals under Jean Chrétien fundamentally transformed the federal state, by imposing massive cuts to unemployment benefits and slashing the transfers that pay for provincially-administered health care, social welfare and post-secondary education programs. The new Liberal Prime Minister of Canada is none other than Paul Martin, who, as Chrétien's Finance Minister, was the principal author of the social spending cuts, and subsequently imposed steep cuts in tax rates for the rich and super-rich.

A similar development has taken place internationally. In Europe, the welfare state is but a thing of the past after more than 20 years of budget-cutting by both avowedly right-wing and social-democratic governments. Moreover, this process will deepen next year as both France and Germany have launched a frontal assault on pensions, health care and social security.

In the United States, the Bush administration has pursued a program of military plunder against Iraq, and of social plunder at home, slashing taxes on inheritance and capital gains while adopting a plan that paves the way for the privatization of public health care for the aged.

In opposing the plans of Charest, workers must be clear about the nature of the struggle before them: it is a challenge not to the policies of a particular government, but to the class strategy of the entire ruling elite in Canada and internationally. It is thus basically a political struggle. In opposition to the principle of market domination put forward by the ruling class in its constant efforts to extract an ever larger share of society's wealth, workers must oppose a progressive alternative—a society of a higher type, where the immense resources made available by modern technology will be put to the service of all, by bringing the banks, utilities and large resource and manufacturing companies under public and democratic control.

The main obstacle workers will have to overcome in the struggle against the Charest government is the confusion generated by the long ideological domination of the workers' movement by Quebec nationalism.

The responsibility for this falls above all on the union bureaucrats who through their reactionary alliance with the big business Parti Québécois have systematically promoted the idea that workers in Quebec have more in common with the ruling class than they do with workers elsewhere in Canada and internationally. They have inculcated the notions that Quebec society is different; that it is not above all characterized by profound class divisions, but by the existence of the "French fact"; that Quebec workers should join with the Francophone business and political elite in demanding a transfer of power from the federal to the provincial level; and that the ultimate goal of the political and social struggles of Quebec workers should be the establishment of an independent capitalist Republic of Quebec.

It is high time for Quebec workers to draw a balance sheet of their bitter experience with nationalism.

In the 1970s, it served to neutralize militant struggles which had put on the agenda the question of political power and channel them behind the PQ of René Lévesque and away from a growing international working class upsurge. The timid reforms of the first Lévesque PQ government quickly gave way to the austerity policies demanded by the ruling elite, leading to mass struggles against the PQ and in 1985 to its fall from power.

If the PQ was subsequently able to return to office it was largely because of the union bureaucrats' efforts to rehabilitate it in the eyes of the working class. The unions played an active role in the campaign of the Quebec establishment to whip up nationalist feelings over the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords, thus completely identifying themselves with the Quebec elite's attempts to gain greater political power at the expense of their rivals in English Canada.

When the PQ returned to power in 1994, the union leaders acted essentially as a part of the government. In the 1995 Quebec referendum, they echoed then-Premier Jacques Parizeau's claim that a "Yes" vote would be a bulwark against the right wing wave sweeping Ontario and rest of the North America. But subsequently they did nothing to support the mass struggles in Ontario against Harris. Rather they solidarized themselves with the PQ government and big business in embracing the zero deficit objective. Indeed, it was the unions that actually proposed the mechanism by which the PQ government eliminated tens of thousands of public sector jobs, thereby ravaging health care and other vital public services and increasing the work burden on their own members.

The immense economic changes which have taken place since the election of the first PQ government in 1976, and which have culminated today with an unprecedented global integration of all aspects of production, have also created the objective conditions for a final settling of accounts with the historically obsolete perspective of nationalism. Workers around the world—whatever language they speak or the color of the skin—face a common big business offensive. Private ownership of the essential economic levers of society and the nation-state system, the basic political structure of capitalism, are an absolute brake on the harmonious and planned development of the world economy in the interests of all and make the attainment of genuine equality amongst all peoples impossible.

The only viable perspective that can guide a serious struggle against the threat represented by the plans of the Charest government is that of the international unity of the working class in a common struggle for socialism and social equality. This is the perspective advocated by the SEP and on a daily basis by the WSW. We call on all those who are revolted by the plans of social demolition of the Charest government to become regular readers of the WSW and take an active part in its development, as the main weapon for the building of an independent political party of working people which is the great task of the day.



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