

Quebec government tries to remake its image for the better to pursue class war assault

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The year-old Quebec Liberal government is facing a popular backlash against its attempt to “re-engineer” the state—a euphemism for the dismantling of public and social services and the massive tax cuts skewed to benefit the most privileged sections of society.

In December, the government rammed through a series of highly contested pieces of legislation that revamped the province’s labor code to facilitate outsourcing, increased fees at government-sponsored day care, and reorganized administrative and trade union structures in the health care sector so as to promote greater “labor flexibility” (i.e., the gutting of working conditions).

These measures were touted by Premier Jean Charest as a “down payment” on the government’s plans to fundamentally change the way in which the state operates and public services are delivered. Later this month, the Charest government will detail its privatization and deregulation plans.

According to opinion polls, fully two thirds of the province’s population are “unsatisfied” with the Charest government. In one case, 80 percent of those interviewed said they thought protests against the government by unions, community organizations and other groups were justified, a reference to the wave of anti-government demonstrations that erupted at the end of last year. A further wave of anti-Liberal protests will take place this Wednesday, when the Liberals mark the first anniversary of their election. The opinion polls further show that were an election held today, the Liberals would not only fall from power, they would be reduced to a small rump in the National Assembly.

Until a few weeks ago, Charest cavalierly dismissed all opposition to his government’s right-wing policies, claiming that the voters had mandated them. (In fact, the Liberals won election by appealing to popular anger over the brutal social spending cuts implemented by the Parti Québécois [PQ] government and by cynically claiming to be opponents of the neo-liberal agenda championed by the Action démocratique du Québec [ADQ].)

Recently, however, Charest and his Liberals have moderated their tone, announced a phoney popular “consultation” on the government’s agenda, and delivered a budget that Finance Minister Yves Séguin labeled “social democratic.” Their aim is to remake the government’s image—it is popularly perceived as a government of and for big business—for the better to press forward with an assault on the working class.

To the dismay of the main employer group, the *Conseil du Patronat*, the Liberals failed in their March 30th budget to deliver on their promise to cut personal income taxes by C\$1 billion a year. Instead, they made measures to support families, especially low-income families, the budget’s centerpiece.

Most of this is smoke and mirrors—a political deception. The Liberals are running full-page ads in the province’s dailies boasting that starting in 2005 low-income families with two children will receive family allowances worth on an annual basis several thousand dollars more than at present, and even middle-income families (those earning

C\$40,00-C\$60,000) will receive close to a thousand additional dollars per year. But what the government fails to mention is that most of the funding for its enriched family allowance program comes from eliminating various family-related tax deductions and credits.

Once the increases that the Liberals have already forced in day care fees, electricity rates, the provincial drug plan and public transit fares are factored in, most Quebec families will actually be worse off.

The budget’s other “pro-poor” measures are equally dubious. The Liberals did fulfill their election pledge to eliminate the financial penalty for welfare recipients who refuse to participate in workfare programs, but they kept the basic payment for an “able-bodied” person at a paltry C\$533 per month. They also reneged on their pledge to restore free prescription drugs to welfare recipients and the elderly.

The corporate media is indignant that the Liberals have called their changes in the family allowance program a tax cut. But by doing so, the Liberals sought to signal to big business that they fully intend to keep their promise to cut personal income taxes by an additional C\$1 billion in each of the next five years.

Precisely because the Liberals’ tax-cutting plan is so clearly an instrument of class war—most of the savings will accrue to the privileged and it will be paid for out of cuts to public and social services that will fall disproportionately on the poor and ordinary working people—they deemed it politic to pretend that the first beneficiary of their “tax cuts” are struggling working families.

In all other respects, the Liberal budget was in keeping with the fiscal austerity of the past decade. Under conditions in which virtually every day there are press reports of emergency room overcrowding and other horrors resulting from the lack of resources in the health care system, the Liberals increased the health care budget by only C\$1 billion or 5 percent. This is half of what the Liberals committed to in last year’s election campaign and just enough to keep up with the inflation rate in the health sector. They increased the education budget by C\$330 million or a mere 2.7 percent. This includes a C\$55 million cut to the post-secondary bursary program. As a result, university and CEGEP (junior college) students will be forced to go still deeper into debt to finance their studies.

All government departments other than health and education had their budgets either frozen or cut, a measure that will translate into declining levels of service, higher user fees, and an increased workload for public-sector workers.

Last but not least, the budget included no money at all to pay for wage increases for the more than 400,000 public- and para-public-sector workers—civil servants, hospital workers, nurses, health care technicians, teachers and other public school employees, and CEGEP employees—whose contracts expired last summer.

As workers prepare to mark Charest’s first year in office by mounting mass protests, they should carefully consider the meaning of the Liberals’ recent maneuvers.

Clearly, the government has been shaken by the depth and breadth of the

popular opposition to its class war assault. But this does not mean that there will be any respite for working people. The budget was merely meant to refashion the government's image before the next two stages in its anti-working offensive: the unveiling of its privatization and deregulation plans; and the drive to impose a public sector labor "settlement" that cuts real wages, increases workloads, and, most importantly, guts contractual limits on the contracting-out of work.

The Liberals' anti-social policies express the fundamental drive of international capital to try to resolve the deepening crisis of the profit system by eliminating the limited social benefits and rights that workers won in the post-Second World War period. Although the PQ now tries to garner popular support by criticizing the Liberals' measures, when in power it presided over the deepest social spending cuts in Quebec history and before the last election began working on its own plan to shrink Quebec's public sector.

On taking office, the Charest Liberal government modeled itself on the Ontario Tory regime of Mike Harris, which in the latter half of the 1990s spearheaded Canadian capital's assault on the working class—imposing brutal cuts to welfare, slashing social spending while delivering large tax cuts to the upper middle-class and rich, lengthening the the workday, and giving a green light to unionbusting by tightening union certification requirements and abolishing the province's anti-scab law.

As in Ontario, this program of open class warfare has led to a political radicalization of Quebec workers. This has prompted concern in ruling-class circles that events could spiral out of control and "social peace" unravel. With the eruption of massive and largely spontaneous anti-government protests last December—protests that caused the province's top union officials to warn that they were losing control over their members—calls began to be heard from the editorial offices of the corporate media for Charest to reconsider his tactics. There was no disagreement, as underscored by the sharp criticisms of last month's budget, with the government's goal of making Quebec more "competitive" by marketizing public services and slashing taxes. But Charest was criticized for needlessly baiting the union leaders, rather than adhering, as previous Liberal and PQ governments have, to the "Quebec model" of corporatist collaboration between government, business and the union bureaucracy.

The Liberals' recent attempts to put a human face on their profoundly anti-social agenda are a direct response to these concerns. By claiming to be pro-poor, the Liberals are also positioning themselves for a propaganda campaign that will target the underpaid and overworked public-sector workers as spoiled "fat cats" who enjoy benefits denied others workers.

There is no question that the union bureaucracy wants to collaborate with the Charest Liberals. The unions tacitly supported the Liberals in last year's election, claiming they were a lesser evil than the ADQ. The union officialdom has repeatedly extended its hand to the government; as proof of its readiness to make Quebec more "competitive," it has pointed to its support for the former PQ's "zero deficit" campaign and to its role in drafting the early-retirement scheme under which the PQ slashed the public sector workforce by tens of thousands. The Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the largest labor federation, has already announced it will participate in the "national summit" the Charest government will convene in the fall.

However, the union leaders are facing mounting pressure from an outraged rank-and-file. Many locals and individual unions have voted in favor of a one-day general strike.

The union bureaucracy fears any militant worker action. But it has a long history of placing itself at the head of opposition movements, the better to confine them to a program of protest that accepts unconditionally the profit system and the domination of the political parties of big business.

Even while raising the threat of a one-day strike, the union leaders are

working to confine the struggle of public-sector workers, which clearly implies a political struggle against the Liberals and the program of big business as a whole within the straitjacket of the state-imposed collective bargaining system.

But the most palpable expression of the union bureaucracy's attempt to smother the mounting popular challenge to the Charest Liberal government is its effort to resuscitate the big business, *pro-indépendantiste* Parti Québécois.

Prominent union officials—including the past president of the Federation of Quebec Unions (CEQ), Monique Richard; the past president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU), Marc Lavolette; the Quebec director of the Canadian Auto Workers, Luc Desnoyers; and the president of the Montreal blue-collar union, Michel Parent—have formed a new faction within the PQ, under the name "Unionists and Progressives for a free Quebec." The faction's stated aim is to push for "progressive measures by the leading bodies of the Parti Québécois" and to "help defeat the Charest government in the next election and quickly realize our dream for a free Quebec."

Quebec separatism reflects the outlook of a section of the province's business and political elite that feels it can best defend its privileges and interests in the global arena by establishing its own independent capitalist state. This program has historically attracted elements of the French-speaking middle class who looked to the state for protection in the context where language barriers in a competitive North American environment made it harder for them to achieve professional success.

The foremost representative of this social type has been the trade union bureaucracy, whose privileged social position has for decades rested on its role in subordinating the working class to the interests of big business in the name of "national consensus" and "national liberation."

The working class has paid a heavy price for its political subordination to the PQ. In the early 1980s, and again in the late 1990s, PQ governments carried out major attacks on working people in response to the demands of the ruling elite. Workers reacted by voting the PQ out of office. But anger at the worst anti-working class actions of the PQ is not a substitute for a conscious political break with Quebec nationalism, based upon the understanding that the true allies of Quebec workers are workers in English Canada, in the US, and internationally.

The Liberals' agenda of social demolition will only be defeated and the union officialdom's attempts to derail the working class opposition movement thwarted if workers turn toward a new political perspective based on the international unity of the working class and its independent political mobilization against the profit system, and for social equality.



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