

Canada: ex-union bureaucrat to head Parti Québécois executive

Guy Charron
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Monique Richard—the president of the *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* (Trade Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec)—was acclaimed president of the Parti Québécois at the party’s convention last weekend. (In Canadian politics, the position of party president is distinct from that of the party leader. It is the party leader who is a party’s principal spokesperson and its candidate to become premier or prime minister.)

The election of Richard, a former president of the *Centrale des Syndicats Québécois* (CSQ), to the head of the Parti Québécois (PQ) executive is a manifestation of the ever-closer collaboration between the union bureaucracy and the PQ apparatus. The PQ, which today forms the official opposition in Quebec’s National Assembly, is a separatist party that, prior to losing power in 2003, formed Quebec’s provincial government for nine years.

Holding up its privileged relations with the union bureaucracy as proof, the PQ likes to describe itself as a progressive party that is sensitive to the concerns of workers. But between 1994 and 2003, the PQ implemented the same type of right-wing policies as the Conservative government of Mike Harris in Ontario and the federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien. Under the leadership of Lucien Bouchard and his then Finance Minister, Bernard Landry, the PQ, in the name of eliminating the provincial budget deficit, imposed massive social spending cuts, closed hospitals, threw the mentally ill onto the streets, slashed tens of thousand of public sector worker jobs, and cut social assistance (welfare) benefits.

The founding of the *SPQ libre* in 2004 and the rise of Monique Richard to the highest post in the PQ apparatus mark a significant change in the relationship between the union bureaucracy and the PQ, one of the Quebec bourgeoisie’s two principal parties.

Since the early 1970s, the union bureaucracy has always collaborated closely with the PQ, sparing no effort to tie the working class to this party. The union leaders turned towards the PQ—which was formed in 1968 as the result of the fusion of a breakaway group from the Quebec Liberal Party and two smaller separatist parties—in the context of a wave of militant trade union struggles and a profound radicalization of the working class. By subordinating the working class to the PQ

and its *indépendantiste* program, the union bureaucracy helped to quarantine the struggles of the Quebec workers from those of their brothers and sisters in English Canada and from the powerful working-class radicalization that swept the globe between 1968 and 1975.

However, till now the union leadership has maintained the pretense that the unions are politically independent from the PQ, since the unions have only officially extended their support to it on a “conjunctural” (*ponctuelle*) basis at election times. In this way, the union leaders have sought to retain more room to maneuver with the other major big business party, the Liberals, and to fend off criticism from the left that they are agents of the pro-capitalist PQ.

Many retired union bureaucrats have gone on to a second career serving as PQ legislators and cabinet ministers—although in recent years this phenomenon has been much more true of the PQ’s sister party in the federal parliament, the Bloc Québécois (BQ).

One of the principal motivations for the founding of the *SPQ libre* in early 2004 was the perception of a section of the union bureaucracy that their weight in the PQ’s counsels has declined. To rectify this, this section advocates that the union officialdom act as a coherent and identifiable pressure group with the PQ. Another section, represented by Henri Massé, the president of Quebec’s largest union federation, the *Fédération des Travailleurs du Québec* (FTQ), thinks that the cohabitation of the *SPQ libre* within the PQ goes too far in identifying the union bureaucracy with the PQ and involving the union officialdom in “party politics”—this notwithstanding the fact Massé is himself a well-known PQ supporter.

The election of Richard by acclamation to the post of PQ president shows that the PQ leadership is eager to work more closely and openly with the union bureaucracy.

The PQ’s claims to be a progressive party have been left threadbare as a result of its two periods in government (1976-1985 and 1994-2003). On both occasions the PQ proved itself a faithful servant of Quebec big business and the Wall and Bay Street (Toronto) banks. The 2003 provincial election highlighted the PQ’s loss of working-class electoral support. The PQ lost almost a third of its votes relative to the previous election and received in terms of its percentage of the popular

vote its worst result since 1973, when the party was just five years old and had yet to form a government. After the PQ's rout in the 2003 election, political commentators mused about the possible death of the separatist movement.

Even if the newspapers have remained silent on this question, there is no doubt that the rise of Monique Richard to the position of president was the result of an agreement between the top leadership of the PQ and the *SPQ libre*.

In early May, at about the same time that it became evident that Richard would become PQ president, since the other candidates in the race had withdrawn, she voiced her support for Bernard Landry remaining the leader of the PQ through the next election in 2007 or 2008. Earlier Richard had refused to publicly back Landry—Lucien Bouchard's right-hand man in the “zero-deficit” campaign and successor as Quebec premier.

(To the surprise of the entire PQ-BQ establishment, Landry quit his post as PQ leader and his National Assembly seat last Saturday after only 76 percent of PQ convention delegates approved his leadership.)

Richard and the *SPQ libre* have not lost any time in demonstrating that they are among the most chauvinist tendencies within the PQ. At last weekend's convention they trumpeted a motion put forward by the hardline *indépendantiste* or *pur et dur* (pure and hard) faction to prohibit francophones and the children of immigrants to Canada from attending English-language CEGEPs (the first level of post-secondary education in Québec).

The *SPQ libre* was founded in the beginning of 2004 in response to the PQ's electoral defeat and the eruption of working-class opposition to the Liberal provincial government of Jean Charest. Its founding members included the leaders of several major Québec unions, former presidents of two of Quebec's three major union federations, and various personalities from the social-welfare and community organizations that are patronized by the union bureaucracy.

Landry and the PQ leadership were quick to embrace the *SPQ libre* and, at its request, modified the party's statutes to allow for the existence of “political clubs”. The *SPQ libre* chose to define itself as a “political club”—a political form borrowed from the French Socialist Party that permits an organization to exist both independently and as an organized tendency within a party—because the union bureaucrats saw this form as giving them maximum flexibility: the possibility of participating actively in the PQ, while posturing, when needed to retain credibility before their members, as opponents of certain party policies and decisions. As one union leader quipped, the status of “political club” allows them to disapprove of some PQ positions without having to tear up their membership cards.

In creating the *SPQ libre*, the union bureaucracy is seeking to resuscitate the illusion that the PQ is a party that is favorable to the workers or at least susceptible to working-class pressure. Commenting on her election to the presidency of the PQ, Richard declared that she hoped that her “presence would give

a signal that people more to the left can find a place within the Parti Québécois. I hope that the skeptics will be confused.”

Through the *SPQ libre*, the union bureaucracy is consciously trying to salvage the principal political mechanism used since the 1970s to prevent the development of an independent political movement of the working class and to divide the struggles of Quebec workers from those of workers across North America and around the world.

It is thanks to the support of the unions that the PQ was able to become the party that has alternated in power with the Liberals for the past 35 years. In 1996, in order to carry out its “zero deficit” program of massive social spending cuts, the PQ obtained the active support of the union leaders. It was the union leaders who then insisted that the government use surplus pension funds in order to eliminate tens of thousands of public sector jobs, leading to an increased work-load for the public sector workers who remained and a serious deterioration in the quality of public services. The present deplorable state of the health care system is a direct consequence of the union leaders' program of subordinating the working class to the dictates of the market and politically tying it to the PQ.

By working to revive the PQ, the union leaders are trying to protect their own social position, which is threatened by the lurch to the right of all official politics. So successful has the union bureaucracy been in suppressing the class struggle that big business and the Charest Liberal government have begun to question the need for the system of tripartite, institutionalized collaboration between government, business and the unions that was put in place in Quebec in the 1970s.

Even more importantly, the union bureaucracy is trying to head-off a radicalization of the working class. It fears that the neo-liberal politics of the present Liberal government will provoke mass social struggles and under conditions where the PQ has been discredited in the eyes of workers.

Six months after coming to power, the Charest government confronted a militant working-class upsurge against its plans to “re-engineer the State” and to amend the labor code so as to promote the contracting out of work. The union bureaucrats were compelled to threaten a one-day general strike, the better to suffocate a mobilization that risked escaping their control. This spring, a student strike against cuts to student aid provoked a significant political crisis and again the union leaders rushed to the aid of the government, pressing student leaders to negotiate a compromise with the Charest government. Since the end of 2003, the level of dissatisfaction with the provincial Liberal government has hovered around 70 percent.



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