

Canada: ex-indépendantiste premier calls for intensified assault on working class

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For A Clear-Eyed Vision of Quebec—the manifesto issued last week by a group of Quebec *indépendantiste* and federalist leaders—is an unabashed call for a renewed big business offensive against the rights and living standards of working people.

Written by a group headed by former Parti Québécois premier Lucien Bouchard, former PQ minister Joseph Facal and André Pratte, the lead editorial writer for the staunchly federalist *La Presse*, the manifesto invokes the threat of Quebec’s demographic decline—the only majority French-speaking jurisdiction in North America will, say the authors, soon be lost in a sea of English- and Spanish-speakers—and competition from China and India to argue for a right-wing agenda akin to that being pursued by Bush and Blair.

The report’s radical right-wing policy prescriptions include: a drive to reduce government debt so as to free up resources for so-called productive investments (like education and training), a shift from personal income to consumption taxes, privatization and public-private partnerships, major increases in household electricity rates, a “workplace environment that encourages performance and innovation” (i.e., the gutting of work rules), university tuition increases and various other changes aimed at encouraging entrepreneurialism or “economic freedom.”

The report denounces Quebecers and especially the working class (identified here as the unions) in no uncertain terms for being resistant to change and balking at the “national consensus”—i.e., the aims of big business and the political elite. That the real target is the working class, not the unions, is underscored by the report’s praise for the union bureaucracy. The report hails “the cooperative and responsible model that characterized” the unions for the past two decades and in particular their support for the PQ’s zero-deficit

drive, which saw the Bouchard PQ government impose massive social spending cuts between 1996 and 1999.

There is much similarity in the report’s description of Quebecers and the way the French and German elites are describing their respective working classes: “They work less than other North Americans; they retire earlier; they benefit from more generous social programs ...” The complaints of a coddled working class are coupled with a denunciation of Quebecers’ “unhealthy suspicion of private business.”

In a similar vein, the report deplores the fact while “French-speaking business people control our economy,” unlike a half-century ago, “they are roundly criticized.”

For A Clear-Eyed Vision of Quebec is an attempt reformulate Quebecois nationalism to correspond with the new needs of the bourgeoisie. Everyone must work together and sacrifice for Quebec, say Bouchard and company. But the policies they advocate are tailored to meet the needs of big business and would cause corporate profits and the incomes of the rich to swell, precisely by reducing, if not eliminating, the rights of working people and the few protections they now enjoy from the vicissitudes of the capitalist market.

The report is laced with the ideas and tropes of traditional Quebec nationalism, concluding with a nationalist appeal to the first French settlers who fought the Indians and English for control of the St. Lawrence Valley: “And like so many times since they first arrived in North America, Quebecers will take their destiny in hand and they will succeed.”

Sovereignist leaders such as Bloc Québécois head Gilles Duceppe and Parti Québécois leadership hopefuls André Boisclair and Pauline Marois were quick to declare the report co-authored by Bouchard a valuable contribution to public debate. Quebec’s

Liberal Premier, Jean Charest, who in the minds of much of Quebec's business elite has stumbled in his attempt to "re-engineer" the state (i.e., slash taxes and cut social spending), welcomed *For A Clear-Eyed Vision of Quebec*. "It came in," said a smiling Charest, "as a boost for us." Charest, who in 1995 was the head of the federal Conservative Party, was a leading spokesman for the "no" side in the 1995 referendum on Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state, while Bouchard, then head of the Bloc Québécois, the PQ's sister party in the federal Parliament, was the de facto leader of the "yes" forces.

The union bureaucrats were less welcoming of Bouchard's manifesto than their allies in the PQ. But their principal objection was from the standpoint that the unions do not represent an obstacle to making changes to the so-called Quebec model—the class strategy of the Quebec bourgeoisie. As evidence, they pointed to the strong support they had given the PQ government, as solemnized in two tripartite "national summits," for the campaign to eliminate the province's annual budget deficit through social spending cuts.

Henri Massé, the president of Quebec's largest labour federation, the Quebec Federation of Labour, said *For A Clear-Eyed Vision of Quebec* was a useful contribution to a necessary public debate: "There are questions, challenges that need to be raised: the demographic challenge, for example; the question of public finances in the medium and long-term. These are serious questions. But the glasses are a little dark for my taste." Massé agreed that household electricity rates should be increased and said the unions were not in principle opposed to public-private partnerships to build infrastructure and provide public services.

For her part, Claudette Carbonneau, president of the *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN), called for increased collaboration between the union bureaucracy, the government and business. The history of Quebec, she said, showed that progress was made not "by cultivating confrontations, but more by solutions arrived at in concert."

That on the tenth anniversary of the 1995 referendum, the federalist and sovereigntists are coming together just as they did in 1996 to launch the assault on public and social services (the zero deficit campaign) once again underscores that the real division in Quebec and Canada is the class divide. The report also expresses the

deep frustration of the elite. Although it is of course partly a pose, the claims of Bouchard, Facal, etc., to be free-thinkers facing a sea of resistance and their complaints of intolerance toward their views do express something true about how the ruling elite perceives the situation and their growing frustration with even the limited checks traditional bourgeois democratic practices place on their ability to further remold class relations in the interests of capital.



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