

Canada: union bureaucrats sponsor candidate for Parti Québécois leadership

Our correspondent
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The *SPQ libre*—Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre (“Unionists and Progressives for a Free Québec”)—has put forward its secretary, Pierre Dubuc, as a candidate for the leadership of the Parti Québécois (PQ).

Dubuc’s campaign to lead the PQ—the pro-Quebec-independence party that has formed Quebec’s provincial government in alternation with the Québec Liberal Party since the beginning of the 1970s—has received scant media attention, and Dubuc is expected to garner only a small percentage of PQ members’ votes. Nevertheless, his candidacy is significant, for it represents a concerted drive by the union bureaucracy to revive the big-business PQ.

Behind rhetorical denunciation of neo-liberalism, the *SPQ libre* strives to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie and to divide Québec workers from the working class in English Canada and internationally.

Recently, the *SPQ libre* proclaimed that André Boisclair, the candidate currently leading in opinion polls of PQ members, is too far to the right and that it, therefore, wants its members and supporters to give their second-ballot votes to Pauline Marois, a candidate every bit as much identified with the PQ establishment as Boisclair.

To claim that Marois is a politician of the left requires a great deal of imagination and fabrication. At one time or another, she has occupied all of the most important ministries in various PQ governments. Moreover, she was a minister during both of the major assaults PQ governments have mounted against the working class, in 1981-1983 and again between 1996 and 1999.

If for the *SPQ libre* Marois is more “to the left” than Boisclair, this is because of her close personal ties to the union bureaucracy. She is a good friend of Henri Massé, the president of the Québec Federation of Labour (FTQ), and her husband, Claude Blanchet, is a financier who for many years served as president of the “Solidarity Fund,” a multibillion-dollar investment fund created and directed by the FTQ.

Marois has welcomed the *SPQ libre*’s endorsement as an example of the “coalition from the left to the right” that she says she would like to create so as to win Québec independence.

The support of the *SPQ libre* for Marois is not a temporary tactical maneuver. It represents the very axis of the *SPQ libre*’s politics. “It is necessary to construct,” wrote Dubuc in a document meant to explain the *SPQ libre*’s aims, “a grand coalition of sovereignist [i.e., pro-independence] forces, with a political spectrum ranging from the left to the right, from the social democrats to the neo-liberals.”

Nor is the *SPQ libre* “holding its nose” as it gives its support to Marois. It was in the following terms that Dubuc recommended his supporters give their second-ballot support to Marois: “She is a rassembleuse [someone who can rally support from diverse groups] and the only one who can achieve the objectives of the *SPQ libre*, that is, to defeat the Charest [Liberal] government and lead us to independence.”

The *SPQ libre* already controls the position of PQ party president. But, if it has stood Dubuc as a candidate for the party leadership, it is not with

the intention of capturing the post of party leader. (Under the PQ’s constitution, the president heads the party apparatus, while the party “leader” is the key figure in the party and its candidate to become provincial premier.) Electing a trade unionist and purported “leftist” as PQ leader could cause the party to lose middle-class and big-business support, thus undermining the very coalition of “social democrats to the neo-liberals” that the *SPQ libre* wants.

So as to make clear that its campaign is directed not at winning the leadership, but at trying to refurbish the PQ’s tattered credentials as a “progressive” party and gaining the union bureaucracy greater influence in the PQ’s inner councils, the *SPQ libre* chose Dubuc as its candidate, instead of one of at least half a dozen other *SPQ libre* leaders who, having served as the presidents of various major unions and labor federations, are well known to the media and Québec public.

Serving as the front man for the union bureaucracy is a familiar role for Dubuc. Since the liquidation in the early 1980s of the little-known Maoist organization of which he was a member, Dubuc has acted as a publicist and apologist for the union bureaucracy. The monthly newspaper he founded in 1984 and continues to edit, *L’Aut’Journal*, gives a left colouring to the policies of the union bureaucracy and in particular to its support for Québec nationalism and Québec independence. In exchange, the unions have patronized *L’Aut’Journal*, by purchasing advertising space and promoting its distribution among their members. Since 1992, Dubuc has become more directly integrated into the union bureaucracy, serving as an information officer for the teachers’ union.

During the present PQ leadership race, Dubuc and the leaders of the *SPQ libre* have crisscrossed Québec in an attempt to convince workers who have left the PQ *en masse* since the early 1980s to rejoin the party or at least once again give it their votes. Says Dubuc, “I’m participating in the race with the objective of strengthening the Parti Québécois, especially by bringing new members from the unions and from progressive organizations.... Much has been said in recent years about the influence of civil society. But the real centre of decision-making and power is in a political party.”

The *SPQ libre* was founded at the beginning of 2004 by a cabal of prominent union bureaucrats and retired bureaucrats, including the just-retired leaders of two of the province’s three major union federations. Its formation represented a significant change in the union bureaucracy’s public posture relative to the PQ.

Since the early 1970s, the union bureaucracy has consistently given its support to the PQ. Yet it nevertheless maintained a pretense of the unions being politically independent, so as to be better able to maneuver with the other governmental party, the Liberals, and to rally support for the PQ at decisive moments.

With the creation of the *SPQ libre*, the union bureaucracy has established an organized faction within the PQ, with the aim of trying to revive the PQ’s flagging fortunes and salvaging the “national coalition of left and right” that it claims is necessary to win independence and

preserve the French character of Quebec.

But Québec society is becoming ever more socially polarized, between a business and political elite that works hand-in-glove with Anglo-Canadian and US capital in fleecing the working class and the mass of working people. The interests of the Québec workers—francophone, anglophone and immigrant—are infinitely closer to those of workers in the rest of Canada, the United States and the rest of the Americas, than they are to the interests of the Québec bourgeoisie.

According to the *SPQ libre*, the PQ must become “the grand coalition it was in the 1970s.” But the “neo-liberal turn” on the part of the PQ is rooted in its class character. Born in 1968 as the result of a split-off from the Québec Liberal Party (the traditional party of the business establishment), the PQ has always been a bourgeois party, with close ties to Québec business and a strong orientation toward US capital.

The constitutional question aside, the PQ and the PLQ have always had similar programmes. During the 1960s and 1970s, both advocated that the provincial state be used to encourage the development and enrichment of the Québécois—i.e., francophone—bourgeoisie. The PQ simply took this position somewhat further than the PLQ, by advocating independence and a wider use of government ownership. As for the PQ’s much-vaunted Bill 101, it well articulated the needs of the petty bourgeois layers that then as now constitute the bulk of the PQ cadre. By making French the principal language of business and commerce, it opened up managerial jobs for them.

The PQ programme resonated with the union bureaucracy, because it shared a similar nationalist political vision, but above all because it saw in the PQ a means of chaining a working class then involved in militant trade union and social struggles to the existing social-political order.

In summary, the “grand,” PQ-led nationalist “coalition of the 1970s” was the principal political mechanism by means of which the political domination of big business and the elite over the working class workers was preserved.

And ever since, the close collaboration between the union leadership and the PQ has proven to be a major weapon for the bourgeoisie in prosecuting its offensive against public and social services and worker rights.

During the 1981-1983 slump, the then PQ government cut teachers’ salaries by 20 percent, a measure without parallel at the time. This was part of a frontal assault on the working class, which saw the PQ reopen all provincial public sector contracts by decree so as to impose wage rollbacks and rewrite work-rules. Then, in the 1984 federal election, the PQ mobilized support for Brian Mulroney’s Conservative Party, helping to bring to power a right-wing government that pioneered privatization and deregulation in Canada. Subsequently, the PQ was one of the main supporters of the free trade agreement between the United States and Canada championed by Ronald Reagan and Mulroney.

After a number of years on the opposition benches, the PQ returned to power in 1994 and promptly began a program of hospital closures. After posturing during the 1995 referendum on Québec’s secession from Canada as a bulwark against a “right-wing wave sweeping North America,” the PQ proclaimed eliminating the provincial budget deficit to be its top priority, and with the unwavering support of the union bureaucracy, imposed savage public spending cuts.

As a result, support for the PQ eroded, and in the 2003 Québec election, the PQ suffered a crushing electoral defeat, losing a third of its votes and obtaining its worst electoral result since 1973, when the party was just five years old and had yet to form the government.

Parallel with the mounting popular disaffection with the PQ, the Québec bourgeoisie has abandoned its support for the so-called Québec model, under which the Québec bourgeoisie advocated significant state intervention in the economy so as to bolster it against its Anglo-Canadian and US rivals. Under the PQ, in the 1970s, the Québec model was

broadened to incorporate extensive, institutionalized tripartite collaboration between the provincial government, business and the union bureaucracy.

One of the chief objectives of the *SPQ libre* is to maintain the existence of this tripartite system of collaboration in which the union federations participate in elaborating the strategy and policies of the Québec bourgeoisie. In arguing that such collaboration is in the “national interest,” the union leadership never misses an opportunity to remind the bourgeoisie of the key role it played in the success of the PQ’s “zero deficit” campaign.

More fundamentally, the union leadership is conscious of and fears the immense alienation of the working class from official politics. At the end of 2003, six months after the election of the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest, the union leaders had to work mightily to derail the popular opposition to Charest’s project of “reengineering the State.” Earlier this year, Québec was rocked by a weeks-long strike of post-secondary students against C\$100 million in cuts to the province’s bursary program that targeted the most financially vulnerable students. The union leaders came to Charest’s aid, by pressuring the students to accept a “compromise” that left the cuts fully intact for the last school year. And today, even as polls show less than 25 percent support for the provincial Liberal government, the union leaders are doing everything in their power to ensure that negotiations for new contracts for close to half a million provincial public sector workers don’t become a frontal confrontation with the Charest Liberal government.

The creation of the *SPQ Libre* is the bureaucracy’s reaction to the intensification of class conflict and its sense that workers are coming to recognize that none of the official parties represent their interests. Through nationalism and hollow denunciations of big business, it hopes to divert the opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the alternate governing party of the Québec bourgeoisie, portray the federal state—not capitalism—as the principal source of the problems confronting working people, and prevent Québec workers from joining with their class brothers and sisters in English Canada, the US, Mexico and around the world in a common struggle against capitalism.



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