

Québec Solidaire: a new mechanism for tying workers to the Parti Québécois

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31 May 2006

Québec Solidaire—the party founded in February through the merger of Amir Khadir’s Union des Forces Progressistes (UFP) and Françoise David’s Option Citoyenne—made its entry onto the electoral stage last month, finishing a strong third in a by-election in the impoverished Montreal riding of Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques.

The Québec Solidaire candidate polled 22 percent of the vote in the provincial by-election, well ahead of the candidate of Quebec’s third party, the right-wing Action Démocratique (AQQ), and just 6 percentage points behind the nominee of the governing Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ). As expected, the Parti Québécois (PQ) retained Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques. But PQ officials expressed concern at both their party’s share of the vote, 41 percent, and an extremely low voter-turnout of 32 percent.

The leaders of Québec Solidaire gushed over their party’s showing in the by-election. “A new left alternative has been formed”, affirmed Amir Khadir, while the party’s co-leader, Françoise David, proclaimed, “We are the only ones who propose a real alternative to the neo-liberal ideas that have rolled back social justice in Québec for the past twenty years.” Party leaders say Québec Solidaire will contest every riding at the next provincial election, which has to be held by the spring of 2008.

The pretension of Québec Solidaire to represent a genuine left-wing alternative to the parties of the Québec establishment cannot withstand analysis.

The vaguely “progressive” rhetoric of the new party is not accompanied by any commitment to challenge the profit system. Indeed, Québec Solidaire does not even propose a program of significant social reforms that would improve the standard of living of the majority. Its denunciations of “neo-liberalism,” which is presented simply as a subjective choice made by conservative politicians, pass over in silence the objective basis of the right-wing lurch in official politics in Canada and all the advanced capitalist countries..

Québec Solidaire does not advocate the unity of workers across borders in a common struggle against global capitalism and the nation-state system. Rather, it calls for the reinforcement of the capitalist nation-state, presenting as a lever of social progress what constitutes, along with the private ownership of the means of producing the wealth, the greatest obstacle to the rational deployment of the resources of the world economy for the benefit of humanity as a whole. On the basis of this reactionary, nationalist perspective, QS supports the efforts of a section of the

Québec ruling elite to reorganize the nation-state system in North America, through the creation of an independent, capitalist République du Québec.

The political careers of the two principal leaders of Québec Solidaire underscore that its roots lie in the Québec nationalist milieu—a milieu dominated by the PQ, the big business party, which since its formation in 1968 as the result of a split-off from the PLQ, has pressed for the creation of an independent Quebec.

Françoise David admits that her “disappointment” regarding the “neo-liberal” politics of the PQ dates back no further than the year 2000, that is to say after fifteen years of right-wing PQ governments. In 1996 David participated in a tri-partite summit (of government, business, and the unions) convened by the PQ Premier Lucien Bouchard in order to launch, in the name of a “zero deficit,” a program of drastic social spending cuts.

Amir Khadir is also a recent convert from the PQ-dominated Québec nationalist milieu. In the 2000 federal election, he stood as the candidate of the PQ’s federal sister party, the Bloc Québécois.

The formation of Québec Solidaire is the response of elements of the middle class to two closely interrelated processes: on the one hand, the brutal counter-reforms implemented by the PQ when in power between 1994 and 2003 (the closure of hospitals, elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs, etc.), and, on the other hand, the growing radicalization of working people—a radicalization manifested in the eruption of strikes and mass protests against the Charest Liberal government in December 2003 and last year’s protracted college (Cégep) and university student strike.

This class polarization has undermined both the capacity of the PQ to present itself as a party “of the people” and the capacity of the union bureaucracy to convince Québec workers to support this big business party. In an attempt to refurbish the PQ’s tattered “left” credentials, a section of union bureaucrats recently created an official faction inside the PQ, *SPQ libre* (Unionists and Progressive for a free Quebec).

In this context, left-talking elements of the middle classes, tied by a thousand threads to the Québécois state and ruling elite, have intervened in order to prevent workers from making a genuine political break with the PQ and its nationalist program.

Québec Solidaire brings together a small dissident faction of the union bureaucracy; the members of Option Citoyenne, which emerged from community groups which had up until now accepted the budget cuts, as attested by the participation of Françoise David

in the economic summit of 1996; and finally, the UFP. The UFP was itself a coalition. Founded in 2002, it brought together the former Quebec wing of the social-democratic NDP (renamed the Parti de la Démocratie Socialiste), an organization of disgruntled PQ supporters (Rassemblement pour une Alternative Politique) and several groups that claim to be Marxist including the Communist Party of Quebec, the Quebec branch of Alain Krivine's United Secretariat, and the International Socialists.

The latter are particularly impatient to develop a new political vehicle through which they can vie for influence in official bourgeois politics. Thus, the UFP, despite all its claims to oppose the PQ, accepted an invitation from the PQ leadership just before the April 2003 provincial election to discuss a possible electoral alliance.

The PQ has shifted to the right - this is admitted by David, Khadir and company. But they pass over in silence the fact that this is rooted in the class nature of that party. Rather their orientation is one of seeking to pressure the capitalist establishment and in particular the PQ to temper the rush to dismantle public and social services and environmental and labor standards.

Little surprise then that Françoise David has left open the door to a "non-aggression pact" with the PQ at the next election—an idea advanced by PQ Member of the National Assembly Jean-Pierre Charbonneau. "Formal discussions with the Parti Québécois," said David, are not excluded, on the condition "that they be discussed with our members."

Subsequently David gave an endorsement of the PQ worthy of any party stalwart: "There are elements of the PQ program that will never be disavowed. It would be unjust to call them neo-liberals. The PQ is not in the same trench as the Liberal Party of Jean Charest, especially as regards the destruction of social gains."

In reality, the Liberals and PQ function in tandem. Whilst they disagree over Quebec's constitutional status, whenever faced with a potential challenge from the working class the two parties join forces. In fact, precisely because of its ties to the labor bureaucracy, the PQ has often proved more successful than the PLQ in imposing the agenda of big business.

With polls showing Québec Solidaire gaining support from working people angered by the right-wing policies of the PQ and Liberals, its leaders have become increasingly anxious to reassure the establishment that theirs will be a responsible party—i.e. one that accepts the existing social order and works with the establishment parties.

"We will elaborate a program that will be generous, but also realistic," said Françoise David. Her co-leader, Amir Khadir, has also rushed to emphasize his realism. "We will establish a new left," he explains, "a democratic left, which offers equal representation to women, which integrates a plurality of opinions, which has an acute consciousness of the environment." This new left, he was quick to add, "will not suffer from delusions of grandeur and won't promise guaranteed happiness to humanity."

While Québec Solidaire has earnestly promised that it does not aspire to seriously "change the world" and indicated it is open to working with the PQ, the PQ establishment is shunning the new party. The new PQ leader, André Boisclair, who has carried out

another shift to the right by welcoming the privatization of health-care and by pledging that a future PQ government will not reopen the 7-year concessions-filled contracts that the Liberal provincial government imposed by decree on half a million public sector workers, quickly ruled out any possibility of an electoral pact between the PQ and Québec Solidaire. This is because the PQ doesn't want to give the rival party legitimacy and because it fears the Québec Solidaire's leftist image will undercut its efforts to woo business support.

The union bureaucracy—which has been angered by the Charest government's attempts to curtail the extensive corporatist institutions and relations through which union-business-government relations have been managed over the past three decades—is also by and large opposed to any loosening of its long-standing ties with the PQ.

Marc Lavolette, the former president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) and the current president of the SPQ libre (Unionists and Progressives for a Free Québec), argued that the priority must be to "defeat the Charest government during the next election and to advance resolutely towards the sovereignty of Québec."

Another former president of the CSN, Gérald Larose, who today leads the Council on Sovereignty [le Conseil de la souveraineté], put it even more bluntly, declaring at the end of the founding congress of QS, to which he had been invited, "only the Parti Québécois is able to bring about sovereignty."

Nor did Henri Massé, the president of the largest union federation in the province, the Federation des travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), mince his words. Québec Solidaire "is a bit too far to the left and their ideas are utopian," he declared. "Among our members, there are certainly long-standing grievances, but they expect more pragmatic things."

The response of Amir Khadir was to celebrate the fact that "the Montreal section of the CSN has already given its support to the birth of a party of the left in Québec." Québec Solidaire still hopes to convince a section of the union bureaucracy to take part in its attempt to create a political vehicle that can pressure the PQ and contain the growing radicalization of working people within the sterile framework of Quebec nationalism and capitalist politics.



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