

# Quebec elections 2007: Quebec Federation of Labour officially backs Parti Québécois

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On March 3 a special convention of the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL—*Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec*) voted overwhelmingly in favor of endorsing the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois (PQ) in the March 26 Quebec election. With more than 500,000 members, the QFL is Quebec's largest union federation and represents a majority of Quebec's unionized industrial workers.

The other major union federations, including the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN—*Confédération des syndicats nationaux*), have announced that they too are supporting the PQ. But so as to maintain “independence,” they are calling on their members to prevent the Liberals winning reelection, rather than expressly advocating a vote for the PQ.

For more than three decades, the union bureaucracy has constituted one of the principal props of the big business PQ.

In announcing the QFL's endorsement, its president, Henri Massé, said that “the catastrophic record of the Liberal Party in the union sphere” is what has caused his union federation to back the PQ. As proof, Massé cited changes to the provincial labor code that encourage union-busting through the contracting-out of work and a Liberal emergency law that imposed wage-cutting collective agreements on more than 500,000 public sector workers and threatens them with draconian reprisals should they take job action.

The arguments Massé puts forward in opposing the Liberals of Jean Charest could apply, however, just as well to the PQ. PQ leader André Boisclair has announced that a PQ government will neither repeal the changes to the labor code nor renegotiate the contracts with the public sector workers.

In the last provincial election, held in April 2003, the PQ suffered its worst result since 1973, when it was only in its fifth year of existence and had yet to form Quebec's government. If the opinion polls prove accurate, the PQ could fare even worse in the coming election, despite the fact that dissatisfaction with the Charest Liberals has been in the neighborhood of 70 percent for most of their term in office and is currently hovering around 60 percent.

In 2003 the QFL contributed to the election of the Liberals. At that time, Massé declared that it was necessary to block the ultra-right Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) led by Mario Dumont from coming to power by working with its big business political opponents, including the Liberals.

Alarmed by the collapse in support for the PQ in the 2003

elections, a section of union bureaucrats subsequently formed a political club within the PQ known as Unionists and Progressives for a Free Québec (*Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre*.) There were two major reasons for this shift: the union bureaucrats were riled by Charest's attempts to scale back the union bureaucracy's decades-long institutional and informal role in governing Quebec. Secondly, and more importantly, the bureaucrats were anxious to refurbish the PQ's battered progressive credentials, for fear that working-class opposition to the Charest Liberals would escape their, and the PQ's, control.

If the PQ has failed to regain popular support despite widespread hostility toward the Liberals, this is principally because of the right-wing policies the PQ implemented during the nine years, from 1994 to 2003, when it last formed Quebec's provincial government.

In the name of achieving a “zero deficit”, that is eliminating the annual provincial budget deficit, the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry savagely slashed social spending, with the full support of the unions. Between 1996 and 1998, annual provincial government spending on health-care was reduced by \$2.3 billion and on education by \$1.9 billion. Provincial transfers to Quebec's municipal governments, meanwhile, were cut by \$350 million per year.

In keeping with their support for the PQ's “zero deficit” campaign, the union leaders proposed that a \$4 billion surplus in the public sector workers' pension fund be used to finance a program of early retirements, leading to the loss of tens of thousands of health care and education jobs. The permanent elimination of jobs in the public sector and the hemorrhaging of qualified personnel dealt a savage blow to Quebec's public and social services, a blow from which they have never recovered.

The PQ also carried out a frontal assault on the most vulnerable layers of society. The Bouchard-Landry government imposed a forced labor program on youths receiving welfare, reduced welfare benefits, and eliminated a program that provided free medications to the elderly and those on welfare. A dozen hospitals were closed and thousands of people suffering from mental illnesses found themselves deprived of medical or other professional support, swelling the ranks of the homeless. In 1999, the PQ harshly repressed a strike mounted by nurses in defense of their working conditions and the health-care system.

Eight months after the Charest government came to power, workers surprised the union officialdom by taking to the streets *en*

*masse*, staging wildcat strikes, and demanding a one-day general strike, to oppose the Charest Liberals' regressive revisions to the labor code and "reengineering of the state." In 2005, a weeks-long student strike against cuts to scholarships and bursary programs again threw the Charest government into crisis. It was only because of the active sabotage of the union bureaucracy that the Charest government was able to survive these challenges.

The PQ is incapable of making an appeal to the profound hatred that exists towards the Liberal Party because the *indépendatistes* defend the same big business interests as their federalist rivals.

Responding to pressure from the ruling class, Boisclair has repeatedly made policy pronouncements aimed at jettisoning any connection, however remote, to the social-welfare policies that the PQ touted in the 1970s. Boisclair has declared that the era in which the unions and the PQ were "buddy-buddy" is over and that "capital must be given comfort, Québec must become the most comfortable place in the world for capital." Boisclair has frequently attacked the Liberals from the right, including denouncing them for not having reduced taxes on the rich as much as they promised because of opposition from the working class.

If the union bureaucracy supports the PQ and suppresses the class struggle on behalf of big business, this is because of the privileged social position that it occupies.

After having bitterly resisted the formation of unions for years, Canada's corporate elite and state encouraged their development in the decades after the Second World War, mindful of the role that the unions could play in policing the working class, that is, in suppressing any working class movement that threatened to go beyond collective bargaining and electoral politics and become a challenge to the subordination of all socio-economic life to big business.

Over the past quarter century, the unions have lurched even further right, developing a myriad of corporatist and tripartite ties with management, business and the Quebec government, and becoming a direct participant in the capitalist exploitation of the working class.

The QFL bureaucrats responded to the 1981-83 economic slump by launching the Solidarity Fund (*le Fonds de Solidarité*), a mutual fund which has benefited from massive Quebec and federal government tax incentives and which uses workers' savings to provide companies, including those in financial difficulty, with capital. The then QFL President Louis Laberge declared that the creation of the Solidarity Fund was a more "revolutionary" measure than the creation of a workers' party, a statement which underscored that the bureaucracy's turn to corporatism was born of their fear that the intensifying class struggle would propel the working class toward independent and socialist politics.

Today, at the same time as they proclaim their support for a balanced budget and stump for the PQ, the union leaders are serving notice that they are prepared to join hands with Quebec's employers in imposing a new round of job and wage cuts on their members. Their only scruple is that the unions be consulted, that is, that the union bureaucracy be allowed to retain its privileges.

At the beginning of February, Massé told a luncheon organized by the Manufacturers and Exporters of Québec (MEQ), "we are capable of working together."

Declaring that Quebec industry is in crisis due to the Canadian dollar's appreciation against the US dollar, China's rise, and other competitive threats, the QFL president proclaimed that the unions were ready to accept job cuts as long as they were negotiated; greater flexibility in work rules if the flexibility was not "completely unrestrained"; and wage cuts if they were moderate.

Not surprisingly, MEQ President Jean-Luc Trahan was quick to clasp Massé's partnership offer. "We are ready to work with you," he declared.

Massé also called for muscular state subsidies and a more advantageous tax regime for business.

In keeping with his argument that the unions have a vital role to play in assisting Quebec companies in remaining internationally competitive, Massé proposed that the Quebec government convene a tripartite economic summit of the unions, government and business. In motivating this proposal, Massé touted the "success" of the 1996 summit on the "zero deficit"—that is, the summit which served as the launching pad for the PQ government's assault on public and social services.

Workers should take Massé's proposal to repeat the "success" of the PQ's 1996 "national" summit as a serious warning.

The QFL and the other unions are responding to the crisis in Quebec's manufacturing sector—100,000 jobs have been eliminated in the past five years—by increasing their collaboration with big business. The bureaucracy's electoral support for the PQ is the political corollary of their collaboration with the employers and government in attacking workers' jobs, living standards, working conditions, and public and social services.

The "holy union of all Québécois" advocated by the union leaders and the PQ in the name of defending the nation is thus revealed for the trap that it really is: Quebec workers are being lined up behind "their" employers and exhorted to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to defend those employers' profits. These sacrifices will then be used as a lever to further attack the social position of workers across Canada, in the United States, and around the world.

In openly backing the PQ, a detested party that is moving to the right, the union bureaucracy is once again demonstrating that it is a prop of the existing social order. Quebec workers must repudiate the nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective of the union bureaucracy and, in concert with workers across Canada, elsewhere in North America and around the world, undertake the struggle to build an independent party of the working class based on a socialist-internationalist program.



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