

Unions tie the working class to big business parties

# Bloc Québécois covers up its support for the Harper Conservative government

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The Bloc Québécois (BQ), the federal political party that advocates independence for Canada's only majority French-speaking province, has sought to staunch the haemorrhaging of its support by appealing to Quebec voters on the basis that only the BQ can prevent the coming to power of a Conservative majority government.

At the beginning of the election campaign, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe denounced the Conservatives and their leader, Prime Minister Stephen Harper: "In 2003, inspired by the Bush administration, Stephen Harper sought to enter Canada into the Iraq war and to rip up the Kyoto protocol, preferring to defend the oil industry rather than the environment. It was the Bush political line that Harper put forward once he was in power. It runs contrary to universal values that the Québécois share with numerous nations of the world."

The electoral fortunes of the BQ have rapidly eroded since the last federal election in 2006, when they obtained 42 percent of the vote. Recent polls have estimated support for the BQ to be at most 35 percent of decided voters and possibly less than 30 percent.

To improve his party's standing, Duceppe has appealed to federalists to vote for the BQ as a means of preventing the election of a Conservative majority government. "There are Canadians that hope that the BQ will fight the Conservatives because they know that, if we deprive them of a majority, it will render a service to Canadians and to all of Canada," declared Duceppe Sept. 14.

Though today the Bloc Québécois denounces the Harper government for being too far to the right, it played an important role in the coming to power and sustenance of the Conservative minority government.

In the years preceding the 2006 election, the BQ, in the name of "defending the interests of Québec," worked in a coordinated fashion with the Conservatives and their predecessors in the Canadian Alliance to counter the influence of the Liberal Party. After the 2006 election, Duceppe played down the significance of Harper's party having won a plurality of seats in the House of Commons saying that that was the business of Canadians. More importantly, the BQ formed a *de facto* coalition with the minority Conservatives, providing them the support they needed to prevail in parliamentary votes on their 2006 Throne Speech and the first two Conservative budgets, as well as on a dozen other "confidence" votes—that is votes in which the government would have fallen had it lost.

The Bloc Québécois' aim in the current election, its strident denunciations of the Conservatives notwithstanding, is to perpetuate the current minority Conservative government so it can continue to horse-trade with it. For all its bluster about Harper and Bush being clones, the BQ is not calling for the defeat of the Conservative government, only that

the Conservatives not be accorded a majority. The *Bloquistes* calculate that they will be in a better position to secure more powers for the Québécois state and for big business in Québec under a minority Conservative government than any other political arrangement in Ottawa.

In pursuit of its goal of an independent capitalist Quebec, the BQ has sought at every opportunity to weaken the influence of the federal Liberal Party, including allying, with the support of the trade union bureaucracy and the self-proclaimed "*souverainiste* left," with the Conservatives—a neo-conservative party with ties to the religious right and a history of anti-Quebec chauvinism.

The Liberals have been viewed by the Quebec *indépendantistes* as their principal adversaries because they have been associated, at least since the days of Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, with the notion of a more centralized federal state and no special powers for Quebec (asymmetrical federalism.)

## A party of Conservatives, Liberals and Péquistes

The alliance between the Conservatives and the Quebec *indépendantistes* is not simply conjunctural or tactical. During the 1984 and 1988 federal elections, the provincial *souverainiste* party, the Parti Québécois (PQ), was allied with the Progressive Conservatives of Brian Mulroney, helping them to win two successive majorities and adopt the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. Later the Québécois *indépendantistes* allied themselves with two other predecessors of the present-day Conservative Party, Preston Manning's Reform Party and Stockwell Day's Canadian Alliance, on the program of "limiting the power of the federal government." This measure is advanced by the right, including Harper's Conservative party today, as a means of dismantling public and social services, and giving greater power to the ruling elite of oil-rich Western provinces at the expense of those in Central Canada, Ontario and Québec.

The BQ is also in fundamental political agreement with the Conservatives on a number of other key points, even if the impossibility of their forming a federal government (the BQ only stands candidates in the 75 Quebec seats) allows them to make occasional demagogic "left" appeals. Like the Conservatives, the Bloc Québécois considers the war in Afghanistan a "noble cause." Duceppe has boasted of his support for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) intervention in Afghanistan "at its origin and as it continues" and has repeatedly denounced the New Democratic Party as "irresponsible" for calling for a quick end to the CAF's combat

mission. Again, like the Conservatives, the BQ presents itself as a defender of “law and order,” calling for a lengthening of prison terms for convicted criminals.

The programmatic similarities between the Bloc Québécois and the Conservative Party stem from the fact that they defend the same essential social interests: those of big business.

The Bloc Québécois has its origins in a split inside the Progressive Conservative Party in 1990. Lucien Bouchard, a minister in the right-wing Mulroney government, acrimoniously resigned after the failure of the Meech Lake (constitutional) Accord. He was subsequently joined by a group of Conservatives and right-wing Liberal MPs in the formation of the Bloc Québécois. Its creation was also approved and supported by the then premier of Quebec, the Liberal Robert Bourassa.

The BQ’s real program and social orientation has been demonstrated in practice by the actions of its twin party at the provincial level, the PQ. In Canadian politics there exist no other two parties so intimately related on a political and organizational level. The two parties support each other during their respective elections, and together formulate their political strategies.

The PQ has formed the provincial government in Québec during eighteen of the last thirty-two years. Its last two mandates, from 1994 to 2003, were characterized by a general assault upon the historic gains of the working class. The PQ government led by Lucien Bouchard, with the full support of the trade union bureaucracy, closed hospitals, slashed tens of thousands of jobs in healthcare and the rest of the public sector, and instituted savage cuts to funding for social services. The PQ government justified these attacks in the name of eliminating the annual budget deficit. Then, when the deficit was eliminated, it embarked on a program of cutting taxes for big business and the wealthy. Disgusted by the politics of the Parti Québécois, which had formed one of the most right-wing governments in North American history, workers have deserted the party en masse, many deciding to simply not vote in the 2003 and 2007 provincial elections.

When the BQ proclaims that it “defends the interests of Québec,” what it really means is that it upholds the interests of Quebec big business—Power Corporation, Bombardier, Ubisoft, Merck & Frost, Québecor, Jean Coutu and other huge multi-national corporations.

This relation of class forces explains the BQ’s principal criticism of the Harper Conservative government: that “its electoral base is in Western Canada,” that is the Conservative Party puts the interests of the oil companies in Alberta before those of big business in Quebec. Quebec’s manufacturing sector—which has been traditionally weaker than industry in Ontario, which has benefited from closer proximity to the American mid-west—has been hard hit by the rising value of the Canadian dollar and the economic slow-down in the United States.

The Bloc Québécois also plays an important role in defending the interests of Québécois and Canadian capitalism by serving as a means of politically harnessing the Quebec working class to the interests of capital and dividing it from workers in English Canada. Québécois nationalism, taking increasingly chauvinistic forms, argues that francophone workers have more in common with the Québécois bourgeoisie than with workers in the rest of Canada and the world.

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The ability of the *indépendantistes* parties—the BQ and PQ—to play this role is bound up with the slavish support they receive from the trade union bureaucracy. The union leadership turned towards the PQ and Québécois nationalism at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s as a

means to regain control and politically neuter an increasingly militant working class. Later Québécois nationalism served as a means to justify the unions’ corporatist collaboration with big business and the state.

As in the past, the Federation des travailleurs au Québec (FTQ—Quebec Federation of Labor), the province’s largest union federation, is giving its full support to the BQ in this election. “We cannot afford the luxury of allowing the Conservatives to govern for the West, folding their arms in the face of thousands of lost jobs in Québec, in the textile, forestry, and manufacturing industries,” declared FTQ President Michel Arsenault.

Underscoring that the FTQ shares the BQ leadership’s perspective of working with a minority Conservative government, Arsenault told a September 24 press conference, “It is important for us that the Conservative government not win a majority.”

The other major union federation in Québec, the Confederation des syndicats nationaux (CSN—Confederation of National Unions), has recommended a “strategic” anti-Conservative vote. If the CSN does not explicitly proclaim its support for the BQ, it leaves little doubt as to which party it supports in practice. “If in other ridings,” said the president of the CSN, Claudette Carboneau, “the way to stop the Conservatives is to elect a Liberal, a New Democrat, fine—go ahead... In more than two thirds of [Quebec] ridings, the real fight is between two options, the Bloc and the Conservatives. In that case, call a spade a spade: a strategic vote means a vote for the Bloc Québécois.”

The links between the trade union bureaucracy and the big business party, that is the Bloc Québécois, go deeper than simple political-ideological agreement. Gilles Duceppe, its leader, and Pierre Paquette, considered by many his political heir, made their careers in the CSN prior to entering electoral politics. The president of the Quebec section of the Travailleurs canadiens de l’automobile (TCA—Canadian Auto Workers) is a star BQ candidate in the current election, running in a riding north of Montreal which used to be home to a GM assembly plant.

The close connections between the trade union bureaucracy and the BQ are frequently invoked by right-wing Québécois nationalists so as to pressure the party to move even further to the right. During the current election campaign, this faction has gone further, with many openly supporting the Conservatives and declaring that the BQ has lost its utility. This development is symptomatic of the sharp turn to the right of the Québécois elite. Right-wing *indépendantistes* (like the ex-PQ minister Jacques Brassard whose vicious criticism of the BQ was trumpeted by the press), the right-wing populist Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ), much of the leadership of Quebec’s current provincial ruling party (the Parti Libéral du Québec), and the editorial board *La presse*—are all supporting the Conservatives and the coming to power of a majority Conservative government.

The working class must draw conclusions from its bitter political experience with the Parti Québécois, the Bloc Québécois, and the Québec nationalist movement in general. The real divide in Canada is not an ethno-linguistic one, but a class divide. Québécois workers must break with the trade union bureaucracies and their nationalist and corporatist politics and consider the option represented by the Socialist Equality Party: the unity of workers across Canada against all fractions of big business, socialism and internationalism.



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