

Quebec elections: Unprecedented alienation from big business parties

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With just two-and-a-half weeks to go before Quebec's December 8 provincial election, the media has been forced to concede that there is little popular interest in, let alone enthusiasm for, the campaigns of the three major, big business parties, the Liberals, Parti Québécois, and Action-démocratique du Québec.

Matters of grave public concern, warranting serious debate, are not lacking. The lamentable state of the public health care system and the threat that an impending world recession represents to Quebecers' jobs and pensions, to name just two.

But working people have little faith in the politicians' promises, having witnessed all governments, whether at the federal or provincial level, pursue essentially the same right-wing course for the past quarter-century or more.

According to a major opinion poll published Wednesday, 51 percent of Quebecers are not interested in the election campaign and less than half (48 percent) are as motivated to vote in the election this December 8 as in the previous one. It is widely anticipated that for the first time in more than 75 years less than 70 percent of the electorate will cast their ballots.

Liberal Premier Jean Charest, who was reduced to heading a minority government by the March 2007 election, was prompted to call the election by the world financial crisis. While publicly he has maintained that Quebec is well-positioned to weather the storm, Charest chose to seek a "fresh mandate" now because he feared that support for his government would be in free-fall by next spring, due to mounting unemployment and the government's need to offset plunging tax revenues by slashing public spending.

Charest calculated that big business would rally behind the Liberals' drive for a majority government, because it would view a government that had no fear of facing the electorate before 2013 as better able to implement unpopular measures, that is to place the burden of the economic crisis on working people.

Charest was also keen to take advantage of the weakness of the opposition parties.

The right-wing populist Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ) more than doubled its share of the popular vote and emerged as the official opposition in the last provincial election. But its support has since plummeted and it is now expected to win a vote-share in the order of just 15 percent.

Many working people who voted for the ADQ in the last election as a misguided protest against the traditional establishment parties, the Liberals and Parti Québécois, have firmly rejected it now that they have come to know more about the ADQ's ultra-right program. The ADQ champions private health care and private schooling and is opposed to the expansion of the province's public daycare program.

The Quebec elite has been quite willing to use the ADQ to push Quebec politics sharply right, including egging on ADQ leader Mario Dumont, in the run up to the 2007 election, in a chauvinist campaign against immigrants and religious minorities. But over the past year, it has made it

manifestly clear that it views the ADQ as too unstable, and too prone to making chauvinist and social-conservative appeals that potentially cut across the drive to impose big business' socio-economic agenda, to be trusted with power.

Hence, the demagogue Dumont has found himself in the uncharacteristic position of having to parry some pointed, if limited, press criticism, including his fatuous claim that a new public school course on comparative religions is aimed at destroying Quebec's "Catholic heritage."

In a desperate attempt to revive the ADQ's flagging campaign and staunch criticism from within his own party, Dumont made a major speech last weekend in which he took "personal responsibility" for the ADQ's purported growing pains.

The pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ) has alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's governing party for the past 40 years. But it has been in almost perpetual crisis—with divisive spats over leadership, what emphasis to put on its *indépendantiste* objective, and how to "modernize" its ostensibly social-democratic program—since falling from power in 2003.

While the PQ is far from officially conceding the election to Charest and his Liberals, it is an open secret that the PQ leadership would consider it a "victory" if the party reclaimed the mantle of official opposition and the ADQ were reduced to a rump.

Liberals and PQ blame each other for health care crisis

A poll early in the campaign found that the number one concern of voters (31 percent of those polled) is health care "accessibility and quality." Since then, the press has been obliged to publish a series of reports, or rather horror stories, pointing to the erosion of the public health care system.

The average waiting time in the emergency department of a Quebec hospital is 16.6 hours. Thirty-two thousand people have been waiting for an operation for more than six months and 800,000 Quebecers, or more than 10 percent of the population, don't have a family doctor. The government is compelling nurses to work overtime, because of chronic staff shortages, putting the health of patients and the nurses themselves at risk.

There have been similar, albeit less dramatic stories concerning a shortage of teachers and excessively large classes in the public education system.

Meanwhile, Charest and PQ leader Pauline Marois have engaged in a cynical debate as to who is responsible for the health care crisis.

Charest has laid the blame on Marois and the dramatic spending cuts that the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard, in which she served as a

leading minister, carried out, with the full support of the union bureaucracy, between 1995 and 1998. These cuts included a program under which thousands of health care professionals, including doctors, nurses, and hospital workers, were encouraged to take early retirement and were not replaced. And when nurses rebelled against the resulting dramatic and dangerous increase in their workload in 1999, the Bouchard PQ government used a savage strikebreaking law to force them back-to-work.

“Pauline Marois left behind her, in the health and social services sector, a disaster, a true catastrophe,” declared Charest on November 12. “And 10 years later, in 2008, we are still living the consequences of those decisions.”

Marois has repeatedly defended her role in the PQ government’s “zero-deficit campaign. “If it had to be done again,” she declared on November 16, “I would do it again.” At the same time, she has observed that the Liberals have held power for the past five years, yet the health care crisis has persisted, if not deepened.

The truth is both Marois and Charest, the PQ as well as the Liberals, are responsible for the health care crisis.

Elected in 2003 on a promise to “fix” public health care, the Liberals have instead pushed forward with the privatization of the system. They have encouraged, under Bill 33, the profusion of private for-profit health care clinics and the development of private health insurance for the rich, creating thereby new levers through which big business can press for the dismantling of a quality, universal public health care system.

Quebec now has the highest rate of private health care spending, 30 percent, and the lowest per capita public health care spending of any province.

On retiring from politics, Philippe Couillard, the Liberal health minister for five years beginning in April 2003, was promptly named to a senior position with an investment fund specializing in private health care.

Big business hopes to exploit crisis

In an attempt to generate enthusiasm for their respective campaigns, the parties have made various promises to increase spending on public services.

These promises, if fulfilled, would not constitute, to say the least, a massive reinvestment in public infrastructure. Moreover, they have been accompanied by repeated pledges on the part of all three parties to balance the books.

In an interview with *La presse*, Marois said that to avoid a budget deficit a PQ government would be ready to raise fees for government services, including possibly electricity rates, and to impose cutbacks. “Once our [spending] priorities are determined,” said the PQ leader, “it’s possible that certain other governmental actions will, in consequence, be placed in question.” It would be, added Marois, “completely irresponsible” to rule out public spending cuts.

Nonetheless, the limited spending promises have been widely and forthrightly condemned by newspaper editorialists and columnists. Former PQ minister Joseph Facal, writing in the *Journal de Montréal*, deplored what he called “the biggest avalanche of extravagant promises that I can remember” and denounced the electorate for invariably choosing those “who always promise more” over he “who promises rigor” and calls for “sacrifice.”

La presse’s lead editorialist, André Pratte, titled his November 13 editorial, “The Crisis? Lost!” “Every party,” complained Pratte, “is multiplying its commitments, each more tempting than the other: thousand more daycare spaces, new tax credits for every taste, more teachers in the

schools, trains, tramways ... How does one finance that if the crisis empties the state’s coffers? ...

“The world is at the edge of an economic precipice. No one knows its depth. In these circumstances, politicians must demonstrate prudence and honesty. Unfortunately that’s visibly not what our candidates are giving us.”

As such commentary attests the Quebec elite wants and expects the next government to press forward with the dismantling of public services, through cuts, privatization, and onerous user-fees.

Indeed, much as they fear for their own stock portfolios, the ruling class, at least to some degree, welcomes the crisis as an opportunity to overcome popular resistance to radical, right-wing changes aimed at redistributing wealth from working people to big business and the rich.

The unions and the PQ

For decades the trade union bureaucracy has functioned as a close political ally of the big business PQ, while developing all manner of corporatist ties that institutionalize the unions’ role as an auxiliary of big business, under PQ and Liberal governments alike.

The union bureaucracy responded to the PQ’s fall from power in 2003 by seeking to develop still closer ties with it, creating an organized faction inside the PQ, the *Syndicalistes et progressistes pour un Québec libre* (Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec).

Once again in this election, numerous unions and union officials are supporting the PQ, whether explicitly, as in the case of the Canadian Auto Workers bureaucracy, or implicitly as in the case of the Confederation of National Trade Unions.

The press expressed some surprise, therefore, when the leadership of the largest trade union federation, the Quebec Federation of Labour, announced November 9 that it was not endorsing any party in the December 8 election. Pressed by reporters for an explanation, QFL President Arsenault said the labour federation did not mean any ill will to Pauline Marois, but that the PQ needed to do more to advance the QFL’s causes.

This is a ruse. If the top leadership of the QFL has moved to somewhat distance itself from the PQ—in 2007, a special congress of more than 1,000 QFL officials voted by a majority of 98 percent to endorse the PQ—it is because it wants to keep its hands free to work closely with Charest and his right-wing Liberals.

In December 2003, less than eight months after coming to power, the Charest Liberals confronted an escalating movement of strikes and protests against a battery of regressive measures, including a law to facilitate contracting-out. The unions torpedoed the opposition movement, saying Charest had a mandate to govern. Thereafter, the Liberals, who had initially snubbed the union officialdom, strove to repair relations with the union bureaucracy.

One element in this process was the election of Raymond Bachand as a Liberal in a December 2005 by-election and his subsequent elevation to the Liberal cabinet. Bachand, who was once an advisor to the first PQ premier, René Lévesque, was from 1997 to 2001 the president-director of the QFL’s *Fonds de solidarité* (Solidarity Fund), a multi-billion dollar venture-capital fund run by the QFL bureaucracy. (Pauline Marois’ husband, Claude Blanchet, it should be noted is also a former head of the *Fonds de solidarité*.)

Whatever party or parties form Quebec’s next government it will, with the connivance of the unions, seek to boost the profitability of Quebec big business at the expense of the jobs, wages, and social position of the working class. To answer this attack, workers in Quebec must repudiate

the pro-capitalist unions and their reactionary alliance with the big business PQ, and join forces with workers across North America in an industrial and political offensive against the profit system.



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