

Québec solidaire: Quebec's “left” party in the orbit of the big business PQ

Louis Girard, Guy Charron
8 December 2008

Québec solidaire (Solidarity Quebec) presents itself as the party of the “left” in Quebec. However, it in no way identifies itself with the working class, let alone socialism. *Québec solidaire*’s program is a collection of vague reformist promises, exemplified by its self-description as the party of “social justice, environmental protection, equality between the sexes, and the participation of all citizens in political decisions” and as the advocate of a “free, sovereign [i.e. independent], just and egalitarian Quebec.”

Québec solidaire (QS) was founded at the beginning of 2006 from a merger of the *Union des forces progressistes* (UFP), [Union of Progressive Forces], a coalition of left and ostensibly revolutionary socialist movements, and *Option Citoyenne* [Citizen's Option], a movement that emerged from community and feminist groups who considered the UFP too radical.

In the Quebec elections this December 8, QS is standing 122 candidates, (out of a possible 125), and aims to win 5 percent of the vote. QS is placing great emphasis on electing its two co-leaders, Françoise David and Amir Khadir, to the National Assembly. Both finished second in their respective ridings in the last provincial election, held in March 2007.

Québec solidaire’s central political axis is to put pressure on the independence, big-business Parti Québécois (PQ) so as to prevent it from going too far to the right. Since 1973-except for the past year-and-a-half when it has been the third party in the National Assembly-the PQ has alternated between forming Quebec’s government and serving as the Official Opposition.

QS is primarily composed of people who have long been in the orbit of the PQ, (community activists, environmentalists and a handful of minor trade union bureaucrats), but who abandoned the PQ after it imposed massive social spending cuts and huge tax cuts skewed to the benefit of big businesses and the rich during its last two terms in office.

Several QS candidates, including Amir Khadir, have previously stood for office under the banner of the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the sister party of the PQ at the federal level. The QS also boasts of having obtained the support of longtime PQ cabinet minister, Robert Perreault, in the present election campaign.

In a recent radio interview broadcast by Radio-Canada, David, after declaring that she was disappointed by the Parti Québécois, continued, “I finally realized that I would have more influence on them from the outside.” Supposing, she continued, “that the PQ forms the official opposition, as I hope... it seems to me that with the presence of Khadir and myself in the National Assembly, the PQ will be made stronger, because

we will force them to go further.”

The QS revealed its true nature when it declared on December 3 that “we support the formation of a coalition government [at the federal level], sustained by the BQ.” Unable to distinguish itself from the PQ or BQ, the so-called “left” party of Quebec backs a coalition government led by the Liberal Party, the Canadian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government. The terms of the Liberal-NDP coalition agreement leave no doubt that were the coalition to take power it would oversee a right-wing government employing populist phrases the better to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people. The coalition would continue Canada’s military intervention in Afghanistan and is already committed to implementing the Conservatives’ \$50 billion, five-year program of corporate tax cuts.

Generally, the press treats *Québec solidaire* with sympathy, depicting it as party of dreamers and idealists who occasionally propose measures that should be taken seriously by the government. David and Khadir are regularly interviewed in major print and electronic publications, and prominent cultural figures openly support them. But QS, like the Green Party, was not invited to participate in a recently televised debate of Quebec party leaders.

With the aim of convincing the Québécois élite that they are a respectable and responsible party, QS insists that it represents not a “sectarian and dogmatic left, but rather a human and accommodating [rassembleuse] left.”

What QS means by this, as a study of its program reveals, is that capitalism is basically alright; it needs only to be spruced up. For QS, classes with opposed interests do not exist. Instead, there exists only a single Québécois people who need to come together for the “common good.” In practice, this amounts to tying the working class to “our” Québécois bourgeoisie.

QS defends the conception that militarism, social polarization, the thievery of the corporate elite and their pillaging of society, racism and other forms of social exclusion, poverty, the all-out attack on democratic rights, jobs and the standard of living are merely questions of choice or of bad leadership, and not the inevitable consequences of a system based on production for private profit. According to QS, it suffices to restrain capitalism, subordinating “the economy to social justice and respect for our environment,” while respecting the profit margins of big investors and speculators.

Québec solidaire has remained almost completely silent regarding the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression, conscious of the fact that this crisis exposes the contradictions of its program. On the one hand,

the timid reforms they propose for the defense of small-scale production and the development of environmental industries are clearly insufficient to protect the jobs and standard of living of workers even from the standpoint of economic nationalism. On the other hand, their insistence on putting forward a balanced budget makes it entirely impossible to even realize such measures.

To promote economic development, QS's electoral platform advocates a modest expansion of public transport, the nationalization of the wind-energy industry, and protective tariffs for small farmers.

QS also proposes forcing the *Caisse de dépôt et de placement du Québec* [the Quebec Pension Plan], the largest investor in Canada with a \$150 billion portfolio, to invest in Quebec businesses, especially those in the "regions," i.e. outside Montreal. Making a populist appeal to widespread anti-big-business sentiment, David explains that "we have no control over investments on the international stock markets."

The principal measure by which QS proposes to address poverty is to increase, by steps over several years, the minimum wage to \$10.20 per hour. Just how timid this measure is can be demonstrated by looking at the program of Quebec's current governing party, the Liberals. The Liberals have pledged to raise the minimum wage to \$9.50 an hour by the end of 2009. To "defend jobs," QS also proposes that the government assist workers in transforming troubled companies into cooperatives.

The petty-bourgeois character of *Québec solidaire* is shown clearly by its attitude toward militarism. In 2001, Canada sent troops to Afghanistan in support of the US invasion and, since 2005, the Canadian Armed Forces have been in the forefront of the counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan. Opposition to this war has never ceased to grow among Canadians, especially in Quebec, where, according to opinion polls, around 70 percent of the population are opposed to the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan. None of this has prevented the Conservative government, with the support of the Liberals, from extending the mission and reinforcing it with more soldiers, tanks and attack helicopters.

Just as with economic questions, *Québec solidaire*'s perspective on militarism is moralistic in form, and localistic in its content. Since its creation, QS has called for the participation of the UN, an institution of and for the imperialist powers, so as to "maintain peace" in Afghanistan, choosing to "forget" that the UN has repeatedly given its support to the NATO occupation of Afghanistan. In the present electoral campaign, as before, QS scarcely mentions the question of the war in Afghanistan.

QS merely adds a few vague lines to the very end of its electoral platform calling for the passage of an entirely symbolic Quebec National Assembly motion "opposing all Canadian imperialist intervention in Afghanistan."

While QS frequently employs the word "imperialist," it uses the term strictly as an epithet. Nowhere does QS seek to lay bare the economic imperatives that lie behind the re-eruption of militarism at the beginning of the 21st Century. If the Canadian bourgeoisie, including the Quebec bourgeoisie, strongly supports the Afghan war, it is because they deem it necessary to aggressively assert their interests on the world stage.

As the rulers of an imperialist power of the second rank, with limited power and resources, the Canadian bourgeoisie deems it necessary to ally with the United States, which is seeking to use its military power to offset the relative decline in its economic strength. Over the past decade, the

Canadian bourgeoisie has sought to resurrect the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as an instrument of war by intervening in the NATO-led wars against Yugoslavia in 1999, in Afghanistan since 2001, and by announcing a massive program to rearm and expand the CAF.

A real opposition to the rise of militarism cannot find expression in a symbolic motion before a provincial parliament. The war in Afghanistan must be exposed for what it is, a war of pillage aimed at defending the interests of the Canadian and Quebec bourgeoisie—a war that can be answered only through the independent political mobilization of the working class against capitalism.

The positions of the QS on the economy and the war go hand in hand with the party's orientation towards the PQ. When Françoise David says that she could "have more influence from outside [the PQ]," she is making reference to her long history of collaboration with this capitalist party.

In 1995, a few months before the PQ's referendum on the independence of Quebec, Françoise David, then at the head of the Quebec Federation of Women, organized a 200 km march that ended in Quebec City with the submission of a number of timid reformist demands to the Parti Québécois. It was principally the PQ that benefited from the event, using it to present itself as a party open to popular influence.

The community groups and pseudo-socialist organizations that have joined forces in *Québec solidaire* were all part of the "Rainbow coalition" in favor of Quebec's independence—that is in favor of the establishment of a capitalist *République du Québec* that was to be part of NATO and NAFTA—which the PQ created, with the assistance of the unions, at the time of the 1995 referendum.

By 1995 the PQ had a long governmental record that demonstrated both its subservience to capital and its readiness to mount savage attacks on the working class. But the "Rainbow Coalition" lent legitimacy to the PQ's claim that an independent Quebec would be a bulwark against the right-wing wind blowing across North America. Meanwhile, the PQ was assuring big business that the creation of a separate Quebec would be an ideal mechanism for dismantling the welfare state.

A year after narrowly losing the referendum, the PQ organized a summit bringing together business, the unions, and the government so as to build the political support necessary for going forward with their plans for draconian cuts to social spending. Françoise David participated in this forum, leaving only at the last hour when she couldn't obtain any assurance from the PQ government that those on welfare would be unaffected by the budget cuts.

In the years that followed, the PQ implemented their "zero deficit" program, eliminating tens of thousands of public sector jobs, closing hospitals, and cutting social assistance. A layer of PQ supporters separated from the party, attempting to keep alive social-democratic illusions about the independence of Quebec.

Québec solidaire, like other newly-established "enlarged left" formations around the world, plays the role of a left bulwark for the bourgeois social order. Should the union bureaucracy prove unable to continue harnessing the working class to the PQ, QS would present itself as a left alternative to the PQ, all the better to tie workers to the program of economic nationalism and Quebec independence.

Québec solidaire enjoys the enthusiastic support of numerous self-proclaimed revolutionary tendencies, including the Quebec group

affiliated with the Pabloite United Secretariat, *Gauche socialiste*. These tendencies are entirely demoralized regarding any prospect of winning the working class to a socialist and internationalist program. By integrating themselves into *Québec solidaire* to form a supposedly respectable party of the left dedicated entirely to pressuring the PQ and working with the union bureaucracy, they are drawing themselves closer and closer to the Canadian and Québécois bourgeoisie.

The approach of the Socialist Equality Party and the Fourth International is the diametrical opposite. We insist that it will not be possible to defend the jobs, standards of living, and democratic rights of working people outside of the struggle for a workers' government. The waging of this struggle requires the building of a mass, revolutionary party that unites Quebec workers with the wider working class of the rest of Canada and North America—not the Quebec bourgeoisie.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact