Solidaire with whom?

Quebec’s new left party links hands with the political establishment

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It has not taken long for Québec Solidaire, Quebec's new self-avowed left-wing party, to reveal its true colours. In last month's emergency session of the Quebec National Assembly, Amir Khadir, the party's first-ever elected legislator, worked hand in glove with the three parties of the Quebec elite, the Liberals, Parti Québécois, and Action-démocratique du Québec.

Under conditions of the most severe capitalist crisis since the Great Depression, Khadir, one of Québec Solidaire's two co-leaders, was at pains to demonstrate that his party will function as a loyal opposition party—that it aims not to challenge the existing social order but rather to be part of the establishment debate. "I want to assure you of my full collaboration," declared Khadir in his first National Assembly speech. Later in the same speech, Khadir thanked the big business politicians for their "welcome": "It allows our young party to assume the role that has been given us with more confidence and in a spirit of *bonne entente* [friendship] and collaboration."

Khadir quickly lived up to his word. He joined with Liberal Premier Jean Charest and the two other party leaders in sponsoring a National Assembly resolution, subsequently adopted unanimously, that outlined "Quebec's demands" as to how the federal government should respond to the economic crisis.

The demands voiced the consensus that had emerged within the Quebec elite in the preceding weeks favouring measures to stimulate the economy to prevent important sections of capital from being driven to the wall and so as to dampen social tensions by acting (in reality, largely appearing to act) to provide jobs.

Several of the resolution's six demands were so vague as to be meaningless. The sum total of the first demand was that "the federal government give assistance to workers, communities and businesses affected by the economic slowdown."

Khadir boasted that it was he who persuaded Premier Charest to include a call for Ottawa "to improve the employment insurance programme by relaxing eligibility criteria and by allowing workers who are in training to continue to receive their benefits." This demand is so radical that it had already been made by the federal Liberals, who when in government slashed jobless benefits to the point that today more than 60 percent of those who lose their jobs are denied employment insurance.

Another of the resolution's demands held up Ottawa's support for the automobile industry as a model. With the enthusiastic backing of corporate Canada, the federal Conservative government is using this "support" as a bludgeon to impose sweeping contract concessions on workers at the Canadian affiliates of the Detroit Three automakers.

The resolution's sixth clause reiterated the National Assembly's opposition to the federal Conservative government's plan to merge the 13 provincial and territorial securities commissions into a single Canada-wide regulator. Thus in voting for the resolution, Khadir solidarized himself and his party with the Quebec financial elite's campaign to preserve a Quebec-based securities regulator, the better to assert its own predatory interests.

The Quebec establishment has frequently resorted to such consensus resolutions and unanimous votes to pressure the federal government. But the creation and promotion of a Quebec "national consensus" is more than a bargaining tool. It has long been an important mechanism by which the bourgeoisie has sought to regulate class relations.

An important element of the so-called Quebec model of socioeconomic development has been institutionalized collaboration between the state, business and union bureaucracy, with a view to using the unions as enforcers of the "national consensus," that is the program of big business. The most infamous example of this was the "zero-deficit" campaign mounted under the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard in the latter half of the 1990s. Politically prepared at two "national economic summits," the zero-deficit campaign saw the unions collaborate in the imposition of sweeping cuts in public and social services, including the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs in education and health care.

Had a socialist been elected to the National Assembly last December 8, he or she would be using their assembly seat as a tribune to warn workers that big business is intent on making

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them pay for the economic crisis through job cuts, contract concessions and the dismantling of public and social services. Indeed, Charest called early elections late last year with the express aim of winning a parliamentary majority so his government would be better able to make the "tough," i.e., unpopular, decisions big business will demand of Quebec's government.

A socialist Member of the National Assembly (MNA) would be seeking to demonstrate to workers that the Liberals, Parti Québécois (PQ), and Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ) are all beholden to big business and that the differences between them, whether over Quebec's status within the federal state or the economy, are tactical. In particular he or she would fight to expose how nationalism, including the semi-institutionalized practice of formulating a purported national consensus, has been used to harness the working class to the interests of the ruling elite.

Québec Solidaire, its occasional demagogic denunciations of corporate big business and neo-liberalism notwithstanding, is charting the exact opposite course. No sooner did it enter the National Assembly than it demonstrated its willingness to work with the parties of big business and to promote illusions that there are "national" aims and interests that transcend and take precedence over the antagonism between workers and capital.

If this were not enough to show that under conditions of mounting economic crisis and class conflict Québec Solidaire would be willing to openly support or join a big business government, Khadir and company have provided a further telling proof of their orientation. Québec Solidaire hailed the accord struck late last year between the Liberals, the social-democratic NDP, and the Bloc Québécois to replace the federal Conservative government with a Liberal-led coalition committed to implementing massive corporate tax cuts and waging war in Afghanistan at least through 2011.

Québec Solidaire purports to be a left party favourable to working people. In fact, it is an aspiring establishment party whose policies combine timid reforms with nationalism and protectionism.

Khadir and Françoise David, Québec Solidaire's other co-leader, made only mild criticisms of the "economic stimulus" measures announced by the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest at the beginning of the three-day emergency National Assembly session on the economy. Whereas the Liberals raised the minimum wage by 50 cents to $9 an hour, Québec Solidaire urged that it be increased to $10.20.

Central to their criticisms was the promotion of "Achetons québécois" [Buy Quebec], the Quebec variant of the "Buy America" and "Buy British" campaigns mounted by the unions and weaker sections of big business. This reactionary protectionist demand serves to divide the working class, promotes the corporatist conception that workers and their capitalist employers have a "common interest," and leads logically to trade war and geopolitical conflict.

In a similar vein, Québec Solidaire accused the federal government of favouring Ontario over Quebec in its response to the economic crisis. Declared David, "It's certain that some $200 million for the Quebec forest industry is nothing when compared with the more than $2.7 billion promised Ontario."

In fact, the $2.7 billion in aid offered by the Harper Conservative government is not for Ontario or Ontarians, but rather to bail out GM, Chrysler and Ford. Far from benefiting workers, whether in Ontario or Quebec, the bailout is being used by the Conservatives to impose wage and benefit cuts on autoworkers, concessions that will be used to press for similar rollbacks from other workers in manufacturing and beyond. The government has stipulated its aid is conditional on the reduction of autoworkers' wages and benefits to the level of workers at the non-union Japanese plants in the US South.

Québec Solidaire's counterposing of the auto bailout to the plight of the forest industry echoes the stand of Parti Québécois and Bloc Québécois and, for that matter, the right-wing government of British Columbia. It serves to pit worker against worker on a regional or national-ethnic basis, while serving to disarm forestry workers by suggesting that they should be pressing for an anti-worker bailout like that being given the Detroit Three.

The only program that meets the need of auto and forestry workers alike is a socialist program to radically reorganize economic life so production and employment are organized to meet human need, not the profit imperative of private capitalist investors.

Charest's solicitation of Québec Solidaire's support and his readiness to make its lone MNA a co-sponsor of last month's National Assembly resolution demonstrate that the elite have taken the measure of Quebec's new left party. Working people, albeit from a diametrically opposed class perspective, should do the same.

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