Québec Solidaire manifesto promotes nationalism and a “moral” capitalism

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Québec Solidaire—a self-avowed left, pro-Québec independence party that since December 2008 has a lone member in the provincial parliament—recently issued a manifesto titled “To End the Economic crisis: Go Beyond Capitalism?”

The manifesto’s ambiguous title with its question mark over capitalism is meant to suggest that Québec Solidaire (QS) is questioning, if not radically opposing, the existing social order. So too, the manifesto’s publication on May 1, the day of international working class solidarity.

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. A careful reading of the manifesto shows that this collection of community organizers, NGO activists, and ex-radicals of the middle class—the Parti Communiste du Québec and Mandelite Gauche Socialiste amongst others, who have joined QS en bloque—is orientated to, and aspires to integrate itself with, the political establishment.

To begin with, QS denies the objective basis for the historic crisis battering world capitalism and rejects an independent struggle of the working class for socialism.

Indeed, the QS does not even appeal for the working class to resist big business’ drive to make it pay for the economic crisis through layoffs, wage cuts, the destruction of public and social services and tax and user-fee hikes.

Rather, QS tries to convince the ruling class to abandon neo-liberalism, which it presents as a simplistic ideology lacking any material basis. According to QS, it is neo-liberalism that has given rise to “unbridled capitalism” and lies at the root of the current financial collapse and world economic slump.

Thus, QS inverts the true relation between ideology and class relations, resuscitating the old middle-class illusion that capitalism has good aspects that can dominate, if only we are able to strip it of its bad sides.

Secondly, QS promotes the strengthening of the powers of the Québec provincial state, up to complete sovereignty or independence from Canada, in order to achieve a “world which fits our dreams.”

What is this but the dreams of a middle-class layer who wants to take a more active role in the running of the Québec state and benefit from its privileges, in exchange for lending the political process of the Québec ruling class a veneer of popularity and of democracy?

Québec Solidaire is politically oriented towards the Parti Québécois (PQ), the pro- indépendantiste party of Québec big business. It participates alongside the PQ in the Conseil de la souveraineté du Québec, has repeatedly said it would be open to a seat-sharing pact with the PQ, and its leaders argue that a strong QS is the best means to pressure the PQ “left.”

No matter that the PQ is a ferocious opponent of the working class and competes with the ultra-right wing ADQ in promoting Québécois and anti-immigrant chauvinism. During its last two terms in government, from 1994 to 2003, the PQ drastically slashed public and social services, while reducing taxes for the rich and big business.

The Québec ruling class uses nationalist appeals and the program of “struggle for Québec sovereignty” to wrest privileges for itself, to harness Québec workers to its class aims and prevent them from uniting with their working class brothers and sisters in Canada, the United States and internationally in a common struggle against capitalism.

Québec Solidaire hangs onto the nation-state as a lifeline for capitalism, counterposing to capitalist globalization and “free trade” calls for economic protectionism and a reinforcement of the nation-state. However, it is precisely this decadent political form that epitomizes everything historically outmoded in the profit system.

Capitalism’s inability to prevent the spread of the financial crisis is largely due to national rivalries. The large nation-states, with the US in the lead, are seeking to extricate themselves from the crisis at the expense of other nations. And it is the fundamental contradiction between the nation-state system and the increasingly integrated world economy which gives rise to militarism and national chauvinism, a growing danger for all humanity.

Let us examine in detail the contents of the QS manifesto:

The document opens with the world financial crisis which broke out in the summer of 2007, when the bottom fell out of the sub-prime debt market in the US. “Then came its impact on the real economy, with factory closures, lay-offs and bankruptcies, giving rise to the economic crisis. But where,” asks the manifesto, “do these different crises come from?”

What follows is a long description of financial instruments associated with subprime mortgages: “Subprimes are risky loans with higher interest rates for the borrower. ... They were made possible by the deregulation of the financial market;” These loans were given “under extremely favorable loan conditions; … Financial institutions offered the refinancing of loans in the form of credit line mortgages.” All this leads to the central thesis that “The crisis of the subprimes shows the limits of the current system: when people stop repaying their loans, the wheels stop turning.”

For Québec Solidaire, the cause of the worst economic crisis at least since the Great Depression of the 1930s is a drop in consumer spending, itself caused by a credit crisis.

The superficial character of this explanation is revealed in the following passage:

“High levels of indebtedness [by the consumer] allow [the system] to respond to an inherent contradiction of capitalism: in order to realize profits, the bosses lower wages or make them stagnant, even as the cost of living rises; but for the economy to function, it is necessary for consumers to purchase goods produced by companies.”

In fact, under-consumption by workers has been a characteristic of capitalism throughout its existence. The real source of profit is located in exploitation: the wage paid to the worker in exchange for his day of work is less than the value he produces within a day.

The exploitation of the working class inherent in capitalism did not prevent it, in its era of ascendancy, from developing the productive forces

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at a galloping pace. The "wheel continued to turn" to the extent that capitalist exploitation allowed the accumulation of profits, the sole true goal of production from the standpoint of the capitalist class.

If the wheel has ceased to turn today, it is because of a crisis in the mode of capitalist accumulation of surplus-value, or for simplicity's sake, profits, rooted in a decline in the rate of profit. As a result of automation, human labour-power, the real source of surplus-value, occupies an even smaller part of the production process and of the value of each individual commodity, meaning on average ever-greater amounts of capital must be set into motion to realize the same profit.

The current economic crisis is, therefore, above all a crisis of production, not one of consumption. It expresses the historical necessity of replacing production for individual profit with a system of planned production for human need.

The petty-bourgeois outlook of Québec Solidaire renders it incapable of examining the capitalist system as a historical system of production, corresponding to a stage in the evolution of humanity.

Hence, the subjective approach of the manifesto in considering the causes of the current crisis. QS, for instance, asks the question: "But how has this crisis of subprimes been able to spread to the heart of the financial system and to rock the foundations of the stock markets and world banking system?"

Responding to its own question, it cites a series of murky financial products which inflated the credit bubble, and then finishes with, "The financial crisis therefore began with a weakening of regulations in the loan market ... [and] a deregulation of the financial sector."

The manifesto presents this deregulation as a simple ideological choice of "neo-liberal globalization." In reality it was the response of the ruling class to a crisis of profit accumulation, itself the product of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—the conflict between social need and private profit, and that between the nation-state and the world economy.

To the extent that the manifesto refers to objective conditions prevailing at the time of the "neo-liberal turn," these are far in the background and not an essential determining factor.

Mixed in are correct but isolated historical references: "In 1945, the US economy accounted for half of the world economy. ... During this period, large enterprises...could permit themselves to grant concessions to their workers. ... From the 1970s on, however, this system was destabilized by the growth of competitors in Europe and in Asia."

The schematic historical treatment hides the fundamental nature of the shift in economic and social policy carried out by the ruling class, beginning in the late 1970s.

This "neo-liberal" shift was a response to the end of the post-World War II economic boom and the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, a world economic and financial order which had been based on the dominant economic position of the United States and involved the widespread use of Keynesian national economic regulation.

To confront the fall in the rate of profit, the ruling class set out to dismantle the Welfare State, to break the unions of a militant working class, to use technological developments to remove national impediments to the mobility of capital, and to expand production on a world scale in search of cheap labor.

The deregulation of the financial markets was one stage in the process of globalization and the "liberation" of capital from its national barriers, a process which for a time boosted capitalist expansion. It was also a means for the ruling class to counter the fall of profits, at least temporarily, through manipulating a mass of fictitious capital which appeared to have the magical property of increasing all by itself. One financial bubble after another arose and broke, from the internet boom of the late 1990s to the real-estate boom of the 2000s—until the entire financial scaffolding, lacking any basis in the process of production, came crashing down.

Reviewing this historical process abstractly, the QS manifesto describes the period of stagflation of the 1970s: "This was a dreamed-of pretext for the neo-liberals to inflict defeat on the unions, and to demand that governments impose cuts in social programs which they had hitherto permitted in the period of growth, in order to put an end to the existing welfare-state."

The use of the word "pretext" robs the process of any objective content rooted in the class struggle and the resurgence of the capitalist contradictions that had been temporarily suppressed and mitigated during the post-World War II boom. This rejection of the class struggle is made more explicit at the conclusion of the manifesto, where one reads: "The financial, economic and ecological crises arise from an ideology—Neo-liberalism—which bases itself on a highly individualistic vision of society and a laissez-faire economic doctrine, with devastating effects."

The political corollary to the subjective economic analysis of Québec Solidaire is an appeal not to the independent political action of the working class, but rather to "enlightened" elements within the ruling class.

"Any solution whose goal is to introduce 'morality' into the financial world would obviously be appreciated," the manifesto intones.

"In this area, certain solutions have already been advanced and some of these seem to us to be interesting to explore in the coming debate... For example, how to:

- Prevent speculation and use of tax havens?
- Democratically control financial institutions?
- Reform the tax system so that it distributes wealth equitably?
- Remake the international trade system of goods and services to favor cooperation rather than competition?"

Millions of jobs are eliminated worldwide; pension funds have collapsed; budgets for education, health and other social programs are axed; taxpayers' money is given in the trillions to the huge banks who are responsible for the crisis in the first place. In short, the ruling class whose system is in mortal crisis is dragging humanity with it into the abyss.

The working class must respond to this grave danger by carrying out a determined political struggle on the basis of a socialist perspective. It must especially learn to beware of middle-class protest groups, like Québec Solidaire, which try to lull them with fairy tales about palliative measures which might be carried out within the capitalism system, particularly through the resurrection of Keynesian national economic regulation.

It is especially important to warn workers against the politically poisonous nationalist conceptions that form the basis of QS's perspective. The QS manifesto presents the process of globalization (followed by the epithet "neo-liberal") as a plot by "hard and fast capitalists: ... Free-trade agreements exist to prevent the States from intervening to control the ravages of the economy."

The unprecedented integration of the world economy, however, is the result of the inherent tendency of the productive forces to overflow the narrow bounds of the nation-state. From this standpoint it has an immense potential for socio-economic progress.

The principal obstacle to the realization of that potential, for the utilization of vast available resources to satisfy human need, is to be found precisely in the continuation of the nation-state, within which capitalism as a system developed historically, and production for private profit.

The QS attaches itself to this archaic form and calls for a return to small local production. They propose to "Refocus cities, villages and neighborhoods on their own inherent capacities for economic development." In accordance with this perspective, QS has long championed protectionist "Buy Québec" policies.

The working class, as an international class united objectively in a vast world process of production, has no interest in defending the nation state, an instrument of rule of the capitalist class. Nor does it have an interest, as QS advocates, in joining hands with the PQ in carving out a capitalist

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Rather, workers in Québec must join with workers in English Canada and around the world to mount a common struggle against capitalism and for a Socialist United States of North America as a transitional stage to a voluntary socialist federation of the world. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) in close collaboration with the other sections of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky.

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