

Québec Solidaire and the dead end of Quebec independence

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Québec Solidaire (QS), a party that presents itself as a party of the left, held its first “programmatic” congress last November. Its purpose was to begin elaborating a party program that, according to QS, will be finished in four years.

Amid the worst economic crisis of the capitalist system since the 1930s, rising militarism and tensions between the great powers, and spiraling social inequality accompanied by attacks on democratic rights, QS devoted its first official programmatic discussions to Quebec independence and so-called “identity” questions.

During this congress, QS voted to describe itself as a pro-Quebec sovereignty and *indépendantiste* party. They also agreed to mount a campaign through the *Conseil de la souveraineté du Québec*, in which the QS already participates, to create a coalition of political parties and tendencies in favor of sovereignty. The *Conseil de la souveraineté* is dominated by the *Parti Québécois* (PQ), a big-business party that has moved sharply to the right in the last 30 years.

QS wants to revive the Quebec independence project and give it a left cover, with vague calls for a “society that is more egalitarian, ecological, feminist, and showing more solidarity.” It thus presents itself as a “social-democratic” alternative to the PQ.

During the QS congress, Françoise David, the co-spokeswoman of the QS, declared her agreement with Jacques Parizeau, the PQ’s elder statesman and heir to the Dale-Parizeau insurance fortune, on “the absolute necessity to renew the discourse on [Quebec] sovereignty.” Parizeau imposed massive cuts in 1982-1983, while serving as finance minister in the PQ government of René Lévesque and then, as Quebec’s premier, mounted an austerity program centering on hospital closures, when the PQ came back to power in 1994.

During the 1995 referendum on the separation of Quebec from Canada, Parizeau organized a pro-independence “rainbow coalition.” Led by the PQ and supported by the trade union bureaucracy, this coalition included many current QS members and leaders and also the *Action Démocratique du Québec* (ADQ), a right-populist party massively rejected by the Quebec population in the December 2008 elections. This is the type of coalition that the QS is seeking to revive.

After her nod to Parizeau, David then said: “Over the years, the discourse on sovereignty lost meaning because some pro-sovereignty politicians have decided to make Quebec a country without a project. We want it to be known: independence without meaning makes no sense!”

This is one of QS’ main criticisms of the PQ: according to QS, the PQ has no *projet de société* (societal project), while the QS has a supposedly left-wing project that links sovereignty and social progress.

Whatever Françoise David and Amir Khadir (the other QS spokesman and its only Member of the National Assembly) may say however, the PQ does have a social agenda: defending the socio-economic interests of the Quebec bourgeoisie. Through sovereignty, the PQ aims to give the Quebec ruling class exclusive control over its own state, thereby enabling

it, or so the argument goes, to pursue its interests without regard for the competing interests of its rivals in other provinces and of the Canadian national bourgeoisie and its federal state. The PQ further calculates that the major reorganization of the state that independence would entail would facilitate the dismantling of public and social services.

To understand QS’ program and why it represents a trap for working people, one must do what QS refuses to do: review the experience of Quebec workers with the PQ and the Quebec *indépendantiste* program.

QS is silent on the bourgeois character of the PQ and its long history of collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy to stifle the struggles of the working class and isolate them from a socialist perspective. This was a mechanism used to block the development of a common struggle mobilizing the workers of Quebec and those of the rest of Canada against the profit system defended by the Quebec independence movement and the Canadian federal state alike.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Quebec was no exception to the radicalization of the international working class. In 1972, after the jailing of the leaders of Quebec’s three principal union federations, there was a spontaneous general strike bringing together hundreds of thousands of workers. Despite its size, however, this movement never had a socialist political leadership and remained under the ideological domination of the bourgeoisie.

The PQ and its leader René Lévesque claimed to have “a favorable outlook towards workers” and managed, thanks to the trade-union apparatuses which enjoyed support in the working class, to win support for a supposedly “left” program of national independence. This allowed them to divide the workers of Quebec from those of the rest of Canada, presenting linguistic and cultural differences as more important than the class struggle.

After coming to power in 1976, the PQ made some concessions to the working class, notably the adoption of an anti-scab law and the cancellation of \$50 million in fines that the courts, implementing the right-wing labor laws of its Liberal predecessor, had imposed on the trade unions. At the same time, the PQ institutionalized tripartite collaboration between the government, business leaders and the trade unions, making it an integral part of the “Quebec model” of capitalist development.

During its second term in office at the beginning of the 1980s, the PQ made a sharp turn to the right. During the 1982-1983 recession, the Lévesque government gutted the contracts of hundreds of thousands of public sector workers, rewriting work-rules, removing cost-of-living protection for pensioners, and cutting wages. When teachers rebelled against these sweeping concessions, the government imposed a temporary 20 percent wage cut and threatened mass firings. Soon after, the PQ fell from power. But the trade union bureaucracy continued to shackle the working class to the PQ and in the early 1990s helped to establish a sister party to the PQ in the federal parliament, the Bloc Québécois, made up of renegade Conservative and Liberal MPs and led by the ex-Conservative cabinet minister Lucien Bouchard.

When the PQ next formed Quebec's government, from 1994 to 2003, its evolution to the right only accelerated. During the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty, the PQ cynically promoted independence as a "bulwark" against the "right-wing wave" sweeping North America. But no sooner was the referendum over than the PQ launched, with the support of the unions, a zero-deficit drive, that ravaged public and social services, including permanently eliminating 40,000 education and health sector jobs.

After all these years pursuing the diktats of big business, the PQ, like numerous other liberal and social-democratic parties around the world, is largely discredited.

It is in this context that various "progressive" Quebec nationalists have chosen to "break" with the PQ, and this break—consummated in the 2006 merger of the Union of Progressive Forces led by Amir Khadir and the Citizens Option led by Françoise David—has been enthusiastically supported by Quebec's pseudo-socialist left. Indeed the Pabloite *Gauche socialiste* (Socialist Left) and the Communist Party of Quebec have joined the QS, claiming it has the potential to become an instrument of working class struggle.

This only underscores their own right-wing evolution and orientation.

The QS' "break" with the PQ is far less than it appears. As its participation in the *Conseil de la souveraineté* illustrates, QS is not averse to collaboration with the PQ. Only it aims to influence it "from the outside," as Françoise David said during her December 2008 electoral campaign.

QS' decision to define itself as both a pro-sovereignty and pro-independence party—rather than just as an *indépendantiste* party—is yet another way for it to hold out a hand to the PQ. So as to reassure big business that independence would not involve any "radical" rupture with the status quo, the PQ and BQ have left open the door to keeping certain economic and political institutions in common with the rest of Canada and this has involved defining their goal as "sovereignty" rather than independence.

Most important of all is the programmatic affinity of the QS and the PQ. The QS essentially recycles the PQ's program of the 1970s, including Quebec independence, protectionist measures, and the emphasis on "identity" questions.

QS presents Quebec independence as an answer to the economic crisis. In a video on the QS web site, Françoise David says: "It is important to speak of sovereignty at this time. One sees it with the crisis ... The [various] peoples want to give themselves the means, the tools to fight this crisis, to elaborate a different social vision, a different economic, ecological vision. So sovereignty is also that, in addition obviously to the language, the culture of Quebec..."

But what are the "means" that Françoise David mentions? How would Quebec's independence be a "tool" for the people of Quebec to "combat" this crisis?

In their draft program, QS writes: "Economic independence—it is the power to exercise our economic sovereignty over our natural resources and control our own economic levers."

This echoes the slogan "Masters in our own house" (*Maître chez nous*) advanced by René Lévesque and the Quebec bourgeoisie in the 1960s and 1970s and which helped to rally popular support for a policy aimed at strengthening the French-Canadian or Québécois bourgeoisie.

What QS purposefully does not ask is: who will be the "masters" in an independent Quebec? Who will possess the banks, factories, and natural resources? Similarly, it does not and cannot address the question as to who currently exercises "economic sovereignty" in the rest of Canada; since it is obvious that English-speaking workers outside Quebec are no more in control of society's "economic levers" than are their French-speaking counterparts within Quebec.

What the QS promotes as "economic sovereignty" has nothing to do with the expropriation of big business and the reorganization of global economic life so production is based on human need rather than private profit. Rather, it is a call for economic nationalism, for state support for Quebec-based enterprises through subsidies and tariff walls. As the experience of the 1930s demonstrates, such a program is a blind alley for the working class. Far from resolving on a progressive basis the contradiction between a global economy and the struggle for markets and profits among rival nationally-rooted bourgeois cliques, economic nationalism only accentuates the tensions between the great powers and divides the working class along national lines, while subordinating them to their "own" capitalist exploiters. (For a more detailed analysis of QS' socio-economic program see, "Québec Solidaire manifesto promotes nationalism and a "moral" capitalism".)

In a revealing radio interview following the QS congress, Françoise David deplored what she calls "a return to English by the back door" in workplaces, particularly in management positions, of "very Québécois businesses that were founded by francophone Québécois." She lamented, "Once you get a few floors up in the corporate headquarters, you have to speak English."

Here is a subject that preoccupies the petty bourgeois layers represented by QS. As thousands of workers, francophone and anglophone, immigrant and native-born, lose their jobs, as governments prepare drastic new cuts in public spending, as great-power tensions rise and democratic rights are attacked, QS prefers to worry about the amount of English being spoken in top corporate positions.

Quebec workers should recognize Quebec Solidaire for what it is—an aspiring party of the Quebec establishment that seeks to revive the perspective of an independent capitalist Quebec, prop up the trade union bureaucracy, and divide workers in Quebec from the developing struggles of workers across Canada and around the world.

To counter the big business assault on jobs and all their social conquests, Quebec workers must detach themselves from all factions of the Quebec and Canadian bourgeoisie, both the supporters of Canadian federalism and the promoters of Quebec sovereignty. In conjunction with workers across North America and around the world, they must strive to develop an independent political movement for the socialist reorganization of socio-economic life. That is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in Canada and its sister parties around the world.



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