

Quebec's Alliance Sociale: An instrument for defending the union bureaucracy's privileges

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Quebec's principal labor federations, several independent unions, and the province's two largest university and CEGEP student associations announced the formation of the Alliance Sociale (Social Alliance) late last year. The new coalition's purported *raison d'être* is to serve as a "counterweight" to the growing "discourse of the right."

Characterized by the media as an instrument for waging "war on the right," the Alliance Sociale's real purpose is to defend the interests and privileged position of the labor bureaucracy—the caste of high-paid functionaries who control the unions and their apparatuses—under conditions of rapidly intensifying class struggle.

The Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), Confederation of National Trade Unions, Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (CSQ) and the other union organizations affiliated to the Alliance Sociale make certain criticisms of Quebec's current Liberal government, which is led by ex-federal Conservative cabinet minister Jean Charest. But the "right" that they are targeting is not the Liberal Party nor the Parti Québécois—the two big business parties that have alternated as the provincial government since 1970 and that have implemented brutal social spending cuts so that the taxes of business and the well-to-do can be reduced.

Above all, the Alliance is not an instrument for mobilizing the working class as an independent political force in defence of its rights and interests. At this point, the Alliance is not even proposing to mount a campaign of protest demonstrations, let alone to organize strikes and other forms of industrial action. Rather, through the Alliance, the unions are appealing, in the most immediate and direct sense, to the big business Liberal and PQ politicians, to spurn the increasingly strident calls from sections of Quebec big business and the press for the marginalization of the union officialdom, which for decades has played a major role in the formulation and implementation of the policies of the Quebec bourgeoisie.

The Alliance Sociale is directed at countering the influence of a section of the Quebec elite that champions "free market" neoliberalism and takes inspiration from the US Republican Party, if not its most rightwing faction, the so-called Tea Party movement. This "new right" includes the nationalist-populist Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), Quebecor boss Pierre-Karl Péladeau and his *Journal de Montréal* and other tabloids, the recently-created Réseau-Liberté Québec (Quebec Freedom Network), the ex-Conservative Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier, and the Montreal Economic Institute and its head, the ex-president of the Conseil du patronat du Québec (the Quebec Employers Council), Michel Kelly-Gagnon.

These rightwingers denounce unions in a manner not seen since Maurice Duplessis and his Union Nationale regime. Quebec's premier for all but four years from 1936 though 1959, Duplessis adopted a battery of anti-union laws, repeatedly mobilized the Quebec Provincial Police in support of scabbing and strikebreaking, and effectively illegalized the Communist Party.

In attacking the unions, the likes of Péladeau, ex-ADQ politician and

Réseau-Liberté Québec enthusiast Éric Caire and *Journal de Montréal* columnist Richard Martineau have two targets in their sites. However some of them are so blinded by their hostility to anything that is suggestive or historically associated with working-class collective action, that they don't distinguish them.

Their principal target, by far, is what remains of the Welfare State programs that the working class wrested from the bourgeoisie during the 1960s and 1970s—a period of militant trade union struggles, which often went beyond or threatened to go beyond the official trade union structures.

The neoliberal and populist right also objects to the system of institutionalized corporatist collaboration between big business, the government and the trade unions that was developed in Quebec, particularly under the first PQ government of René Lévesque, and subsequently came to be viewed as an essential element of the "Quebec model" of economic development and "national consensus" politics.

This system has long served the bourgeoisie well, incorporating the unions ever more directly in imposing capitalist austerity and restructuring on the working class. One has only to recall the unions' role in assisting the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard in imposing massive cuts in social spending, eliminating tens of thousands of public sector jobs, and slashing welfare, in the name of a "zero deficit."

But under conditions of ever more ferocious capitalist competition, sections of the bourgeoisie increasingly resent the various crumbs that fall to the union officialdom under Quebec's system of institutionalized tripartite collaboration. A particular sore point are the union controlled investment funds—the FTQ's Solidarity Fund and the CSN's Fondation, which benefit from lavish government tax concessions not available to other mutual funds and thereby provide the union bureaucracy with a valuable source of enrichment.

The union officialdom is increasingly anxious—anxious that the intensifying class struggle is forcing it ever more openly to play the role of capitalist enforcers and anxious that the most rightwing sections of capital are threatening some of their privileges.

The union bureaucracy's fears of political marginalization were heightened by the Parti Québécois leadership's decision earlier this year to abolish the Syndicalistes et Progressistes pour un Québec Libre (Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec) as a political club within the PQ, so as to underscore the PQ's "independence" from the unions. Six years before, a group of prominent union officials had founded the SPQ Libre with the support of then PQ leader Bernard Landry, with the aim of strengthening the bureaucracy's ties with PQ in the aftermath of the 2003 election. In that election, working class voters had deserted the PQ en masse in anger over the Landry-Bouchard PQ government's dismantling of public services and other rightwing measures.

That the dissolution of the SPQ Libre was ordered by the current PQ leader, Pauline Marois, who has close ties to the unions—her husband, Claude Blanchet, was for many years the CEO of the FTQ's Solidarity

Fund—served only to increase the union bureaucracy’s alarm.

The union bureaucrats also fear that their rightwing opponents will exploit the scandal surrounding political kickbacks, mafia infiltration, and inflated-bids in the construction industry—a scandal in which the unions are implicated—to press forward with their campaign to strip the union officialdom of its tripartite posts and political influence.

With its Alliance Sociale, the union bureaucracy is seeking to justify its privileges to the Quebec elite, by proving that it remains a useful and pliant partner. In opposing Quebec’s neoliberal and populist right, the unions are offering their collaboration to the provincial Liberal government and PQ in making Quebec more “competitive” and are seeking to remind them of the many occasions over the last three decades in which the unions upheld “social peace.” That is the many occasions on which they isolated and smothered militant worker mobilizations against the big business policies of PQ and Liberal governments alike. Thus in 1982, the province’s public school teachers were left to defy the PQ’s wage-cutting decrees alone, and in 1999 when the nurses rebelled against the Bouchard PQ government’s budget cuts, defying draconian anti-strike legislation, the unions refused to take any action in their support. Similarly, in 2003-4 the unions torpedoed the movement for a general strike against the Charest Liberal government’s initial volley of rightwing measures.

By incorporating Quebec’s largest student associations in their Alliance Sociale, the unions are seeking to position themselves to politically control and contain the opposition to the Charest government’s plans to rapidly raise university tuition fees. The union bureaucracy fears that a militant student upsurge could serve catalyst for a major movement of the working class and hope to win credit with Charest by channeling any student mobilization into politically harmless channels.

Five years ago, it must be remembered, the union federations worked with the Liberal government to bring an end to the longest student strike in Quebec history. Henri Massé, the then FTQ president, declared, “It’s clear that the student associations, if they want to negotiate, must make compromises. One can’t solve matters like this without compromises.”

The Alliance Sociale’s founding statement, “Another Quebec is Possible,” leaves no doubt that this ostensible coalition of the left unconditionally defends capitalism and the place of the union bureaucracy in the existing social-political order. The statement entirely accepts the framework of the current ruling class debate: Quebec’s budget must be balanced through a combination of tax and fee hikes and social spending cuts that in no way impinge on, let alone challenge, the economic stranglehold of big business and the rich; Quebec’s economy must be made more competitive, i.e. more profitable for the owners of capital

The statement begins by criticizing “the dominant thinking that repeats untiringly mantras promoting the disengagement of the state, the privatization of public services, laissez-faire economics and everything for the market.”

This is pure demagoguery. Last spring, when Quebec’s Liberal government introduced a budget that slashed social spending, hiked consumption taxes and service-fees, and introduced a mechanism to shrink the public service through attrition, the unions limited their opposition to a press conference. Indeed, they immediately proclaimed that the government’s austerity budget, which outlined plans for years of real-dollar spending cuts, constituted no impediment to rapidly concluding new collective agreements for more than half a million public sector workers. “I wouldn’t say the budget closes the door to negotiations,” declared CSN President Claudette Charbonneau. “That would be false. All the space [for a settlement] is there.”

The unions soon abandoned their initial demand of an 11.25 percent wage increase over three years, pressing upon their members contracts

that provide for a 6 percent wage increase over 5 years, with the opportunity for a larger increase if Quebec’s GNP expands at a rate faster than it has at any time over the last 40 years.

The union leaders have hailed this settlement, which will result in a decline in workers real wages and opens the door to job cuts, as “historic.” “Historic because we succeeded in settling in six months, because there was no special law [imposing contracts by government fiat] and because, in the future, employees of the state will benefit from economic growth,” declared Michal Arsenault, the president of the FTQ, Quebec’s largest labor federation.

The Alliance Sociale does not demand that the government cease its spending cuts and other austerity measures. It merely counsels, “For restoring a balanced budget, we should envisage a longer time-frame.”

It then proposes, in the name of equity, that the Quebec government introduce a fourth tax bracket of 28 percent on incomes above \$127,000. Currently, the highest tax bracket in Quebec is 24 percent and it is levied on all taxable income over \$76,700. The unions well know there is little chance that this measure—which is so radical it actually conforms with the tax policy of Canada’s rightwing Harper Conservative government—will be adopted. The PQ, no less than the Liberals, has long proclaimed cutting taxes on corporations and the rich a cardinal principal.

The unions’ true response to the capitalist crisis comes later in their “Another Quebec” statement. After emphasizing that the unions are “conscious of the difficulties that confront Quebec society,” the statement advocates an intensification of tripartite union-business-government collaboration. So as to encourage “Quebec know-how” and “the vitality of our enterprises,” it is necessary, the statement says to have “social dialogue” and privilege “workers’ true contribution to the organization of work and business innovation.”

By giving the unions a greater place in workplace organization and innovation—that is in boosting productivity through speed-up and changes in work rules—the labor bureaucrats hope to demonstrate to big business and government that they are their best partners.

The Quebec unions have a long history of invoking the threat from the right as an argument for subordinating the working class to the politics of the bourgeoisie. For many years, the unions prevailed on workers to support the PQ to oppose the Liberals. More recently, they have encouraged support for the Liberals as the “lesser evil” to the rightwing populist ADQ.

The reality is the bourgeoisie as a whole in Quebec, as across Canada, has stampeded to the right. Whatever their tactical disagreements, Charest, Marois, and the neoliberal and populist right all agree that the working class must pay for the capitalist crisis.

Workers in Quebec must break politically and organizationally from the pro-capitalist unions and in conjunction with workers across Canada develop a working class counter-offensive against the big business assault on jobs, wages, public services and workers’ rights. Such a movement would encourage strikes and other forms of working class resistance. But such action will have an enduring impact only if it is linked to the struggle for a workers’ government committed to radically reorganizing economic life so as to place social needs before profit.



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