

# Québec Solidaire courts big business PQ

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One of the two co-leaders of Québec Solidaire declared last weekend that the ostensibly left wing party would welcome the opportunity to “work with,” i.e. sustain in office, a minority government led by the big business Parti Québécois.

Françoise David made the remark while speaking before a meeting of the Quebec Federation of University Students (FEUQ), a student group that is close to both the PQ and the trade union bureaucracy.

David’s declaration is only the latest step QS has taken to demonstrate its readiness to ally with the PQ against the provincial Liberal Government of Jean Charest and to participate in a pro-Quebec independence “common front” in which the PQ would be the dominant force.

Just before Charest dropped the writ for the September 4 Quebec election, Québec Solidaire concluded a non-aggression pact with Option Nationale (ON), a third, recently-formed *indépendantiste* party.

Under this pact, Québec Solidaire is not standing a candidate in the riding of Nicolet-Bécancour where Option Nationale chief Jean-Martin Aussant is running for re-election. In return, Option Nationale has chosen not to contest the Montreal riding of Gouin, where Françoise David is standing for election.

In announcing the QS-ON pact, Françoise David declared that there are “enormous similarities” between the two parties. “The Option Nationale program,” said David “is progressive, so too is ours.”

Formed last year, shortly after Aussant broke away from the PQ, Option Nationale shares many, if not most, elements of the PQ’s right-wing nationalist program. Aussant’s principal criticism of the PQ is that its leadership has not fought hard enough for Quebec’s secession from the Canadian federal state, preferring, apart from in the immediate run-up to the 1980 and 1995 referendums, to promote itself as the “best managers” of Quebec’s provincial government.

A former PQ finance critic who frequently attacked the Charest Liberals for excessive spending, Aussant was an investment banker before joining the PQ frontbench.

Among other high-level posts, he served as Morgan Stanley Capital International’s London vice president from 2003 to 2005.

In marked contrast with David’s quasi-endorsement of the ON, Aussant was at pains to distance himself from the QS program. “Our platforms have similar things,” he told the press conference at which the non-aggression agreement was announced. “But there still are reasons why both parties exist.” In other words, while QS dresses up its capitalist pro-independence program with left-sounding phrases, Option Nationale positions itself more openly on the right and proclaims in traditional conservative fashion that it aims to create “a Quebec economy, which enriches the Québécois”.

Electurally speaking, QS has little to gain from a pact with Option Nationale. ON is little more than a personal platform for Aussant and will be lucky to win more than one or two percent of the popular vote on September 4.

But by forming an alliance with ON, Québec Solidaire is sending a clear signal to the Parti Québécois that its recent call for a coalition of “sovereignist” (pro-Quebec independence) parties was meant in earnest.

In June, QS issued a proposal for a sovereignist electoral alliance that was to consist of it, the Parti Québécois, Option Nationale and several MNAs (Members of the National Assembly) who had quit the PQ in June 2011 to sit as independents.

While QS makes various criticisms of the PQ, it insists on distinguishing the PQ, the Quebec’s elite’s alternate party of government for the past four decades, from the “federalist right” or “neoliberal right,”—whom it qualifies as Charest’s Liberals and the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), a newly-minted big business party led by the millionaire businessman and ex-PQ cabinet minister François Legault.

According to the QS and much of the pseudo-radical left that is in its orbit, the priority must be to defeat the federalist Liberals and this necessitates allying with the purported “lesser-evil,” the PQ—a party which carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history when

it last held office.

To date the PQ has refused such overtures because it calculates any association with the “radical” QS will undermine its efforts to convince the bourgeoisie that the PQ is the best instrument for imposing capitalist austerity.

Nonetheless, the QS’s courting of the PQ provides the latter with a significant political boost. It helps refurbish the PQ’s threadbare “left” credentials, making it better able to politically and electorally exploit the opposition among working people to the Liberal government’s austerity program of social spending cuts and university tuition fee, electricity rate, and regressive tax hikes

The timing of QS’s attempt to contract an electoral alliance with the PQ is particularly significant, coming as it does after the PQ has been buffeted by crisis and the entire political establishment has been shaken by the student strike and the popular opposition to the Liberals’ attempt to break the strike through their draconian Bill 78.

The PQ has been in severe crisis for most of the past decade, as attested by its loss of Official Opposition status in the 2007-8 minority National Assembly and the monumental defeat suffered by its sister party, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), in the 2011 federal election. Despite the unpopularity of the Charest government during most of the nine years it has held office, the PQ has been unable to benefit electorally.

In recent months, the PQ has been able to gain some traction by posing as an opponent of the Liberals’ drive to institute the “user-pay principle” for public services, including the government’s plan to hike university tuition fees by 82 percent over the next seven years. QS has facilitated the PQ’s attempt to pose as an ally of the students, jointly mounting a press conference with the PQ and the more moderate PQ-aligned student associations on March 22.

Even more significantly, QS’s call for a PQ-led “sovereignist” electoral alliance was made in June, that is at the very moment when the trade unions were mounting a vigorous campaign to force an end to the student strike and seeking to divert the students behind a drive to replace the Liberals with the PQ in the coming elections.

Through its electoralist orientation, promotion of the PQ, touting of the unions as genuine worker organizations, and refusal to call for systematic defiance of Bill 78, QS has been an accomplice in the ruling class campaign to suppress the student strike.

QS attached minimal conditions to its June 20 call for an anti-Liberal sovereignist “common front”—six policy

commitments that, as it itself noted, are “almost all ... already included in the programs of the parties involved in the call.”

Indeed, the PQ had previously publicly committed itself to five of QS’s six “conditions.” These are repeal of Bill 78; the abolition of the Liberals’ schedule of university tuition fee increases; withdrawal of the per-head health care tax; a new tax bracket for the richest Quebecers; and a review of the Mining Act with a view to increasing government royalties.

The last of QS’s “conditions” was a commitment to giving “an important place” to proportional representation” in determining the composition of the National Assembly.

Although more democratic than the current “first past the post” system, the introduction of proportional representation would in no way challenge the political dominance of big business and its parties over the working class.

If QS, which currently has just one member in Quebec’s National Assembly, attaches such importance to proportional representation, it is because it would enable it to garner more political influence and further integrate itself into the political establishment, including through vote-trading, alliances and coalition governments.

QS’s relationship to the PQ underscores that it is nothing more than the left flank of Quebec’s ruling elite. Their programs promote similar reactionary ideas associated with the project of creating a capitalist *République du Québec*: most importantly that workers share more in common with the French-speaking ruling elite than with their class brothers and sisters across the country; and that the working class must subordinate its interests to the drive of sections of that elite to reshuffle the borders of the capitalist nation-state system in North America so as to give them greater power and influence.



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