

Quebec's major parties advance rival right-wing agendas

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During the campaign for the September 4 Quebec election, the province's major parties have traded accusations of corruption, promoted a slew of right-wing policy planks, and engaged in mutual finger-pointing as to who is responsible for the perilous state of the province's public health care system.

The governing Liberals have run an extreme right-wing campaign, in which they have held up their imposition of an 82 percent increase in university tuition fees and passing of draconian legislation to criminalize the Quebec student strike as proof of their readiness to take "tough," "unpopular" decisions.

Premier Jean Charest has repeatedly attacked Pauline Marois, the leader of the Official Opposition Parti Québécois (PQ), for capitulating to the "street," a reference to the PQ's claims to have supported the student strike

Charest has denounced the Liberals' other major rival, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), for making "irresponsible" promises of tax cuts and increased education spending that would purportedly jeopardize a balanced budget. In making this attack, Charest has openly appealed to former supporters of the right-wing populist Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ) to recognize that their true home is the Liberal party. (In what was officially described as a merger, the CAQ took over the ADQ earlier this year.)

The Liberals' right-wing appeals appear to have gained little public traction. A spate of opinion polls indicate that after nine years in office the Liberals will win barely a quarter of the popular vote next Tuesday and be reduced, for the first time ever, to third-party status in the National Assembly.

In recent years, the PQ, long the Quebec bourgeoisie's alternate party of government, has repeatedly attacked the Liberals from the right, that is

for not reducing government spending fast enough and reputedly favoring tax increases over social spending cuts in their drive to balance the province's budget. However, over the past eight months, the PQ has made a small—and manifestly cynical—feint left on socio-economic issues in the hopes of tapping into the massive popular opposition to the Quebec Liberal and federal Conservative governments' austerity policies.

The PQ is claiming that if it forms the government it will cancel the Liberals' \$200 per adult health care charge, scrap a Liberal plan to raise electricity rates well above generation-cost increases, and limit university tuition fee hikes to the rise in inflation. These measures and a handful of other promises, such as a modest increase in daycare spaces, are to be paid for through higher mine royalties and a small increase in the tax rate on high-income earners. The latter measure would only partially reverse the cuts in the taxation rates on the rich made by Liberal and PQ government alike over the last 12 years.

While seeking to paint the election as a stark choice between a "progressive" PQ and "two right-wing parties," Marois has been at pains to reassure big business that by enlisting the support of its trade unions allies the PQ can more effectively slash public services and promote privatization than its political rivals.

At the beginning of the election campaign, Marois urged students to end their strike and obey Bill 78 (Law 12). On Monday she reiterated that call after students at Montreal's two main French-language universities staged protests in defiance of Law 12 provisions that make it illegal to protest within 50 meters of a university or CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) building. In urging students to submit to Law 12, Marois emphatically rejected students' demand tuition fees be abolished and education recognized as a

social right.

Socio-economic issues have not been the focal point of the PQ campaign. Rather it has emphasized Liberal corruption and Quebec nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism.

With the most powerful sections of big business opposed to reopening the question of Quebec's constitutional status under conditions of global economic crisis, the pro-independence PQ is emphasizing a series of anti-democratic measures aimed at ensuring the "primacy" of "Quebec values" and the French language.

The PQ is vowing to deny newcomers to Quebec certain political rights, including the right to stand as candidates in provincial and municipal elections, if they do not prove French-language proficiency after three years' residence. It is also pledging to introduce a hypocritical "secular charter" under which public sector workers would be barred from wearing religious symbols, but "discreet" Christian crosses would be exempt. Furthermore, in the name of upholding Quebec's "cultural heritage," the PQ insists that the crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly remain.

The PQ came into violent conflict with the working class on the two previous occasions it held power. In 1983, it threatened to fire teachers en masse after they struck in defiance of the Lévesque government's wage-cutting public sector contract-decrees. In 1999 it used a Bill 78-type law to break a strike by nurses, who had rebelled against the impact of public sector job cuts on their workload and patient care. Marois served as a leading cabinet minister in both these governments.

The unions and the ostensibly leftwing Québec Solidaire (QS) are providing the PQ with pivotal support in repositioning itself to electorally exploit and politically emasculate the popular opposition to the Charest Liberal government.

While not formally endorsing the PQ, the unions and their student association allies, FECQ and FEUQ, are campaigning for the defeat of the Liberals and CAQ, in other words for a PQ or PQ-led government.

In June, Québec Solidaire called for the formation of a PQ-led alliance of "sovereignist"—i.e. pro-Quebec independence—parties to defeat the Liberals. With the PQ leading, albeit only narrowly, in the opinion polls, QS spokespersons are gushing over the possibility their party could be called upon to prop up a minority PQ

government. Speaking on the weekend, Francois Saillant, a high-profile QS candidate in the Montreal working-class riding of Rosemont, declared "For me that is the ideal scenario."

Led by Francois Legault, a multi-millionaire businessman and former PQ cabinet minister, the CAQ has been heavily promoted by the corporate media since Legault first began exploring the possibility of creating a party that would "put aside the federalist-sovereignist dispute" so as to concentrate on making socio-economic "change."

Legault has made the axis of the CAQ campaign's denunciations of the old-line parties as corrupt and subservient to "special interests." Speaking in last week's leaders' debates, he ruled out supporting either the Liberals or PQ in the event no party wins a majority in the National Assembly. The Liberals, said Legault, have "dirty hands" while the PQ has "hands tied to the unions."

There is much evidence to suggest that the entire Quebec political establishment—of which Legault has been a part for close to 15 years—has long presided over a system of bid-rigging and political kickbacks in the construction industry.

But Legault is very much using the corruption issue as did Harper and his Conservatives in the 2006 federal election, that is as a means to divert attention from a right-wing agenda that is inimical to the interests of working people. At the same time, so as to rally big business support, the CAQ has focused on a select series of right-wing policy planks. These include "experimenting" with health care privatization, gutting teacher seniority rights, eliminating 4,000 Hydro-Quebec jobs, giving municipalities the right to lock out their employees, and making it more difficult for unions to obtain accreditation.



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