

Parti Québécois to deliver austerity budget

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16 November 2012

Quebec's two-month-old Parti Québécois government will deliver an austerity budget next Tuesday (November 20).

Traditionally Quebec budgets are tabled in the spring, but Premier Pauline Marois has said urgent action must be taken now so as to avoid wrenching cuts to public services in the future.

Already the government has ordered the Health Ministry to slash spending by \$400 million just in the remainder of the current fiscal year, which ends March 31, 2013. The government claims that this cut will not impact on services, but this is manifestly untrue. According to the government's own directive, \$50 million in "savings" is to come from the postponing or canceling of surgical operations.

Other ministries have or will soon receive similar directives, as the PQ seeks to fill what it claims is an unanticipated \$1.5 billion hole in the budget that the previous Liberal government drafted for the 2012-13 fiscal year.

Big business has pressed for the PQ to introduce a fall budget, saying it needs a clear demonstration of the government's intentions.

When the PQ last formed the government it carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history—a fact Marois has repeatedly trumpeted as proof that her party is fiscally responsible and pro-business. But the business elite has taken exception to a number of populist promises the PQ made in a bid to staunch the hemorrhaging of its traditional working-class electoral support and has been mounting a concerted campaign to force the PQ to shelve or modify them.

Ceding to pressure from big-business lobby groups and the corporate media, the PQ abandoned, within weeks of taking the reins of power, plans to eliminate a controversial two hundred dollar per adult healthcare head tax and to increase taxes on capital gains and dividends.

Seeking to placate business, Marois and her finance minister have repeatedly vowed that they will make good on the previous Liberal government's pledge to eliminate the annual provincial budget deficit by the 2014-15 fiscal year and do so despite a sharp fall in the economic growth rate. They have also been at pains to declare that "growing the economy"—a euphemism for deregulation, cutting corporate taxes, and other pro-business measures—is their first priority.

During last summer's election campaign, the PQ promised to limit the growth in program spending to slightly more than 2 percent per annum for the next five years. Due to the impact of inflation and population growth, this cap would quickly translate into a sharp drop in per capita spending and steep program cuts. But the government is signaling that it may constrict spending even more sharply.

According to an article in Wednesday's *La Presse*, next week's budget will cancel or delay numerous infrastructure projects.

While in opposition, the PQ repeatedly criticized the Liberals from the right, accusing them of irresponsibly increasing government spending. However, in the run-up to the September 4 election, Marois cynically affected a calibrated "left" turn aimed at appealing to popular anger over the Liberals' drive to impose the reactionary "user pay" principle for public services.

On taking office the PQ made a show of canceling the Liberal's scheme to increase university tuition fees by 82 percent over seven years and rescinded the blanket restrictions on demonstrations contained in the draconian legislation the Liberals adopted last May in a bid to break the then three-month-old student strike.

The trade unions and the student associations, including CLASSE, the student group that led the student walkout, immediately hailed these actions, claiming that they constituted a victory for the student strike.

In reality the strike was suppressed. The unions, longtime allies of the PQ, systematically isolated the students, vehemently opposing any and all calls for worker action in support of the striking students or any challenge to the Liberals' austerity agenda. They and the student associations most directly under their influence—FEUQ (the Quebec Federation of University Students) and FECQ (the Quebec Federation of College Students)—openly campaigned for the students to end their strike and rally behind the PQ. This perspective was exemplified by the slogan adopted by the Quebec Federation of Labour, Quebec's largest union federation: "After the streets, to the ballot box."

CLASSE meanwhile abandoned its timid calls for a broader protest movement, no sooner than did the union bureaucrats' voice their opposition. Moreover, it gave backhand support to the PQ, by claiming that the defeat of Jean Charest's Liberal government would advance the students' cause.

Québec Solidaire (QS), the pro-Quebec independence party that is promoted by the pseudo-left, also played a major role in the strike's suppression and in the promotion of illusions in the PQ. In June, QS offered to enter into an electoral pact with the PQ and just days before the election its co-leaders, Francoise David and Amir Khadir, gave an interview in which they guaranteed that if QS held the "balance of power" in a minority parliament, it would support a PQ government for at least a year—thereby giving this big-business party a veritable blank check.

The Quebec elite's alternate party of government for the past four decades, the ostensibly "left" PQ has repeatedly been used by the bourgeoisie to emasculate oppositional movements and to create "national consensus" for the implementation of rightwing measures.

Having worked to defuse the political crisis precipitated by the student strike, the PQ is now pivoting to directly implementing the bourgeoisie's austerity agenda.

This includes developing a means whereby students will be forced to pay more for their education. Curtly dismissing students' demand for the abolition of tuition fees, PQ Premier Marois has said her government will call for the inflation indexing of fees at a "summit" meeting on university finances and funding to be held in February.

According to press reports, the government is also considering financing the interim freeze in university fee hikes it imposed, pending the outcome of its education summit, by eliminating the provincial tuition tax credit—that is, by hiking taxes on students and their parents.

The government is also preparing legislation—patterned after the provincial labour code—to "guarantee" students' right to strike. In reality such legislation would, like the labour code, make all strikes illegal except those that were authorized through an elaborate government-designed process and threaten any student association that failed to follow and enforce this process with severe penalties.



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