

Quebec's Option Nationale: An aspiring party of big business

Richard Dufour
30 March 2013

At its first full convention, held earlier this month, Option Nationale—a new party formed by a split-off from the big business Parti Québécois—reached out to what it called “right-wing” Quebec sovereignists and paraded its support for capitalism and indifference to poverty.

The Option Nationale (ON) convention also opened the door to a possible merger with the PQ, which, since returning to power last September, has imposed steep cuts in social spending, including punitive cuts to social assistance benefits, and offered its support for the French imperialist intervention in Mali.

Québec Solidaire (QS), an ostensibly “left” party promoted by the Pabloites, has repeatedly described Option Nationale as a “natural ally.” It forged a limited “non-aggression pact” with it in last September’s provincial election and recently voted to work for an ON-QS merger.

But the ON convention spurned the QS’s overtures and publicly eschewed identification with the “left,” declaring that its aim is to build a party in which “right-wing” sovereignists will be fully at home.

This was hardly surprising. ON is the political vehicle of Michel Aussant, a former investment banker and ex-PQ legislator, and it is being mentored by Jacques Parizeau, the scion of one of Quebec’s wealthiest families and a former PQ Premier of Quebec.

Aussant set the tone for the convention, declaring that “capitalism, when contained by a proper legal and regulatory framework, is the best system.”

The convention re-elected him as party leader by acclamation and voted to grant him an annual salary of \$86,000. To the few delegates who urged debate on the size of the leader’s salary, Aussant replied, “For the hours I put into this party this is not far from the minimum wage.”

Aussant’s flippant dismissal of the plight of the working poor was in keeping with the convention’s rejection of a proposal to make the fight against poverty a party priority.

The convention promoted Option Nationale as Quebec’s only truly sovereignist party. The PQ, it asserted, is preoccupied with gaining provincial office and QS too focused on promoting its “social project” and to the determinant of uniting all sovereignist forces.

For decades and through a series of parties—including the PQ and its chief provincial rival, the Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ)—the Quebec bourgeoisie has pressed for greater powers for the Quebec state, so as to strengthen its hand against its big business rivals and its domination and political control over the working class.

The PQ has held two sovereignty referendums, but has always left open the door to a possible new bargain, including a continued economic union, with the rest of Canada. Since its narrow loss in the 1995 referendum, the PQ has repeatedly been torn by factional warfare. Many of the party’s petty bourgeois cadre have complained that the leadership is soft-peddling independence and demanded the PQ introduce further chauvinist measures to promote French as Quebec’s sole official and “public language” and ensure that immigrants and religious minorities adhere to “Quebec values.”

For decades the unions have worked to harness the working class to the PQ, promoting it and the Quebec *indépendantiste* movement as “progressive,” while systematically isolating the struggles of Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and around the world.

But long historical experience—notably of PQ governments imposing sweeping austerity measures and using savage anti-strike laws—has demonstrated that

the PQ is no less an implacable defender of big business and enemy of the working class than the Liberals and enormously undercuts the PQ's electoral support among working people.

Option Nationale was formed in response to the crisis that wracked the PQ following the May 2011 federal election. In that election, its sister party, the Bloc Québécois, was almost wiped off the political map as Quebecers turned en masse to the social-democratic NDP, a party hitherto little-known in Quebec, so as to demonstrate their opposition to the traditional political establishment, federalist and sovereignist alike.

With the PQ hit by a raft of defections, Aussant set up the ON with the aim of salvaging the Quebec bourgeoisie's sovereignist option, if not the PQ itself.

Aussant told this month's convention that he is confident that one day "people will say that a sovereignist vote is a vote for Option Nationale." At the same time, he left the door open to his followers eventually integrating into the PQ ranks, declaring, "If a party is as resolutely sovereignist as Option Nationale we will collaborate, or even merge with that party so as to advance the cause." In subsequent discussion with reporters, he suggested that his and ON's return to the PQ are unlikely under its current leader, Premier Pauline Marois, thereby underlining that were the PQ to choose a new leader committed to more aggressively promoting Quebec independence a merger might well result.

The guest of honor at the ON convention was none other than the 82 year-old Jacques Parizeau. The long time idol of the PQ's "hardline" faction, Parizeau was a leading cabinet minister in the PQ government of the early 1980s that imposed sweeping concessions on public sector workers by government decree and threatened to fire teachers en masse. As PQ Premier from September 1994 to January 1996, Parizeau pushed through hospital closures and other austerity measures, initiating the PQ's campaign for a "zero deficit" that under his successor, Lucien Bouchard, became the mechanism for imposing the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history.

In a warmly-applauded speech, Parizeau reaffirmed his loyalty to the PQ, a party to which he said he is "attached with every fiber of my body," while criticizing its lukewarm promotion of Quebec sovereignty. He welcomed Option Nationale's

emergence as "leaven in the dough."

In a significant passage, the former PQ premier elaborated on this theme. "If your enthusiasm gradually spreads throughout the sovereignty circles," said Parizeau, "then an agreement between all sovereignists becomes possible."

Parizeau is a highly conscious representative of the Quebec ruling class, fighting determinedly to reverse the decline in support for the PQ and its proposal for a capitalist République du Québec. As such, he welcomes the efforts made in this direction by Option Nationale. But he fears that this is not enough, coming from a party that openly displays its admiration for capitalism and its indifference to pressing social problems such as poverty and low wages.

In the run-up to the 1995 sovereignty referendum Parizeau forged a PQ-led "rainbow coalition" in favor of sovereignty that included the right wing populist ADQ (predecessor of the current CAQ), the Quebec unions, and the pseudo-left. Parizeau is seeking a means to create a similar broad coalition, in particular one that includes the unions and the middle class forces that are in and around Québec Solidaire. Parizeau sees Option Nationale as a bridge to draw these layers more closely into the PQ's orbit.

Québec Solidaire's courtship of such an openly right wing party as Option Nationale attests to its own character as an aspiring bourgeois party, whose aim is to pressure and manoeuvre with the traditional parties of big business. Indeed, by proclaiming its readiness to ally and merge with ON, QS seeks to send a message to the PQ that it is open to co-operation with it as well. Indeed, the QS leadership meeting last December that voted to pursue a merger with ON also voted to consider a "tactical", i.e. electoral, alliance with the PQ at the QS congress to be held in early May.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact