

Quebec unions mount nationalist campaign against savage cuts to jobless benefits

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Tens of thousands of workers from New Brunswick and all parts of Quebec joined a mass protest in Montreal last Saturday to oppose the federal Conservative government's dismantling of Employment Insurance.

The demonstration was yet another sign of the mass opposition in the working class across Canada to changes to EI introduced in the 2012 federal budget. Under these changes, seasonal workers and other repeat EI claimants will have their benefits slashed. Moreover, they and all EI recipients can and are being forced to accept cheap labor jobs outside their area of expertise.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) intervened at the demonstration, distributing hundreds of copies of a statement entitled: "Build rank-and-file committees of struggle independent from the unions to mobilize the working class against Harper and Marois."

Below we publish a translation of an article that first appeared in French on the WSWs last month that exposes the politics of the union-led Coalition québécoise contre la réforme de l'assurance-emploi (Quebec Coalition against Employment Insurance Reform), which organized last Saturday's rally with the aim of politically derailing the opposition to the EI cuts.

The trade union-led *Coalition québécoise contre la réforme de l'assurance-emploi* (Quebec Coalition against Employment Insurance Reform) has promised to mount a "massive mobilization" in response to the federal Conservative government's brutal cuts in jobless benefits and efforts to press-gang the unemployed into cheap-labour jobs.

But the Coalition bears no resemblance to a genuine working-class challenge to the draconian cuts Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservatives are making to the worker co-financed Employment Insurance program. Rather, it is another example of the empty oppositional pose the unions have adopted for decades, the better to contain and suppress the working class and impose the diktats of big business.

Time after time, the unions have intervened to thwart militant struggles in defence of jobs and public services. One can cite, for instance, their isolation of the 1999 Quebec nurses' strike, a struggle that had erupted in opposition to the sweeping budget cuts the unions had imposed in collaboration with the Parti Québécois (PQ) provincial government; their acceptance in 2005 of the Charest Liberal government's imposition, by government decree, of seven-year concessionary contracts on half a million Quebec public sector workers; or their torpedoing of the mass movement that erupted in May 2012 against Bill 78 and their campaign to divert the Quebec student strike behind the election of a PQ government that has now

imposed sweeping social spending cuts.

The unions have invited the *Union des Municipalités du Québec*, the mouthpiece for the province's big business municipal governments, to join their Coalition, and are promoting all manner of right-wing big business politicians as allies of the workers and unemployed in the fight against the Conservative cuts.

In keeping with this right-wing orientation, the unions are appealing to the Harper government to "rethink" its Employment Insurance (EI) cuts, completely ignoring what motivates this right-wing "reform"—namely, the class war that all levels of government are waging at big business's behest in order to make working people pay for the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Indeed, the unions have signaled that they are ready to accept Harper's cuts in jobless benefits, so long as the government carries out "real public consultation" and "impact studies."

The unions' campaign revolves around the claim that there is a "national consensus" in Quebec against the Conservatives' cuts, a consensus that transcends class divisions.

This nationalist fiction is aimed at dividing Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in English Canada and tying them to the political representatives of Quebec big business. It facilitates the efforts of Quebec Premier Pauline Marois and her PQ government to camouflage their own attacks on the working class behind hypocritical condemnations of the federal EI "reform."

The changes to EI—including more restrictive rules surrounding accessibility, the obligation to accept a job up to a 100 kilometers (62 miles) away and at 30 percent lower wages, and harassment by inspectors who are themselves under threat if they don't meet cost-reduction targets—have provoked substantial popular opposition. In Quebec and the Atlantic provinces—the regions of the country where seasonal work is especially common and which, therefore, will be particularly affected by the tightening of eligibility rules and new penalties for repeat EI claimants—there have been sizeable protests.

And across Canada, growing numbers of workers recognize that the attack on the unemployed is part of a broader Conservative-government and ruling-class agenda to drive down worker living standards and gut worker rights. In the past two years alone, the Harper government has raised the retirement age, slashed billions from federal spending, imposed a health-care funding formula designed to make Medicare unsustainable, and repeatedly illegalized strikes, then ordered government-appointed arbitrators to impose employer concession demands.

In the face of this all-out assault, the Coalition is mounting an anemic protest campaign. It largely consists of "unannounced visits"

to the offices of Conservative MPs, with the aim of showing them that their EI reform “does not make sense.”

The futility of appealing to these representatives of the ruling class has been quickly exposed. After a “visit” to the office of Industry Minister Christian Paradis in the Eastern Townships, a spokesperson for the coalition confessed: “We invited Minister Paradis to a meeting in order to explain the concerns of his voters, and I fear our invitation is a dead letter.”

The following comment appears on the coalition’s website: “Reflecting a true consensus in Quebec against the [EI] reform, all the organizations in the coalition are mobilized around the slogan: “In our place (*Chez nous*), it’s NO to the ravaging of EI.” This slogan—with its invocation of the Quebec nationalist trope *Chez nous*—is displayed in large letters on billboards in several Montreal neighbourhoods.

Its significance is highlighted in a remark Claude Faucher, vice-president of the *Centrale des syndicats démocratiques* (CSD-Congress of Democratic Trade Unions), made at the public launch of the *Coalition québécoise contre la réforme de l’assurance-emploi*: “The unemployed, workers, employers, trade unions, employer associations, municipal and provincial governments have all explained to the Harper government that its reform does not make sense.”

Contrary to Faucher’s statements and what is implied by the “*Chez nous*” in the coalition’s slogan, the true allies of the unemployed and workers of Quebec are not “employers,” their “associations,” or “municipal and provincial governments.”

These forces represent the class enemy. They work tirelessly to intensify the exploitation of workers in order to increase the profits of big business. The genuine allies of Québécois workers are working people across Canada, in the United States, and overseas, all of whom face the same ruling-class offensive against their wages, jobs, and social rights.

The nationalist perspective of the coalition is reflected in its make-up: trade unions, student associations and representatives of the petty bourgeoisie and weaker sections of big business, such as farmers, municipalities and chambers of commerce, that are threatened by Harper’s new measures. “We already anticipate a shortage of seasonal manpower in the regions (i.e. outside the Montreal and Quebec City metropolitan areas), a loss in productivity, and therefore a loss of income for businesses and this in a local economy that is already fragile,” says Joel Arseneau, mayor of Îles-de-la-Madeleine and a prominent coalition spokesman.

At an April 4 Coalition-sponsored protest in Montreal there were representatives of the Liberal Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the PQ. When in office, these three big-business parties have all imposed their own anti-working class measures, including cuts to public and social services. As a result of the cuts in EI carried out by the Chretien-Martin Liberal government, today less than 40 percent of Canada’s jobless can draw EI benefits.

The PQ, which returned to power last September with the unions’ support, delivered an “emergency” budget last fall that imposed the biggest social spending cuts since the PQ’s “zero-deficit” drive of the mid-1990s, while renegeing on promises to cancel the Liberals’ regressive per-head health care tax and increase taxes on the rich. In February the PQ imposed 3 percent per year university tuition hikes and soon after it announced cuts in social assistance (welfare)—cuts it has justified by invoking the same reactionary pretext as the Conservatives: that the government must ensure the jobless not become “dependent” on state support.

At the same time, the PQ government has established a “National

Commission to Review EI”—co-chaired by Gilles Duceppe, the former head of the PQ’s sister party, the Bloc Québécois—as a means of covering up its own right-wing measures and drumming up support for its program for a separate *République du Québec*. Not surprisingly, the unions, which for decades have politically subordinated the working class to the big-business PQ, and their Coalition have warmly welcomed this maneuver.

The PQ and its union allies have long experience in exploiting the reactionary measures adopted by Ottawa to turn attention away from the imposition of like policies by the Quebec government.

On returning to power in 1994, the PQ announced a program of hospital closures. Yet with the support of the unions and the pseudo-left, PQ Premier Jacques Parizeau and BQ head and ex-Conservative cabinet minister Lucien Bouchard appealed to Quebeckers to vote “yes” to Quebec independence in the 1995 referendum as the only way to block “the right wave” sweeping across North America.

This phrase referenced the massive social spending cuts, including to EI, imposed by the Chretien-Martin federal Liberal government and the “Common Sense Revolution” of Mike Harris’s Ontario Progressive Conservative government, which slashed social assistance benefits by 22 percent.

Yet in the year after the referendum, the PQ, now headed by Bouchard, put in place, with the help of the unions, its own program of drastic social spending cuts, including the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs in the health and education sectors.

Today, the joint assault on what remains of the welfare state is being carried out by a Conservative government at the federal level, an NDP-backed Liberal minority government in Ontario, and a PQ government in Quebec.

A genuine struggle against the Conservatives’ EI cuts requires the independent political mobilization of the working class across Canada in opposition to big business’s assault on jobs, wages and worker rights and the austerity agenda being implemented by its political representatives in Ottawa, Quebec City, Toronto. In opposition to the never-ending ruling class demands for cuts and sacrifices, workers should advance a socialist program—the fight for a workers’ government that would radically reorganize socioeconomic life so that the abundant human, technical and natural resources that are available could be mobilized to satisfy social needs, not enrich a tiny capitalist elite.



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