

Quebec unions silence criticism of PQ welfare cuts

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According to a report published last week in the Montreal daily *La Presse*, Quebec's unions forced the cancellation of a press conference that was to be held on the sidelines of a demonstration protesting against the federal Conservative government's cuts to Employment Insurance (EI), because it was intended to draw attention to the parallel cuts to social assistance (welfare) being made by the provincial Parti Québécois (PQ) government.

This act of political censorship underscores the unions' role in smothering opposition to the PQ government and its austerity program and in channeling, through their *Coalition québécoise contre la réforme de l'assurance-emploi* (Quebec Coalition Against the Employment Insurance Reform), the opposition to the Conservative government along rightwing nationalist lines.

The *La Presse* article reports that two days prior to an April 27 "national" (i.e. Quebec-wide) protest against the EI cuts, "all the presidents of (Quebec's) major trade union federations jointly signed a letter to Francois Saillant, coordinator of the *Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain* (FRAPRU— the Popular Action Front for Urban Redevelopment), to convince him to cancel a planned press conference that would have ... simultaneously denounced the (PQ's) cuts to social assistance and the federal reform of Employment Insurance."

Signed by the heads of the Quebec Federation of Labour, the Confederation of National Trade Unions, the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec*, and other major unions, the letter claimed that any criticism of the PQ government's cuts would "have the effect of diverting attention from the critical issues in the fight over Employment Insurance, and the strong, unified message that we must always deliver with one voice."

FRAPRU, whose coordinator Francois Saillant is a founding member and long-time leader of the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, meekly submitted to the unions' demands

In their letter to FRAPRU, the union presidents repeated the lie they have peddled for decades that the big business PQ is an ally of working people, especially in opposing the socially regressive actions of federal Liberal and Conservative governments. Stephen Harper's Conservatives, claimed the bureaucrats' letter, "could profit from this double-message"—of opposition to the Conservatives' EI and PQ's welfare cuts—"to argue that the *forces vives* (progressive forces) in Quebec are divided."

Contacted by *La Presse*, Quebec Federation of Labour President Michel Arsenault confirmed that the unions had censored criticism of the PQ at their April 27 demonstration, but claimed that he considers the PQ's welfare cuts "unacceptable."

Workers have heard decades of such double-talk.

The unions claimed to support last year's militant student strike against the Charest Liberal government's university tuition fee hikes. But, in the name of preserving "social peace," they joined with Premier Jean Charest at the beginning of last May to bully the student associations into accepting a sellout deal that would have seen the government's tuition fee hikes implemented in full. When students rejected this sellout and the government responded by imposing its authoritarian Bill 78, the unions again claimed to support the students and denounced Bill 78 as akin to the War Measures Act. However, they announced they would obey Bill 78 to the letter—including provisions that legally compelled them to order teachers and other university and CEGEP (college) personnel to act as strikebreakers—and worked systematically to isolate the

students and channel the opposition to the Charest government behind the PQ's election campaign.

Predictably the PQ, which had, with the unions' help, feigned support for the students, pivoted to the imposition of austerity no sooner did it win last September's provincial elections.

With only nominal opposition from the trade unions, Pauline Marois' PQ government has imposed austerity measures that go far beyond those attempted by Charest. These include: the steepest social spending cuts in 15 years, the maintenance of a regressive healthcare head tax, the elimination of thousands of jobs at Hydro Québec. And the aforementioned cuts to social assistance: cuts that the PQ has justified by invoking the same reactionary rationale as the Harpers' Conservatives have given for their EI cuts—the supposed need to end “dependency” on income support programs.

In February the unions participated in the sham education summit the PQ organized to provide political cover for their imposition of 3 percent annual university tuition fee hikes, welcoming it as a step forward.

The unions' muzzling of FRAPRU underscores the validity of the characterization that the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) made of the April 27 demonstration in a statement distributed at the protest. It began: “The demonstration organized today by the union-led *Coalition québécoise contre la réforme de l'assurance-emploi* has nothing to do with a genuine workers' mobilization against the anti-worker assault being jointly mounted by the Harper and Marois governments.”

The statement warned that rather than fighting for then independent political mobilization of the working class across Canada, the unions were promoting the fraud of a “national Quebec consensus” against the EI cuts, uniting the PQ, Liberals, NDP, municipal politicians and various big business lobby groups.

“This nationalist fiction,” said the statement, “serves to divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, and to politically subordinate them to the representatives of the capitalist class—whether they are in the municipalities, or opposition parties like the Bloc Québécois and NDP. Equally, it facilitates the efforts of the Marois PQ government to use the federal cuts to Employment

Insurance as a smokescreen to hide its own anti-worker measures.”

The unions, it should be added, are currently mounting a major lobbying campaign in association with the PQ government, the Montreal Chamber of Commerce and other “forces vivres” of Quebec to defend the tax concessions enjoyed by the union-controlled investment funds—the Quebec Federation of Labour's Solidarity Fund and the Confederation of National Trade Unions' *Fondaction*.

Through these multi-billion dollar funds, the union bureaucrats have developed intimate ties with big business and become junior partners in capitalist exploitation. They exemplify the transformation of the unions from limited organizations of working class defence into corporatist enforcers of wage and job cuts and capitalist austerity.

To the dismay of the union bureaucrats and the Quebec elite, for whom the union investment funds have become a significant source of venture capital, the Conservatives announced in this year's federal budget that they intend to phase out a 15 percent tax credit that applies to all monies invested in the Solidarity Fund and *Fondaction*. The union bureaucracy immediately united with the Québécois political elite and the employers' associations to demand that this decision be reversed for it will make the funds less profitable, to the detriment of the pocket books of employers and union bureaucrats alike.



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