

Parti Québécois pursuing chauvinist “identity” agenda to split working class

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23 August 2013

Quebec’s Parti Québécois (PQ) government plans to press for the adoption of chauvinist legislation this fall that would bar provincial public sector workers from wearing “conspicuous” religious symbols while at work.

According to a report in Tuesday’s *Journal de Montréal*, more than half a million workers—including Quebec civil servants, all those employed in the public health care and school systems, at universities and CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges), and by provincially-subsidized daycares—would fall under the government ban. They would be legally barred from wearing any form of hair or face covering identified with Islam, including the hijab, the Sikh turban, the Jewish kippah, and “conspicuous” crucifixes.

The PQ intends to present this anti-democratic measure as a means of defending secular values. Its real aim is to marginalize and whip up animosity against Quebec’s religious and ethnic minorities, stigmatizing them as outsiders who threaten Quebec society, and thereby split the working class.

The reactionary character of the proposed ban on religious symbols is underscored by its blatant hypocrisy. According to the *Journal de Montréal*—and this is consistent with previous PQ pronouncements—the government’s legislation affirming Quebec’s official “secular” status will be fashioned so as to exempt symbols of the Roman Catholic Church.

The crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly, the cross atop Montreal’s Mount Royal, and countless other “conspicuous” Catholic symbols will be protected—indeed sanctified—on the grounds they constitute part of Quebec’s heritage. Similarly, public sector workers will be permitted to wear “discreet” crucifixes.

Drawing inspiration from similar reactionary

measures imposed by the French state, the PQ initially intended to dress up its attack on religious minorities and immigrants as a “Secular Charter.” However, fearing that this would alienate rightwing Catholics, it recently announced that it was repackaging it as a “Charter of Quebec Values.”

The PQ has neither confirmed nor denied the details of the ban on “religious symbols” outlined in the *Journal de Montréal* report. Some earlier reports had suggested such a ban would apply only to those directly employed by the Quebec government—judges and civil servants.

But Bernard Drainville, the head of the PQ’s cabinet subcommittee on “Identity,” did confirm at a press conference Thursday that the government will release a document in September explaining the aims and parameters of its Charter and table legislation several weeks later. Drainville said the PQ government is determined to define the limits of “religious accommodation.”

For the better part of a decade, Quebec nationalists and the most rightwing sections of the corporate media like the *Journal de Montréal* have been claiming that members of religious minorities—many of them immigrants—are too conspicuous in Quebec, authorities have gone “too far” in accommodating them, and that the “rights” and “values” of the majority are threatened.

Thus the Premier of Quebec, Pauline Marois, defended the Quebec Soccer Federation (QSF), last spring when it banned Sikh youth from participating in games on the transparently spurious grounds that Sikh headcoverings constitute a safety risk. Ultimately, after the soccer’s world governing body FIFA said the ban was unjustified, the QSF was forced to back down.

The furor over the reputed excessive

“accommodations” made to religious minorities was first championed by the rightwing populist Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), a right-wing populist party that was being promoted by sections of big business as a means of pushing politics far to the right.

After the PQ suffered a debacle in the 2007 provincial election, it drew the conclusion that it must never again cede the so-called Quebec identity issue to its opponents. Soon after assuming the PQ leadership, Pauline Marois proposed that Quebec adopt legislation denying basic political rights—including the right to stand as a candidate in a provincial or municipal election or donate to a political party—to newcomers to Quebec who do not prove French language proficiency after three years’ residence.

When the National Assembly recessed in June, the PQ announced that it intended to place “identity” issues at the center of its fall legislative agenda. In addition to its “Charter of Quebec Values,” the PQ intends to press for passage of Bill 14, which aims to further strengthen Bill 101—a chauvinist law that by giving French a privileged status in the workplace and commerce served to provide educated French-speaking Quebecers greater access to managerial-administrative jobs.

Bill 14 will force companies with 26 to 49 employees to conduct their business in French and secure a government “Francization” certificate. Under Bill 101 these regulations only applied to larger companies. The PQ had also wanted Bill 14 to extend Bill 101’s ban on native French-speakers and immigrants sending their children to English schools to CEGEPs. But, having only a plurality of seats in the National Assembly, the PQ had to back down in face of opposition from the other parties.

The PQ cynically claims that Bill 14 will give Quebecers the “right to live and work” in French. The reality is the Marois government is pursuing austerity measures no different from those of the federal Conservative government and the NDP-backed minority Liberal government in Ontario, so as to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis.

Last November, just two months after taking office, the PQ imposed a budget containing the steepest social spending cuts in 15 years. While the Harper Conservatives are slashing benefits for the unemployed (Employment Insurance), the PQ has taken the axe to social assistance (welfare) benefits.

Around the world, big business governments are whipping up anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism as a means of dividing the working class and justifying imperialist wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The PQ’s chauvinist “identity agenda”—its proposed ban on non-Catholic “religious symbols” and its Bill 14—have the same purpose. By whipping up chauvinism it aims to divert attention away from its big business socio-economic policies and channel the mounting social anger over ever-increasing economic insecurity and social inequality against religious and ethnic minorities.

In this, it is counting on the support of the trade unions and the pseudo-left, which for decades have boosted the PQ as a progressive alternative to the federalist parties of big business, promoted Quebec nationalism, and isolated the militant struggles of Quebec workers from those of workers in English Canada and around the world. The unions have strongly supported Bill 14, repeating the PQ’s lies that it will protect Quebecers’ jobs. Quebec Solidaire (QS) voted in favor of Bill 14, after its first reading, on the grounds that it goes in the “right direction.” While criticizing the PQ for wanting to accord Catholic symbols a privileged status, QS has claimed that the debate over “reasonable accommodation” is legitimate, rather than exposing it for what it is—an anti-democratic debate, mounted on false pretenses, and with the aim of promoting chauvinist reaction and dividing the working class.



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