PQ introduces chauvinist, antidemocratic Charter of Quebec Values

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Quebec's Parti Québecois government has tabled a chauvinist "Charter of Quebec Values" that when enshrined in law will prohibit more than half-a-million public and para-public sector workers from wearing "conspicuous" religious signs while at work and deny public services to Muslim women wearing a face-covering.

Under the proposed Charter, civil servants, public school teachers and university and CEGEP instructors, doctors, nurses and other hospital workers, municipal and school board employees, and workers at provincially-funded day cares will be prohibited from wearing "overt and conspicuous religious symbols." These include the Sikh turban and kirpan, the Jewish kippa, and the Muslim hijab or headscarf.

Except in emergency situations, any Muslim woman wearing a burka or niqab will be refused public services, including education and health care.

Ostensibly aimed at promoting secularism, equality, and women's rights, the PQ's Charter is a flagrant attack on democratic rights that stigmatizes and ostracizes immigrants and religious minorities. By so doing, the big business PQ is seeking to divert public intention and anger away from its right-wing program of social spending cuts and regressive tax and electricity hikes and to split the working class.

The proposed Charter is both bigoted and hypocritical. While banning symbols of the province's religious minorities, it provides numerous exclusions for Roman Catholic symbols and practices. Some of these exclusions are dressed up as an affirmation of Quebec's heritage, others are based on arbitrary distinctions.

The hijab and kirpan are banned on the grounds that they are conspicuous. Meantime, pendants in the shape of the cross are permitted if they are not "ostentatious."

"Religion has occupied a fundamental role in Quebec history;" asserts the PQ document launching the proposed Charter, "We must protect this heritage."

The Charter explicitly sanctions the giant electrified cross that sits atop Mont Royal (the mountain from which Montreal takes its name) and the continued hanging of a crucifix in the National Assembly. In 1936, Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis, an arch-reactionary, ordered that the crucifix be hung over the Speaker's Chair in the provincial legislature so as to symbolize the unity of the state and Catholic Church.

Furthermore, despite the PQ's claims to be concerned with upholding the secular character of the state, the government will continue to provide funding to religious schools and tax exemptions to religious institutions—in both cases the vast majority of them Catholic.

While the PQ is presenting its charter as the logical extension of the *deconfessionalization* or secularization of Quebec's education and health and social welfare systems implemented a half-century ago, it's real roots lies in a reactionary campaign initiated by the right wing populist ADQ and the tabloid press in the run-up to the 2007 provincial election. This campaign, which was based on the deliberate misrepresentation of a handful of incidents, claimed that the recently-adopted state policy of "reasonably accommodating" religious and ethno-cultural difference was reducing Quebec's majority to second-class status.

The furor against "reasonable accommodation" and the PQ Charter have fed off and fan the anti-Muslim prejudice that has been whipped up by the North American and European elites to rally support for a succession of imperialist wars—wars, such as that in Afghanistan, in which Canada has been a major participant.

Cynically, the PQ is presenting its legislation as a blow for women's rights. In fact, as numerous critics have observed, its principal victims will be the Muslim women that are fired or denied public sector employment because of their faith. (As the result of large-scale immigration from the Middle East and North Africa to Quebec since the 1970s, Muslims now constitute Quebec's largest non-Christian religious group.)

Questioned as to whether the PQ charter would not constitute a barrier to immigrants and minorities working in the public sector, the cabinet minister responsible for the Charter, Bernard Drainville, said, "Working for the state is

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not a right. It is a choice that comes with certain responsibilities." Subsequently Drainville said that he hopes the private sector will also adopt the charter, implicitly calling for those wearing religious head-coverings to be denied private sector employment as well.

Feigning "openness" and "good faith" and in attempt to mollify opposition from the Montreal-area, where immigrants and minorities constitute a significant share of the population including health care workers, the government has said that certain public institutions and municipal governments will be permitted to ask for a five-year exemption from applying the ban on religious symbols. However, the PQ insists that no exemption can be granted public schoolteachers or day care workers because they are in position to "influence" children.

Québec's principal opposition party, the Liberals, are opposing the ban on public sector workers wearing religious symbols. However they do support—and indeed in 2011 when they formed the government they introduced a bill towards this end—outlawing women wearing burkas and niqabs from accessing or providing public services.

While the Liberals are posturing as champions of democratic rights, little more than a year ago they were presiding over a campaign of state repression and violence aimed at breaking a province-wide student strike. This included the adoption of Bill 78, legislation that effectively illegalized the strike and placed sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate over any issue anywhere in Quebec.

The unions, which have long been allied with the PQ and last year worked might and main to divert the student strike and the mass opposition to Liberal government behind the big business PQ, have welcomed the proposed Charter. The SFPQ, which represents 40,000 civil servants, has given the Charter its unqualified support. The Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU) and the *Centrale des syndicats du Québec* (CSQ-Quebec Union Federation), respectively the province's second and third largest union federations , have stated their agreement with the need for a Charter, but say they want to deliberate further before commenting on all the specifics of the proposed ban on religious symbols.

Québec Solidaire (QS), a pseudo-left nationalist party with two National Assembly members, is also lending legitimacy to the PQ's Charter. It claims that this chauvinist initiative, which was first championed by unabashed rightwing forces like the ADQ, is a serious attempt to deal with a significant societal problem.

"Québec Solidaire welcomes several steps proposed by Minister Drainville," began the press release QS issued in response to the PQ's tabling of its proposed Charter. Like all the other parties in the National Assembly, QS supports a legal ban on women who are wearing the burkha or nijab receiving or providing public services. However, like the Liberals it says the government is going too far in imposing a blanket ban on public sector workers wearing religious signs.

The major federal parties have all denounced the Charter, with the Harper government saying that should the ban on "conspicuous religious" symbols become law it will consider challenging its constitutionality before the Supreme Court.

The opposition of the principal parties of the Canadian ruling class to the PQ's chauvinist attack is selective and self-interested and invariably bound up with their promotion of reactionary Canadian nationalism and the "democratic credentials" of the Canadian state. These would-be champions of democratic rights have implemented or acquiesced to sweeping attacks on civil liberties and worker rights. These include the suppression of strikes, the overturning of longstanding democratic juridical principles such as the presumption of innocence and the ban on the use of information gained through torture, and the cover-up of the Canadian security-intelligence apparatuses' systematic spying on Canadians' electronic communications.

Workers across Canada—English and French-speaking and immigrant—should not entrust the opposition to the PQ's reactionary Charter of Values to rival sections of Canada's big business establishment. Rather this attack on basic democratic rights and attempt to foment nationalism and chauvinism must be met with the struggle for the independent political mobilization of the working class in defence of the democratic rights of all and in opposition to the agenda of austerity and war being pursued by the entire bourgeoisie and all its political representatives, from the Conservatives and PQ through the NDP.

This author also recommends:

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