

PQ pushing ahead with implementation of chauvinist Quebec Charter of Values

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Despite widespread and mounting popular opposition to its chauvinist “Charter of Quebec Values,” Premier Pauline Marois and her Parti Québécois (PQ) government are determined to make it law.

While the PQ claims the Charter is aimed at affirming the secular character of the Quebec state, it is a transparent attack on the rights of religious minorities—especially Muslim immigrants from the Maghreb and Middle East. By whipping up Quebec chauvinism, the PQ is seeking to divert attention from its big business austerity agenda and divide the working class.

Under the proposed Charter, all Quebec public and para-public sector workers, including doctors, nurses, hospital orderlies and janitors, daycare workers, civil servants, and public school and CEGEP (college) teachers, would be forbidden—as a condition of their continuing employment—from wearing “conspicuous” religious symbols while at work. Specifically outlawed would be the Muslim hijab or headscarf, the Sikh turban and kirpan, and the Jewish Kippah.

The Charter would also prevent Muslim women who cover their faces with a *niqab* or *burka* from receiving public services, except in the case of a medical emergency.

Meanwhile, in the name of preserving Quebec’s religious, i.e. Roman Catholic, “heritage,” the Charter stipulates that the numerous Catholic symbols in Quebec’s official iconography and public spaces—including the cross on the Quebec flag—will be untouched.

When the PQ unveiled its anti-democratic Charter last month, it knew that it would largely be rejected by Quebec’s minorities, as well as by its principal political rival, the federalist Parti Libéral du Québec. Indeed, it was counting on such a reception, so as to drum up support in the run-up to a provincial election that it could call for as early as December 9.

But the minority PQ government has been taken aback by the scale and scope of the opposition. Some sections of Quebec’s big business elite have opposed the Charter because they fear it will damage Quebec’s international reputation and the province’s efforts to attract immigrants to expand an aging workforce.

More significant, however, has been the opposition of working people—French, English and immigrant—who uphold the democratic principle that all people, regardless of their religious beliefs or their ethnicity, should have the same access to jobs and public services.

Faced with this popular opposition, two former PQ Quebec

Premiers, Jacques Parizeau and Lucien Bouchard, recently urged the Marois government not to proceed with the public sector-wide ban on the wearing of “conspicuous” religious symbols. While approving of the spirit of the Charter, they counseled a more cautious approach, with the warning that the government’s proposal was giving credence to the claims of their federalist opponents that Quebec separatism is intolerant, even xenophobic.

These arguments, however, appear to have had no impact on Marois and her ministers.

In fact, press reports indicate that the government intends to make the legislation even more anti-democratic, not less.

The Charter as originally proposed said that some institutions—the Montreal Jewish General Hospital was frequently given as an example by PQ Ministers—could seek a five-year exemption from implementing the ban on “conspicuous” religious symbols.

According to a recent report in the Montreal daily *La Presse* the PQ now intends to eliminate or greatly limit this “opting out” provision, by restricting its application and possibly stipulating it will be in effect only during a three-year “transition” period.

The PQ was aghast when all the municipalities on the Island of Montreal, all the major candidates in the current Montreal mayoralty race, and numerous hospitals and other institutions announced they would make use of the Charter’s “opting out” provision.

According to *La Presse*, the PQ has also decided it will extend the ban on wearing conspicuous religious symbols to all members of the Quebec legislature (National Assembly), municipal councils and school boards.

In an apparent concession to the Charter’s critics, the PQ is said to be ready to drop its insistence that the crucifix in the National Assembly, which was first hung in 1936 by the arch rightwinger Maurice Duplessis to symbolize the union of Church and state, remain. However, the *La Presse* report added that pivotal to the government’s change of heart was a statement from the Quebec Assembly of Catholic Bishops sanctioning the crucifix’s removal.

In the month-and-a-half since the government tabled its Charter numerous groups and individuals have come forward to expose how the Charter will victimize Muslim women and to refute the PQ’s claims that Quebec is facing a crisis over “accommodating” religious minorities. In reality, this is a bogus issue that was drummed up by the rightwing populist ADQ and the corporate media, especially the tabloids of billionaire Pierre-Karl Peladeau,

and subsequently appropriated by the PQ and, to a lesser degree, their Liberal rivals.

Katia Atif of the organization *Action Travail des Femmes* (Women's Work Action), has noted that the PQ's proposed ban on publicly-funded daycares employing hijab-wearing women will have a perverse impact on immigrant women who already find it difficult to find work.

Because they generally have difficulty in getting their foreign diplomas recognized, explained Atif, "There is an overrepresentation of Arab-Muslim women, especially veiled women, in child care." Commenting on this situation, the president of the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* (Quebec Women's Federation), Alexa Conradi, remarked: "The Charter will solve nothing on that front and might just worsen the situation by forcing them to leave the environment in which they have succeeded in finding a place."

During a meeting held in late September in Montreal, the Association of Private Care Quebec (AGPQ), which represents private day care operators, voted against the Charter of Values, with 353 members voting against and just seven for. "No one," said a resolution adopted at the meeting, "should be excluded and dismissed for rules imposed by a state that promotes division, exclusion, strife and discord for ideological purposes." The AGPQ accused the government of creating a "false problem." According to its president, Sylvain Lévesque, no parent has ever complained about a teacher wearing a Muslim headscarf.

Thousands of people—including well-known artists such as singers Richard Desjardins, Dan Bigras and Michel Rivard, actress Marie Brassard and filmmaker Hugo Latulippe—have signed a petition entitled "Towards an inclusive Quebec," which strongly condemns the Charter of Values.

It notes that immigrants to Quebec suffer from especially high rates of unemployment, then states, "The ban on religious symbols in the public, schools and daycares can only exacerbate the exclusion of immigrants from the Quebec labor market. In this regard, the ban will only make even more vulnerable women wearing the hijab and increase inequality between men and women, particularly in terms of access to employment. It is therefore expected that this Charter, which is presented as a means to help achieve gender equality, will have the opposite effect."

Opposition to the Charter is especially strong in the health care sector, where many doctors and managers have warned that the Charter could cause Quebec to lose urgently needed qualified personnel. Following a survey of its members last month, the Quebec Association of Health and Social Services Institutions (AQESSS) reported that 100 percent of its member institutions have no problem with workers wearing religious symbols.

These same institutions reported that in the past two years they have received no complaints about their personnel wearing religious symbols. Only one of the scores of establishments that were polled claimed to have had "significant problems" with the issue of religious accommodation.

In releasing this study, the director-general of AQESSS, Diane Lavallée, said, "We fear that the ban on wearing of conspicuous religious symbols will lead to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, in addition to creating unhealthy tension where

previously there was none."

This is precisely what is happening: since the unveiling of the Charter, Quebec has witnessed a sharp rise in xenophobic incidents. Muslim women are "jostled, insulted and denigrated," according to an open letter issued by the Coalition of Women's Centres of Quebec. "A veiled woman was backed into at a grocery store with a cart while being screamed at to return to her country," reported a member of the Women's Centre of Verdun. "Others have been spat upon," she added, referring to "six to eight events" that the center had heard of.

The PQ's Charter has nothing to do with the defense of secularism and equality between men and women. This chauvinistic and anti-democratic project—which is similar to the anti-democratic measures implemented by France and other European governments—is rooted in the intensification of class tensions.

Since the global economic crisis of 2008, the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the attacks by the ruling class against the conditions of workers have increased dramatically. Without yet reaching a level of class consciousness that matches the force of the capitalist offensive, the growing resistance of the working class and the spread of anti-capitalist sentiment has been seen in the revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, the general strikes in Greece and Spain, and to a lesser but still significant extent, in the mass movement that erupted against the Charest Liberal government during last year's Quebec student strike.

The PQ—which came to power after the trade unions and Québec Solidaire isolated the student strike and tied it to this big business party—immediately imposed austerity measures, including massive social spending cuts and electricity rate rises, that went well-beyond those of its Liberal predecessors.

Given the opposition caused by these reactionary measures, the PQ is now trying to divide workers by stoking ethnic and religious differences, drawing attention to artificial problems, such as the supposed threat facing "Quebec culture" from immigrants who want to "impose" their values.

This promotion of anti-immigrant sentiment draws upon and stokes anti-Muslim prejudices that have been used to justify the wars of conquest that have been carried out over the past decade by the Western imperialist powers, including Canada, in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Like all sections of the Canadian ruling elite, the PQ makes reactionary appeals to chauvinism and nationalism in order to divert attention from the true problems of society—the profit system and the domination by society of a small clique of super-rich.



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