

Quebec's Bill 60—a chauvinist attack on democratic rights

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Quebec's minority Parti Québécois (PQ) government intends to make its chauvinist Charter of Quebec Values the center of legislative and political debate in Quebec in the first months of 2014, so as to deflect attention from its social spending cuts and with a view to possibly precipitating an election focused on "identity" issues.

Late last year, the government tabled legislation in the National Assembly to enact the Charter and starting on January 14 the Quebec legislature will convene public hearings on Bill 60.

Renamed the "Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and the equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests," Bill 60 actually goes further than the original version of the Charter, unveiled last September, in attacking the social and democratic rights of religious minorities and more than half-a-million public and para-public workers.

Should Bill 60 become law, Muslim women wearing a face-covering (the niqab or burqa) would be denied access to public services, including health care, except in "emergencies." Furthermore, at the risk of losing their jobs, more than a half-million Quebec public sector workers—including civil servants, teachers, university instructors, hospital workers, and municipal and school board employees—would be banned from wearing so-called "ostentatious" religious symbols at work. The proscribed symbols include the Sikh turban and kirpa, the Jewish kippa and Muslim hijab (headscarf). The wearing of "discreet" crucifixes would, on the other hand, be permitted.

The first version of the Charter proposed that the ban on religious symbols also apply to government-subsidized daycares. Bill 60 widens the restriction on the wearing of religious symbols still further, stipulating that workers from any privately-owned company employed on a contractual basis by a Quebec public or para-public institution could be subject to its provisions.

With many hospitals, educational institutions, and universities signaling their intention to make use of a provision in the Charter's initial draft allowing them to apply for a renewable, five-year exemption from applying the ban on religious symbols, the government has chosen to sharply curtail

exemptions under its Bill 60. Following the bill's adoption, there will be a one-year "adaptation" period. Thereafter, municipalities, universities, hospitals and other institutions may request a "four-year" transition period at the end of which they will be expected to enforce the religious-symbol ban. Moreover, any institution granted an extended "transition" period must adopt a policy outlining how and when it will bring itself into conformity with Bill 60. Should it fail to do so, the government will have the power to impose such a policy on the institution.

The government has packaged this flagrant attack on democratic rights as an affirmation of secularism and women's rights. What a cynical fraud!

In addition to providing a loophole for the wearing of Roman Catholic symbols, Bill 60 provides an exemption, in the name of protecting "Quebec's heritage" for the continuing presence of countless Catholic symbols in the public domain, including the giant electrified cross that sits atop Mont Royal, the mountain from which Montreal takes its name. So as to court support from rightwing Catholics, the ostensibly secularist PQ government has not even ordered the removal of the the crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly. It was placed there in 1936 by Premier Maurice Duplessis, an arch rightwinger, as a symbol of the unity of state and church. According to Bernard Drainville, the Minister for Democratic Institutions and Active Citizenship (i.e. the Charter), the crucifix's fate will be the determined at a future date through a "consensus-based" decision of all four parties in the National Assembly.

No less hypocritical are the claims of the government, the nationalist elite, including billionaire tabloid-proprietor Pierre Karl Péladeau, and broad sections of feminist professionals and businesswomen that Bill 60 is a blow for women's rights. In fact, as numerous critics of the bill have observed, the largest group threatened by the loss of their jobs and/or denial of employment under the ban on religious symbols are Muslim women—a minority that already suffers from unemployment and poverty rates far above the provincial norm. The PQ knew its Charter would be contentious. Indeed, that was its principal attraction—a means of diverting attention from the PQ's austerity agenda and dividing the working class. Nonetheless,

Premier Pauline Marois and her government were initially taken aback by the breadth of the opposition to the Charter. This opposition is itself socially and politically heterogeneous. It includes broad sections of the working class and religious and ethnic minorities outraged by the government's attempt to cloak a chauvinist attack on democratic rights in progressive verbiage, as well as important sections of big business. The latter fear the Charter will damage Quebec's economy by discouraging immigration and investment.

Nevertheless, after protracted internal debate, the PQ decided to press ahead with the Charter, even expanding its scope, in the belief that stoking Quebec chauvinism is its best means of staunching popular opposition to its big business socio-economic agenda and polarizing the electorate into pro-Charter PQ and "anti-Charter" camps.

All three opposition parties have lent legitimacy to the PQ's chauvinist Bill 60, by endorsing the government's discriminatory proposal to deny public services to veiled Muslim women and supporting its reactionary claim that immigrants and religious minorities constitute a threat to "Quebec values."

However, the opposition parties are balking at imposing a blanket ban on all public and para-public employees wearing conspicuous religious symbols. The ostensibly leftwing Québec Solidaire would extend the ban only to those with "coercive powers"—judges, police officers, and prison guards. The rightwing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) has said that in addition to those exercising "coercive powers," those with "moral authority" over children—i.e. school teachers and daycare workers—should be forced to remove conspicuous religious symbols when at work or lose their jobs.

The Liberals, Quebec's principal federalist party and the Official Opposition, initially made a show of opposing any state ban on the wearing of religious symbols. Party leader Philippe Couillard went so far as to claim such a ban would be imposed over his "dead-body." But following a backbench revolt, Couillard made an abrupt about-face in late November and said the Liberals are ready to consider supporting such a ban if limited to state employees in positions of authority.

In an open letter to Couillard, Liberal National Assembly Member Fatima Houda-Pépin had

taken exception to her party leader's claim that Liberals could never support violations of democratic rights, noting that Quebec Liberal governments have "limited freedom of expression (a fundamental freedom)" by stipulating that all commercial signs must be in French and that if other languages are used French must be predominant.

Houda-Pépin's remarks underscore that whatever their differences over Bill 60, all sections of the capitalist elite, in Quebec and across Canada, are increasingly indifferent and hostile to democratic rights and want to acclimatize the population to their curtailment and suppression. It should be recalled, the Canadian ruling class strongly supported the

Quebec Liberal government's drive to break the 2012 Quebec student strike; its use of unprecedented police violence and adoption of legislation (Bill 78/Law 12) that effectively criminalized the strike and placed draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate in Quebec over any issue.

Quebec's unions, including the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) and the Confederation of National Trade Unions, have endorsed the chauvinist premises of Bill 60 and many, if not all, of its anti-democratic specifics. Agreeing in principle that the state should regulate the wearing of religious symbols by public employees, the unions quibble only over how far the ban should be extended. For example, the healthcare professionals union *la Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ) has endorsed Bill 60 in toto. Meanwhile, the CSN opposes the ban on religious symbols in hospitals, but calls for its full implementation in the education sector, including child care facilities, and its extension to private schools and daycares.

The unions' support for the PQ's anti-democratic Charter is far from surprising. Longtime allies of the big business PQ, the unions constantly wave the flag of Quebec nationalism so as to divide workers in Quebec from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and around the world. The unions systematically isolated the 2012 Quebec student strike and worked to channel the opposition to the Charest Liberal government behind the PQ helping ensure its election in September 2012. Through the union-supported PQ, the ruling class was able to re-stabilize the political situation, then initiate a new round of austerity measures that go well beyond those implemented by Charest's Liberals.

Workers should reject the PQ's chauvinist and anti-democratic charter, which only serves to divide the working class. The real source of the problems facing working people—mounting economic insecurity and social inequality, social dislocation and imperialist wars—are to be found not in religious or ethno-linguistic differences but in the subordination of all socio-economic life to the enrichment of a tiny clique of the ultra-rich.



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