

Parti Quebecois government intensifies big business' austerity drive

Keith Jones**26 February 2014**

Quebec's minority Parti Quebecois (PQ) government presented an austerity budget last week with the aim of rallying big business support before making a bid to win a parliamentary majority in a spring provincial election. The budget commits the government to years of social spending cuts and imposes major electricity-rate and public daycare-fee hikes, while leaving the tax rates for big business, the rich and super-rich at record or close to record low levels. The PQ government is vowing to limit the annual increase in program spending to just 2 percent per annum for the next three years. Because of inflation and population growth, this constitutes a significant cut in real per capita spending under conditions where public services and infrastructure have already been ravaged by years of PQ and Liberal "zero-deficit" drives. In the coming year, the government is actually reducing by .8 percent its total funding allocation for all programs other than health care and education.

Meanwhile electricity rates—most Quebecers rely on electricity to heat their homes—are to be increased by almost 6 percent in the coming year and daycare fees will rise by 20 percent by September, 2015.

Finance Minister Nicholas Marceau also served notice that the government will take a hard line in negotiations with the province's public sector workers, including likely demanding cuts in retirement and other benefits. Contracts for almost half-a-million civil servants, teachers, school support staff, nurses, and hospital workers expire in March 2015.

Even as Marceau boasted of the government's determination to impose fiscal discipline, he cynically claimed that the PQ could "restrain" government spending without adversely impacting public services. To camouflage the true extent of the coming cuts, the PQ broke with tradition and did not present departmental spending estimates along with its budget.

Premier Pauline Marois and her PQ have been signaling

for weeks that they intend to call a spring election. There are two reasons that the pro- *indépendantiste* PQ is eager for an election. First, it wants to go to the polls before its latest round of budget cuts take effect and before Quebec's economy sours further. Over the twelve months ending in January 2014, only ten thousand new jobs were created in Quebec, all of them part-time, leaving the province with an official jobless rate of 7.5 percent.

Second, the PQ is hoping to capitalize on the chauvinist "charter of Quebec values" campaign it has mounted with the support of the rightwing tabloid press. The PQ has whipped up animosity against immigrants and religious minorities, with the aim of diverting attention away from its big business austerity program, polarizing the electorate, and casting itself as the "defender" of Quebec's French-speaking majority.

Under the PQ's Bill 60, Quebec's 600,000 provincial public and para-public sector workers will be barred, under threat of dismissal, from wearing "ostentatious" religious symbols and head-coverings. In addition, Muslim women who are fully veiled will be denied public services, including education and health care, except in the case of an "emergency."

The PQ is claiming that Bill 60 strikes a blow for secularism and women rights. This is a hypocritical fraud. Muslim women, as numerous critics have observed, constitute far and away the largest group threatened with the loss of public sector employment. Furthermore, Bill 60 has been crafted so as to allow the wearing of crucifixes and to protect, in the name of preserving Quebec's "heritage," the Roman Catholic symbols that abound in Quebec's public sphere.

The PQ will argue that it needs a majority in the National Assembly to adopt Bill 60 and Bill 14. The latter bill, which the PQ abandoned last Fall for want of parliamentary support, would extend the provisions of the Quebec Language Charter (Bill 101) to businesses with

26 to 49 employees, so as to force them to use French in all internal communications. It would also restrict the right of native French-speakers to attend English-language CEGEPs (pre-university and technical colleges) and make it easier for the government to strip municipalities that have traditionally been home to large numbers of English-speakers of bilingual status.

Opinion polls indicate that the PQ has been able to increase its popular support from around 30 percent to 40 percent, enough to win a parliamentary majority under the first-past-the-post electoral system, by siphoning support from the rightwing Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ).

The principal opposition party, the Liberals, are widely identified with big business. In 2012, the Liberal government of Jean Charest used unprecedented state repression, including mass arrests, the arming of police with rubber bullets, and the adoption of a police-state type law (Bill 78) in a bid to break a militant province-wide university and CEGEP student strike. The Liberals were determined to force through university tuition fee increases as part of their drive to impose the reactionary “user-pay” principle for public services.

The PQ’s chauvinist Charter of Values campaign has thrown the federalist Liberals into disarray. Initially party leader Philippe Couillard made a show of his vigorous opposition, vowing that it would be adopted over his “dead body.” But after months of internal party wrangling, the Liberals adopted a policy that in some aspects is more explicitly anti-Muslim than that of the government and have taken to attacking the PQ for reputedly wanting to banish religion from the public sphere. (See: “Quebec Liberals stoke PQ’s anti-democratic Charter of Values campaign”)

It is the trade unions and the pseudo-left Quebec Solidaire, however, who are principally responsible for the fact that the big business PQ stands poised to win a majority government and to do so by employing reactionary nationalist and anti-immigrant appeals.

For decades the pro-capitalist unions have politically subordinated the working class to the PQ and systematically divided it from workers in the rest of Canada, while promoting the reactionary political project of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie to create a *République du Québec* that would be a partner in NATO, NORAD and NAFTA.

Fearing that the 2012 Quebec student strike could become the catalyst for a working-class challenge to the austerity agenda of big business, the unions—under the slogan “Après la rue, aux urnes” (After the streets, to the

ballot box)—worked to shut it down and harness the opposition to Charest to the big business PQ.

In this they were assisted by Quebec Solidaire (QS), a self-avowed “left,” pro-Quebec independence party. In June 2012, QS proposed to the PQ that they strike an electoral alliance and just days before the September 2012 provincial election QS announced that if it held the balance of power in a minority parliament it would maintain a PQ government in office for at least a year, without so much as asking for a single policy commitment.

Like the unions, QS has lent legitimacy to the PQ’s anti-democratic Bill 60, endorsing the fraudulent claim that “Quebec values” are threatened by religious minorities and presenting its own, slightly less draconian proposal for a “secular Charter.” The QS supports denying veiled women public services, but argues that the ban on religious symbols should be restricted to judges, police officers and others with coercive state powers.

For decades the PQ has implemented austerity measures and used draconian legislation to criminalize workers’ struggles and impose rollbacks. Yet both the union officialdom and QS claimed to have been shocked and disappointed by last week’s austerity budget.

Covering up the fact that the PQ is no less a party of big business than the Liberals or Stephen Harper’s Conservatives, QS legislator Amir Khadir criticized it for “surrendering” to business pressure. “After all the electoral promises it made in 2012, we could have expected that the PQ would have demonstrated greater independence from the business elite and its powerful lobbies and thought first about the middle class,” bleated Khadir.



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