

Quebec elections: The issues facing the working class

Guy Charron
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Eighteen months ago, the unions, Québec Solidaire, and the student associations welcomed the election of Pauline Marois' Parti Québécois (PQ) government, claiming that it constituted a "victory" for the six month long, province-wide, post-secondary students' strike. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party advanced a diametrically-opposed analysis: the PQ's election was the means whereby the ruling capitalist elite "diverted popular opposition into channels that are harmless to the status quo."

The balance sheet of the past 18 months of PQ government leaves no doubt as to which of these two analyses were correct. The PQ has expanded and deepened the assault on the working class carried out by Jean Charest's Liberal government. Among a raft of right-wing measures, it has: imposed the most severe social spending cuts in two decades; criminalized a strike of 75,000 construction workers; established a mechanism for slashing municipal workers' pensions; and imposed annual university tuition fee hikes and slashed hundreds of millions from university budgets.

In a clear signal to big business that it intends to intensify its austerity drive, the PQ has named as its "star" election candidate none other than billionaire Pierre-Karl Péladeau—an ultra-right-winger, who for years has used his media empire to advocate tax cuts for big business and the rich, privatization, and other reactionary measures. These include the now infamous "Quebec Charter of Values" put forward by the Marois government in an obvious attempt to divert popular anger away from its austerity measures by stoking anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism—all under the hypocritical guise of promoting equality between men and women.

Why are workers and youth faced with this gloomy winter of social reaction when only two years ago the Maple Spring was reviving so many hopes? The answer to this question is vital in preparing for the great social struggles that lie ahead, regardless of the composition of the next government.

The unions bear the principal responsibility for the defeat of the 2012 student strike, which had the potential of

triggering a unified offensive by youth and workers against the dismantling of public services and big business job- and wage-cuts.

The unions did everything in their power to prevent workers from joining the striking students. No sooner had the Charest government passed Bill 78 (Act 12), which effectively outlawed the strike, placed sweeping restrictions on the right to demonstrate, and ordered the unions to make teachers and other university and CEGEP personnel act as strike-breakers, than the unions announced that they would comply with it in full. Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) President Michel Arsenault wrote to the Canadian Labour Congress and unions across Canada to demand that they give no support to the striking students, so as to leave them to face the state assault alone. At the same time, the QFL, soon followed by the province's other unions, mounted an active campaign to end the strike and channel the mass opposition movement it had galvanized behind the big business PQ under the slogan, "After the street, to the ballot box."

Since the 1980s, the unions have imposed round-after-round of wage and job cuts and concessions in working conditions, while becoming ever more integrated into management and the state and thereby securing and expanding the perks and privileges of the union bureaucracy. A consummate example of this is the QFL Solidarity Fund, a \$9 billion investment fund run by the QFL bureaucracy that consorts with big business and the banks to develop profitable Quebec enterprises at workers' expense.

The role the unions played in suppressing the 2012 student strike was completely in line with that they played in 1996, when they gave their full support to the "zero deficit" drive of the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard. Indeed, it was the unions that proposed the early retirement scheme the Bouchard PQ government used to eliminate 40,000 education and health sector jobs. In the winter of 2003-4, when a mass movement erupted against the Charest Liberal government's promotion of contracting out and plans to "reengineer"—i.e. slash and privatize—public services, the unions smothered it. And in 2005, the unions worked with

the Charest to ensure “social peace” by shutting down a student strike, so as to ensure the students’ struggle didn’t serve as the catalyst for a rebellion by half a million public sector workers from whom the government was demanding concessions.

In their ultimately successful effort to strangle the 2012 student strike, the unions were assisted by the leaders of the FEUQ (Quebec University Students Federation) and FECQ (Quebec College Students’ Federation)—with whom they and the PQ have a long partnership. And the student leaders were rewarded accordingly. FECQ President Léo Bureau-Blouin was elected to the National Assembly on the PQ’s behalf in the 2012 election and former FEUQ President Martine Desjardins is standing as a PQ candidate in the April 7 election.

For its part, CLASSE, the most militant of the student organizations, confined itself to pressuring the Charest government solely over the issue of university tuition fees. It opposed the perspective of turning to the working class, the only social force with the power to defeat big business and its austerity agenda, and any fight to mobilize the workers independently of the union apparatuses. Underlining the bankruptcy of their radical phraseology, CLASSE quickly dropped its timid call for a “social strike” once the union leaders made clear their vehement opposition to any widening of the protest movement, let alone the industrial and political mobilization of the working class against big business and its political representatives.

CLASSE promoted Quebec nationalism, limiting itself to the framework of provincial politics, although the right-wing program of the Liberals was only the Quebec version of the anti-worker austerity measures being applied across Canada and around the world. Ultimately, CLASSE aided and abetted the harnessing of the student strike to the Parti Québécois. Its leaders repeatedly claimed that the electoral defeat of Charest would be a “victory” for the students. And in June 2012 when Marois took off her “red square”—the symbol of the strike—so as to reassure big business that the PQ’s “support” for the strike was a pose, CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois urged her to keep wearing the “red square”—rather than using this incident to warn students about big business PQ.

The supposedly “left-wing” Québec Solidaire (QS) also played a key role in the political emasculation of the student strike. It supported the unions’ campaign to divert the opposition movement into elections and legitimized the campaign to replace the Liberals by the PQ. For years, the QS had sought an electoral alliance with the PQ and in June 2012 it publicly repeated its offer. Then just days before the September election, QS announced that if it held the balance of power in the National Assembly it would provide

unconditional support for a minority PQ government for at last a year.

According to Québec Solidaire and the unions, the PQ is “progressive” because it is an *indépendantiste* party—i.e., favors Quebec’s secession from Canada. They seek to divide the struggles of workers in Quebec from those of workers in English Canada and internationally and systematically conceal the fact that the formation of another capitalist state in North America is the political project of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie. Marois, whose husband is a multi-millionaire and former top official of the QFL Solidarity Fund, and Quebecor boss Pierre-Karl Péladeau want to become *Maîtres chez-nous* (Masters in our own house) so as to make Quebec more “competitive,” through tax cuts and the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state, and the state a more effective instrument in advancing their predatory interests in Quebec and internationally.

To oppose capitalist austerity, workers must reject both Quebecois and Canadian nationalism and adopt a socialist internationalist program aimed at mobilizing workers across Quebec, Canada, and around the world in a common struggle against the capitalist profit system. French and English-speaking and immigrant workers should fight for workers’ governments in Quebec City and Ottawa that will radically reorganize socio-economic life, so as to make fulfilling social needs, not the profits of a tiny clique of businessman and bankers, its animating principle. To prosecute this struggle, workers need to build new organizations of struggle independent from and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions—above all a revolutionary socialist party.



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