

# United Steelworkers reaffirm support for big business Parti Québécois

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The United Steelworkers, whose members in the United States are locked in a bitter struggle with the oil companies over pay and conditions, has found yet another way to attempt to politically shackle workers in Quebec. The union has publicly endorsed one of the candidates for the leadership of the Parti Québécois (PQ) and, in so doing, has reaffirmed its staunch support for a big business party that over the past three decades has repeatedly come into headlong conflict with the working class, imposing sweeping social spending cuts and outlawing strikes.

In a letter published in the Montreal daily *Le Devoir* last month, the Steelworkers' leadership announced that it supports "unreservedly" Martine Ouellet's campaign to become PQ leader. The Member of the Quebec National Assembly (MNA) for the Montreal South Shore riding of Vachon, Ouellet was the Minister for Natural Resources in Pauline Marois' PQ government.

The Steelworkers' endorsement is part of a campaign being mounted by the Quebec union bureaucracy to "save" the PQ, whose popular support has reached an historic low. Since the end of the 1990s, the PQ and the PQ-led movement for Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state have experienced one debacle after another because of their right-wing politics. The unpopularity of the PQ deepened further during the Marois government, which held power for 18 months, from September 2012 to last April.

The letter, signed by Daniel Roy, the leader of the Métallos (the Steelworkers' Quebec branch), argued that in a situation where "the link between this party and the workers is now more tenuous," it is fundamental to "rebuild the bridges" with the PQ. Roy, who is also the vice president of the Quebec Federation of Labor, added that "despite its faults and its recent backsliding," this party "remains the best political vehicle for taking power and putting forward the interests of the middle class."

In reality the PQ is an enemy of working people and, along with the pro-federalist Liberals, has served for the past forty years as one of the Quebec elite's two parties of government. It won the elections called in the summer 2012 in order to put an end to the six-month-long province-wide student strike that had erupted against the university tuition increases of the Liberal government of Jean Charest. Its ability to do so was bound up with the support it received from the student associations and from the unions, which had intervened to isolate the strike and prevent it from spreading to the working class under the slogan, "After the streets, to the ballot box."

The unions' claim that the PQ was the "lesser evil" to Charest's "neoliberals" was endorsed by the pseudo-left, pro-Quebec independence Québec Solidaire. It appealed to the PQ for an electoral alliance, then on the eve of the election announced that in the event the QS held the balance of power in a minority parliament it would sustain the PQ in power for at least a year.

Once in power, the PQ rapidly imposed huge budget cuts and permanent annual tuition fee increases. The PQ government also upheld Montreal's P-6 regulation and similar municipal bylaws that duplicated the draconian restrictions on the right to demonstrate that the Charest government had imposed in its notorious anti-student-strike law, Bill 78. P-6 continues to be regularly invoked by the police to declare demonstrations illegal and violently disperse them.

While maintaining record low taxes on big business and the rich, the PQ government in which Ouellet was a minister slashed social assistance and enacted an emergency law to criminalize a strike by 75,000 construction workers. And with its "Quebec Charter of Values," the PQ fomented animosity against religious minorities and immigrants, especially Muslims, with the aim of diverting attention away from its austerity measures and splitting the working class on ethnic and

cultural lines.

When new elections were called in spring 2014, the billionaire press magnate and arch-right winger Pierre-Karl Péladeau announced he would run as a candidate for the PQ, further underlining its character as a party *of and for* big business. The Liberals ended up winning the elections, while the PQ, with only 25.4 percent of the popular vote, recorded its worst result since 1970, the first election in which it participated.

In his letter, Roy—whose 60,000-members Métallos are the province’s largest industrial union—calls on the union bureaucracy and the so-called “left” to close ranks behind the PQ. He exhorts “progressives, unionists, environmentalists, whether they belong to the PQ or not, members of [Québec Solidaire] or non-affiliated” to “become paid-up members of the PQ.”

This line dovetails with the campaign being mounted by the QFL and other major unions and by the SPQ-Libre (a political group inside the PQ that speaks for the union bureaucracy) to get workers to join the PQ so as block Pierre-Karl Péladeau from winning the PQ leadership.

No matter which party has been in power, the pro-capitalist unions have for decades faithfully collaborated with the employers and the government to impose job-and wage-cuts and other concessions on workers.

However, the union bureaucracy cemented a political alliance with the PQ soon after it emerged in 1968 as the result of a split from the Quebec Liberal Party. The turn of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy to the PQ and Quebec nationalism was a means of politically harnessing the massive offensive of the Quebec working class that convulsed Canada’s only majority French-speaking province in the early 1970s to the drive of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie to expand its wealth and power. It also served to quarantine the Quebec workers’ struggles from those of their class brothers and sisters in the rest of North America.

Elected to power for the first time in 1976, the PQ rapidly abandoned its façade as a party “favorable to workers.” In 1982-83 the PQ government of René Lévesque slashed public sector workers’ pay by as much as 20 percent and when teachers rebelled threatened them with mass firings. In the name of achieving a “zero deficit” the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard eliminated more than 40,000 jobs in health care and education between 1996 and 1998, then broke a strike of nurses with a savage back-to-work law.

The Steelworkers’ leader gives his “unreserved” support to Martine Ouellet (a member of the

administrative committee of SPQ-Libre from 2004 to 2007) precisely because she, more than any other candidate, wants to continue close collaboration with the unions in order to stifle the class struggle.

The bureaucracy has feathered it nest through the corporatist government-employer-union collaboration long promoted by both of Quebec’s major parties, but especially the PQ. Roy is himself a member of the Board of Directors of the QFL’s Solidarity Fund, a \$9 billion investment fund that provides capital to Quebec businesses.

According to Roy’s endorsement, Martine Ouellet is “firmly progressive,” and the candidate who will provide the best “left” cover for the PQ’s reactionary project for an independent capitalist Quebec.

An engineer, Ouellet built her political career during the 1990s when the PQ was carrying out a marked turn to the right. As natural resources minister she worked closely with the big mining companies, putting in place policies favorable to them, including the maintenance of low levels of taxation.

Perceived as a “left” candidate because of her connections with the unions, Ouellet herself insists that this “label” is not appropriate and that she is “very pragmatic” regarding the economy. She is also promoting herself as the candidate most determined to make Quebec a country, a claim also made by the very right-wing Péladeau.

No matter who wins the leadership of the PQ, the party will remain as determined as the Liberals to impose the dictates of big business and international finance.

Under conditions where the working class in on a collision course with the current Liberal government, which is seeking to implement massive social cuts, workers must take the unions’ embrace of the pro-austerity PQ as a serious warning. As they did during 1980s and 1990s, and more recently during the student strike in 2012, the unions are seeking to smother opposition to capitalist austerity and isolate the Quebec workers from the Canadian and North American working class by channeling them behind the PQ and promoting Quebec nationalism.



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