

Unions reaffirm ties to Parti Québécois as it prepares to anoint arch-right winger

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Bernard Drainville, the principal rival of billionaire businessman Pierre-Karl Péladeau for the Parti Québécois (PQ) leadership, announced in late April he was abandoning the race to succeed Pauline Marois as PQ leader.

Just days after cautioning the crisis-ridden PQ against viewing Péladeau as a “saviour,” Drainville proclaimed his rival’s victory in the membership ballot was inevitable and, in the name of “party unity,” announced he was withdrawing from the contest and rallying to Péladeau’s side. The installation of Péladeau as PQ leader, a process likely to be completed this Friday when the results from the first of a possible two-stage primary are announced, will represent a further rightward lurch on the part of the big business, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois.

The controlling shareholder of the Quebecor-Videotron media-telecommunications empire, Péladeau has long advocated for an intensification of the assault on the working class, including the dismantling of social programs, the privatization of public services and the destruction of worker rights. Péladeau personally oversaw far-reaching restructuring operations at Quebecor, imposing 14 lock-outs in 15 years to force workers to accept drastic job cuts and sweeping contract concessions.

Péladeau has used his media empire to stoke Quebec chauvinism, encouraging an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim campaign that was whipped up in 2007 on the spurious claim that the “rights of the Québécois majority” were being trampled on so as to accommodate ethnic and religious minorities.

Through his daily newspapers, including the *Journal de Montréal* and the *Journal de Québec*, Péladeau also promoted the Quebec “Charter of Values, a xenophobic and anti-democratic measure advanced by the Marois PQ government—a move that contributed to its heavy electoral defeat in April 2014 after just 18 months in office.

With Péladeau’s victory a virtual certainty, the union bureaucracy has sent a clear signal that the arrival of this notorious right winger at the PQ’s helm will in no way call into question its longstanding political alliance with this big

business party.

Just two days after Drainville quit the leadership contest, prominent union leaders—including Daniel Roy, the president of the Quebec section of the United Steelworkers, David Chartrand of the Machinists (IAM), Yves Ouellet, the head of the 70,000 member FTQ-Construction, and Magali Picard, the Quebec Vice-President of the Public Service Alliance of Canada—stood alongside Martine Ouellet to make official their support for her candidacy for the PQ leadership.

To fervent applause from the union bureaucrats, Martine Ouellet demagogically proclaimed that “the PQ must once again become the party of the workers and the middle class.” Of course she made no attempt to explain her support for the Bouchard-Landry PQ government, which between 1996 and 1998 imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history, and, when nurses rebelled, criminalized their strike and threatened them with savage reprisals. Nor did she in anyway distance herself from the Marois government, in which she served as a cabinet minister. It outlawed a province-wide construction strike and in the name of balancing the provincial budget imposed sweeping social spending cuts, while hiking electricity rates and university tuition fees.

Daniel Roy, who had declared his and the Steelworkers’ “unreserved support” for Ouellet last February, gushed to reporters: “Finally, we have a candidate who upholds our values, who supports a progressive society, who defends the middle class,” adding, “It’s a breath of fresh air for us, the workers.”

With Drainville out of the race, the SPQ-Libre (Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec), a political group inside the PQ that speaks in the name of the union bureaucracy, has also endorsed Martine Ouellet—a member of its leadership committee between 2004 and 2007. The SPQ Libre claimed Ouellet “best represents social-democratic and environmentalist values,” adding that she would serve as a “rallying point for all sovereignist (pro-independence) elements in the Parti Québécois and throughout Quebec.”

For several months, the SPQ-Libre and the major union federations, especially the largest, the FTQ (Quebec Federation of Labour), have been calling for the entire union officialdom and the so-called “left” to close ranks behind the PQ. This is at a point when the PQ’s support in the working class is at an all-time low, owing to the draconian social cuts carried out by successive PQ governments. Some unions have also called on workers to take out membership in the PQ in the name of “saving the PQ” from Péladeau.

Those union leaders who support Martine Ouellet do so because, more than the other candidates, she advocates that the PQ maintain close ties with the union bureaucracy and continue to rely on the system of tripartite union-business-government collaboration the PQ helped fashion in the 1970s and 1980s as a means of suppressing the class struggle and imposing the diktats of big business. The union bureaucrats also like Ouellet’s call for a renewed push for an independent Quebec, as they calculate a capitalist *République du Québec* will be better able to pursue a reactionary, economic nationalist “Quebec First” program.

For decades, the alliance between the PQ and the unions has been one of the principal mechanisms used by the ruling class to quarantine the struggles of the Quebec workers and divide them from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada.

Thanks to the union bureaucracy, the PQ was able to exploit the offensive mounted by the working class in Quebec in the decade between 1965 and 1975 to strengthen the position of the rising francophone ruling elite. Although the Parti Québécois has always been a capitalist party defending the interests of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie, the unions depicted—and still depict—this party as “progressive” or at least a “lesser-evil” than the federalist Liberals.

Whilst a large section of the union officialdom is using Ouellet’s candidacy to claim that there is still a “social-democratic” wing of the PQ and that it thus remains the best “progressive” option, another faction is directly supporting Péladeau. In mid-April, more than a dozen high-placed union leaders, several now in retirement, published an open letter emphasizing that the rightwing businessman was best placed “to confront the most aggressive federalists” and make Quebec a country. Referring to Péladeau’s notorious anti-union record, the letter argued that “the issue here is not negotiations over a union contract but the achievement by Quebec of its independence.”

The arrival on the political scene of the reactionary press magnate has exposed not only the unions but also Québec Solidaire (QS), a pseudo-left party closely aligned with the PQ. Commenting on Drainville’s announcement, the QS’s parliamentary leader Françoise David criticized the latter for

giving his support to the “most right-wing candidate” when there were other “more progressive” candidates.

A few weeks ago, QS responded positively to an appeal launched by some PQ leaders for a renewed effort to “bring together” all those who support Quebec independence. At that time, David affirmed that the QS is ready to work with a party led by Pierre-Karl Péladeau.

“Québec Solidaire is always open to dialogue, to discussions, especially when it is a question of preparing for independence,” said David. “We must have discussions,” he insisted, “no matter who is the new leader of the Parti Québécois.”

Some QS members are critical of David’s repeated overtures toward the PQ, especially her willingness to consider a QS-PQ electoral alliance, which, they fear, would expose too openly the political affinity between the two parties. These differences notwithstanding, all sections of QS will collaborate—directly or indirectly—with a party led by Péladeau. The QS is already formally aligned with the PQ through its participation in the pro-sovereignty coalition “Oui Québec” (formerly the Conseil de la Souveraineté du Québec.)

The marked turn to the right by the official left must be a warning to workers in the province and throughout the country. Determined to stifle and sabotage any serious struggle against capitalist austerity, the unions and the pseudo-left in Quebec are intensifying their promotion of Quebec nationalism with the aim of subordinating workers to the big business PQ and preventing the development of a unified movement of the working class directed against big business and all its political representatives, federalist and Quebec sovereignist.

As they did during the student strikes—in 2012 and, more recently, this year—the unions will do everything possible to prevent an independent mobilization of the working class and assist the ruling class in imposing its austerity measures.

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