

Quebec Solidaire's disingenuous role in Canada's reactionary niqab debate

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At the initiative of Québec Solidaire—a pseudo-left, pro-Quebec independence party—Quebec's National Assembly unanimously passed a motion October 1 that expressed “concern” over a spike in “Islamophobic statements” and condemned the “incitement of hatred and violence.”

Two days earlier the media had reported that two teenagers had assaulted a pregnant woman wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf) in Anjou, a northeastern borough of Montreal. A resurgence of hate speech on social media was also noted. Several rightly blamed the reactionary election campaign hue and cry that the ruling Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois (BQ) have whipped up against Muslim women wearing the niqab (a Muslim veil that covers the face except a band across the eyes) when taking the oath of Canadian citizenship. (See: Canada's Conservatives stoke anti-Muslim bigotry).

The motion “against islamophobia” sponsored by Québec Solidaire (QS) parliamentary leader Françoise David is pure hypocrisy. The rise of intolerance towards the Muslim minority is the outcome of years of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant demagoguery in which the entire Quebec political establishment and ruling elite is complicit. For years, Quebec and “Quebec values” have been depicted as under threat from religious minorities and other “outsiders”—especially Muslim fundamentalists who are said to be intent on imposing their retrograde attitudes toward women in Quebec.

This distorted image of reality is part of a concerted campaign to divert public anger and anxiety over mounting social inequality and economic insecurity and to make immigrants—and Muslims, in particular—scapegoats for the crisis of world capitalism, the real source of the endless assault on jobs, wages and

public services.

The posturing from the politicians and newspaper columnists about “gender equality” is also being used to give a pseudo-democratic face to the illegal, predatory wars waged by Washington and its European and Canadian allies in the oil-rich Middle East.

During the campaign for the October 19 federal election, Gilles Duceppe, the leader of the Bloc Québécois (the federal counterpart of the Parti Québécois), has combined bellicose calls for increased Canadian military action in support of the US' Iraq-Syria war with harsh criticism of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper for not going far enough in his banning of the niqab.

Speaking during the second party leaders' French-language debate, Duceppe insisted that the niqab should be prohibited not only during the oath of citizenship, but also during voting. “You saw how Ms. David voted during the motion on the covering of the face,” noted Duceppe. “She is against it.”

Duceppe was referring to Québec Solidaire's support for a motion passed unanimously by the Quebec National Assembly on September 17 that urged the parties contesting the federal election to “make a formal commitment to ban veiled voting.”

Following the September 17 vote, Québec Solidaire Member of the National Assembly Amir Khadir told the press his party had “no difficulty adding its voice to the motion,” then called for a “secular charter” stipulating “that the face must be uncovered when receiving public services, except in emergencies, including in schools and health care facilities.”

Under the guise of “secularism,” Québec Solidaire agrees that observant Muslim women should be deprived of essential services such as health care and education. Thus for all practical purposes, it supports

the Quebec Liberal government's Bill 62. Tabled in the National Assembly last spring, Bill 62 would bar women wearing the niqab or burqa from accessing public services, by stipulating that public services must be "given and received with the face uncovered."

Québec Solidaire has a long record of legitimizing the trumped up furor over the alleged excessive "accommodation" of religious and ethnic minorities—a campaign initiated in 2007 by the right-wing populist Action Démocratique du Québec and tabloids of the media mogul and current Parti Québécois leader Pierre-Karl Péledeau.

In 2013, Québec Solidaire welcomed the Charter of Quebec values put forward by the PQ government of Pauline Marois. It would have obliged Muslim female public sector workers to stop wearing the hijab or face dismissal.

Québec Solidaire is a party of the privileged middle class that aspires, like its sister party and role-model in Greece, Syriza, to gain access to the corridors of power by demonstrating to the ruling capitalist class that it completely defends the existing socioeconomic and political framework—including when it exudes chauvinism and xenophobia.

The special role that Québec Solidaire plays as the "left" ally of the big business, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois is to cover up the reactionary implications of its anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourse.

"It's fine to have a debate on whether the niqab should be worn or not," said Françoise David, in explaining the reasoning behind her October 1 motion. "But to talk about it for two weeks, and for political parties, particularly the Conservatives, to turn it into the main issue in the elections by posing as defenders of women, then I say, 'Enough'."

Through its promotion of anti-Muslim chauvinism, the PQ-led Quebec *indépendantiste*, or sovereignty, movement finds itself in the same camp as the Conservatives and their neo-conservative leader Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Harper has had no trouble in joining the PQ, BQ and QS in invoking "the equality between men and women" as a cover for appealing to and stoking anti-Muslim prejudice and as part of the campaign to sustain in office his government of war and reaction.

In a political development highly incriminating for

Québec Solidaire, Gilles Duceppe of the Bloc Québécois—the champion of the struggle against the niqab and for the imperialist war in the Middle East—proved to be Harper's main ally in this charade.

Françoise David's motion "against islamophobia" was a political stunt designed to cover the tracks of this compromising alliance and QS's complicity in it.

Revealingly, the maneuver was almost derailed by the virulent opposition of the Parti Québécois to the inclusion of the word "islamophobia" in the motion. David had to acknowledge in the press that even though the PQ ended up voting for her motion, it "was not entirely heartfelt support." She quickly added, "Let me be clear, I'm not saying at all that ... the Parti Québécois is islamophobic. Under torture I would not say that."

This is an extraordinary admission. Since suffering defeat in the 1995 referendum on Quebec's secession from Canada, the PQ has increasingly effected a *tournant identitaire* (a turn to "identity" issues) that encourages anti-immigrant sentiment. Québec Solidaire is complicit in this embrace of chauvinist exclusivism, which belies the claims of bygone years about the democratic nature of the Quebec independence movement and reveals its true face—the selfish project of a section of the Quebec bourgeoisie to erect its own capitalist state where it would reign over the workers, where it would be, to use the slogan popularized by PQ founder René Lévesque, "*maîtres chez-nous*" (masters in our own house.)"

As QS co-leader David proclaimed, there is no question of the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire giving up, even "under torture," its orientation to, and participation, in the *indépendantiste* movement of the Quebec bourgeoisie, or its repeated offers to the PQ of an electoral alliance. Even if this be at the expense of Muslim women or other minorities in a political climate increasingly marked by ruling-class incited intolerance and xenophobia.



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