Quebec union leader heads new right-wing populist party

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24 December 2016

Bernard “Rambo” Gauthier, a prominent official with the Quebec Federation of Labour’s construction wing (FTQ-Construction), has taken the leadership of a new right-wing populist party. *Citoyens au pouvoir* (Citizens to Power) combines anti-immigrant broadsides with demagogic denunciations of the “establishment.”

At the Dec. 6 press conference at which Gauthier announced that he will stand as Citizens to Power’s 2018 Quebec election candidate in the North Shore riding of Duplessis, the FTQ-Construction Local 791 official denounced immigrants, going so far as to call them “invaders.” “At one point,” said Gauthier, immigration “was okay, but now it’s getting out of hand.”

“We need to take care of the people from here, before looking after outsiders,” continued Gauthier. He also attacked Quebec’s policy of “reasonable accommodations” for religious minorities, saying “we do not want any of that” and claiming that for the people of Quebec’s regions what is happening in the cities is “scary.”

Gauthier rebuffed press suggestions he is a Québécois Donald Trump, noting he is an “ordinary taxpayer,” not a billionaire. But he added he has learned from Trump’s election victory.

Gauthier peppered his remarks with vulgar language, denounced Quebec’s traditional parties, and promised to “restore power to the people.” Referring to social inequality and growing poverty, he said: “Everything to the richest and nothing to the poorest, it must f---ing stop.”

Gauthier raised the specter of “violence,” saying he has entered politics to try to avert a “civil war.”

The Local 791 official describes himself as a proponent of Quebec independence and a disappointed Parti Québécois (PQ) supporter.

It is impossible to say whether Citizens to Power will gain any popular traction. The *Journal de Montréal*, the province’s leading right-wing tabloid, gave lavish coverage to Gauthier’s entry into official politics and claimed he has significant support in the small industrial city of Sept-Isles and its environs.

Whatever the case, the emergence of Citizens to Power is a warning is to the working class.

Under conditions of mounting economic and social crisis, ultra-right wing demagogues like Trump and far-right parties like France’s National Front are coming to the fore. These virulent anti-working class forces are exploiting popular anger against the traditional ruling class politicians due to their imposition of brutal austerity measures and pursuit of imperialist aggression and war.

If the populist far-right has been able to gain support from sections of working people, it is above all because of the role that the pro-capitalist trade unions, traditional ostensible “left” parties such as the British Labour Party and the French Socialist Party, and pseudo-left forces like Syriza in Greece have played in implementing austerity and the ruling elite’s turn to militarism.

In Quebec, the unions have suppressed the class struggle for decades, while politically subordinating the working class to the big-business and increasingly openly chauvinist and anti-immigrant PQ.

Since the 1980s, the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party, which have alternated as Quebec’s government, have carried out a devastating assault on the working class.

In the name of achieving a “zero (budget) deficit” or under the pretext that “there is no money,” successive Quebec governments have ravaged public services, including health and education, cut gaping holes in the so-called social safety net, and pillaged workers’ pensions. As part of their systematic redistribution of wealth to the most privileged, Quebec governments have also implemented round after round of tax cuts for big business and the rich.

This class war program has been carried forward with the support of the union bureaucracy in which Gauthier has made his career. For decades, whenever workers and youth have come forward to challenge the ruling class offensive, the unions have isolated and smothered their struggles.

In May 2012, when workers poured onto the streets to defend Quebec’s striking students from state attack raising

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the prospect of a general strike, the unions recoiled in horror. Determined to preserve “social peace,” they advanced the watchword “from the streets, to the ballot box” and threw their political weight into snuffing out the strike and harnessing the opposition to the Charest Liberal government’s austerity program to the election of the Parti Québécois. In 2015, a widespread mobilization of Quebec public sector workers was again sabotaged by the union bureaucracy, which used the threat of a strikebreaking-law and government decreed-contracts to pressure workers into accepting concessions.

While the unions have been suppressing working-class opposition, the ruling elite has for the past decade sought to poison public opinion with anti-immigrant, particularly anti-Muslim, venom in order to confuse and divide working people and rally support for Canadian imperialism’s military interventions in the Middle East.

These are the political conditions that have paved the way for someone like Gauthier to launch a right-wing populist movement. Such movements use radical-sounding “anti-establishment” rhetoric including phony denunciations of some of the deprivations caused by big business, to channel popular anger into reactionary and xenophobic channels.

Gauthier's anti-immigrant chauvinism arises quite naturally out of the nationalist politics and the corporatist, economic nationalist agenda long promoted by the union bureaucracy. For decades the unions have promoted the lie that Quebec workers have more in common with their Quebec bosses than workers elsewhere in Canada and internationally, imposed concessionary contracts in the name of “saving Quebec jobs,” and advocated for protectionist policies that pit workers against each other. Through its multi-billion dollar investment fund, the Fonds de Solidarité, the Quebec Federation of Labour works hand-in-glove with the banks and other investors to build profitable Quebec business, including through the imposition of anti-worker corporate restructuring agreements.

The union officialdom has also supported, often openly and at least tacitly, the Quebec ruling elite’s turn to ever more virulent forms of chauvinism. This includes the outcry over “reasonable accommodations” for immigrants that was trumped up by the media beginning in 2007; the Parti Québécois’ Charter of Quebec Values, which would have barred half a million provincial public sector workers from wearing “ostentatious” religious symbols, such as hijabs; and the current Liberal government’s Bill 62 on religious “neutrality” which would prohibit women wearing a burka or niqab from receiving public services.

Some of the most fervent supporters of anti-democratic measures targeting immigrants and Muslims are to be found in the union bureaucracy. The SPQ-Libre (Trade Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec), a pro-PQ grouping led by former top union officials, vigorously supported the PQ’s Charter of Values.

Québec Solidaire, a pseudo-left party in the orbit of the PQ, has also participated in the anti-immigrant campaign, describing the “debate” over “reasonable accommodation” and the PQ’s Charter of Values as “legitimate,” even if they sometimes went “too far.” Québec Solidaire’s parliamentary leader Françoise David has said that “even under torture” she would never accuse the PQ of being Islamophobic.

Amir Khadir, another QS legislator, has declared himself ready to welcome Gauthier into the ranks of QS, declaring the union bureaucrat “a victim of the discourse of the elites who convey prejudice [about immigration].”

Gauthier, for his part, has dismissed Québec Solidaire as just another establishment party. Indeed, QS is now offering to form an alliance with the PQ to “defeat the Liberals” in the next provincial election, which is slated for October 2018. This alliance would not be a “progressive” alternative to Philippe Couillard's Liberals, but rather a new ruling-class mechanism for attacking the working class.

Alongside Gauthier at his Dec. 6 press conference was Frank Malenfant, former leader of the Party of Those Without a Party, the forerunner of Citizens to Power. In YouTube videos, Malenfant speaks of a “leaderless” party based on “direct democracy,” a political concept to which Gauthier also referred and that is often promoted by anarchists. Behind the individualistic and subjective conceptions of the anarchists lies petty bourgeois hostility to the working class constituting itself as any independent political force, through the building of its own party, and imposing its own solution to the crisis of capitalism.

It is precisely this hostility to the political independence of the working class, combined with virulent Quebec nationalism and toxic anti-immigrant rhetoric, that characterizes the new political vehicle of union bureaucrat Bernard “Rambo” Gauthier.

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