Ten years of Québec Solidaire: The record of a pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist party

Part two

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Reviving anti-working class Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism

Québec Solidaire's special function within Quebec and Canadian politics is to attempt to revive popular enthusiasm for the retrograde and increasingly explicitly chauvinist program of Quebec independence. This is inseparable from the support that Québec Solidaire (QS) provides the trade union bureaucracy in isolating the Quebec working class and its struggles from those of its class brothers and sisters elsewhere in Canada and internationally.

Ind é *pendantiste* nationalism first became a significant political current in Quebec in the 1960s and has been principally associated with the big business Parti *Québécois* (PQ) since its formation in 1968 in a split-off from the Quebec Liberal Party.

The call for Quebec's secession from the Canadian federal state, for the reshuffling of the nation-state system in North America to create a capitalist *République du Québec*, articulates the class interests and aspirations of a faction of Quebec's ruling elite. This faction calculates that an independent Quebec would provide a better base for accumulating profits and otherwise asserting its interests, because it could pursue trade, tax and other socio-economic policies exclusively tailored to the needs of Quebec capital and strike its own deals with Washington and Wall Street.

The PQ, for example, has for a quarter century expressly promoted independence on the basis that the reorganization of the state apparatus inevitably entailed would provide a choice mechanism for slashing state expenditure, that is, for pressing forward with the elimination of public and social services.

Typically the most virulent proponents of Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism have come from sections of the privileged middle classes—lawyers, academics, entertainers and union bureaucrats. These layers, who form the social base of Québec Solidaire, anticipate that the creation of a *République du Québec* would provide opportunities for their personal advancement, by creating new positions in government administration, and that an independent Quebec would be freer to pursue exclusivist, affirmative action-type language policies.

Quebec nationalism, including its *indépendantiste* variant, is an ideological pillar of capitalist rule in Quebec and Canada, serving to bind Quebec workers to the Quebec bourgeoisie and split them from the Canadian and international working class.

The Quebec working class has had a bitter experience with the PQ.

Canada's only majority French-speaking province was convulsed by militant working class struggles for almost a decade beginning in the late 1960s. This upsurge, which was part of a worldwide working class offensive, terrified the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy. With the assistance of the Stalinist Communist Party, the Pabloites and Maoists, the unions diverted the working class behind the PQ. While the unions and Stalinists openly promoted the PQ and its claim "to have a favourable prejudice to the workers' movement," the Pabloites hailed *indépendantiste* nationalism as a form of "anti-imperialism" and supported the call for chauvinist language laws.

In their suppression of the working class upsurge, the Quebec unions were also assisted by the union bureaucracy and social-democratic politicians of the NDP in English Canada. All were determined to keep the militant struggles of the Quebec workers quarantined within *la belle province*.

Once in power, the PQ, came headlong into conflict with the working class. In 1982-83, René Lévesque's second PQ government imposed wage cuts and other concessions on hundreds of thousands of public sector works by government decree. When teachers rebelled, it threatened them with mass firings.

Every subsequent PQ government has pursued right-wing austerity measures. Between 1996 and 1998 the Bouchard PQ government carried out, in tandem with its federalist adversaries in the Chretien-Martin federal Liberal government, the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history. Then, when their budgets were balanced, both governments implemented massive tax cuts for big business and the rich.

Notwithstanding the unions' steadfast support for the PQ, both it and its federal sister party, the Bloc *Québécois* (BQ), have seen their working class support hemorrhage over the past decade and a half. Beginning with the 2003 provincial election, the PQ and BQ have suffered a series of electoral debacles that at several points have called into question their continued existence as major forces in Quebec electoral politics.

The formation of Québec Solidaire in 2006 was an attempt to preempt a conscious class break of the working class from the PQ and, above all, its Quebec *indépendantiste* program.

Over the past decade, QS has striven to give a "progressive" and "democratic" gloss to the Quebec sovereignty or independence movement. While it criticizes the PQ for having "accommodated to neo-liberalism" and not being aggressive enough in pressing for independence, QS regularly makes overtures to the PQ and proudly declares itself a fellow pro-sovereignty party. This finds formal expression in Québec Solidaire's participation in the PQ-led coalition of pro-sovereignty organizations, *OUI Québec*.

While systematically covering up the class character of the PQ and apologizing for or minimizing the reactionary import of its actions, QS

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claims that the nation-state can be a lever for social progress and a bulwark against the “excesses” of capitalist globalization. This is a lie.

The nation-state, like capitalism, with which it historically arose, has been transformed in the contemporary imperialist era into a barrier and menace. It serves as the platform from which the various rival national cliques of capitalists vie for markets, resources and strategic advantage, and do so increasingly through aggression and war.

Only the overthrow of capitalism and the nation-state system by the revolutionary action of the world working class will enable the mighty forces of global economy, produced by the collective labour of generations of workers, to be used rationally in the fulfillment of human needs, thereby purging the world of war and want.

The entire political activity of QS is directed against this: at combating the development of socialist internationalist consciousness within the working class; at urging workers to politically identify themselves as *Québécois* who have more in common with French-speaking capitalists like Desmarais and Peladeau than workers in Ontario, o r the US; and at tying them to the faction of the Quebec bourgeoisie that is seeking to create a third imperialist state in North America.

Significantly, all the leading forces that today comprise Québec Solidaire were part of the so-called “rainbow coalition” PQ Premier Jacques Parizeau established in the run-up to the 1995 referendum on Quebec independence. Extending to the populist Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) on the right and the Pabloite Gauche Socialiste on the “left,” this coalition endorsed a plan for an independent capitalist Quebec that was to be a partner of NATO, NORAD and NAFTA.

Québec Solidaire’s role in the suppression of the working class

Quebec Solidaire’s incestuous ties to the PQ and the trade union bureaucracy and its hostility to a genuine working class challenge to austerity were exemplified during the 2012 Quebec student strike, which mobilized hundreds of thousands of students over a seven-month period in opposition to the Charest Liberal government’s drastic university tuition fee hikes.

The strike had the potential to become the spearhead of a cross-Canada offensive against austerity, especially in May 2012 when workers poured onto Quebec’s streets to oppose legislation criminalizing the strike and dramatically curtailing the right to demonstrate over any issue. The unions, which had systematically isolated the striking students, recoiled in horror. They urged a turn “from the streets to the ballot box” and redoubled their efforts to isolate the students and harness the opposition to the Charest government’s austerity agenda, behind the big business PQ.

QS claimed to support the students, but voiced not a word of criticism of the unions. Instead it joined in their efforts to promote the PQ as a “progressive” force. In June 2012, it called on the PQ to join it in an electoral bloc. Then just days before the September 2012 election, QS pledged that if it won enough seats to hold the balance of power, it would provide unconditional support for a PQ minority government for at least one year.

Its “progressive” credentials burnished by the unions and QS, the PQ did win enough seats to form a minority government for 18 months from September 2012 through 2014. However, to its chagrin, the QS did not hold the balance of power. During this period, QS repeatedly expressed its “disappointment” as the PQ, which, after making token concessions to end the political crisis provoked by the student strike, implemented austerity measures that surpassed even those of Charest.

No less revealing was Québec Solidaire’s response to the PQ’s turn to anti-immigrant chauvinism, as a means of deflecting attention away from it austerity policies and splitting the working class. Under its “Charter of Quebec values,” the PQ proposed to prohibit public sector employees from wearing “ostentatious” religious symbols (but not “discrete crucifixes”) at work—a measure explicitly aimed at Muslim women wearing the hijab.

QS supported the concept of the Charter, just as earlier it had legitimized the reactionary debate that the ADQ and right-wing tabloids had incited over the purported “excessive” accommodations made to Quebec’s religious minorities. QS only complained that the PQ ban on “religious symbols” should be more selectively targeted.

Since the return of the Liberals to power in Quebec City, QS has worked with the unions to suppress mounting working class opposition, first to cuts in municipal workers’ pensions and then sweeping cuts to public and social services. In 2015, QS pledged its full support to the unions as they separated opposition to the cuts from the contract struggle of more than a half- million public sector workers. When the public sector union Common Front signed a treacherous deal that imposed a cut in real wages and an increase in the retirement age, QS hailed the deal as having “extracted valuable concessions” from the Couillard government.

A party moving ever further to the right

While QS works systematically to prevent Quebec workers from fusing their struggles with those of workers elsewhere in Canada, it does on occasion ally with the unions, the social-democratic NDP and the pseudo-left in English Canada to politically contain and derail social opposition.

In the fall of 2008, QS supported the abortive attempt of the Liberals, NDP and BQ to oust the Harper government and form a Liberal-led coalition government committed to “fiscal responsibility,” i.e., austerity, $50 billion in corporate tax cuts and waging war in Afghanistan until 2011.

Similarly, QS supported the union-spearheaded “Anybody but Harper” campaign in the 2015 federal election and subsequently welcomed the coming to power of Justin Trudeau’s Liberals.

QS has been increasingly at pains to demonstrate to the Quebec elite that it has “responsible” and “credible” economic policies. In May 2014, while the newly elected Quebec Liberals were pressing ahead with a new round of draconian austerity policies, QS legislator Amir Khadir endorsed the government’s “zero-deficit” goal, only criticizing the Liberals for insisting on a one-year timeframe. He subsequently held up the Wynne Ontario Liberal government, which has slashed social spending, imposed real wage cuts on provincial workers and criminalized teacher strikes, as a model for the Couillard Liberals to follow.

Québec Solidaire’s ostensible left wing is an integral part of its evermore explicit right-wing orientation.

Benoit Renaud, a leading member of QS with a long association with the pseudo-left International Socialists (IS), published an article in December 2014 calling for the “political and social left” to oppose the “top 1 percent” by courting the support of the “next 9 percent”—that is the highly privileged layer that makes up the remainder of the wealthiest 10 percent of Quebec’s population.

Renaud enthused over the possibility that the “mayor of a major city, a socially responsible businessman or a manager in the education sector” might “make the jump and wear the colors of Québec Solidaire” in the elections slated for 2018. The following year QS announced a “regional tour,” where it met with various Chambers of Commerce and owners and executives of small and medium sized business to sell itself as a “credible and economically innovative” party, i.e., a defender of the profit system.

Renaud is representative of a whole layer of pseudo-revolutionary

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groups in Quebec—including Gauche Socialiste, Alternative Socialiste and La Riposte—that have dissolved themselves into QS and attempt to provide a thin “Marxist,” and even “Trotskyist,” gloss to its reactionary nationalist politics.

After ten years of existence, Québec Solidaire stands exposed as a representative of the affluent middle classes, a nationalist, pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist party, and staunch ally of the trade union bureaucracy. As the class struggle intensifies, it will come into ever more open conflict with the working class. Were it to come to power in the coming period, whether alone or as a junior partner in a PQ-led coalition government, it would quickly reveal itself to be in deed as in word the sister party of Syriza—an enforcer of austerity and militarism.

Concluded

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