Quebec Liberals expand chauvinist bill targeting Muslims

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Thousands of migrants, mostly Haitian, have recently crossed the US-Canadian border near Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec, to escape the Trump administration's threats of deportation and apply for asylum in Canada.

They have received a warm welcome from ordinary people, who are sensitive to the plight of those who have suffered severe hardship. Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas, was devastated in 2010 by an earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people. In 2016 a hurricane destroyed a large part of the island.

But the reception from the Quebec and Canadian elite has been cold, if not hostile. Migrants are widely portrayed by the media and the establishment parties as "illegals," even "invaders," including by the two main opposition parties in Quebec, the Parti Québécois (PQ) and the Coalition for Quebec's Future (CAQ), and by the Conservatives, the Official Opposition in Ottawa.

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard and his Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) government have adopted the pose of defenders of civil rights. They are claiming to be "open" to the asylum seekers and have warned that the xenophobic agitation of the opposition parties is encouraging the extreme right.

"[P]olitical leaders need to be very careful when they describe people as illegal when they are not," said Couillard. "When you make it seem as though we can solve the problem by snapping our fingers, we worry the population and we encourage this kind of thing." Here Couillard was pointing to the connection between the anti-immigration pronouncements of the PQ and CAQ and a spike in the activity and public presence of the far-right.

But there is an enormous gap between Couillard's humanitarian rhetoric and the actions of his government.

Since returning to office in 2014, the Liberals have carried out massive cuts in health care, education, social assistance and child care. In 2015-16, with the help of the trade unions, the Couillard government imposed cuts in the real wages, pensions and working conditions of a half-million public sector workers.

In May of this year, in a move that has become the norm across Canada, the PLQ criminalized a strike by 170,000 construction workers who were resisting the employers' drive for "flexibility" in work schedules, cuts in overtime pay, and a five-year contract with wage increases below the rate of inflation.

This is on top of the attacks on democratic rights unleashed by the Liberals during the student strike that shook Quebec in 2012. Liberal Premier Jean Charest responded by unleashing police violence against the students and adopting a draconian law, Bill 78, that effectively illegalized the strike and banned demonstrations over any issue.

Now the PLQ is making its own pronounced turn towards chauvinism to divert the growing opposition to its austerity measures in a reactionary direction and to split the working class.

The party's real attitude to the asylum seekers and other immigrants can be gauged by the government's moves to amend Bill 62—proposed Liberal legislation that in the name of the "security" and the "religious neutrality of the state" targets the Muslim minority. Bill 62 would prohibit anyone giving or receiving public services while wearing a face covering, a provision that explicitly targets Muslim women who wear the burqa or niqab.

It is meant as the Liberals' response to the debate over the reputed "excessive accommodation" of religious minorities—a reactionary and diversionary debate that Quebec's political elite and media have promoted for the past decade.

The Liberals' new version of Bill 62 would extend its reach to municipalities, public transit companies, museums and other government agencies, thereby imposing a virtual public ban on the wearing of Muslim face-coverings.

The strengthening of Bill 62 is part of a series of calculated steps taken by Couillard and his Liberals in recent months to promote chauvinism.

In the name of upholding Quebec's "cultural," i.e., Roman Catholic, "heritage," Health Minister Gaétan Barrette and other leading Liberals have defended the decision of a

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Quebec hospital to restore a giant crucifix to its central position at the hospital's main entrance.

In June, after a police officer was stabbed in the United States by a Muslim Quebec resident, Couillard adopted the typical language of anti-Muslim chauvinism, declaring that it was not possible to "separate such events—terrorism—from Islam in general" and asserting that Quebec Muslims have a special responsibility to oppose terrorism.

The fact that Bill 62 provides for certain unspecified accommodations has raised the ire of the opposition parties, who predictably claim that the anti-democratic legislation does not go "far enough."

The CAQ, which recently said that the border between the United States and Quebec "shouldn't leak like a sieve," has called on the government to be "firmer in enforcing its regulation on the giving and receiving of services with the face uncovered."

For his part, Parti Québécois (PQ) leader Jean-François Lisée has called on Couillard and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to suspend the international agreement under which the federal government accepts asylum-seekers. Lisée has tweeted that Quebecers "are against the normalization of illegal crossings" and has sought to whip up chauvinism with demagogic denunciations of the government for providing financial support to asylum-seekers while telling "us it can't give two baths" a week to seniors in nursing homes.

Lisée is also adamantly opposing a request from the mayor of Montréal, where most Quebec Muslims live, for the right to opt out of some of Bill 62's provisions.

Both the CAQ and the PQ are criticizing the Liberals for not banning the chador, traditional Iranian clothing that covers the body but leaves the face uncovered. Both organizations also argue that the bill should prohibit the wearing of religious symbols by state employees in "positions of authority," including, in the CAQ's case, daycare workers. This ban was first proposed in 2008 by the Liberal-appointed Bouchard-Taylor Commission on "reasonable accommodation."

It is noteworthy that Bill 62 has received tacit support from New Democratic Party (NDP) federal leadership candidate and Quebec MP Guy Caron. Niki Ashton, who also aspires to lead Canada's social democratic party, and who is being heavily promoted by the pseudo-left as a quasi-socialist, also indicated her support for what she termed the "consensus among Quebec's political leaders on secularism." But she later backtracked after coming under fire for supporting legislation "dictating women's attire."

Québec Solidaire, the ostensibly "left-wing" pro-independence party, has remained silent on the amendments to Bill 62. Although it occasionally criticizes certain "excesses" in the identity debate, QS has played a key role in legitimizing it with the claim that discussions on "religious accommodation" are "necessary."

QS's response to the rise of xenophobia has been anything but principled. Faced with the spike in asylum-claims, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, the new "male spokesperson" for QS and former 2012 student strike leader, said the "situation is serious" and that "some concerns are legitimate." The next day, he solidarized with the governments of Quebec and Canada—instruments of big business, which are trampling on worker and democratic rights—declaring the "real problem is Donald Trump."

Canada, under the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, hypocritically claims to be in favor of refugees. But this is a sham.

Canada's Liberal-led government has accepted only 40,000 Syrian refugees in the last two years, although millions have been forced to flee the civil war in that country, and it has made clear that many, if not most, of the Haitian asylum seekers will be deported.

Moreover, Ottawa has taken part in almost all the US-led military interventions and wars of the last quarter century that are at the root of the refugee crisis. This includes the "regime change" operation that overthrew Haiti's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 2004. These interventions, from Libya to Afghanistan, have razed entire societies, forcing millions to flee.

Canada's turn to militarism, which is fully supported by both the federal and sovereignist (pro-independence) wings of Quebec's ruling elite, is taking place in tandem with a cross-country assault on public services and workers' wages and pensions.

It is these regressive policies that create fertile ground for far-right, ultra-nationalist groups like La Meute (the Wolf Pack). Last month La Meute staged a high-profile demonstration in Quebec City, under police protection, to demand Canada violate its international obligations and immediately return all the asylum-seekers to the US. On January 29, a young Quebec sympathizer of Donald Trump and France's National Front, strongly influenced by the anti-Muslim discourse of Quebec's politicians and media, opened fire in a mosque in Quebec City, killing six people and wounding 20.

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