

Quebec “clarifies” application of anti-Muslim law

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Quebec Justice Minister Stéphanie Vallée announced Tuesday several purported “clarifications” to the provincial Liberal government’s newly-enacted law denying public services, including health care and education, to women wearing Muslim face-coverings.

Last week, as Bill 62 was being adopted by the National Assembly, Vallée explicitly stated that Muslim women who wear the niqab or burka would have to have their “face uncovered” from the beginning to the end of their municipal bus ride, library visit, or use of any other public service.

On Tuesday, she claimed that she had been misinterpreted: those wearing a Muslim face-covering who want to use a municipal bus will be forced to show their faces, for “identification” and “security” purposes, only when they embark or if asked to do so by transit police.

Quebec’s Justice Minister also “clarified” that veiled women will not be denied emergency medical services. Those accessing hospital services in other circumstances “will have to have their face uncovered,” said Vallée, “when they are in direct contact with an employee. But when they return for example to the waiting room, they will not be obliged to have their face uncovered.”

Vallée expressed dismay that the Liberals’ actions have provoked an outcry across Canada, including within Quebec. Immigrant and civil rights groups, and large numbers of ordinary people, have rightly condemned Bill 62 as a bigoted attack on Muslim women, an especially marginalized and vulnerable minority.

Vallée and Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard have shamelessly lied about the aims of Bill 62. The Liberals’ ban on public services being given or received by persons with “face covered” manifestly targets devout Muslim women and them alone. But the Liberals have sought to hide the law’s anti-democratic and chauvinist intent behind spurious claims that it is motivated by concerns

over security, social harmony, and even inclusion and women’s rights.

Vallée’s expressions of dismay at her Tuesday press conference were not feigned, however. The government has been taken aback by the hostile reaction to its stigmatizing of veiled Muslim women and is now trying to limit the damage to its longstanding efforts to cast itself and Canadian federalism as a tolerant, liberal alternative to its more stridently Quebec nationalist and anti-immigrant opponents in the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ) and the “autonomist” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec’s Future).

Vallée’s “clarifications,” of course, change absolutely nothing about the deeply reactionary, bigoted character of Bill 62.

It is a calculated attempt to incite prejudice, so as to divert mounting social anger over socioeconomic insecurity, including the social devastation wrought by the Liberals’ brutal austerity drive, into reactionary channels and split the working class.

By enshrining in law that essential public services must be denied veiled women, the government is effectively summoning shopkeepers and restaurant owners to ban them from their premises and the public to shun them. A spike in harassment and physical attacks on Muslims will undoubtedly follow, as was the case during 2013-14, when the then PQ government of Pauline Marois brought forward its chauvinist “Charter of Quebec Values.”

Bill 62 is titled an “Act to foster adherence to State religious neutrality.” But in keeping with its chauvinist aims, it gives the Roman Catholic faith a privileged status in Quebec, in the name of preserving Quebec’s “cultural heritage.” The Liberals’ two-faced position on religion was highlighted again on Tuesday, when its legislators voted down a proposal to debate removing the crucifix that hangs over the Quebec National Assembly.

The PQ and CAQ have opposed Bill 62 from the right,

arguing it does not go far enough. Yesterday, PQ leader Jean-François Lisée said his party favours making it illegal to wear a Muslim face-covering in public and that it would use the “notwithstanding clause” in Canada’s Constitution, which allows governments to violate basic rights guaranteed under the Charter of Rights and Freedom, so as to ensure such a blanket ban could not be overturned through a court challenge.

As for Québec Solidaire—the pseudo-left, Quebec indépendantiste party that has three legislators in the National Assembly—it has played a pivotal role in legitimizing the efforts of the Quebec and Canadian elite to make immigrants, and Muslims in particular, scapegoats for the capitalist crisis.

It haggled with the PQ over the details of the latter’s chauvinist Charter and has insisted that the decade-long debate over the “reasonable accommodation” of ethnic and religious minorities is rooted in legitimate concerns. In fact, this debate was a reactionary canard from the outset—a furor whipped up by the right-wing tabloid press of media tycoon and prominent PQ supporter Pierre-Karl Péladeau and by Mario Dumont and the right-wing populist ADQ (a precursor of the CAQ)

Last January after a young person influenced by the ultra-right and the bigoted anti-Muslim discourse of Quebec politics massacred six people at a Quebec City mosque, QS legislator Amir Khadir attributed the attack to a “malaise” in Quebec society. This, he said, needed to be addressed by all four parties in the National Assembly joining forces to quickly adopt Bill 62, if the government would only amend the legislation to ban judges and other “members of the state exercising coercive powers” from wearing religious symbols.

Whilst Québec Solidaire ultimately voted against Bill 62, it has pointedly refused to denounce it as a chauvinist attack on Muslims and an egregious violation of democratic rights. Instead QS, like the PQ, mocks the “absurdities” of the new law.

The federal Liberal government and the Ontario and Alberta governments have all criticized Bill 62 so as to posture as champions of democratic rights. All these governments have imposed austerity and are complicit in the criminalization of social opposition.

The entire Canadian establishment has invoked the phony “war on terror,” which has always been closely associated with the promotion of Islamophobia, to justify Canada’s participation in US-led imperialist wars in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, as well as a vast expansion of the powers and reach of Canada’s national-

security apparatus.

Whilst there is genuine anger and outrage among working people in English Canada over the anti-democratic actions of the Quebec government, the opposition of the federalist political establishment is imbued with Canadian nationalism, which is falsely depicted as “progressive” and of a different kind, than the “insular, retrograde” Quebecois variety.

In fact, Canadian nationalism is increasingly serving as a rallying crying for imperialist war and social reaction. The Conservatives have repeatedly incited anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim prejudice. As for Trudeau, he has maintained a conspicuous silence on Trump’s travel bans targeting predominantly Muslim countries, and while claiming to be pro-refugee, his government is threatening to deport those seeking refuge from Trump’s anti-immigrant policies.

Bill 62 is patterned after chauvinist laws adopted by several European countries, notably France, where it is now illegal to wear the hijab (Muslim headscarf) in public schools and Muslim face-coverings have been outlawed in all public spaces.

In Canada as in Europe, the ruling elite has no answer to the breakdown of capitalism other than to intensify the assault on the working class and to brawl over markets, resources and profits through great-power geopolitics and war. It is within this context and with the aim of dividing the working class that the Quebec and Canadian establishment are turning to social reaction, eviscerating democratic rights, and promoting nationalism and anti-Muslim chauvinism—as exemplified by Bill 62.



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