

In merging with split-off from big business Parti Québécois Pseudo-left Québec Solidaire shifts further right

Louis Girard, Richard Dufour
26 February 2018

Québec Solidaire—the pseudo-left party that has three legislators in the Quebec National Assembly—voted by a majority of more than 80 percent at its congress late last year to join forces with Option Nationale (ON). The latter is a small right-wing nationalist party formed in 2011 at the initiative of former Parti Québécois (PQ) Members of the National Assembly who deemed the PQ too “soft” in its advocacy of Quebec independence.

Subsequently confirmed by a 90 percent vote in favour by Option Nationale members, the merger between QS and ON is part of Québec Solidaire’s longstanding efforts to bring together the so-called “sovereignist [pro-Quebec independence] family.” Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, Québec Solidaire’s co-leader and official male spokesperson, was euphoric. “We are going to invite Quebecers to take back Quebec,” he declared, “and join the great family of independent nations during the first term in office of the unified party.”

Québec Solidaire’s “sovereignist family” is neither new nor progressive. It is the same reactionary coalition of professionals, trade union bureaucrats, academics, small business owners, and other middle class elements who have moved in the PQ’s orbit for decades, while claiming to be “left,” even socialist. Its goal has always been to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in Canada, the US and overseas; and to subordinate them to the faction of the Quebec ruling elite that wants to increase the powers of the Quebec state with the aim of reinforcing their political-ideological control over the working class, creating a more globally “competitive” Quebec, and asserting their predatory economic and geostrategic interests on the world stage.

Relations between QS and ON have not always been so cordial. Beginning with Jean-Martin Aussant—the former investment banker and PQ legislator who founded and led Option Nationale for its first two years—ON leaders long reproached Québec Solidaire for putting too much emphasis on the “social question.” According to Nic Payne, another founding member of ON who was chairman of its national council and opposed the merger, “Many separatists will continue to see in this party [QS] a sort of left that is sometimes doctrinaire and disconnected.”

With its merger with Option Nationale, Québec Solidaire is tightening its embrace of Quebec nationalism and tilting still further right with the aim of convincing Quebec’s ruling elite it is ready to play a larger role in establishment politics—including by participating in, or even leading, a capitalist government.

Under conditions where Quebec’s two traditional parties of government, the Liberals and the PQ, are popularly discredited after decades of imposing capitalist austerity and criminalizing social opposition, QS is seeking to exploit its undeserved “left” reputation to gain access to the corridors of power.

With the danger of imperialist war, the accelerating assault on

democratic rights, and the immense rise in social inequality provoking a leftward shift of workers and youth all over the world, QS wants to convince the ruling class that its “progressive” posture makes it an ideal tool to block any revolutionary threat to the profit system—in the manner of Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his France Insoumise.

As a pledge of loyalty to the existing social order, QS is moving to water down, if not outright jettison, its vague promises of social reform and adopt an even more explicitly right-wing formulation of its program for Quebec independence.

Merger on a right-wing program

Even though Option Nationale is by far the smaller of the two parties, both in terms of membership and electoral influence (less than 1 percent of the vote in the last Quebec election as compared to more than 7 percent for Québec Solidaire), the merger took place largely on ON’s terms.

It demanded and obtained from QS a commitment to put more emphasis on Quebec independence and to more explicitly tie separation from Canada’s federal state to the needs of big business. Urged to put aside its pseudo-democratic phrases touting independence as a “social project” of a “free people,” QS agreed to more forthrightly articulate the views of the faction of Quebec’s ruling elite that sees the creation of a capitalist *République du Québec* as a better guarantor of the interests of Quebec Inc.

Under the pretext of defeating Philippe Couillard’s Liberals and the right-wing populists of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) in the provincial election of 2018, QS is already preparing its next move—an electoral alliance with the PQ. The PQ is a big-business party that has slashed social spending whenever in power and is now spreading virulent anti-immigrant, and especially anti-Muslim, chauvinism. Alongside its sister party in federal politics, the Bloc Québécois, the PQ has also supported every imperialist intervention Canada has carried out over the past three decades as a loyal ally of Washington and NATO.

As a prelude to the merger, the leaders of Québec Solidaire and Option Nationale submitted to their respective memberships an agreement in principle with instructions to “take it or leave it.” It reads like the legal text of a political takeover, with QS committing to a host of political and organizational concessions to the right-wing nationalists of ON, including:

- the adoption of large sections of the program of Option Nationale (“The congress to follow the 2018 election will focus on a review of the entire program, in particular... with a view of aligning it with the program of ON”)

- a commitment to maintain pro-business fiscal and economic policies (“The unified party will present... a financial portrait demonstrating the financial viability of an independent Quebec”)

- the sidelining or abandonment of Quebec Solidaire’s timid social demands in favor of a message centered on nationalism (“Among the sources of oppression to be denounced by the unified party... the Canadian colonial regime will be placed at the same level of importance as neoliberalism”)

- the strengthening of political ties with the PQ through an umbrella group of sovereigntist parties dominated by the PQ (“The unified party will continue its participation in the OUI-Quebec [Yes Quebec] coalition”)

- the promise to recognize Option Nationale as a political club within QS with a privileged status and to promote its explicitly pro-business agenda by “reprinting and developing the book entitled *Le livre qui fait dire oui*.”

This last condition refers to a pamphlet produced by Option Nationale, the title of which can be roughly translated as “The book that makes one say yes” to independence.

The ON pamphlet highlights the real class content of the program of Quebec independence. It develops the perspective historically associated with Jacques Parizeau, who as Quebec’s PQ premier called the second referendum on Quebec independence in 1995, and who until his death in 2015 led the hardline separatist faction within the PQ, even while acting as patron of Option Nationale.

In line with the views of Parizeau, who himself hailed from one of Quebec’s wealthiest families, *Le livre qui fait dire oui* argues that an independent Quebec would be better placed to take aggressive measures to promote the interests of Quebec capitalism and without having to accommodate the interests of other factions of Canadian big business. The state, it declares, must “defend its strategic interests, that is, the competitive advantages it has over other states in certain industries.”

In another significant passage, the ON pamphlet declares, “With the savings generated by independence, our room for maneuver will be greater, which will allow us choices. A more interventionist government will be able to invest in our strategic sectors, for example. A more right-wing government will be able to lower our taxes, while a government leaning more to the left will be able to reinvest in health and education.”

The last scenario, that of a “left” government ready to “reinvest in health and education,” only serves to throw sand in the eyes of workers—especially under conditions of a systemic crisis of world capitalism. The independent Quebec envisaged by Option Nationale—and now explicitly endorsed by Quebec Solidaire—would have as its main objective to reorganize the state apparatus so as to better serve the “independent” interests of the Quebec bourgeoisie in the global commercial and military-strategic struggle for profits, markets and resources. This would go hand in hand with a more pronounced promotion of Quebec nationalism, including through chauvinist language laws, so as to even more systematically promote the lie that Quebec workers have more in common with their Québécois bosses than with workers in the rest of Canada and internationally.

This would lay the political ground for an intensified ruling class offensive aimed at gutting what remains of the public and social services won by previous generations of workers through bitter social struggle. The

subsequent “savings” would give an “interventionist,” “more right-wing” government of an independent Quebec the “room for maneuver” needed to grant billions in subsidies to the “strategic” jewels of Quebec industry like Bombardier and Quebecor and further slash the taxes of the richest 1 percent and their hangers-on in the managerial and professional elite.

Towards an alliance with the big business PQ

What has prepared Québec Solidaire for its recent merger with Option Nationale is its entire evolution since its founding more than 10 years ago by community, feminist, and pseudo-Marxist activists and a smattering of union bureaucrats. They came together to revive the discredited program of Quebec independence and prevent workers and youth from drawing revolutionary socialist conclusions from the emergence of the PQ as the most ruthless enforcer of capitalist austerity. The social composition of QS and the main axes of its development—parochialism, subservience to the trade union bureaucracy, economic nationalism and an orientation to the PQ—literally threw it into the arms of Option Nationale and its explicitly right-wing Quebec nationalism.

The relationship between QS and the PQ is being continuously discussed in mainstream media circles. “How much do you see yourself offering an alternative to the PQ?” a reporter asked a QS spokesperson in the days leading up to the merger with ON. “Our goal is not to provide an alternative to the Parti Québécois,” said Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, who was visibly anxious to avoid anything that could look like a criticism of the PQ. “It’s the Liberals who are in power, it is the CAQ that is leading the polls,” he insisted. “It is an alternative to these parties that we propose.”

At its congress last December Québec Solidaire all but avoided any mention of the PQ, although the focus of debate at its previous congress, just six months earlier, had been a proposal, strongly supported by the QS leadership for an electoral alliance with the PQ. Ultimately, that proposal was rejected because a majority of delegates feared QS would be badly discredited if it so openly aligned with a big-business party identified by broad sections of the working class with brutal social spending cuts and xenophobic appeals.

The December Congress left the strong impression that the QS leadership is seeking to ban all criticism of the PQ, while throwing a political bridge toward its sister sovereigntist party by merging with Option Nationale. (The latter is known to be favorable to an electoral understanding with the PQ, especially if it commits to calling an independence referendum in its first term of government.)

One of the principal architects of the QS-ON merger and a supporter at last May’s QS congress of an electoral alliance with the PQ, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, has despite his young age a long experience in the political subordination of workers and youth to the PQ. As the principal spokesperson for the student association (CLASSE) which led the Quebec student strike in 2012, Nadeau-Dubois helped the union bureaucracy divert this movement behind the PQ, precisely at the moment when it threatened to become the catalyst for a broader working-class challenge to the entire austerity agenda of the ruling class in Quebec and Canada. For its part, QS urged the PQ in June 2012 to form an electoral alliance with it; then on the eve of the September 2012 election promised unconditional support to a minority PQ government for at least one year.

Another highlight of Québec Solidaire’s December Congress was when Nadeau-Dubois blamed workers for the rise in the polls of the right-wing populist CAQ by pointing to the “desperation” of some “that does not always lead to good decisions.” This is a slander. As a close ally of the union bureaucracy and the PQ, it is Québec Solidaire that bears a heavy responsibility for the rise of right-wing forces that benefit—in Quebec as in

Europe and the United States—from the association of Social Democracy, the unions, and other “left” establishment forces with austerity and war.

Through its shift to a more aggressive nationalism and its support for the xenophobic agenda of the PQ and the entire ruling class, Québec Solidaire is facilitating the rise of chauvinist sentiments that feed the most right-wing forces. QS long described the reactionary ruling-class debate over “excessive accommodation” of immigrants and religious minorities and the PQ’s abortive Charter Of Quebec Values as “legitimate.” And it kept silent last October when the Liberal majority in the National Assembly passed Bill 62, which targets Muslim women by denying those wearing a religious face-covering access to essential public services such as health care, education or public transit.

As an ally and accomplice of the trade union bureaucracy, QS also bears political responsibility for the suppression of the class struggle, thereby opening the door for far-right forces to exploit mounting social anger. In 2015-16, for example, when more than a half-million Quebec public sector workers mobilized to fight for better working conditions and public services, QS assisted the unions in containing their opposition within a bogus negotiating process predicated on acceptance of the government’s lie that there was “no money” for improving wages and benefits or public services.

As a petty-bourgeois nationalist party of the privileged middle class, QS demonstrated at its December congress, once again, a total lack of interest for any issue beyond Quebec’s borders. As geopolitical tensions around the world are reaching explosive levels and Washington threatens to wipe North Korea off the map, QS has nothing to say about preparations by Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government to participate in this criminal enterprise and the close ties it maintains with the Trump administration on all military and security matters.

After supporting the “Anybody but Harper” trade union campaign for the Liberals in the 2015 federal election, and then welcoming the return to power of the Canadian ruling class’ traditional party of government, Québec Solidaire observed a complicit silence on the Liberals’ plans to increase military spending by 70 percent over the next decade, Canada’s increased role in the latest US war in the Middle East and its spearheading of NATO’s military mobilization on Russia’s borders.

Support for bankrupt Catalan nationalism

The world capitalist crisis did intrude on the deliberation of QS congress in the form of the participation of two delegates from the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy), the so-called “left wing” of the Catalan separatist movement, whose actions were hailed as a model for QS.

What the CUP and its delegates in fact provided was an object lesson of the class character of “left nationalism.” Following in the train of the big bourgeois Catalan nationalist parties, the CUP has opposed any attempt to mobilize Spanish and European workers against the dictatorial methods of the Rajoy government and instead made pathetic appeals for intervention by a European Union that strongly supports Madrid in preserving the territorial integrity of capitalist Spain.

Upon arrival in Canada, the CUP delegates appealed, not to Canadian workers to oppose the repression of the Spanish state, but rather to the Quebec Liberal government of Philippe Couillard. “I hope we will have the chance,” said Anna Gabriel and Eulalia Reguant of the CUP, “to meet the Premier of Quebec to discuss the role that Western democracies can play in protecting democracy within Europe itself.”

Québec Solidaire took a similar position. Not only did it refuse to strongly condemn Ottawa’s support for the brutal repression of the Catalan referendum by the Spanish government. It also painted as fighters

for democracy the Liberals who now form the governments in Ottawa and Quebec—the very same federalist forces that have prepared the legal ground for their own anti-democratic measures against any future referendum on Quebec secession with their 2000 “Clarity Act” and threats to ethnically partition Quebec.

“Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Couillard,” said QS legislator and female co-leader Manon Massé, “must immediately do their duty as democrats by putting pressure on Madrid to abandon the legal proceedings that weigh on Catalan independence leaders.”

In their presentation before the Québec Solidaire congress, CUP delegates defended their party’s decision to support a right-wing Catalan nationalist government and vote for its budget in 2017. They neglected to mention that this government has attacked workers by imposing savage austerity measures and breaking strikes by metro (subway) drivers and airport workers.

Its merger with Option Nationale leaves no doubt that Québec Solidaire is preparing to play a similar role in Quebec and Canada as CUP has done in Catalonia and Spain.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact