

Unions stump for big business PQ in Quebec's October election

Félix Gauthier
24 August 2018

In the run up to yesterday's formal launch of the campaign for Quebec's October 1 provincial election, many major unions joined forces in a "pre-campaign" aimed at channeling the mass opposition to Philippe Couillard's Liberal government and its savage austerity measures behind the big business Parti Québécois (PQ).

Six of the largest Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) affiliates—including the United Steelworkers (USW), Machinists (IAM), and Canadian Unions of Public Employees (CUPE)—plastered "swing" electoral districts in Montreal, Quebec City, and smaller cities with posters bearing the slogan *Libécaquiste, Caquilibéral—On mérite mieux* ("LibeCAQ, CAQliberal, we deserve better"). The posters show a two-faced head, split vertically, and comprised of half of Couillard's face and half of the face of CAQ (Coalition Avenir du Québec) leader François Legault.

For decades the unions have politically subordinated the working class to the pro-austerity, pro-independence PQ. And if there was any doubt their current "anti-Liberal, anti-CAQ" campaign is a continuation of this policy, Quebec CUPE President Denis Bolduc was quick to dispel it. Explaining the objectives of the unions' campaign, he declared their message for working people is, "Go to the Parti Québécois or Québec Solidaire, we are not saying which."

Formed in 2006, Québec Solidaire is a pseudo-left party that is a junior partner of the PQ-led "Quebec sovereignist (pro-independence) family." It is electorally competitive in less than a dozen of Quebec's 125 electoral constituencies.

The unions' "pre-campaign" amounts to a desperate PR stunt on behalf of the PQ, a party so hated by workers that it could well be reduced to no more than a half-dozen National Assembly legislators after the October 1st election. For months, polls have consistently shown that the PQ has the support of 20 percent of the electorate or less, placing it a poor third behind the Liberals and the right-wing populist CAQ.

Earlier this summer the FTQ published an election platform that declares, "The QFL and its affiliated unions wish the election of a government that is resolutely committed to promoting a system of social justice, human dignity and democratic freedom."

These hypocritical phrases serve to obscure the reactionary character of the union bureaucracy's decades-long alliance with the PQ, whose claims to "have a favourable bias for the working class" it long touted, and which it continues to promote as a

"progressive party" or, at the very least, a "lesser evil" as compared with the "neo-liberal," pro-federalist Liberals and CAQ.

In reality, the entire history of the PQ, which was formed in 1968 out of a split-off from the Liberals, shows it to be a faithful and ruthless defender of the interests of the Quebec bourgeoisie.

The union-backed PQ: a pioneer of capitalist austerity

The PQ was a pioneer of capitalist austerity in Quebec and, indeed, across Canada. During its second mandate, from 1981 to 1985, which coincided with a major economic slump, the PQ violently attacked the working class. This included imposing wage-cutting contracts on public sector workers by government decree, threatening to fire striking teachers en masse, and using a record number of "special" or emergency laws to criminalize and break militant public sector strikes.

It was also during this period that the trade unions moved sharply to the right, systematically repudiating any traditions of independent struggle and integrating themselves ever more completely into management, to the point where today they function as an outright industrial police force of capital, imposing factory closures, wage cuts and other concessions to ensure corporate "competitiveness." As part of this process, the union bureaucracy sought to develop new sources of income, intertwining its interests with those of the rising financial aristocracy.

In 1983, as it was suppressing public sector workers' opposition to the PQ imposed wage-cuts, the FTQ leadership was negotiating with the PQ government for tax and other concessions so it could proceed with the launching of a union-run investment fund. With assets of more than \$14 billion, the Fonds de solidarité FTQ is today Quebec's largest venture capital firm.

The corporatist reorientation of the unions and the brutal shift of the PQ toward austerity were bound up with global transformations in class relations and capitalism's mode of accumulation, henceforth based on the parasitic plundering of workers' past social gains and unbridled financial speculation.

Like the contemporaneous Chrétien-Martin federal Liberal government and the Harris Conservative government, the Bouchard-Landry PQ government (1995-2003) slashed billions of

dollars from social spending and eliminated tens of thousands of jobs in education and health care. The unions gave their blessing to the PQ's attacks at "national economic summits," and in 1999 when nurses rebelled against the impact of years of austerity they isolated them in the face of escalating government threats.

Despite the union bureaucracy's continuing support, including their establishment in 2005 of a "political club" inside the PQ—the SPQ Libre (Trade Unionists and Progressives for a Free Quebec)—support for the PQ within the working class has hemorrhaged since the turn of the 21st century. For the past 15 years, the PQ has been consigned to the opposition benches for all but 18 months.

In September 2012, it won a plurality of seats and was able to form a minority government, after the unions, with the support of Québec Solidaire and the student associations, channeled the mass movement triggered by the more than half-year long Quebec student strike behind the election of a PQ government.

In May 2012, at the very point when workers were taking to the street to oppose the Charest Liberal government's efforts to break the strike through savage state repression and the student movement threatened to become the catalyst for a broader working-class challenge to austerity, the unions, with the FTQ in the lead, came forward with the watchword "From the streets, to the ballot box."

After re-stabilizing bourgeois rule, the PQ government of Pauline Marois quickly transitioned back to social spending cuts, imposed annual hikes in university tuition fees and in 2013 criminalized a province-wide construction strike.

During its year-and-a-half in power, the PQ sought to divert attention from its perpetuation of austerity and to split the working class by promoting anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism. In the name of defending "Quebec values" and secularism it brought forward legislation to ban more than a half-million public sector workers from wearing religious symbols, while carving out an exception for Roman Catholic crucifixes

The PQ calculated it could use its chauvinist "Quebec values" campaign to win a majority in the April 2014 election. But instead the Liberals, exploiting disenchantment with the PQ's austerity measures and widespread opposition to its demonization of immigrants, returned to power.

In 2015-16, mass working class opposition erupted against the Couillard government's "anti-deficit" campaign. But the unions again torpedoed the incipient mass movement, using the threat of government strikebreaking legislation to prevail on half-a-million teachers, health care workers and civil servants to accept contracts imposing real-wage cuts, pension rollbacks, and other concessions.

What accounts for the growth of the rightwing populist CAQ?

It is this record that explains the profound hostility of ordinary people toward the two traditional governing parties of the Quebec ruling class, the Liberals and PQ.

But because the unions have suppressed the working-class

opposition to their austerity agenda, the right-wing populist CAQ has been able to benefit from the anger with the political establishment.

Developments in Quebec parallel those in Ontario, where the Conservatives were elected in June led by the Trump-admirer Doug Ford, the US and Europe. The growth of rightwing populist and ultra-right forces is the product of the right-wing shift of the ruling establishment *as a whole*, which is inseparable from the bankruptcy of the traditional "left" parties and the social devastation their policies have caused.

The PQ's recent call for "robust economic nationalism" and the anti-refugee remarks of its leader, Jean-François Lisée, are part of this resurgence of rightwing nationalist politics. This goes hand in hand with the PQ and BQ's support for the militarist shift in Canadian foreign policy. They are fervent supporters of Canadian imperialism's participation in the US-led wars in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia and its implication in US military-strategic offensives around the world.

In contrast to the surge to the right of the traditional bourgeois parties, workers are increasingly using their own methods to defend their interests, and in so doing, they are coming into conflict with trade unions and the capitalist state. The recent wildcat strike of Quebec crane operators, and their refusal to return to work despite an order from the Labour Administrative Tribunal and repeated appeals by their own union leaders, took place shortly after the eruption of a mass movement of teachers in the United States. This movement was organized outside the unions, which had to face immense grassroots opposition before they were finally able to strangle it.

Already numerous throughout the world, such rebellions will only increase because they are the product of the crisis of the capitalist regime of exploitation which the unions support and help sustain, but which for the working class has become unsustainable.

In promoting the pro-big business and ever-more stridently chauvinist PQ, the unions are doubling down on the right-wing course they have pursued for the past five decades and which has facilitated an ever-widening big business offensive against the working class and is now opening the door to the most right-wing elements: the systematic isolation and sabotage of workers' struggles; the political subordination of workers to the profit system; and the use of ethno-linguistic differences to divide French-speaking workers in Quebec from their English-speaking brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and internationally.

In order to defend their class interests and oppose austerity and war, workers must break with the nationalist, pro-capitalist and *péquist* orientation of the trade unions, and take the path of independent political struggle against a putrefying capitalism on the basis of international socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact