Québec Solidaire open to supporting government led by right-wing populist CAQ

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Shortly before last week's official launch of the campaign for Quebec's October 1 election, the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire (QS) announced that it would be open to propping up a minority government formed by the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ). Currently leading in the opinion polls, the CAQ is a rightwing populist party that advocates draconian social spending cuts, massive tax cuts for big business and the rich, and the deportation of immigrants who fail to pass French-language and Quebec "values" tests after three years of residence in Quebec.

"When it comes to serving ordinary people, Québec Solidaire has always worked in collaboration with any party," QS co-leader and candidate for provincial premier, Manon Massé, said in a *La Presse* interview. In the case of a hung parliament, Massé explained, QS could support either a minority Parti Québécois (PQ) or CAQ government, although she added that with the latter party QS has major differences "over our vision of the economy."

"I think," continued Massé, "the first collaboration, whether with the Parti Québécois or the CAQ, will be on reform of the voting system."

This is not the first time that QS has publicly voiced its hope to hold the balance of power under a minority government led by the Parti Québécois (PQ), the Quebec ruling class' alternate party of government since the 1970s. That QS is now open to bargaining with, and potentially propping up a government formed by, the right-wing populists of the CAQ illustrates how quickly this pseudo-left party, based on the affluent middle class, is turning to the right as it seeks to convince the ruling elite that it poses no danger to the existing order and should be granted greater influence, even a share of governmental power.

QS's bottom-line condition for supporting a minority PQ or CAQ government speaks volumes about its pro-capitalist orientation. QS is not demanding an end to austerity—a promise that would in any case be meaningless coming from a party that has ravaged public services like the PQ or from a sworn enemy of the welfare state like the CAQ–but a reform of the current first-past-the-post electoral system to include an element of proportional representation.

The QS leaders calculate such a reform would increase the party's weight in the National Assembly, paving the way for its further integration into the ruling establishment, including participation in capitalist governments, where it would provide a "left" cover for the continuing assault on the working class.

Electoral reform is part of a whole program of demands Québec Solidaire advances in the name of "expanding democracy." Some of these demands, such as its calls for affirmative-action and the election of a Constituent Assembly to draft the constitution for an independent capitalist Quebec, are deeply inimical to the struggle to unite the working class against Quebec, Canadian and international capitalism. But even when not championing anti-democratic proposals, the QS campaign to "expand democracy" blithely ignores the manifest shift of the ruling class in Canada and around the world toward the criminalization and suppression of social opposition, and thereby promotes the most dangerous illusions in putrefying bourgeois democracy.

Significantly, the call for electoral reform, which is also a hallmark of the Green Party, is viewed favourably by a minority faction of the ruling class that is concerned with the mass alienation from the established parties and electoral politics and is seeking new political mechanisms to trap workers within the capitalist framework.

Québec Solidaire's class character, its defence of the current social order and opposition to any genuine working-class challenge to austerity, was exemplified by the role it played in assisting the trade unions in isolating and politically defanging the 2012 Quebec student strike.

At its height in May 2012, the student strike brought hundreds of thousands of workers onto the streets and threatened to become the catalyst for a broader working-class movement against the entire ruling-class austerity agenda. Terrified at this prospect, the union bureaucrats declared the strike over and, under the slogan "From the street to the ballot box," redoubled their efforts to channel

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the strike and broader movement against austerity behind the big business PQ.

In tandem with the union campaign to derail the strike, the QS in June 2012 proposed the PQ join it in an electoral alliance. Then, just a few days before the September 2012 Quebec election, QS pledged to provide unconditional support to a PQ minority government for at least a year if it held the balance of power.

The unions and QS thus blazed the path to power for the Pauline Marois-led PQ government, which, during its 18 months in office, imposed annual hikes in university tuition fees, slashed social assistance, criminalized a province-wide construction strike, imposed austerity budgets and fanned the flames of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism through its Charter of Quebec Values.

Québec Solidaire's principal role is to resuscitate illusions in the programme of Quebec sovereignty or independence, which articulates the aspirations of a section of Quebec's ruling elite to strengthen the Quebec state so as to make it a more effective tool for advancing its interests against the working class and its rivals in English Canada and internationally. The promotion of Quebec nationalism also serves to ideologically underpin class rule—to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in Canada, the United States and overseas.

From its founding in 2006, QS has been oriented toward the petty bourgeois Quebec nationalist milieu and the PQ, which it touts collectively as the "big sovereignist family." Last year, when QS congress delegates rejected a leadership-endorsed proposal to pursue an electoral alliance with the PQ, the *WSWS* explained that the divisions within QS were tactical. The lower ranks of the party leadership feared QS would be discredited by publicly joining hands with a party long associated with savage cuts to health care, education and other key public services, and the promotion of Islamophobia.

Since then, QS leaders have worked night and day for a political rapprochement with the PQ. Last December, QS merged with Option Nationale (ON), a small party formed on the initiative of former PQ MPs on the basis that the PQ had become too "soft" in promoting independence. QS seldom says a word about the PQ's decades-long record of imposing austerity or its open promotion of anti-immigrant chauvinism. On the rare occasions it criticizes the PQ, it is for having pushed Quebec's secession from Canada to the backburner.

During an interview on Radio-Canada last June, Massé, obviously annoyed by the journalist's insistence on presenting QS as "aggressive" towards the PQ, said: "It's funny that you say that because we never talk about the PQ."

Québec Solidaire's recent offer of political support to the CAQ, which is a natural extension of its strident nationalist orientation, is far from an aberration. QS-like forces around the world are increasingly aligning with right-wing nationalists.

SYRIZA, the Greek "radical left" party that QS presents as a model, was elected in 2015 promising to fight the austerity demands of the European Union and IMF. As soon as it took power, it made an alliance with the Independent Greeks, a right-wing party with links to the Greek army. Based on the privileged middle class and rooted in Greek nationalism, SYRIZA quickly reneged on its promises and imposed more drastic social cuts than its predecessors. It has since helped spearhead the EU's brutal attacks on refugees.

Another example is the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy), the so-called "left" wing within the separatist movement in Catalonia. Two delegates from this party were invited by QS to its December 2017 congress. There they defended the CUP's decision to support a right-wing Catalan nationalist government and to vote in 2017 for its austerity budget. To applause from the QS faithful, the CUP representatives insisted this was the price to pay to obtain a referendum on Catalan independence.

Québec Solidaire works within the PQ-led sovereignist movement, reaches out to the right-wing populists of the CAQ, and models itself after reactionary "new left" parties that have imposed or supported brutal attacks on the working class. In the run-up to Quebec's October 1election, under conditions where the establishment parties are increasingly discredited and resistance to capitalist austerity is growing among working people, QS is once again offering its services to the ruling class, to dissipate, divert and derail working-class opposition.

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