

Polls predict Quebec elections likely to end in hung parliament

Our reporters

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Opinion polls suggest no party will win a parliamentary majority in Monday's Quebec provincial election.

At the campaign's outset, the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ-Coalition for Quebec's Future) had a more than five-percentage point lead over the Quebec Liberal Party, which has governed Quebec for all but 18 months of the last 15 years. But the CAQ's crude Quebec chauvinist appeals, including its plan to expel immigrants who fail French-language or "Quebec values" tests after three years' residence, have repelled many voters.

At the last of three debates between the leaders of the four parties represented in the outgoing Quebec National Assembly—the Liberals; CAQ; the big business, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ); and the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire—CAQ head and one-time PQ cabinet minister François Legault soft-peddled his party's anti-immigrant stance. The Liberal government, he demagogically declared, is the only one that the CAQ wants to expel.

However, Legault couldn't help himself. When a CAQ supporter asked him Wednesday if he would "fight for us" against immigrants who are "effacing us," Legault exclaimed, "Yes, of course that's what we want ... It is a question of protecting who we are as Quebecers."

The Liberals, headed by Premier Philippe Couillard, remain the preferred party of government of most of Canadian and Quebec big business. The press is full of commentary lamenting that whilst Quebec's economy is the "best" it has been in decades, the Liberals are so widely despised they are in danger of garnering their smallest-ever share of the popular vote in a Quebec election.

In reality, what the corporate media is celebrating is a massive decades-long assault on the working class, mounted jointly by the federalist Liberals and their PQ *indépendantiste* rivals and combining massive social spending cuts and the promotion of for-profit health care and education with huge tax cuts for big business and the rich. This assault, which reached a qualitatively new level under the Couillard Liberal government, has ravaged Quebec's

public health care and education systems and other vital social services, and driven increasing numbers to depend on foodbanks to feed themselves and their families.

Québec Solidaire (QS) is the only party to have appreciably increased its support during the campaign for Quebec's October 1 election. Recent polls indicate that its promises of limited social reform—including dental insurance and free dental care for children and low-income Quebecers, an immediate increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, the phasing out of all university tuition fees, and a 50 percent reduction in public transport fares—have resonated with youth and working people. This includes some workers who out of disgust with the Liberals and PQ had been preparing to vote for the CAQ.

As of early this week, QS had the support of 15.8 percent of the population, more than double its vote-share in the 2014 election, and 27 percent of Quebec's youth.

The Liberals and CAQ, meanwhile, are reportedly running neck-and-neck at around 30 percent support; while the PQ, the party that for decades alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's government and which the trade unions have long staunchly supported, hovers around 20 percent.

Québec Solidaire's rise in the polls is a distorted expression of the growth of anti-austerity and anti-capitalist sentiment, especially among the youth. But workers and youth looking to QS as a means to oppose the ruling class assault on workers' social and democratic rights and capitalism's descent into war and reaction will be cruelly disappointed.

QS makes no pretense to be a workers' or socialist party. It describes itself as a "left," pro-independence, feminist, environmentalist, and anti-globalization (*altermondialiste*), "citizens" party. It speaks not for working people, but for privileged sections of the upper middle-class—academics and other professionals, trade union bureaucrats and small business-owners—who resent the increasing wealth and power of the 1 percent, but are bitterly opposed to class struggle and any working class challenge to the capitalist social order.

Under conditions of the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression, characterized by trade war, the frantic rearmament of all the major powers, and the turn of capitalist ruling elites the world over to authoritarian methods of rule and the promotion of ultra-right forces, QS seeks to revive illusions in the discredited Quebec *indépendantiste* project and a national reformist program.

Founded in 2006, by forces that eleven years earlier, in 1995, had formed the left flank of PQ Premier Jacques Parizeau's "rainbow coalition" to create a capitalist *République du Québec* that was to be part of NATO and NAFTA, Québec Solidaire has always orbited around the PQ-led Quebec sovereignty movement, and has made repeated offers to the PQ of electoral alliances.

Predictably QS is using its increased popular support to seek to further integrate itself into the ruling establishment, with the aim of securing for itself a role in administering Quebec capitalism.

On the eve of the campaign's launch, QS co-leader and candidate for Quebec Premier Manon Massé said that if her party were to hold the balance of power it could potentially prop up a minority PQ or even CAQ government, in exchange for a commitment to introduce some form of proportional representation. (See: Québec Solidaire open to supporting government led by right-wing populist CAQ.)

Last week, after years of QS lobbying, Manon Massé was invited to address the Montreal Chamber of Commerce. In her appearance Massé went out of her way to reassure Montreal's business leaders that QS believes the private sector has an important role to play in Quebec's economy.

Rejecting the provocative suggestion of the Chamber's president that QS is a "revolutionary socialist" party, Massé drew a distinction between the QS program—which talks about partially nationalizing certain sectors of the economy—and its electoral commitments. "If I am told 'nationalization of banks', I say no," she insisted. "In a first mandate, this is out of question."

At the same time, Massé postured as a "revolutionary," taking a page from Bernie Sanders's 2016 US election campaign, which QS regularly cites as a model. As a candidate for the Democratic Party nomination, Sanders presented himself as a "democratic socialist" opposed to the domination of American political life by "millionaires and billionaires" and an advocate of a "political revolution." However his real function was to neutralize the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment among workers and youth by channeling it back into the Democratic Party, one of the twin parties of American imperialism—and more specifically behind Hillary Clinton, the presidential candidate of Wall Street, the CIA, and the Pentagon.

The QS boasts of being an anti-austerity party. But it has

repeatedly supported the pro-capitalist trade unions in quarantining the struggles of Quebec workers from those in English Canada and internationally, and in suppressing any genuine working-class challenge to austerity. .

When the 2012 Quebec student strike threatened to become the catalyst for a working class upsurge, Quebec's union federations, with the complicity of the NDP, intervened to close down the strike and channel the burgeoning anti-austerity movement behind the election of a PQ government, under the watchword "From the streets to the ballot box." This betrayal received the full backing of QS. In June, when the union campaign to scuttle the strike was in high gear, it appealed to the PQ for an electoral pact; then just days before the September 2012 election, QS announced that if it held the balance of power it would unconditionally support a PQ minority government for at least a year.

Three years later, it endorsed the unions' isolation and betrayal of the Quebec public sector workers' mobilization against the Couillard Liberal government's budget cuts and concession demands.

At the final leaders' debate, Massé sought to downplay the significance of Legault's scapegoating of immigrants, which parallels developments in the US and Europe. Confronted with growing social anger and class struggle, the ruling class is bringing forward ultra-right elements to whip up hostility against refugees and immigrants so as to intimidate and split the working class and justify state repression.

Massé deplored the CAQ's plan to deport immigrants who fail French language and "Quebec values" tests, but added, "I believe you when you say that you have nothing against immigrants."

Itself based on a nationalist, exclusivist program, QS has played a pernicious role over the past decade in legitimizing the rise of Quebec chauvinism. When the CAQ's predecessor, the ADQ, and the tabloid press first began raising a hue and a cry over so-called "excessive accommodations" to immigrants and religious minorities, Québec Solidaire called it a "legitimate debate." Similarly, QS endorsed the PQ's attempt to impose a "Quebec Charter of Values," during the 18 months the PQ held power between 2012 and 2014, merely criticizing some of the details of the proposed ban on public sector workers wearing "ostentatious religious symbols" (with a special exclusion for crucifixes.)



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