

Canada: Workers need a socialist program to fight the right-wing populist danger

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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The following statement was distributed by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters at Sunday's "March against Racism" in Montreal.

Many immigrants and members of religious minorities, including large numbers of Muslim women, joined the 5,000-strong demonstration to voice their opposition to the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ).

Since winning the Oct. 1 Quebec election, the CAQ has reaffirmed its plans to slash immigration by 20 percent and pass chauvinist legislation banning teachers and others in so-called positions of "state authority" from wearing the hijab and other religious symbols.

At press conferences on consecutive days last week, CAQ leader Francois Legault said he would be ready to use the "notwithstanding clause" to suspend democratic rights "guaranteed" under Canada's constitution so as to implement his party's "religious symbols" ban, and CAQ spokesperson Geneviève Guilbault vowed that those who fail to submit to the anti-democratic ban will be fired.

The democratic rights of refugees, immigrants, and working people as a whole are under assault by Quebec's and Canada's ruling elite. To defeat this assault—in which all of the establishment parties are participants—requires the independent political mobilization of the working class against capitalist austerity and imperialist war.

Such a mobilization can only be prepared through an irreconcilable struggle to expose the official "left" of the political establishment—the trade union bureaucracy, the social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP), Québec Solidaire (QS), and the Parti Québécois-led "sovereignist family," of which QS is a proud member.

It is the official "left"—through its suppression of the class struggle, complicity in the imposition of job, wage and social spending cuts, and its open or tacit promotion of anti-immigrant chauvinism—that has created the conditions for right-wing populist forces, such as the CAQ in Quebec and Doug Ford in Ontario, to come to power by exploiting popular disaffection with the traditional big business parties.

All over the world, the rise of anti-austerity and anti-war sentiment among workers and young people, while yet to find positive political articulation, is rightly perceived by the ruling elite as a threat to the capitalist order. Their response is to incite xenophobia against refugees and immigrants so as to divert attention from the real cause of mounting poverty and economic insecurity: the crisis-ridden capitalist profit system.

Thanks to the xenophobic agitation of the establishment parties and big business media, and with active support from the highest levels of the capitalist state, right-wing populist and nationalist forces—like Trump in the United States, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the *Lega* in Italy—are being mobilized by the ruling class as

part of its preparations to use anti-democratic methods and state repression against growing working class opposition.

The working class and the defense of democratic rights

This socialist and internationalist analysis of the contemporary rise of chauvinism and xenophobia and its core conclusion—that the world working class is the only social force capable of countering the ruling elite's right-wing rampage and that the defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism and war—are rejected by the organizers of today's march against racism.

An amorphous coalition of middle-class anti-racism, immigrant rights, and feminist NGOs and pseudo-Marxist groups like Fightback, the march organizers advance a nationalist, protest program that constitutes a political trap for the working class. Their aim is to protest to the establishment and keep the struggles of the working class confined within the framework of capitalism and the nation-state.

This "Coalition against racism" separates the rise of chauvinism in Quebec from its objective source, the global capitalist crisis, portraying it largely as a "Quebec" phenomenon, divorced from similar developments in the rest of Canada and around the world. They ignore the close relationship between the rise of the far right and the imposition of brutal austerity and war policies by the traditional "left"—the French Socialist Party, the British Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party, and the union-backed Democratic Party in America. Politically skeptical of the working class, whom they portray as attracted to, if not dominated by, racism, their "anti-racist" calls are directed to the supposedly liberal sections of the ruling class and the capitalist state.

At a press briefing last week, demonstration spokesperson Safa Chebbi endorsed the claims of the big business media that the CAQ swept the Quebec election. This false narrative is aimed at politically intimidating the working class, which will rapidly come into mass opposition with the François Legault-led CAQ government and its neo-liberal and chauvinist agenda.

Ignoring that only one in four Quebecers voted for the CAQ, and that many of those who did were casting a protest vote against the traditional parties of the Quebec ruling class, the Liberals and the Parti Québécois, Chebbi argued that the new government was "the result of several years of the normalization of racism in the public debate." She thus suggested that racism has captured a large part of the electorate—a slander against the working class that was more explicitly featured on

the website for the march in its denunciation of the right-wing policies of Legault “and his many far-right supporters.”

At the same press conference, another organizer of the demonstration, Javiera Araya of Solidarity Across Borders, called upon the Montreal police, a bastion of racism and systematic violence against ethnic minorities, to “end its collaboration with (Canada) Border Services.”

A genuine struggle against the Quebec chauvinist right and in defence of the democratic rights of refugees, immigrants, and religious minorities, requires a turn to the working class and the fight to unite Quebec workers with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and overseas in the struggle against capitalist austerity and war.

The main obstacle to the independent political mobilization of workers is the trade union bureaucracy. For decades, the unions have suppressed worker opposition to the big business offensive on jobs, wages, pensions, and public services. And when social struggles have nonetheless broken out—for example the 2012 Quebec student strike which at its height threatened to become the catalyst for a working-class challenge to austerity, or the 2015 struggle of more than half a million public sector workers against the Quebec Liberal government’s concession demands—the unions quickly intervene to isolate them, confining them within a strictly provincial framework and then suppress them.

Québec Solidaire’s role in the rise of Quebec chauvinism

Québec Solidaire, the supposedly “left-wing” party that in the October 1 Quebec elections was the undeserving beneficiary of growing anti-austerity and anti-capitalist sentiment, especially among young people, is a loyal defender of the corporatist unions. Its timid demands for social reforms are derisory in the face of the social catastrophe caused by capitalism, and never go beyond the framework of the profit system.

A party of the privileged upper-middle class, QS is hostile to the prosecution of the class struggle by workers. This is evidenced by its role in the 2012 student strike, when it helped the trade unions to harness the mass movement to the big business party, Parti Québécois (PQ), and its role in the 2015 public sector struggle. In the latter case, QS hailed as a “victory” a union sell-out that kept in place the massive social spending cuts of the Couillard Liberal government and imposed major contract concessions, including pension and real wage cuts, on public sector workers.

QS has played a particularly pernicious role in the rise of virulent Quebec chauvinism over the past decade. Rather than denouncing the reactionary debate over the purported “excessive accommodations” granted to cultural and religious minorities that was whipped up by the CAQ’s predecessor, Mario Dumont’s *Action démocratique du Québec*, 10 years ago, QS called it “legitimate.” Similarly, it did not condemn the Charter of Quebec Values that Pauline Marois’ PQ minority government introduced in 2013 for targeting minorities, especially Muslim women, working in the public sector; it only criticized the PQ for going “too far” by extending its ban on religious symbols (crucifixes excepted) to all half-million Quebec public sector workers. Québec Solidaire then took an ambivalent position on the Couillard Liberals’ Bill 62 (on “state neutrality”) that sought to bar

Muslim women who wear religious face-coverings from accessing public health care, education and transit services. QS opposed Bill 62 solely on the grounds that the bill’s wording would make it “inapplicable.”

QS also bears political responsibility for helping pave the way for the CAQ’s impeding legislation prohibiting so-called “representatives of the State”—judges, police officers, prison guards and teachers—from wearing religious symbols. QS has repeatedly demanded such a measure (except without the inclusion of teachers).

To the extent that QS distances itself from the most blatant manifestations of anti-immigrant chauvinism, it is from the standpoint of moral appeals. QS covers up the essential political function of Islamophobia, which is to divide the working class, and justify the imperialist wars launched in the Middle East and elsewhere by Washington with Ottawa’s full support. On the rare occasions that this provincialist party takes a stand on major international issues such as war, it is to cover up Canada’s own imperialist actions with a pseudo-humanitarian veil. QS has not denounced, let alone mounted any campaign against, the federal Liberal government’s plans to increase military spending by 70 percent by 2026.

Québec Solidaire does not hide its ambitions to “play in the big leagues” by becoming ever more integrated into the ruling establishment, including by joining government. They are following in the footsteps of their Greek “cousin” SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), which took power by promising to end capitalist austerity, but quickly reneged on its promises, forming a coalition with a right-wing Greek nationalist party and imposing even more draconian social cuts than its predecessors.

The central role of QS is to revive the discredited program of Quebec independence. Through the creation of a capitalist Quebec Republic, a faction of the Quebec bourgeoisie hopes to better assert its predatory class interests, including by boosting the “competitiveness of Quebec-based corporations” on global markets through an intensified assault on the working class, and by fanning nationalism to split Quebec workers from their Canadian and international class brothers and sisters.

Under conditions of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally, we call on those opposed to the right-wing, populist CAQ to fuse the opposition to racism and anti-immigrant chauvinism with the working class’ struggle to win decent jobs and quality health care and education for all. Only through the building of a working-class political movement dedicated to establishing workers’ power and social equality can democratic rights be defended in the face of the capitalist elite’s turn to unbridled reaction and war.

We encourage everyone who agrees with this program to make contact with the Socialist Equality Party, which is in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The ICFI is the political heir to the principled and decades-long struggle waged by the Fourth International to forge the international unity of the working class, and fight all forms of national opportunism within the international workers movement such as Stalinism and social democracy.



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