

Unions to “work with” Quebec’s new right-wing populist government

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The leaders of Quebec’s major trade union federations have responded to the victory of the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec’s Future) in the October 1 provincial election by offering to collaborate with Quebec’s new government.

“I say ‘give them a chance.’ I am ready to sit down with the CAQ government, with (CAQ leader and premier-designate) François Legault so that we can work together to advance Quebec,” announced Daniel Boyer, president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL), the province’s largest union federation.

For her part, Sonia Éthier, the president of the Quebec Union Federation (known by its French acronym, the CSQ), declared, “We have tasted the Couillard (Liberal) government’s medicine and we hope that the new government will not serve us the same medicine or even the same remedies.” In the same vein, Claire Montour, the president of the CSQ’s health care federation, the FSQ-CSQ, said, “We are available to discuss with representatives of the new government and share with them our solutions to improve access to care and improve working conditions.”

The union leaders’ eagerness to work with the CAQ—a party known for its hard-right big business policies, including advocacy of laws criminalizing workers’ struggles—underscores that the trade union bureaucracy is turning even further right; and doing so under conditions where Quebec workers will soon be propelled into major struggles with the new CAQ government.

Six major QFL-affiliated unions, including the United Steelworkers (USW), Machinists (IAM), and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), mounted a campaign during the elections to denounce the Liberals and the CAQ as “twin pro-austerity parties.” This move was a thinly veiled call for a vote for the big business Parti Québécois (PQ), a long-time ally of the union bureaucracy, which imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Quebec history between 1996 and 1998. But no sooner was the CAQ elected, than the unions bowed down before Legault to offer their services.

Similarly, the leaders of USW Local 9700, the bargaining agent for the 1,030 workers at the ABI aluminum smelter in Becancourt who have been locked out since January, touted the phony, vacuous claims of “support” for the ABI workers that the leaders of all four major parties made during the election campaign in a transparent ploy to garner votes. The day after the elections, the Steelworkers congratulated Legault on his victory and urged this millionaire, former Air Transat boss and one-time PQ cabinet minister to make good on his election commitment to “intervene” in the ABI labour dispute.

The unions’ eagerness to work with the CAQ is the outcome of their decades’ long suppression of the class struggle and their corporatist integration with government and big business in promoting the “competitiveness” of Quebec capitalism, as exemplified by the QFL’s \$10 billion-plus venture capital fund, the so-called Solidarity Fund.

Similarly in Ontario, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) responded to the election of the right-wing populist Doug Ford in Ontario’s June 7 provincial election by appealing for talks and collaboration. In recent weeks, major Ontario unions like the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) have been meeting behind closed doors with Ford government representatives, even as they push through a raft of right-wing measures and lay the groundwork for a massive assault on public services and the rights and jobs of the workers who administer them.

The unions and the party of the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire paved the way for Legault’s rise to power. By sabotaging worker resistance to the big business assault and politically subordinating the working class to the PQ, they created conditions in which the CAQ could make an appeal to popular discontent and cynically present itself as the party of “change.”

Mass anger against the ruling elite’s austerity and war program has fuelled a succession of explosive social struggles in Quebec. Just in the past six years, these included the six-month 2012 Quebec student strike, a wave of public sector strikes in 2015 that at its height mobilized half-a-

million workers, and province-wide strikes by more than 175,000 construction workers in 2013 and 2017.

But each time the unions isolated and suppressed these struggles. In 2012, when the student strike threatened to become the catalyst for a broader working-class challenge to austerity, the unions did everything they could to shut it down and to politically neuter the opposition movement. Under the slogan “From the streets to the ballot box,” they worked—with the complicity of the student associations and Québec Solidaire—to divert the opposition to the Charest Liberal government and its austerity program behind the election of a Parti Québécois government. Once in power, Pauline Marois’ PQ government imposed drastic cuts to social programs and incited Quebec chauvinism against immigrants and religious minorities, especially Muslims. This included a proposed purge, in the name of defending “Quebec values,” of public sector workers who wear the hijab, Sikh turban, Jewish kippah, or other “ostentatious” religious signs.

During the 2015 public sector workers’ struggle, whatever their tactical differences, both the “Common Front unions” and the independent teachers’ and health care workers’ unions were determined to straitjacket the fight against the Liberals’ budget cuts within the framework of a collective-bargaining dispute. Yet it was clear from the outset that workers were facing a political struggle that required the mobilization of the entire working class to defend public services and challenge the anti-union laws.

The unions’ current attempt to present the CAQ as a party whose “bad political choices” can be corrected by popular pressure is a blatant lie that is aimed at demobilizing and disorienting workers and youth. The CAQ’s promises of reinvestment in health care and education were pure electoral demagoguery. Since its founding in 2011 through a merger between the personal political vehicle that Legault had created, with the backing of the billionaire Charles Sirois, and the remnants of the anti-immigrant Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), the CAQ has played a major role in pushing Quebec politics further right.

CAQ’s pledges of initial social cuts of \$1.2 billion, including the elimination of 5,000 civil servant jobs deregulation and the expansion of private health care, do not prevent the union bureaucrats from “giving” Legault “a chance.”

The CAQ victory comes as right-wing populist forces, including Trump in the United States, the ultra-right AfD in Germany and Doug Ford in Ontario, have been able to gain electoral traction by exploiting social anger with the traditional political establishment. Their ability to do so is entirely bound up with the role that the establishment “left” parties—the social-democrats and in the US the union-backed

Democratic Party—and the trade unions have played in imposing austerity and war. Like the other “new right” forces, the CAQ seeks to stir up racism and xenophobia, scapegoating immigrants and refugees for the social crisis caused by the right-wing policies pursued by the establishment parties of all stripes.

The unions are complicit in the ruling elite’s attempt to divide the working class along ethnic and national lines. In the name of defending “Quebec” and “Canadian” jobs, the unions have railed against workers in other countries, while imposing job cuts and concessions. Now, with the development of trade war, they are lining up behind Canada’s major corporations and the federal Liberal government, offering their support for tariffs and other protectionist measures.

The unions systematically isolate the struggles of workers and, through their promotion of Quebec nationalism, work to divide Quebec workers from workers elsewhere in Canada and internationally, while promoting the lie that Quebec workers have more in common with French-speaking billionaires, like Péladeau and the Desmarais family, than with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of North America and overseas.

The unions’ offer to work with the CAQ underscores the urgency of workers building new organizations of struggle, independent of the corporatist, pro-capitalist trade unions, and based on a new political perspective: the mobilization of the working class—French, English and immigrant—against austerity and war and in the fight for a workers’ government, that would radically reorganize socioeconomic life to make social needs, not capitalist profit, the animating principle.



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