

Quebec's new CAQ government to prioritize its chauvinist anti-immigrant agenda

Laurent Lafrance
8 November 2018

Quebec's new Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec's Future) government has announced that its top priorities, in its first months in office, will be lowering taxes, as part of a drive to promote a more “entrepreneurial” Quebec, and passing legislation prohibiting teachers and other “state employees in positions of authority” from wearing religious symbols.

Quebec Premier and CAQ founder François Legault is cynically promoting the discriminatory ban on religious symbols as the cornerstone of a “secular Quebec charter,” ostensibly aimed at asserting the “religious neutrality of the state” and gender equality.

Like US President Donald Trump, Ontario Premier Doug Ford, Germany's AfD, Italy's Lega, and other right-wing populist and ultra-nationalist forces that have recently become politically prominent, the CAQ combines a draconian program of social spending cuts, privatization and deregulation with the promotion of xenophobia and attacks on democratic rights. Its “secular charter” is a calculated attempt to incite Quebec chauvinism, so as to divide the working class, and divert social anger over mounting economic insecurity and social inequality, including the impact of its own impending austerity measures, into reactionary channels.

Legault's proposed ban on religious symbols is part of a broader CAQ agenda that presents immigrants and religious minorities as a threat to Quebec society. During the campaign for the Oct.1 Quebec election, the former Air Transat boss and one-time Parti Québécois (PQ) cabinet minister steadfastly defended his party's unconstitutional and anti-democratic proposal to deport immigrants who fail either a French-language or a “Quebec values” test after three years' residence in Quebec.

The CAQ is also committed to slashing Quebec's annual intake of immigrants by more than 20 percent. Despite complaints from many of its big business supporters about a manpower shortage, Quebec's new CAQ government has already initiated discussions with Ottawa on reducing the number of immigrants the province receives in 2019 to

40,000, from the current 52,000.

Legault thought it politic to distance himself from a tweet from Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's far-right National Rally (formerly the National Front), applauding the CAQ election victory. But just days before the Oct. 1 vote, when a CAQ supporter asked him if he would “fight” the 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 CAQ has yet to flesh out the details of its “secular charter.” But its proposed ban on wearing religious symbols is a flagrant attack on Quebec's religious minorities and especially Muslim women. Teachers, judges, police officers, crown prosecutors and other state employees in “positions of authority” will be banned from wearing head coverings such as the Muslim hijab, the Sikh turban, and Jewish kippah, and other religious symbols, such as the kirpan.

Under Bill 62, legislation adopted in 2017 by the previous Liberal government, Quebec hospitals, schools, and all other provincial public and para-agencies, including municipal transit systems, are prohibited from providing services to Muslim women who choose to wear the niqab or burqa, except in “emergency” situations. This law, whose application has been suspended pending the outcome of a court challenge of its constitutionality, was denounced by the CAQ as “inadequate.”

The CAQ says there will be a “transition” period in the application of its ban on religious symbols. Thereafter, those who refuse to comply will be fired or have to transfer to another government job where they are no longer in a “position of authority.”

The new government has also vowed that in the event the courts find its ban unconstitutional it will invoke the reactionary “notwithstanding” clause, which empowers Canada's federal and provincial governments to deny rights “guaranteed” under the constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The CAQ's secular charter is entirely hypocritical. Even as it attacks immigrants and religious minorities in the name

of “secularism,” it is defending the ubiquitous presence of Roman Catholic symbols in Quebec institutions on the grounds they constitute part of Quebec’s “heritage.” This includes the crucifix affixed above the Speaker’s chair in the Quebec National Assembly (parliament) and those found in courthouses across the province.

The entire Quebec political establishment is complicit in promoting the reactionary political conceptions that have now found expression in the CAQ’s chauvinist, anti-democratic policies.

In 2007, the Liberal government of Jean Charest set up the Bouchard-Taylor Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, after the ADQ, which merged into the CAQ at its founding in 2011, and the tabloid press had raised a hue and a cry about “excessive accommodation” and the reputed marginalization of Quebec’s “majority.”

Later, as mentioned above, the Liberals pushed through their Bill 62, which specifically targets Muslim women.

During the 18 months the PQ held office in 2012-14, it sought to enact a Charter of Quebec Values. The Charter’s centerpiece was to be a prohibition on Quebec’s more than half million public sector workers wearing religious symbols, although there was an explicit exemption for “discreet crucifixes.”

A particularly foul role has been played by Québec Solidaire (QS), the pseudo-left pro-Quebec independence party. Although the “accommodation debate” was promoted from the outset by the right and far-right, QS called it legitimate. QS endorsed and continues to endorse the Bouchard-Taylor commission’s call for a ban on “persons in authority” wearing religious head-coverings and other symbols, and it supports the denial of public services to Muslim women who, out of religious conviction, wear the burqa or niqab.

The QS has taken to calling itself the “real opposition” to the CAQ, since winning 10 seats and 16 percent of the vote in the Oct. 1 election

But it boycotted the very first demonstration against the new government—a demonstration held Oct. 6 in opposition to racism and the CAQ’s anti-immigrant policies, and which was joined by large numbers of immigrant workers, including Muslim women.

Manon Massé, Québec Solidaire’s parliamentary leader and principal spokeswoman, has repeatedly sought to excuse and downplay the significance of Legault’s chauvinist policies. This includes declaring during an election debate exchange with Legault, “I believe you when you say you have nothing against immigrants. I’ve been around you enough to affirm that.”

If Québec Solidaire is so intent on excusing the conduct of

Legault and his CAQ, it is because QS wants to obscure the fact that deeply reactionary forces—including outright fascist groups—are emerging from the Quebec nationalist movement to which QS belongs.

What criticisms QS does make of the CAQ’s chauvinism are from a nationalist standpoint, that Legault is dividing Quebecers and weakening Quebec. Never does QS denounce the whipping up of chauvinism as part of the assault on the working class, nor explain that this is a global phenomenon rooted in the crisis of capitalism.

In English Canada, sections of the ruling class are similarly promoting anti-immigrant chauvinism, Islamophobia and, particularly in Alberta and New Brunswick, hostility to Quebec and to francophones so as to divide the working class. This is exemplified by Ontario Premier Doug Ford who has sought to scapegoat refugee claimants for a social housing shortage, as he initiates a massive new austerity drive.

Ford and Legault, who posture as protagonists of change and ordinary people against the traditional political establishment, both owe their election victories to the trade unions’ systematic suppression of the class struggle. In Ontario, the unions eagerly supported a Liberal government that slashed social spending, cut taxes for big business, and criminalized worker job action. The Quebec unions, which for decades have supported the pro-austerity PQ, sabotaged and betrayed a series of explosive workers’ struggles over the past six years, including the mass movement against austerity triggered by the 2012 Quebec student strike and the 2015 public sector workers’ fight against concessions and budget cuts.

Opposition to the attack on the democratic rights of immigrants and religious and other minorities is a critical element in the fight to mobilize the working class—French, English, immigrant and aboriginal—against all the parties of the Quebec and Canadian establishment and against the profit system they defend.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact