

How Québec Solidaire abetted the rise of anti-Muslim chauvinism

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Québec Solidaire is being hailed by the entire Canadian pseudo-left milieu as “the real opposition, in Parliament and in the streets” to Quebec’s right-wing populist CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government.

In reality, Québec Solidaire (QS) is a party of the privileged middle classes that has already demonstrated its hostility to any genuine working-class challenge to capitalist austerity. It assisted the trade unions in politically derailing the 2012 Quebec student strike and in suppressing the mass opposition, spearheaded by public sector workers, in 2015-16 to the Couillard government’s draconian social spending cuts. Internationally, it is allied with other “new left parties” like Syriza in Greece, Spain’s Podemos, and the Left Party in Germany that have formed or joined governments that have mounted sweeping attacks on the working class.

Moreover, for more than a decade QS has played a politically pernicious role in abetting the Quebec and Canadian ruling elites in their promotion of anti-immigrant, and especially anti-Muslim, sentiment.

In Canada, as around the world, the bourgeoisie is promoting xenophobia and Islamophobia as a means of diverting popular anger over mounting economic insecurity and social inequality; splitting the working class; rallying support for imperialist aggression in the Middle East; and emboldening reaction, including the far right.

Yet QS consistently characterized Quebec’s twelve-year long, right wing-incited furor over “excessive” accommodations to religious minorities, and the ensuing campaign to ban public sector workers from wearing religious head coverings and other religious symbols, as “legitimate” and “necessary.” QS itself repeatedly championed discriminatory proposals, from banning state employees in positions of “authority” from wearing religious symbols to barring access to public services to the tiny number of devout Muslim women in Quebec who wear the *niqab* or *burka*.

Now, however, under conditions where the new CAQ government has tabled a discriminatory law targeting religious minorities and especially Muslim women, Québec Solidaire is attempting a political makeover.

The CAQ’s Bill 21 or “state secularism” law prohibits the wearing of religious symbols by teachers and state employees in so-called “positions of authority,” deprives fully veiled Muslim women of essential public services such as health care, and invokes the “notwithstanding clause,” which enables governments to run roughshod over the rights constitutionally “guaranteed” under Canada’s Charters of Rights and Freedoms, so as to ensure that it cannot be struck down by the courts.

On March 30, Québec Solidaire’s National Council voted to repudiate its decade-long support for a ban on religious symbols only slightly less extensive than that in the CAQ’s Bill 21, and initiated a campaign to recast QS as an opponent of anti-immigrant chauvinism and defender of Quebec’s religious minorities.

This is a fraud. Québec Solidaire’s volte-face has nothing to do with a principled stand in defence of democratic rights. Nor does it constitute a shift to the left as the ostensibly socialist wing of the pseudo-left in

Quebec and English-Canada claims.

Within hours of the QS National Council vote, senior party leaders signaled their continued support for barring fully veiled women from all public and para-public sector jobs. Moreover, the entire QS leadership—from the party’s current coleaders, Manon Massé and Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, to their predecessors, Françoise David and Amir Khadir—have all sought to downplay the significance of the change in QS policy, steadfastly denying that QS has contributed to the growth of anti-immigrant chauvinism and Islamophobia.

For their part, groups like Fightback and Gauche Socialiste—which at times criticized the previous QS position as an “unfortunate” concession to chauvinism and the right—have hailed Québec Solidaire’s change in position, holding it up as proof that QS is amenable to “left-wing” pressure.

Like the QS leadership, the pseudo-Marxist groups are determined to cover up and obscure the significance of Québec Solidaire’s role in legitimizing and propagating extreme Quebec chauvinism. Towards this end, they exclude discussion of the global political environment in which Quebec’s so-called “secularism” debate emerged and evolved, and the intimate connection between the whipping up of Islamophobia and imperialist policy—including Canadian imperialism’s participation in a series of US wars in Central Asia and the Middle East and the promotion of “human rights” imperialism. Several of these wars, including the Afghan War and the 2011 NATO assault on Libya, it need be emphasized, were supported by QS leaders.

Québec Solidaire’s newfound opposition to the Quebec nationalist-led campaign to hypocritically and cynically invoke “secularism” to justify discrimination against Muslims and other religious is a tactical maneuver.

It is above all a tacit admission that, while the privileged middle-class layers for whom QS speaks have been marching relentlessly to the right over the past decade, the working class is moving in the opposite direction. On a global scale, the past two years have witnessed a dramatic upsurge in the class struggle. Mass protests have erupted in France and Algeria, strikes in the US have reached their highest level in three decades, and workers around the world have begun rebelling against the right-wing, nationalist union bureaucracies, most notably in the strike earlier this year by tens of thousands of manufacturing workers in Matamoros, Mexico. All of these struggles have underscored the fact that for millions of workers globally, the decisive issue is not race, ethnicity, religion, or language, but social class.

Exploding QS’s bogus Quebec *indépendantiste* perspective, which at its heart asserts that workers in Quebec have more in common with their French-speaking bosses than they do with English-speaking workers across Canada and North America, the class struggle has also intensified in Canada’s second most populous province. Major strikes involving hundreds of thousands of public sector workers and construction workers erupted in 2015 and 2017.

At the same time, the emergence of Trump as US president, the neo-

Nazi AfD as Germany's official opposition, and far-right parties like Italy's *Lega* at the head of governments in more than half a dozen European countries has served to highlight that everywhere crisis-ridden capitalist elites are vomiting up reaction, and that anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism has played a pivotal role in incubating such forces.

Under these conditions, QS feared that to continue to so openly associate itself with the explicitly right-wing and antidemocratic Quebec chauvinist campaign to ban religious symbols would irreparably damage its credibility among workers and young people. This, in turn, would prevent it from playing the decisive role it seeks to perform on behalf of Quebec capital: trapping leftward-moving workers and young people in the blind alley of parliamentary protest politics and the reactionary program of Quebec separatism. Following its more than doubling of its share of the popular vote to 15 percent in last October's Quebec election—a distorted expression of a political radicalization among working people—QS decided that a cosmetic readjustment of its policy on religious symbols was necessary, as a means to both cover its own tracks and bolster its fraudulent left-wing credentials.

This cynical maneuver cannot disguise the fact that QS is a pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist party, a purveyor of nationalism and chauvinism, and an implacable opponent of the struggle to unite workers in Quebec with their class brothers and sisters in English Canada and internationally in the struggle for workers' power and socialism.

The remainder of this article will document the role Québec Solidaire has played in legitimizing and stoking the Quebec chauvinist right, then return to a consideration of its recent volte-face.

The manufactured 2007-08 "reasonable accommodation" crisis

In 2007, the big-business media, especially the tabloids owned by Quebecor boss and future Parti Québécois leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau, and the right-wing populist ADQ (Action démocratique du Québec) manufactured a crisis with their relentless denunciations of "unreasonable" or "excessive" accommodations to cultural and religious minorities. The provincial Liberal government responded by setting up the Bouchard-Taylor commission, named after its two co-chairs, which then served as a platform for right-wing elements to vent their prejudices against religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

In its report, the Bouchard-Taylor commission established that the mass media and forces such as the ADQ (which was subsequently absorbed into the CAQ) had inflamed tensions by whipping up a furor over a handful of petty disputes. But in its recommendations, the commission not only adapted to this chauvinistic campaign. It fueled it by advocating a ban on the wearing of religious symbols by government employees deemed to be in "positions of authority."

This opened the door to the advocacy of a whole series of antidemocratic measures aimed at immigrants and minorities. For example, the PQ (Parti Québécois), which the ADQ had supplanted as the official opposition in the 2007 election, responded to its relegation to third place by turning toward the promotion of unvarnished Quebec chauvinism. It called for a "Quebec citizenship" bill that would deprive newcomers to Quebec of key political rights, including the right to stand in provincial and municipal elections, if they failed a French proficiency test.

Founded in 2006 as an ostensible left alternative to the ruling duopoly of the twin big-business parties, the federalist Liberals and the pro-independence PQ, Québec Solidaire played a key role in legitimizing the Quebec ruling elite's turn to anti-immigrant

chauvinism. Instead of denouncing the debate over "reasonable accommodation" as a right-wing provocation, it claimed that it was motivated by legitimate concerns. It then went on to endorse the Bouchard-Taylor Commission's call for a ban on religious symbols for state functionaries in "positions of authority," painting such a measure, which would only pave the way for further discrimination, as an appropriate response to a real societal problem.

QS provides a "left" cover to the PQ's Charter of Quebec Values

In 2012, QS helped to bring the PQ back to power in the wake of a powerful province-wide student strike that at its height threatened to become the catalyst for a working-class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity.

While the union bureaucracy worked night and day to isolate and divert the student revolt behind the reactionary objective of replacing the Liberals with a PQ government in the coming elections, the QS proposed an electoral alliance with the PQ. Then just a few days before the September 2012 election, it gave a further boost to illusions in the PQ, by pledging that if it held the balance of power, it would extend unconditional support to a minority PQ government for at least a year.

Barely brought to power with the joint support of the unions and QS, the PQ government of Pauline Marois went on to impose drastic cuts in social spending and introduce its Charter of Quebec Values to ban the wearing of so-called ostentatious religious symbols (excluding "discreet" Christian crucifixes) by all public sector employees. This ultra-reactionary measure threatened hundreds of Muslim women employed in Quebec's hospitals, schools and other public institutions with dismissal, as well as Jewish men who wear the kippah and turbaned Sikhs.

QS responded by welcoming the "debate" provoked by this antidemocratic PQ bill. What actually followed was a spike in hate speech against immigrants, and even physical attacks on Muslim women by right-wing extremists. Although QS complained the PQ's Charter went "too far," it insisted that the Charter could not be described as xenophobic and was, at root, well-intentioned. Françoise David, then co-spokesperson of QS, solemnly declared: "I am not saying at all that... the people of the Parti Québécois are Islamophobic: under torture, I would not say that."

With two seats in the Quebec National Assembly, QS was able to introduce its own bill on "Secularism of the State" in early October 2013. Largely inspired by the Bouchard-Taylor report, this symbolic bill was a milder version of the PQ's Charter of Values that limited the prohibition on religious symbols to government employees in a position of authority such as judges, police officers or prison guards. Significantly, it also included a new attack on the rights of religious minorities by denying fully veiled Muslim women access to essential public services such as health care, except in an emergency.

Two weeks later, the CAQ, which then held 19 seats in the Quebec Parliament, also introduced a symbolic bill entitled "Charter of Secularism", which included the same elements as the QS bill, with the proviso that teachers and school principals would also be considered as persons in positions of authority.

The differences between the PQ's Charter of Values and the respective QS and CAQ bills were only a matter of degree. All three parties agreed to restrict in one way or another the democratic rights of religious minorities in the name of "secularism."

The de facto coalition between the PQ, CAQ and QS on this issue

continued under the Couillard Liberal government, which came to power in April 2014 by exploiting popular hostility to the PQ's austerity measures and its antidemocratic Charter of Values.

After the Quebec City massacre: QS intensifies its attack on minority rights

On January 29, 2017, the Quebec City mosque, which had received numerous threats in the previous months, suffered a bloody terrorist attack by a right-wing extremist. Alexandre Bissonnette opened fire on dozens of worshippers, killing six people and injuring eight, including six seriously. Bissonnette's attack was manifestly political: he had made extensive xenophobic comments on social media and proclaimed his admiration for Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump.

QS responded to the Quebec City atrocity by seeking to cover up the culpability of the entire ruling establishment in stirring up anti-Muslim prejudice and creating a noxious political climate conducive to chauvinist violence.

It conspicuously failed to denounce the campaign of the mass media and corporate politicians stigmatizing Muslims as a threat to Quebec values—a campaign that certainly encouraged Bissonnette to commit this horrible act. Instead, in the name of "calming things down," QS gave succor to the chauvinist right by intensifying its call for a ban on religious symbols for some government employees. And when the PQ and CAQ agreed to support the QS stance, putting temporarily aside their own calls for a more extensive ban, QS hailed this as evidence of a "broad consensus" to supposedly ease interreligious tensions, conveniently ignoring that this "easing" was to be accomplished by acquiescing to the demands of the chauvinist right, widely promoted by the Quebec establishment, to curtail minority rights.

QS opposes the Liberals' Bill 62 from the right

The Couillard Liberal government—for its own reasons, having to do with fears of losing its traditional electoral constituency among the province's cultural minorities—chose not to go as far as demanded by the PQ, the CAQ and QS.

Yet in October 2017, the Liberals adopted Bill 62, a law that explicitly targeted Muslim women, by stipulating that people wearing a facial veil (niqab or burka) would be deprived of vital public services such as education, public transport or health care. This demonstrated once again that no section of the ruling elite, federalist or Quebec sovereignist, is ready to defend minority rights—including Trudeau's federal Liberal government, which is complicit in Trump's anti-immigrant witch hunt and has now moved to further restrict the rights of refugee claimants.

Québec Solidaire voted against Bill 62 from the right, bemoaning the absence of any ban on religious symbols. As for the clause depriving veiled Muslim women of essential public services, QS expressed doubts about the government's ability to apply it, noting that the bill's wording (which sought to cover up its discriminatory intent with language about public security and transparency) was ambiguous. But QS failed to raise any principled objection. This is not surprising, since this reactionary measure was first proposed by QS itself in October 2013.

QS offers to work with the right-wing populist CAQ

Throughout the 2018 Quebec election campaign, Québec Solidaire continued to accommodate to, and cover up for, chauvinist reaction. At the beginning of the campaign, QS co-leader and candidate for Quebec premier Manon Massé said her party would be ready to consider supporting a minority government led by the right-wing populist CAQ—a party notorious for its advocacy of privatization, deregulation, sweeping cuts to public services, and further tax cuts for big business and the rich.

Realizing that such a right-wing socioeconomic program could not win broad popular support, the CAQ sought to downplay it in the run-up to the 2018 elections. Instead, it focused on a right-wing populist appeal, trumpeting a host of chauvinist measures. These included a 20 percent reduction of immigration to Quebec, the expulsion of new immigrants who fail a French language and "Quebec values" test after three years' residence in Quebec, and a ban on the wearing of religious symbols by teachers and government employees in a "position of authority."

As the campaign progressed, there was an increasing public outcry against the CAQ's chauvinist positions. QS, however, continued to make gestures toward the CAQ. Rather than pointing to the parallels between the positions of the CAQ and those of the AfD, Le Pen's *Ralliement national*, and similar far-right forces and warning that its chauvinist agitation was aimed at splitting the working class, Massé came to the CAQ's defence. In the middle of a televised leaders' debate, Massé insisted CAQ leader François Legault "is not racist."

QS has remained largely silent on the two bills Legault and his CAQ government have introduced to implement their right-wing populist program: Bill 9, which reduces the number of immigrants accepted in Quebec and opens the door to racism and Islamophobia by adding "cultural" criteria to the selection process; and Bill 21, which violates the rights of religious minorities.

Organically opposed to the independent political mobilization of the working class against the CAQ government and Quebec's capitalist elite, QS systematically minimizes the danger of right-wing populism. It invokes the climate change crisis—its current preoccupation—not to indict capitalism and the nation-state system; but rather to justify its parliamentary protest politics, including repeated appeals to the big-business CAQ government, while working closely with the pro-capitalist unions to suppress the class struggle.

Why QS has abandoned the Bouchard-Taylor "compromise"

As the above has documented—and it is far from a full account of Québec Solidaire's insidious role in Quebec's phony secularism/religious accommodation debate—the party of the Quebec pseudo-left long facilitated the rise of anti-Muslim chauvinism.

The QS National Council vote opposing restrictions on public employees wearing religious signs in no way constitutes a shift towards a principled defence of the democratic rights of minorities. And this is not only because the leadership continues to defend the foul role QS has played for more than a decade—as exemplified by Khadir's declaration in the wake of the March 30 vote, lauding, yet again, Bouchard-Taylor as "an honourable compromise."

A principled defence of the democratic rights of minorities can only be based on the independent political mobilization of the working class against the root cause of social inequality, imperialist war and

the assault on democratic rights: the global capitalist system. Such a socialist program is furiously opposed by QS.

Québec Solidaire's change of position is a tactical adaptation. It is an attempt to cover its tracks under conditions where it was increasingly being discredited as an accomplice of the far-right, and in the midst of a resurgence of class struggle and growing political radicalization in Quebec, Canada and around the world.

From its very origins, it was obvious that Quebec's accommodation/secularism debate was a right-wing campaign. But everything that has happened in the past 12 years in Quebec and internationally has confirmed this—from the Quebec mosque massacre and the activities of local far-right groups such as La Meute, to the emergence of the fascistic AfD in Germany, Trump in the US or Bolsonaro in Brazil, and more recently the anti-Muslim atrocity in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Québec Solidaire's "repositioning" on the secularism/accommodation debate is aimed at better placing it to contain and derail the growing movement of the working class, above all to ensnare it within the reactionary Quebec nationalist/*indépendantiste* perspective.

QS's project for a capitalist Quebec republic represents the interests of a section of the Quebec ruling class that seeks its own nation-state as a lever to improve its geopolitical position on the world stage and increase its political domination of the working class, by suppressing the class struggle in the name of "national unity."

The "left" nationalism promoted by QS is consciously aimed at preventing workers in Quebec from joining forces with workers in the rest of Canada and internationally in a common struggle against capitalism. In the 1960 and 1970s, it was used as a mechanism to quarantine the explosive struggle of Quebec workers and politically subordinate them to the big-business PQ.

Today, under conditions of capitalist breakdown, the eruption of trade war, the surge in global geopolitical tensions and the attempts of ruling elites to stoke ethno-religious and other differences to undermine the fundamental class unity of workers, Quebec nationalism—like its ideological twin Canadian nationalism—will prove to be the incubator for the vilest chauvinist politics.

Significantly, Québec Solidaire's international allies share its complicity in the rise of chauvinist forces. In Germany, the Left Party considers "free movement and immigration as the main source of increased competition for low-paying jobs." In Spain, Podemos has welcomed measures taken by an Italian government made up of a coalition in which Matteo Salvini's neo-fascist Northern League plays the leading role. In Greece, Syriza has imposed more drastic social cuts than its predecessors, attacked refugees, and for years was in a governmental alliance with the Independent Greeks, a right-wing nationalist party with close links to the army.

The defence of the rights of minorities, an essential element in the defence of the democratic rights of the working class as a whole, must be based on the rejection of all forms of nationalism and identity politics—including Québec Solidaire's attempt to resuscitate the largely discredited Quebec *indépendantiste* program. It requires instead the political mobilization of French, English and immigrant workers throughout Canada in a common struggle against capitalism, in the closest collaboration with their class allies in the US, Mexico and around the world.

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