

Quebec Premier's Facebook page flooded with anti-Muslim messages

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Hundreds of anti-Muslim messages appeared on the Facebook page of Quebec Premier François Legault after he attended an official ceremony last month to mark the third anniversary of the Quebec City mosque massacre. On January 29, 2017, a right-wing extremist assaulted the mosque, killing six worshipers and wounding many others.

Notwithstanding Legault's pathetic efforts to dismiss their significance, the deluge of hate messages underscores the profound connection between the establishment's chauvinist debate over "state secularism" and the "unreasonable accommodation" of minorities and the rise of reactionary and outright fascist forces.

On his Facebook page, Legault, who heads the province's right-wing "Quebec First" CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government, shed crocodile tears over an "event that we didn't think was possible in Quebec." "We have gathered tonight," he continued, "to remind ourselves that our people are not immune from this hatred. But this hatred is not Quebec's hatred."

Legault's professions of sympathy for the victims of the Quebec City mosque attack enraged the far-right elements that have been feeding for more than a decade off the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies promoted by the entire Quebec political and media establishment. Muslims, and above all Muslim women, have been the principal targets of this vile campaign.

"White supremacists don't exist in Quebec, but there are thousands of Islamists," declared one of the critical messages posted on Legault's Facebook page. Another defended the Quebec City mosque shooter, writing: "Bissonnette did not deserve 40 years in prison." Some posted the logo of La Meute, a far-right, anti-immigrant group that has gained prominence in recent years.

Legault and the phony state secularism law that his government rammed through the National Assembly last June (Bill 21) have emboldened these chauvinist and outright fascist elements. But the CAQ has merely continued the chauvinistic rhetoric and anti-democratic policies promoted by all the parties in the National Assembly.

- In 2006–2007, the corporate media and the ADQ (since absorbed by the CAQ) stoked a furor over the purportedly "unreasonable accommodations" granted to religious minorities. In response, the Charest Liberal government appointed the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. It admitted that the "accommodations" issue had been trumped up by inflating a handful of minor incidents, but nevertheless recommended, in the name of affirming Quebec's secular character, that state employees in "coercive positions" (judges, prison guards, police officers) be barred from wearing "religious symbols."

- In 2013–14, a minority Parti Québécois government pressed for the National Assembly to adopt a "Charter of Quebec Values" that would have prohibited the province's 550,000 public sector workers from wearing religious symbols, although it made sure to include an exception for "discreet" Catholic crosses.

- In 2017, Quebec's Philippe Couillard-led Liberal Party government passed legislation (Bill 62) that stipulates that Muslim women wearing the "Islamic veil" (niqab or burqa) must be deprived of public services, including health care, education and municipal transport.

- Last year, the corporate media welcomed the CAQ's Bill 21, hailing it as a legitimate and long-sought "compromise." In doing so, it deliberately covered up the profoundly anti-democratic content of its key measures: a ban on providing public services to

veiled Muslim women (inspired by the Liberals' Bill 62); a ban on hiring elementary and secondary school teachers wearing the hijab, Jewish kippah or Sikh turban (inspired by the PQ's "Charter of Values"); numerous exceptions, in the name of preserving Quebec's "heritage," for Roman Catholic symbols in state institutions; and the use of the "notwithstanding clause" to prevent Bill 21 from being struck down by the courts because it violates the Canadian or Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Québec Solidaire (QS), which falsely portrays itself as a left-wing party, played a key role in legitimizing the right-wing debate over "unreasonable accommodation" and state "secularism," proclaiming them as "necessary." For a decade its only complaint was that the PQ and CAQ sometimes went "too far."

Millions of people in Quebec and across Canada were revolted and outraged by the Quebec City mosque massacre. Yet in its immediate aftermath, QS rallied to the side of the ruling elite and assisted it in suppressing discussion of the obvious link between the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim violence and the chauvinism being promoted by the political establishment and corporate media. Absolving them of all responsibility, QS urged the Couillard government to adopt the Bouchard-Taylor Commission's call for a ban on the wearing of religious signs by state employees in "coercive positions," claiming that it constituted the "minimum consensus" of the parties in the provincial legislature.

Although QS formally opposed Bill 21 when it came up for adoption by the National Assembly last year, it has since refused to conduct any campaign against it, while insisting on several occasions that the CAQ is "not racist." It made no official comment on the wave of anti-Muslim messages posted on Legault's Facebook page following his participation in this year's commemoration of the Quebec City massacre.

It should also be mentioned that the *Journal de Montréal* (JDM), the right-wing tabloid owned by former Parti Québécois leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau that spearheaded the original media campaign over "unreasonable accommodation," did not comment on the hate messages that appeared on the Premier's Facebook page.

Echoing the position of Legault and the entire ruling establishment, the JDM's columnists routinely

denounce any mention of an "Islamophobic current" in Quebec as nothing but "Quebec bashing." One of them, former PQ minister Joseph Facal, vented his outrage that survivors of the Quebec City massacre had participated, along with thousands of others, in a demonstration against Bill 21.

There is deep sympathy among working people in Quebec for the victims of the Quebec City attack and other vicious anti-immigrant acts. And there is a strong popular opposition, though politically inarticulate, to Bill 21.

This much was acknowledged by interim Parti Québécois leader Pascal Bérubé who said, while defending Legault's chauvinistic policy, "There are also people who are attacking Mr. Legault's government and our own political party, saying that we discriminate against many people in our society, and that is not acceptable either."

Under conditions of the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, the bourgeoisie is vomiting up chauvinist and fascist reaction, as exemplified by Trump's rise to the US presidency and the emergence of the ultra-right AfD as the official opposition in Germany's parliament. Fearing the growing upsurge of the international working class against austerity, unending wars and ever-widening social inequality, capitalist governments around the world are implementing chauvinist measures like Bill 21 so as to scapegoat immigrants and minorities and split the working crisis.

Islamophobia, in particular, serves as an ideological tool in mobilizing support for the predatory wars and regime-change offensives that Washington and its allies, including Canadian imperialism, are waging in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran and other Muslim-majority countries.



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