

With new school program on Quebec Culture and Citizenship, CAQ government intensifies its national-chauvinist offensive

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In an Oct. 19 speech inaugurating Quebec's new parliamentary session, Premier François Legault announced that a mandatory Quebec Culture and Citizenship course will be introduced into the province's elementary and secondary school curriculum. The new course, or more accurately program of courses, will replace an Ethics and Religious Culture course/program that the Quebec nationalist right criticized for being contrary to "Quebec values" and promoting "Canadian multiculturalism."

The new course will promote "Quebec pride" and emphasize Quebec's "distinct culture," so as to cover up the fundamental class divisions that run through Quebec and all 21st century capitalist societies, and foster a nationalist outlook, including that young people should politically define themselves as "Québécois."

The new course is part of a redoubled campaign by Legault and his "Quebec First" Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government to stir up Quebec chauvinism and mobilize the Quebec nationalist right and far-right.

Deputy Premier Geneviève Guilbault confirmed this goal, saying in a burst of candour unusual for a capitalist politician that the new course will produce good citizens "with obviously a little chauvinistic flavour."

Legault spelled out the reactionary political objective underlying the course in a speech he gave to the CAQ's youth wing in September. "This is not the time to divide Quebec," the premier thundered, "This is the time to defend our social cohesion." He went on to define the CAQ as "a bulwark against radicals" and "a bulwark for our national cohesion." This is language historically associated with the far right and fascist dictatorships to justify the brutal repression of all forms of working class opposition.

Since his election in 2018, Legault, a multimillionaire and former Air Transat CEO, has made the defense of the Quebec "nation" the ostensible mission of his government. This has not stopped the CAQ from slashing public services, attacking working conditions, denouncing the "overly generous" wages of Quebec manufacturing workers, repeatedly threatening to criminalize strikes, and prioritizing profits over human lives

during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early in its mandate, the CAQ pushed through two chauvinist laws that cut the province's annual intake of immigrants, exclude minorities wearing religious symbols from teaching in Quebec schools and bar Muslim women wearing full-face veils from receiving education, health care and other public services.

More recently, the Legault government has stoked fears over the continued predominance of the French language in Quebec to justify the introduction of Bill 96—legislation that would significantly expand the scope of the province's Charter of the French Language to allow even more language discrimination. Bill 96 would amend the Canadian Constitution to enshrine the existence of a "Quebec nation" with French as its only "common language," and restrict the right to receive provincial public services in English to those deemed part of the "historic" English-speaking community—thus excluding all immigrants, and potentially those whose parents immigrated to Canada one or more generations back.

During the last federal election, Legault openly supported the hard-right Conservatives of Erin O'Toole, whose anti-worker policies align with those of the CAQ, on the grounds that they are the only federalist party that respects the "autonomy of the Quebec nation."

A recent announcement that the mandatory redistribution of seats in the federal House of Commons following the 2021 census will likely mean that Quebec will lose one federal MP prompted a veritable battle cry from Sonia LeBel, Quebec's Minister responsible for Canadian Relations and Treasury Board President. "We have a nation to defend," avowed LeBel.

Legault is personally in the forefront of this campaign, with his promotion of economic nationalism and initiatives such as the "blue basket," a protectionist campaign to boost Quebec-based manufacturing by slashing labour costs and business regulations. Legault has also issued glowing tributes to Maurice Duplessis—a former Quebec premier (1936-1939 and 1944-1959) notorious for his rabid anti-communism, repression of strikes and unions, anti-democratic "padlock" law, alliance with the church and big business, and persecution of religious minorities. Legault has proclaimed Duplessis a "great

nationalist” who “defended his nation” despite his “flaws.”

The CAQ’s nationalist campaign is distinguished by an intensity that reflects the acute nature of the social crisis that it seeks to divert attention from.

Despite the assurances of the ruling elite and its political representatives that Quebecers can now “live with the virus,” the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage. More than 500 people in Quebec continue to be infected daily in the province and over 2,000 across Canada. In the week ending October 29, COVID-19 killed an average of four Quebecers per day.

Quebec’s health and education systems, battered by the pandemic after decades of budget cuts and austerity, are on the verge of collapse. There is an acute shortage of qualified personnel and the infrastructure is dilapidated.

At 5.1 percent, inflation has reached its highest level in Quebec since 2003 and price increases are far outpacing the miserable wage increases that workers are being granted. Spikes in the price of gasoline and many essential food items are threatening the standards of living of millions of workers, who are also confronting a housing crisis characterized by sky-high home prices and a shortage of affordable housing.

Beholden to a ruling class determined to increase worker exploitation so as to prevail over its capitalist rivals in the race for profits and investment, the CAQ has no solution to this social catastrophe. Already, LeBel has announced that the province’s November 25 budget update will see an intensification of austerity measures (referred to under the Orwellian euphemism of “enhanced efficiencies”). Moreover, in his October 19 inaugural speech, Legault announced yet another “reform” of the health care system. This is to be carried out under the rubric of “decentralization” and will include no additional funding to overcome the catastrophic conditions produced by decades of underfunding.

Facing growing social opposition, Quebec’s ruling elite is intensifying its promotion of Quebec nationalism in an attempt to strengthen its political-ideological hold over the working class. Its goal is twofold: to divide the working class in Quebec along ethnic and linguistic lines; and to isolate Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the US and overseas.

Hence Legault’s efforts to promote “*la fierté québécoise*” (Quebec pride) and insistence on the importance of “social” and “national cohesion,” that is the subordination and suppression of the working class to the Quebec bourgeoisie and its mercenary economic and geopolitical interests.

Tellingly, Legault has pointed to the pandemic as an example of how Quebec nationalism ensured “a cohesion that helped us ... to respect the instructions, to get vaccinated, to buy Quebec products.”

If Legault can present his disastrous handling of the pandemic as a success, it is because the trade unions and Québec Solidaire (QS), the pseudo-left pro-Quebec independence party that is the third party in the National Assembly, have—in the

name of “national unity” in a time of crisis—joined the corporate media and the other opposition parties in rallying behind the CAQ government and its murderous policies. Fully supported by Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government, these policies have resulted in Quebec having both in real and in per capita terms far and away the highest pandemic death toll of any province in Canada.

The unions and QS have backed the ruling class drive to force workers back to work, including by reopening schools, amid the pandemic, and they sabotaged the struggle of Quebec’s half-million public sector workers against the CAQ government’s austerity contract proposals. The unions and QS are similarly integrated in the campaign now being spearheaded by the CAQ to whip up chauvinism and bolster “Quebec Inc.” against its competitors in the rest of Canada, and globally, through economic nationalism. In so far as the unions and QS have criticized either Bill 96 or Legault’s “panier bleu” initiative, it is from the standpoint that the government hasn’t gone far enough.

The turn of powerful sections of the capitalist elite to an avowedly chauvinistic and anti-immigrant nationalism and their cultivation of far-right forces to violently impose “social cohesion” on working people is not exclusive to Quebec. It is an international trend, as demonstrated by the rise of the AfD in Germany and Marine Le Pen in France, and Trump’s attempt, via his failed January 6 coup, to establish a presidential dictatorship in the United States with the help of the fascist riff-raff who stormed the Capitol.

Confronted everywhere with the same elite indifference to suffering and death and a devastating social crisis decades in the making, workers around the world have begun to break out of the straitjacket in which the pro-capitalist unions and establishment “left” parties have long entrapped them. Through mass strikes and protests they have begun to assert their independent class interests.

The response of the ruling class is an aggressive chauvinist campaign to divide workers along national, ethno-linguistic and racial lines and fan the flames of reaction and militarism. The working class must respond by unifying its struggles and putting into practice Karl Marx’s revolutionary watchword: “Workers of the world, unite!”



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