

Workers must oppose Bill 96, Quebec's chauvinist language law

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Quebec's National Assembly adopted Bill 96—a chauvinist language law—by a vote of 78 to 29 Tuesday.

Voting for Bill 96 were the ruling rightwing “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), led by the multi-millionaire ex-Air Transat CEO François Legault, and the pseudo-left, pro-Quebec independence Québec Solidaire.

The federalist Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) and the Parti Québécois (PQ) voted against. The PQ, which held referendums in 1980 and 1995 on Quebec “sovereignty” or independence, did so because it deemed Bill 96 did not go far enough in asserting the supremacy of French as Quebec's sole “official language.”

One hundred pages and 201 articles long, Bill 96 is touted by Quebec Premier Legault as a much needed “modernization” of Bill 101, the Charter of the French Language that the Parti Québécois adopted shortly after it first came to power in November 1975.

Justified in the name of staving off a much-exaggerated threat of the demographic decline of French in Quebec, Canada's lone majority French-speaking province, Bill 96 is fundamentally anti-democratic.

It would further enhance the privileged position of the French language in Quebec public life. Indeed, that is its stated aim. Formally titled “An act respecting French, the official and common language of Quebec,” Bill 96 would add to Canada's constitution two clauses stating that “Quebecers form a nation;” and that “French shall be the only official language of Quebec. It is also the only common language of the Quebec nation.”

Bill 96 has three interrelated objectives:

1) to promote Quebec nationalism and chauvinism so as to strengthen the political and ideological domination of Quebec's ruling elite, and divide the working class within Quebec along ethno-linguistic lines and Québécois workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and internationally;

2) to bolster the position of the francophone petty bourgeoisie by expanding the affirmative action-type elements of Bill 101;

3) to strengthen the position of the Quebec government and elite in its power struggles with Ottawa and other provincial or regional-based factions of the bourgeoisie.

Bill 96 is in keeping with other chauvinist measures introduced by the CAQ government. The most notable and odious of these is its “secularism” law (commonly known as Bill 21), which targets religious minorities, especially Muslim women. Bill 21 bars those who wear “religious signs,” such as the hijab or Jewish kippah, from being employed by the Quebec government as school teachers and in other positions of “authority,” and bars devout Muslim women who wear the niqab or burkha from receiving basic public services, including health care and education.

Knowing full well that Bill 96 tramples on democratic rights, the CAQ government has invoked the “notwithstanding clause” to exempt it from

constitutional challenges under either the Canadian constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms or Quebec's own *Charte des droits et libertés de la personne* (Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms).

Use of the “notwithstanding clause” is increasingly being normalized by governments across Canada. But the CAQ government has gone further by preemptively shielding the entire law, not just a specific clause or clauses, from court challenges on the grounds they violate basic democratic rights.

Some of Bill 96's most significant provisions would:

*expand the provisions of Bill 101 that require French to be the principal language of work to companies with 25 to 49 employees and to federally-regulated sectors of the economy (eg. banking, federal Crown Corporations, telecommunications, and air and much of railway transport).

*prevent, in most circumstances, all but state-designated members of the “historic English community” from communicating with the provincial government in English and accessing vital public services, including health care, in English.

*force all immigrants and refugees to communicate exclusively with the government in French, beginning 6 months after their arrival in the province, and prohibit public sector workers (apart from those employed in certain officially-designated bilingual institutions) from communicating with them in English or any other language. The use of state-funded interpreters is expressly forbidden.

*permanently cap the percentage of CEGEP (pre-university and technical college) students at English-language CEGEPs to no more than 17.5 percent; and, in order to further limit the enrollment of native French speakers and allophones (those whose mother tongue is neither English or French) at English CEGEPs, ensure that preference in admissions is given to those permitted to receive their primary and secondary education in English under the restrictive provisions of Bill 101.

*establish a French-language ministry and Commissioner of the French Language, and give language-inspectors sweeping powers to access computers and data, without any need to obtain a warrant, to ensure the provisions of Bill 96 and 101 are being adhered to.

*give French “marked or net predominance,” on all commercial signs. (Already most commercial and public signs must be in French and the French text must be “markedly predominant.”)

*give the French texts of provincial government laws and regulations interpretive precedence over their English-language versions.

Strengthening “social cohesion”

Bill 96 is touted by the CAQ government as a major element in a “Quebec First” nationalist-autonomist agenda that includes everything

from Bill 21; legislation reducing immigration levels (Bill 9) to a new mandatory school program aimed at boosting pride in Quebec's "unique" culture and values; and a gamut of economic nationalist measures.

Quebec Premier and CAQ founder François Legault has repeatedly promoted this agenda as a means of strengthening "*cohesion sociale*" (social cohesion)—that is to suppress class conflict and uphold the "national interests" of the Quebec bourgeoisie.

Tellingly, Legault has pointed to the pandemic as proof of what Quebecers can achieve when they are "united." In truth, the government's profits before lives policy has exacted a devastating toll of mass infections, death and social misery. With more than 15,000 officially recorded COVID-19 fatalities, Quebec's pandemic deaths far exceed every other province in both absolute and per capita terms. But opposition from the working class has been smothered by a nationalist "*union sacrée*" (holy union) of the Quebec establishment anchored by the trade unions and Québec Solidaire.

At root, the CAQ government and Quebec elite's promotion of an ever more explicitly right-wing chauvinism is born of anxiety and fear. Fear, above all, that their ideological-political hold over the working class has been undermined by decades of capitalist austerity, ever-deepening social inequality and Canadian imperialism's participation, with their staunch support, in US-led wars and aggression.

Popular support for the PLQ and PQ, the rival federalist and Quebec sovereignist parties that alternated as Quebec's government from 1970 to 2018, has hemorrhaged. Their differences over Quebec's constitutional status notwithstanding, both the PLQ and PQ incarnated the new secular Quebec nationalism of the 1960s, and for several decades championed a program of making broad use of the power of the state to promote the growth of the francophone bourgeoisie.

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Moreover the development of socio-economic life, including the ruinous response of governments the world over to the COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating that capitalism and the nation-state system in which it is historically rooted are in irreconcilable conflict with the needs of society. None of the burning problems facing working people can be solved on a national basis.

Quebec's trade unions have for decades promoted Quebec nationalism as the political-ideological cover and legitimization for their ever expanding corporatist ties with big business and the state and role as junior partners in the imposition of capitalist austerity. Predictably, the unions have been among the most enthusiastic supporters of the CAQ's Bill 96. The FTQ, the largest of Quebec's labour federations, issued a press release Wednesday that said it "rejoiced" at its passage. Insofar as the unions have criticized Bill 96, it is along the lines of the PQ, the big business pro-independence party which they shamelessly promoted for decades as it slashed social spending and attacked workers' rights—that is, for not going far enough.

Québec Solidaire's support for Bill 96 is both entirely predictable and politically damning. For decades the Quebec pseudo-left, and especially the various Stalinist and Pabloite groupings, have promoted the lie that Quebec nationalism and the call for reshuffling the borders of North

America to create a third imperialist state in North America, a *République du Québec*, are "progressive." They played a significant role in assisting the union bureaucracy in diverting an explosive movement of the Quebec working class in the late 1960s and 1970s, which was part of a global eruption of class struggle, behind the PQ. And they have continued to promote Quebec nationalism—including lending legitimacy to the phony and foul debates over "excessive" accommodations to immigrants and banning public sector worker from wearing religious symbols—as it has become ever more explicitly chauvinist and right-wing.

The Canadian establishment's response to Bill 96

The initial reaction of the Canadian political establishment outside Quebec to Bill 96 was muted. In the run-up to the September 2021 election, all the federalist parties tried to sidestep the question of Bill 21, and even more so Bill 96 then only in its initial drafting, for fear of getting on the wrong-side of Legault and his CAQ government. Legault is a garden-variety right-wing populist, but powerful sections of the Quebec elite have championed him as a political titan.

Moreover, many of the reactionary nationalist conceptions that underlie Bill 96 are not necessarily in conflict with the NDP-backed Trudeau government's relentless promotion of identity politics, including the notion being given ever greater prominence that Canada is comprised of discrete communities defined by race, ethnicity, and religion, and requiring separate representation.

That said, there has been a marked change in the Anglo-Canadian political establishment's attitude toward Bill 96 in recent weeks. This includes prominent media coverage of "anglophone" protests against Bill 96 in Montreal.

The federalist political forces now denouncing Bill 96 do so not from the standpoint of defending basic democratic rights, but rather Canadian "national unity" and the federal state, the principal political instrument through which the bourgeoisie exercises its rule.

A chorus of *National Post* and *Toronto Sun* columnists who only a few weeks ago were supporting the Conservatives' instrumentalization of the far-right Freedom Convoy to push for the scrapping of all remaining anti-Covid public health measures and destabilize the Trudeau Liberal government are now thundering against the anti-democratic provisions of Bill 96.

As for Trudeau, he declaims about upholding democratic values, while presiding over ever-deepening social inequality, routinely outlawing worker job action, and providing staunch support to the US-NATO war on Russia. Canadian imperialism, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has exposed, played a major role in preparing and instigating this war though its decades-long alliance with Ukrainian fascists who collaborated with Hitler, and promotion of far-right Ukrainian nationalism.

Shedding light on the real concerns within the federalist elite over Bill 96, a *Globe and Mail* editorial yesterday accused the CAQ government of "redefining the constitutional order" and "trying" to leave Canada by "tiptoe(ing) out the back door."

Workers in Quebec, across Canada, and around the world, irrespective of the language they speak or the colour of their skin, confront the same basic problems arising from the breakdown of the capitalist system: an endless pandemic, soaring inflation, ever deepening social inequality, the dismantling of public services, and an imperialist-instigated war in Eastern Europe that is rapidly becoming a direct conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

Working people must oppose the CAQ's chauvinist language law, and all the ruling class attempts to divide them—be it through the promotion of

Canadian and Quebec nationalism, Anglo-chauvinism, racism or identity politics—from the standpoint of socialist internationalism. That is the struggle to unite and mobilize the working class as an international class fighting for the socialist reorganization of society so the resources of the world economy can be used to meet human needs, not enrich and advance the predatory geopolitical interests of the few.



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