

Quebec's ruling CAQ whipping up anti-immigrant chauvinism ahead of provincial election

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At its recent policy convention, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), the right-wing nationalist party that governs Canada's only majority French-speaking province, announced it intends to campaign for powers over immigration currently held by the federal government to be transferred to the province.

"I'm asking, in the next election [to be held this October 3], for a strong mandate to go ahead and negotiate this with the federal government," thundered Quebec Premier and CAQ leader François Legault to loud applause from some 1,500 party leaders and activists. "It's a question of survival for our nation," Legault added emphatically.

Some rank-and-file party delegates went so far as to propose the government hold a referendum on the issue, but the party leadership refused to entertain that idea, at least at this point.

The demand that immigration powers be "repatriated" to Quebec challenges the fragile balance of power between the federal and provincial governments, a source of great internal tension within the Canadian federal state since its founding.

By inventing a "danger" to "our nation" from immigration, Legault is pursuing a twofold objective: to divert attention from his government's disastrous management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deplorable state of public services and the devastating economic effects of galloping inflation; and to provoke a conflict with Ottawa in order to stoke the virulent Quebec chauvinism that forms the ideological basis of his reactionary government.

The CAQ convention was dominated by what Legault calls the promotion of "Quebec pride" and anti-immigrant agitation. Seeking to portray immigrants and their families as a threat to "Quebec culture," Legault complained that "half" of the new arrivals to Quebec under the federal government's "family reunification" program—a tiny portion of the population—do not speak French.

The premier added absurdly that if the Quebec government does not get the immigration powers it demands, "It may become only a matter of time before we become a Louisiana." Louisiana is a US state and former French colony, where today barely 2 percent of the population speaks French. In Quebec, by contrast, 90 percent of the population speaks the language, and

for 78 percent it is their mother tongue.

The CAQ convention was held only a few days after the Legault government passed its Bill 96—a chauvinist law aimed at promoting French as Quebec's sole "public language." By further restricting the language rights of minorities (especially those of immigrants), this new legislation reinforces the anti-democratic elements of Bill 101 passed in 1977 by the Parti Québécois.

Not surprisingly, the CAQ's chauvinist Bill 96 has received the enthusiastic support of Québec Solidaire, an ostensibly "left" party that advocates Quebec independence—the creation of a capitalist *République du Québec*, that is, a third imperialist state in North America.

Quebec's CAQ regime, like governments across Europe and North America, is whipping up chauvinism and "normalizing" far-right conceptions and forces. A key element in this is the scapegoating of refugees and immigrants for the terrible social ills created by the profit system. Last month, Legault urged the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government to close Roxham Road, which traverses the Canada-US border between Quebec and New York State. In recent years, Roxham Road has served as a means for thousands of refugees who were fleeing Washington's punitive refugee and immigration policies, and would otherwise not be eligible to seek asylum in Canada, to cross into Canada and make refugee claims.

Quebec nationalism—like its twin Canadian nationalism and all forms of nationalism—is an ideological tool used to suppress the class struggle, subordinate workers to their "own" national ruling class, and thus prevent the development of a unified working class movement against capitalism. It is no coincidence that Legault justifies his right-wing nationalist policies by invoking the need to maintain "social cohesion."

The CAQ's incessant Quebec flag-waving serves as a means for it and the ruling class to divert attention away from the ever deepening social crisis and as a smokescreen behind which to prepare a further assault on public services and tax cuts for big business and the rich. Thus, while the CAQ intends to make Quebec chauvinist appeals the pivot of its re-election campaign, the corporate media are regularly issuing warnings to the

Legault government that it will have to “get its fiscal house in order” post-election, i.e. implement a fresh round of austerity and other measures aimed at boosting investor profits at the expense of the working class.

For key sections of the Quebec ruling elite, the promotion of nationalism is also a means of strengthening its position in its power struggles with Ottawa and other regional and provincially-based factions of the Canadian bourgeoisie. As for chauvinist language laws, such as Bill 101 and the newly adopted Bill 96, they are particularly popular with Quebec's francophone upper-middle class as they provide a stepping stone to positions of power and lucrative careers in government and corporate boards at the expense of their anglophone rivals.

The CAQ's current nationalist crusade is the culmination of a chauvinist, anti-immigrant campaign that the entire Quebec political establishment has been waging for the past 15 years. This campaign has included:

- * the manufactured scandal around the “unreasonable” accommodations supposedly granted to religious minorities;

- * the Parti Québécois' “Charter of Values,” which sought to prevent more than a half million Quebec government employees from wearing “conspicuous” religious symbols, except for Christian crucifixes;

- * the Couillard Liberal government's Bill 62, which, under the pretext of “secularism,” prescribed that public services be provided and received “with faces uncovered” in an explicit attack on the tiny minority of Muslim women in Quebec who wear the full veil (burqa or niqab);

- * the CAQ's Bill 21, which, taking its inspiration from both the PQ's Charter and the Liberals' “secularism” law, prohibits the wearing of religious symbols by teachers and other government employees deemed in “positions of authority” and bars fully-veiled Muslim women from accessing health care and other public services.

This reactionary campaign was supported from the start by the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire under the pretext that it was a “legitimate debate.” More recently, QS has timidly criticized Legault's comments on immigration and called his reference to the “Louisianization” of Quebec a “gross exaggeration.” But this is a cover-up, considering that just days earlier, the same QS voted in favour of the CAQ's chauvinist Bill 96.

Among Bill 96's many anti-democratic provisions are a stipulation that six months after their arrival in Quebec, immigrants and refugees will be allowed to communicate with the provincial government solely in French; and a ban on public sector workers (except those working in certain designated bilingual institutions) from communicating with newcomers in English or any language other than French.

In addition to QS, the Legault government has received crucial support from the trade unions. For decades, the union bureaucracy has worked to divide the Quebec working class from its class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and to subordinate workers to the Quebec capitalist elite on the pretext

that they speak the same language and are of the same nation. The pro-capitalist unions welcomed Bill 96, and to the extent that they have criticized it, it is from the point of view of their traditional PQ allies who feel that the law does not go far enough in its discriminatory measures against non-French speakers.

The Quebec Liberal Party and some business leaders have offered limited criticism of the CAQ's chauvinism, but from a purely pragmatic perspective. For example, Charles Millard, CEO of the Quebec Federation of Chambers of Commerce, expressed concern that such policies would tarnish Quebec's “branding” abroad. That is, the ability of businesses to attract foreign investment and cheap immigrant labour.

As for Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, its posture of opposition to the CAQ's policies is fraudulent across the board, as is the long-standing “pro-immigrant” image it has cultivated with the assistance of the big business media.

Trudeau has maintained Canada's pro-employer immigration regime, which is largely based on the needs of the labour market, and for that reason has been touted by fascists like former US President Donald Trump and the AfD in Germany as a model to follow. Tens of thousands of temporary workers, including more than 50,000 agricultural workers, arrive each year in Canada. These workers, who are brutally exploited and frequently bound to a single employer, have virtually no rights.

In blatant violation of international law, the Trudeau government is also working closely with Washington—first under Trump and now Joe Biden—to increasingly seal the border between the two countries and prevent the arrival of asylum seekers fleeing the United States.

At the same time, Canada is taking advantage of Washington's savage anti-migrant policy on its southern border with Mexico to wash its hands of the plight of the oppressed masses of Latin America, who are seeking to flee the hellish conditions of poverty and insecurity caused by decades of imperialist oppression and violence—at the hands not just of Washington, but also Canadian imperialism.



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