

Hate incidents targeting Quebec's religious minorities spike after passage of CAQ's Bill 21

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A study released last month by the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) highlights the devastating impact that the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government's "state secularism" law, or Bill 21, has had on Quebec's religious minorities.

Adopted in June 2019, Bill 21 prohibits public school teachers and government employees in "positions of authority" from wearing religious symbols—including the hijab, Jewish kippah and Sikh turban—and denies essential public services to devout Muslim women who wear the niqab or burqa. The CAQ government has placed the entire law under the anti-democratic "notwithstanding clause." This means that its provisions cannot be struck down by the courts even if they are found to violate rights constitutionally "guaranteed" under the Canadian constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Quebec's own charter of rights.

According to the survey conducted for the ACS by the market research firm Léger, two out of three Muslim women have experienced or witnessed a hate incident since the passage of Bill 21. In addition to verbal attacks, they reported physical violence such as being spat on or having their Islamic headscarf torn off. As a result, 78 percent reported a deterioration in their feeling of "being accepted as full members of Quebec society." Members of other religious minorities, such as Sikh and Jewish men, also reported a significant increase in hateful acts directed against them and their co-religionists and a growing sense of alienation and rejection.

This marginalization of religious minorities is the intended and desired outcome of the Quebec ruling class. For the past two decades, the political establishment has whipped up chauvinism against immigrants and religious minorities to distract attention from, and scapegoat them for, the social crisis caused by capitalism, and to divide workers along ethnic, cultural or linguistic lines.

From 2007 onwards, the political and media establishment used a few isolated incidents to denounce the allegedly "unreasonable" accommodation of religious minorities. This campaign led to a series of anti-democratic bills aimed at banning public sector workers from wearing head coverings

and other religious symbols. It culminated in the passage of Bill 21 shortly after the election of the CAQ, a right-wing chauvinist party led by multi-millionaire and former Air Transat CEO François Legault.

All political parties have played a role in this reactionary campaign. The Quebec Liberal Party, which was in power when the "reasonable accommodation" furor first erupted, attempted under Bill 94—legislation that was tabled in the National Assembly in 2010 but never adopted—to mandate that state services, including health care and education, must be given and received "with uncovered faces." This anti-democratic principle would be enshrined in Bill 62 passed by Philippe Couillard's Liberal government in 2017, and then incorporated into the CAQ's own Bill 21 in a strengthened form through the invocation of the "notwithstanding clause."

The Parti Québécois (PQ), which advocates the creation of an independent capitalist Quebec republic that would be an integral part of NATO, NORAD, and the recently "modernized" NAFTA, went even further with its 2014 Charter of Quebec Values. It would have prohibited Quebec's more than half million public and para-public employees from wearing religious symbols, although "discrete crucifixes" were to be permitted. The PQ's supposed "state secularism" law also contained numerous exceptions to "preserve" Quebec's Roman Catholic "heritage."

Bernard Drainville, who was the minister responsible for this bill while he served in the 2012-2014 PQ government, is now a "star" CAQ candidate for the Oct. 3 Quebec election.

Two weeks ago, Jean-François Lisée, an adviser to PQ Premiers Lucien Bouchard and Jacques Parizeau who himself served as PQ leader from 2016 to 2018, virulently criticized an advertisement from the HEC, the Université de Montréal's business schools, that showed a woman wearing a hijab.

As for Québec Solidaire (QS), an ostensibly "left wing" pro-independence party, it contributed to the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism by maintaining for more than a decade that the "debate" on "reasonable accommodation" was legitimate and necessary. In 2013, at the height of the debate over the PQ's Charter of Values, it introduced its own bill on

the “secularization of the state” that differed from those of other parties only in the degree to which it discriminated against members of religious minorities.

Only in 2019, amid a resurgence of far-right movements promoting chauvinism and xenophobia internationally, did QS attempt a political repositioning. At a point when it was already certain the bill would be passed by the National Assembly, with or without its support, Québec Solidaire suddenly declared it opposed Bill 21. However, it conspicuously absented itself from anti-Bill 21 demonstrations.

Further demonstrating the opportunistic and cynical character of its anti-Bill 21 stance, QS leader Gabriel-Nadeau Dubois recently declared that he wanted to “allow the wearing of religious symbols for everyone,” before adding that under a QS government employees such as teachers and police officers would be still barred from wearing head coverings for “security reasons” or because they could be an impediment to their work. He also insisted that he did not want to make an election issue out of the ban on religious symbols. This is tantamount to endorsing Bill 21 and the continuing targeting of religious minorities by discriminatory measures.

Quebec’s French-speaking bourgeois elite has long deployed Quebec nationalism as a key political-ideological weapon to rally support for its factional struggles with its capitalist rivals, and most importantly to prevent Quebec workers from joining their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and internationally.

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With global capitalism roiled by the COVID-19 pandemic and now the NATO proxy war with Russia over Ukraine, the CAQ government has doubled down on its promotion of its chauvinist “Quebec First” agenda. This has included various economic nationalist measures, and the introduction of a new Quebec Culture and Citizenship program in public schools. Most important is the adoption of Bill 96, which asserts that French shall be Quebec’s sole “official and common language,” and towards that end further restricts access to English-language CEGEPs (pre-university and technical college) and services.

As the result of the reactionary provisions of Bill 96, immigrants, six months after their arrival in Quebec, will henceforth be barred from using English or any language other than French when communicating with the provincial government or accessing essential public services. Bill 96 also expands the discriminatory, affirmative-action type clauses of Bill 101, the Charter of the French language adopted in 1977, to ensure the French-speaking middle class has ready access to senior positions in government and big business. Like Bill 21, Bill 96 was pre-emptively shielded from constitutional court challenges by placing it in its entirety under the “notwithstanding clause.”

The opposition parties all expressed their fundamental

agreement with the central objective of the legislation. The PQ voted against it, though, on the grounds that it did not go far enough. QS voted in favour, with Ruba Ghazal, its critic for the French language in the National Assembly, saying during the debate over Bill 96 that it was an opportunity to “bring together” Quebecers “around our common language.”

This nationalist rhetoric echoes Legault’s promotion of “national pride” throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as a means, to use his words, of ensuring “social cohesion,” i.e., suppressing the class struggle in favor of the fictitious unity of the supposed Quebec “nation” whose members, from low-wage workers to multi-millionaires, are said to share the same basic interests.

Faced with a working class that is entering into struggle against the big business assault on its working and living conditions, the Quebec ruling elite will take advantage of the ongoing election campaign to intensify its promotion of chauvinism and nationalism. They will seek to deflect the popular anger over growing economic insecurity and social inequality by redirecting it against immigrants and religious and linguistic minorities, while undermining the class consciousness of Quebec workers.

Already, the various big business parties are vying to see who can come up with the most Quebec-chauvinist measure: for the CAQ, it’s a matter of “regaining control” over immigration; Éric Duhaime’s Conservative Party of Quebec is moving in the same direction by promising to reduce the number of new immigrants Quebec receives annually; as for the PQ, it wants to bar all Quebecers whose mother tongue is French and all immigrants, including those who are native English speakers, and their children and grandchildren receiving their CEGEP education in English.

Quebec workers must reject this outpouring of reactionary nationalism and build unity with their class brothers and sisters in Canada—French- and English-speaking and immigrant—in a common struggle to defend the jobs, wages and public services of all and for the socialist reorganization of the economy to bring about social equality.



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