

Quebec election campaign dominated by right-wing, chauvinist appeals

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Quebec's Oct. 3 provincial election is being held amid an immense social crisis and growing working-class opposition, yet what dominates the campaign are the right-wing policy prescriptions and rank chauvinist appeals of the various big business parties.

This includes rival tax-cutting and privatization plans, under conditions where public health care and education are dying the death of a thousand cuts; claims that immigrants threaten the "Quebec nation;" and calls for still more restrictions on access to public services in English.

Like the rest of Canada, Quebec has been roiled by the two-and-a-half-year-long COVID-19 pandemic and the economic fallout from the US-NATO instigated war with Russia over Ukraine. However, neither of these pivotal issues figures prominently in the official campaign.

The war, Canadian imperialism's prominent role in it and the federal Liberal government's massive military spending hikes are never mentioned. None of the five parties with representation in the outgoing National Assembly—including the two that are pro-Quebec independence—sees any reason to do so, because they all support the war with Russia and Quebec serving as a bulwark, whether as part of the Canadian state or not, of the US-led imperialist world order.

With 16,658 COVID-19 deaths, Quebec has by far the highest per capita pandemic fatality rate of any province. COVID infections have likely also left hundreds of thousands of Quebecers with the debilitating impacts of Long COVID.

Yet the only trenchant criticism of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government's ruinous pandemic response is coming from the far-right Parti Conservateur du Québec (PCQ). Led by former radio shock-jock and "Freedom" Convoy champion Eric Duhaime, the PCQ denounces the CAQ government not for failing to pursue a science-based Zero COVID elimination strategy, but for purportedly violating Quebecers' "freedoms" by imposing limited mitigation measures, such as partial lockdowns and mask-mandates.

If the Liberals, Parti Québécois (PQ) and the ostensibly "left-wing" Québec Solidaire have next to nothing to say about the pandemic, it is because they have all faithfully supported the CAQ's profits-before-lives pandemic policy through seven waves of mass infection and death. This policy was supported and overseen by the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, which fully backed the back-to-work/back-to-school campaign in every province.

No party has made an issue of the CAQ government's dismantling of COVID testing and contact tracing, and all other anti-COVID preventive measures, apart from vaccinations, during the past nine months, even as Quebec was being ravaged by three Omicron variant-driven waves. Like the government, the opposition parties met the

revelation that COVID-19 killed more people in the first six months of this year than all of 2021 with a collective shrug of the shoulders.

Health experts are warning that with schools now reopened without any anti-COVID measures for the first time since the pandemic began and the weather cooling, the pandemic's eighth wave is all but inevitable. But just as they are united on the question of the war, so Quebec's rival parties from the PCQ and CAQ to Québec Solidaire stand as one on pandemic policy. All insist nothing should be done that impedes the churning out of profit, that the population must "learn to live" (and die) with the virus, and COVID-19 must be allowed to continue to spread and mutate even at the risk of it spitting out more infectious and lethal variants.

The pandemic aside, the rival parties cannot entirely ignore the social crisis. Workers' wages are being squeezed by near-double digit inflation. Decent, affordable housing is increasingly beyond reach for many due to the failure of all levels of government to invest in social housing and a massive, years-long, speculation-driven rise in real estate prices. The public health system is on life support, as a result of decades of cost-cutting and the pandemic's impact on health care workers, who have had to fight the worst health crisis in a century amid acute personnel and equipment shortages. Waits of 8 hours or longer to see an emergency room physician have been common in Quebec for years. But now the ill and injured must also contend with emergency room closures on virtually a daily basis.

As solutions to this swirl of crises and dysfunction, the rival parties are proposing reactionary measures that will only make matters worse—increased for-profit health care, tax cuts for the rich, enhanced landlord rights, etc.—or in the case of Québec Solidaire tiny social spending increases and feeble reforms.

Since October 2018, Quebec has been governed by the CAQ. A right-wing, "Quebec First" populist party, the CAQ was founded with the express aim of overcoming the so-called "prosperity gap" between Quebec and Ontario, by increasing corporate profitability and investor returns through massive austerity, privatization and tax cuts.

Led by former Air Transat CEO François Legault, the CAQ government has imposed real-wage cuts on public sector workers, intervened obtrusively on the side of the bosses in private sector contract disputes, and won plaudits from big business for its criminal mishandling of the pandemic.

In the name of boosting Quebecers' "pride" and Quebec's "national" and "social cohesion," the CAQ government has also pushed through a series of chauvinist measures, aimed at whipping up right-wing Quebec nationalism and splitting the working class.

These include Bill 9, which reduced Quebec's intake of immigrants and established new, racist "civilizational compatibility" criteria for

their selection, and Bill 21, which targets religious minorities, above all Muslim women. Bill 21 prohibits those wearing religious head-coverings from teaching at the province's public schools and stipulates that devout Muslim women who wear the niqab or burka cannot receive essential public services, including health care and education.

Last spring, the CAQ adopted Bill 96, a sweeping reform of the Quebec Language Charter adopted by the first PQ government in 1977. It has broad implications and multiple objectives. Chief among them are reinforcing the French-speaking middle-class' privileged access to corporate managerial positions, and limiting access, especially for immigrants, to public services in English. Under Bill 96, immigrants to Quebec will only be allowed to communicate with the government in French after just 6 months' residence.

Quebec Premier Legault has doubled down on his chauvinist appeals during the election campaign. Last week he associated immigrants with "violence" and "extremists." In a speech on Sunday, he denounced the calls from sections of big business and his Liberal and QS opponents for increased immigration levels to ease labour shortages as a threat to "national cohesion."

Legault has vowed that if re-elected his government will press Ottawa to give the province full and exclusive control over immigration. Quebec's premier knows full well that the Justin Trudeau-led federal government will reject this demand, but he hopes that it will serve to make immigration and Quebec's call for greater constitutional powers the focus of public debate as his government pivots to "post-pandemic" austerity.

The PQ has attacked Legault and the CAQ government for not going further in restricting minority rights and reducing immigration, dismissing Bills 96 and 21 as "half measures."

All of the parties, however, have participated in the promotion of Quebec chauvinism and the stigmatizing of immigrants. Bill 21 incorporates measures first proposed in PQ and Liberal legislation. QS long promoted the reactionary debate over supposed "excessive accommodations" to immigrants as "legitimate," covered up the chauvinist motivations of the PQ's Charter of Values, and voted for the CAQ's Bill 96.

The 2018 election represented an historic debacle for the PQ and Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ), the two parties that had dominated Quebec provincial politics and alternated in government since 1970. The Liberals won just 24.8 percent of the vote and the PQ 17.1 percent. In both cases, this was their lowest ever vote share.

Supported by the union bureaucracy, the big business, pro-independence PQ once had a significant base of electoral support in the working class. But that was shattered by its imposition of round after round of massive social spending cuts, epitomized by the austerity shock drives of 1982-83 and 1996-98, which were frequently enforced by vicious anti-strike laws.

The Liberals formed Quebec's government from 2003 through 2018, except for a brief 18-month PQ interregnum between Sept. 2012 and April 2014. Under Jean Charest, they gutted restrictions on contracting-out, cut taxes for big business and the rich, and in 2012 unleashed massive state violence against striking students. Returned to power under Philippe Couillard, the Liberals completed the savage austerity drive Charest had initiated, cutting billions from health care, education and other social services.

Everything suggests that the Liberals and PQ will fare even more poorly on Oct. 3.

If the CAQ has reaped the political dividend from the collapse in

support for the PQ and the Liberals, it is above all because of the unions' systematic suppression of the class struggle.

As across Canada, the unions have for decades imposed contract concessions, policed "emergency" anti-strike laws, sabotaged mass working class opposition to austerity, and promoted nationalism (only substituting the Fleurs de Lys for the Maple Leaf).

In 2012, when the province-wide student strike threatened to become the catalyst for a working-class rebellion against capitalist austerity, the unions intervened ruthlessly to shut it down and divert the opposition to Charest behind the election of another right-wing PQ government.

The unions have played a pivotal role in implementing the ruling class's profits-before-lives pandemic policy, suppressing worker opposition to the reopening of schools and non-essential businesses and to the CAQ's authoritarian decrees whereby health care workers are compelled to do endless hours of forced overtime.

The FTQ, CSN and CSQ union federations' "social dialogue" with the reactionary CAQ government is complemented by their support, alongside the NDP and the union bureaucracy in English Canada, for a purportedly "progressive" federal Liberal government that is waging imperialist war against Russia and determined to impose huge, inflation-driven real wage cuts on working people.

The union bureaucracy has for decades promoted Quebec nationalism as the political-ideological cement of its anti-worker corporatist partnership with big business and the state. Its insistence that Quebec workers must join hands with the Québécois capitalist elite to defend the "Quebec nation" and French language has prepared the political ground for Legault's anti-immigrant demagoguery and chauvinist laws.

Indeed, much of the union bureaucracy welcomed Bill 21, and in so far as the unions criticize the CAQ over Bill 96, they do so on the same lines as the PQ. That is, for not taking even tougher measures to impose French as Quebec's sole "official" and "common language."

Whatever language they speak or their ethnicity, workers in Quebec confront the same fundamental problems as do workers elsewhere in Canada and around the world—war, soaring prices, the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental destruction, entrenched social inequality and the threat of authoritarian rule. None of these problems can find progressive resolution outside of the unification and mobilization of the global working class against capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system. Workers in Quebec must repudiate the nationalist-corporatist trade union apparatuses and build new organizations of mass struggle committed to socialist internationalism and the fight for workers power alongside their class brothers and sisters in English Canada, the US, and internationally.



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