

Re-elected Coalition Avenir Québec government will come into headlong conflict with the working class

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The right-wing, “Quebec First” Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) was re-elected with an increased parliamentary majority in Monday’s provincial election.

Led by François Legault, a former Air Transat CEO and Parti Québécois (PQ) cabinet minister, the CAQ captured 90 of the 125 National Assembly seats.

Much of the corporate media is describing the CAQ victory as a “landslide.” This is a gross exaggeration. The CAQ won only 41 percent of the votes cast, a modest 3.5 percentage point increase from the 2018 election when it first came to power, unseating the Quebec Liberals. But because the opposition vote was fractured among four parties, the CAQ was able to increase its seat count by 16.

Voter participation, while down only slightly from 2018, was the second lowest in any Quebec election in the past 90 years. When account is taken of the more than a third of Quebecers who chose not to vote, the CAQ’s “landslide” translates into the support of just 27 percent of the electorate.

The CAQ’s first term in office was dominated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Legault government, like the federal Liberal government and its counterparts in the other provinces, has prioritized protecting profits over saving lives. This has resulted in seven waves of mass infection and death that have killed 16,699 Quebecers.

Yet because of the support of the corporate media and the complicit silence of the Liberals, PQ and pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, Legault has been able to tout Quebec’s ruinous response to the pandemic a great success—one purportedly attributable to its “*cohésion nationale*” (national cohesion.) During the election campaign, as throughout the past two years, the only challenge to Legault came from the extreme right, with Eric Duhaime and his Quebec Conservative Party (PCQ) denouncing the government for the limited mitigation measures it imposed in earlier stages of the pandemic and championing last winter’s fascist-instigated, “Freedom Convoy” occupation of Ottawa.

While implementing the back-to-work/back-to-school pandemic policy of big business, continuing the austerity agenda of its Liberal and PQ predecessors, and obtrusively intervening on the side of the bosses in one contract dispute after another, the CAQ government has stoked Quebec chauvinism with a series of measures attacking immigrants and the province’s religious and linguistic minorities.

During the election campaign, Premier Legault associated immigrants with crime and violence and repeatedly suggested that they are a threat to the “values” and French character of the “Quebec

nation.” Last week, after CAQ Immigration Minister Jean Boulet lying told a radio debate that 80 percent of immigrants “don’t work, don’t speak French, or don’t adhere to the values of Quebec society,” Legault gave him the feeblest slap on the wrist, saying he could be back in the post-election cabinet, but not as immigration minister. Shortly thereafter the premier himself said any increase in immigration levels would be “a bit suicidal.”

In his victory speech Monday night, Legault broke into English to cynically proclaim himself “the premier of all Quebecers.” He also made a point of reiterating his government’s plan to make “our health system more humane, more efficient,” and gave a shout out to Christian Dubé, the ex-business executive he has placed in charge of “health care reform.” The latter is a euphemism for privatization and budget cuts, camouflaged as shredding bureaucracy and empowering health care professionals.

Continuing hemorrhage of support for the traditional parties of government

In Monday’s election the two parties that alternated as Quebec’s government from 1970 to 2018, the federalist Quebec Liberal Party (QLP) and the *indépendantiste* PQ, continued to hemorrhage support. Combined they won less than 29 percent of the popular vote.

The PQ finished third in the popular vote with a 15.6 percent share, down 2.5 percentage points from 2018, its worst-ever result.

The Liberals lost more than 400,000 votes and saw their share of the popular vote shrivel from 24.8 percent in 2018 to just 14.37 percent, reducing them to fourth-place.

Nevertheless, both parties tried lamely to claim a victory of sorts. The PQ because they had exceeded pre-campaign expectations, finishing third rather fifth in the popular vote and winning three seats, including that of their leader, Paul St. Pierre-Plamondon, instead of one.

The Liberals because they won 21 seats—almost all of them on the island of Montreal where Quebec’s immigrant population, and English and religious minorities are concentrated; re-elected their leader, Dominique Anglade; and, most importantly, will continue to form the official opposition.

Much has been made in the press of Quebecers’ increasing weariness with and alienation from the decades-long wrangling

between the PQ and PLQ over Quebec's constitutional status and the division of powers between Quebec City and Ottawa. No doubt this is true. But what above all accounts for the collapse in support for the two traditional parties of the Quebec capitalist elite is their joint role in imposing decades of austerity that have left health care, education and other vital public services to die the death of a thousand cuts, and have frequently been enforced through savage anti-strike laws.

The CAQ was formed by Legault in 2011 with the express aim of intensifying the ruling class' drive to eviscerate public services through spending cuts and privatization and to slash taxes on business and the rich. But he came to power in 2018, by exploiting popular anger over the massive cuts the Couillard Liberal government had imposed—the largest since the 1996-1998 “Zero deficit” drive of the Bouchard/Landry PQ government—and after the trade unions had for decades systematically suppressed mass working class opposition to austerity.

Much as the CAQ was used in its early years to push the established parties further right, sections of the ruling class have promoted the former radio shock-jock host Eric Duhaime and his PCQ during the past two years. Openly appealing to the far-right and exploiting confusion among more backward sections of the population, including financially-stressed small business owners over the government's ruinous pandemic response, the PCQ won 12.9 percent of the popular vote, but no seats.

The role of Québec Solidaire

Québec Solidaire (QS), an ostensibly left-wing pro-Quebec independence party, finished second in the popular vote, but fell far short of its stated goal of becoming the official opposition. QS won 11 seats, eight in Montreal, two in Quebec City, and one in Sherbooke, for a net gain of one from 2018. At 15.6 percent its vote share was actually down 0.5 percent from the last election.

Visibly disappointed, QS co-leader and candidate for Quebec premier Gabriel Nadeau tried to put the best face on the party's indifferent result, claiming QS, alone of the opposition parties, had “resisted” a CAQ “wave.”

In reality Quebec was not swept by a CAQ “wave.” The CAQ won just two of the 27 seats on the Island of Montreal, home to Quebec's largest, most cosmopolitan and principal working-class city.

Rather, Legault and his CAQ benefited from the popular alienation with the traditional parties of provincial government and Québec Solidaire's own right-wing campaign, which was aimed at convincing the ruling class that it is a “responsible” party that can be trusted with a share of power.

On the most essential issues facing working people—the US-NATO war on Russia, the Trudeau Liberal government's massive hikes in military spending, the ruling class' profits-before-lives pandemic policy and big business' drive to increase the “competitiveness” of Quebec capitalism—QS entirely subscribes to the reactionary ruling class consensus.

Throughout the campaign, QS was at pains to put paid to its image as a party of social protest, or in QS parlance “a party of the street and the ballot box.” This was exemplified by the comportment of Nadeau-Dubois, who boasted at every opportunity that he had “matured” from his days as a leader of the 2012 Quebec student strike.

QS advanced a program of modest social spending increases to be financed by equally timid tax hikes on big business and the rich. However, it largely centered its campaign on its program to make Quebec, in the name of fighting the climate change crisis, a world leader in “green” capitalism. Underscoring the right-wing nationalist character of Québec Solidaire's call to make the fight against climate change “un 'projet de société” (societal project), Nadeau-Dubois specifically pledged in his post-election night address that QS would partner with Premier Legault and his CAQ government whenever they take a step forward in opposing climate change.

QS criticized the most provocative and incendiary of the anti-immigrant remarks made by Legault and other CAQ leaders, but has itself aided and abetted the Quebec ruling elite's promotion of chauvinist politics. It long promoted the reactionary debate over “excessive accommodations” to religious minorities that resulted in the CAQ's discriminatory Bill 21 as “legitimate.” Last May, it voted in favour of the CAQ's Bill 96, legislation aimed at reinforcing the special status of French as Quebec's sole “official” and “common language.”

The QS would not and could not expose Legault's attempt to, in his words, reinforce “social” and “national cohesion” by stoking chauvinism for what it is: part of a ruling class drive, in the face of ever-deepening capitalist crisis, to scapegoat minorities, split the working class within Quebec, and use Quebec nationalism to strengthen its ideological-political hold over Québécois workers so as to divide them from their class brothers and sisters in English Canada and internationally.

Predictably, within hours of the reelection of the CAQ government, the trade unions, led by the Quebec Federation of Labour, Confederation of National Trade Unions and Centrale des Syndicats du Québec (Quebec Union Federation) appealed for “social dialogue” and pledged to work with Legault.

However, the unions will not be able to suppress the class struggle as they have in the past. As across Canada and internationally, workers in Quebec are being driven into struggle by the impact of decades of capitalist austerity and contract concessions now compounded by a global pandemic and an ever-widening imperialist war.

The Legault government will be tasked by the ruling class with imposing “post-pandemic” austerity. They will also look to it to bolster big business' drive to make workers' pay for the economic crisis through inflation-driven real wage cuts, including by criminalizing worker job action and by imposing concessions on the more than half-million public sector workers whose contracts expire next March. Toward these reactionary ends, the CAQ government will no doubt double down on its anti-working class chauvinist agenda.

In response, workers in Quebec must break free of the political and organizational control of the pro-capitalist unions, repudiate their nationalist program, and unite their struggles with those of workers in English Canada and internationally in a counter-offensive against austerity and imperialist war and for social equality.



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