

How should workers respond to the right-wing furor over Trudeau's appointment of a Canadian Special Representative to combat Islamophobia?

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6 February 2023

A filthy faction fight has erupted within the Canadian ruling class over the federal Liberal government's appointment of Amira Elghawaby, a journalist and high-ranking employee of the federal government's Canadian Race Relations Foundation, as the country's first-ever Special Representative to combat Islamophobia.

Canada's pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government, which has backed US wars of aggression against Muslim-majority countries throughout the greater Middle East for over two decades and is now waging war against Russia in alliance with American imperialism, claims its selection of Elghawaby for the newly-created post demonstrates its commitment to fighting Islamophobia. It is simultaneously lobbying the Biden administration to close a loophole in the Canada-US "Safe Third Country Agreement" that allows migrants, many of them from countries devastated by imperialist wars backed by Ottawa, to escape immediate deportation to the United States and apply for refugee status by crossing the US-Canadian border outside of official entry points.

The Quebec political establishment—led by a trio of right-wing nationalist parties, the ruling Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ), the Parti Québécois (PQ) and Bloc Québécois (BQ)—has met Elghawaby's appointment with a torrent of invective. Its aim is to portray any and all criticism of Quebec's chauvinist and discriminatory Bill 21 as an "anti-Quebec" slur and thereby beyond the pale.

Quebec Premier François Legault, BQ leader Yves-François Blanchet and a host of newspaper editorialists and columnists have seized upon a handful of ill-considered remarks made by Elghawaby, in some cases deliberately misconstruing their meaning, to try to silence opposition to Bill 21 and sully the irrefutable contention that it and the reactionary debate from which it emerged have stoked anti-Muslim bigotry and violence.

Exhibit One in the nationalist campaign against Elghawaby is an article she co-authored with former Canadian Jewish Congress head Bernie Farber in 2019, shortly after the CAQ's Bill 21 became law. Titled "Quebec's Bill 21 shows why we fear the tyranny of the majority," the article partially cites the results of a single opinion poll, then declares, "Unfortunately, the majority of Quebecers appear to be swayed not by the rule of law, but by anti-Muslim sentiment."

Framed as a defence of "state secularism," Bill 21 prohibits those working for the provincial government in "positions of authority,"

including as public school teachers, from wearing religious symbols, such as the hijab, the Jewish kippah or Sikh turban. It also prohibits those devout Muslim women who wear the full veil (niqab or burqa) from receiving essential public services, including education and health care. At the same time, in the name of preserving Quebec's "heritage" the law gives an exemption to the Roman Catholic symbols that are ubiquitous in Quebec's public institutions. Similarly, government officials have said they have no intention of barring teachers from wearing "discreet" crucifixes.

This unholy mixture of religious bigotry and ethno-linguistic nationalism is the product of a "debate" incited by Quebec's political and media establishment for over a decade on the reputed "threat" immigrants, especially Muslims, constitute to "Quebec values." By fomenting a virulently exclusivist and chauvinist nationalism, Quebec's ruling elite has sought to scapegoat immigrants for the deepening socioeconomic crisis and shift official political life sharply to the right.

The reactionary campaign against "excessive accommodation" to immigrants was initiated in 2006-07 by the right-wing populist ADQ, which merged with the CAQ at its founding in 2011, and the *Journal de Montreal*, a tabloid owned by the billionaire former PQ leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau. But the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire has played a critical role in promoting it, repeatedly blessing the phony, anti-immigrant "secularism" debate and state action to uphold "Quebec values" as "legitimate."

This review of the origins of Bill 21 shows how false and one-sided it is to claim, as Elghawaby did in 2019, that it expresses the "tyranny of the majority." Her remarks, which ignore the political forces and class issues in the Quebec chauvinist agitation against immigrants, and the Muslim minority in particular, express at best a misguided outlook. But whatever her personal intentions may have been, Elghawaby's position is par for the course among the middle-class identity politics crowd that serves as a major pillar of support for the Trudeau government. These social layers, with their six-figure salaries and stock portfolios, like to think that the working masses are seething with racism, nationalism and religious bigotry, and can only be enlightened by a select group of "diverse" representatives of discrete and arbitrarily defined "communities," which require "representation" within the structures of the capitalist state and corporate boardrooms by people like themselves. For all the venom of the current dispute,

their outlook has much in common with the right-wing Quebec nationalists, who insist that only they have the right to speak on behalf of the “Quebec nation.”

The fact of the matter is that Quebecers have been bombarded with right-wing nationalist and anti-immigrant propaganda on a daily basis by the political establishment for well over a decade. The unanimity of this campaign was underscored in the National Assembly last Tuesday, when the members of the Quebec legislature, including the official opposition Quebec Liberal Party, unanimously approved a resolution presented by CAQ minister for secularism Jean-François Roberge that demanded Trudeau sack Elghawaby as Canada’s Special Representative to combat Islamophobia.

François Legault, the CAQ premier who has overseen a homicidal response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has officially claimed over 17,975 lives and used repressive state powers to break struggles by workers for wage and benefit improvements, demagogically asserted after the vote that Trudeau was inciting “contempt for Quebecers” by refusing to fire Elghawaby. Legault, BQ leader Blanchet, and their media backers refused to relent even after Elghawaby publicly apologized for her remarks and claimed they were misinterpreted. They were joined by far-right federal Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, whose allies in Western Canada stoke reactionary Anglo-chauvinist, “Alberta First” and Western regional politics that mirror the CAQ’s Quebec chauvinism.

In the debate over Elghawaby’s appointment, Québec Solidaire (QS) has once again greased the pole for the establishment’s promotion of right-wing nationalism. It has joined in the attacks on Elghawaby for “Quebec bashing,” and demanded she explain herself, while saying it wants to have the opportunity for its parliamentary leader, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, to meet with her before deciding whether to join the other parties in demanding Trudeau fire her. The 11 QS legislators abstained on the vote on Roberge’s motion, but when one of their number made a social media post accusing Legault of using the issue as a “diversion,” he was publicly reprimanded by QS co-leader Manon Masse.

Québec Solidaire’s despicable role underscores that there is no way within the province’s political establishment for the majority of working people, French- and English-speaking, immigrant and native-born, to express their opposition to the use of reactionary nationalist provocations to poison political and cultural life.

There is also no way for workers to defend democratic rights, including the rights of religious minorities, in alliance with the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau government and its cynical brand of identity politics. With the enthusiastic backing of the trade unions and social-democratic New Democrats, Trudeau’s Liberals employ bogus references to “human rights” and “multiculturalism” to facilitate and justify the crimes of Canadian imperialism. It need only be said in this regard that Irwin Cotler, the man Trudeau selected in 2021 as Canada’s Special Representative to combat anti-Semitism, is an ardent Zionist, a proponent of war against Iran and one of the most vocal advocates of the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine that was used to justify the NATO powers’ destruction of Libya in a brutal 2011 air war.

At home, the Trudeau government’s “multiculturalism” includes the cultivation of “nation-to-nation” relations with a thin layer of the Indigenous business elite and middle-class professionals to “reconcile” the overwhelmingly impoverished Native population to brutal capitalist exploitation. These partnerships aim to open up Indigenous-controlled land to energy and mining interests in order to

boost corporate profits, and secure a steady supply of the raw materials needed by Canada and its US imperialist ally to wage wars abroad and dominate the clean energy economy of the future.

These policies both conceal and help strengthen the social and political forces primarily responsible for the growth of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of religious and ethnic discrimination. They divert attention away from an examination of the sharp lurch of capitalist politics to the right, expressed in decades of social spending cuts and attacks on workers’ wages, 30 years of uninterrupted imperialist wars, the stoking of anti-immigrant sentiments and the gutting of democratic rights. These policies, supported by parties of the right and nominal “left” alike, have produced explosive levels of social inequality, and nourished far-right, militarist and violent sentiments among the most backward and disoriented layers of the population.

It is significant in this regard that the position of Special Representative to combat Islamophobia has its origins in the national Summit on Islamophobia the Trudeau government convened in July 2021 in the aftermath of the slaying of a Muslim family of four by a right-wing extremist in Hamilton, Ontario. One day prior to the summit, the Trudeau government convened an entirely separate National Summit on Anti-Semitism, which was dominated by the attempt to slander left-wing criticism of Israeli government policy as “anti-Semitism.” The war-monger Cotler was the summit’s co-convenor.

There is no “progressive” side in the squabble between different factions of the Canadian and Quebec bourgeoisie over Elghawaby’s appointment. Neither the proponents of Quebec’s chauvinist Bill 21, nor the advocates of multiculturalism and identity politics have anything to offer the working class except war, austerity and reaction.

The urgent task of opposing the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, which are in the final analysis products of the crisis-ridden capitalist profit system, demands the unification of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. In opposition to the divisions consciously cultivated and manipulated by competing factions of the ruling elite to set working people against each other on the basis of language, race, nationality, religion or sexual orientation, working people must counterpose their class interests by taking up the struggle for the socialist transformation of society to secure democratic rights and genuine social equality for all.



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