

Ottawa and Quebec intensify their efforts to block refugees from filing asylum claims

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10 February 2023

Quebec's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government and political establishment as a whole are stepping up their anti-immigrant campaign, with amplified demands for the immediate closure of Roxham Road. A country road that traverses the US border 60 kilometers south of Montreal, Roxham Road has been used by tens of thousands of migrants since 2016 to seek political asylum in Canada.

Coming from impoverished countries in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa, these migrants sometimes risk their lives cutting through the woods in freezing temperatures to cross the border at Roxham Road. This is because under the reactionary Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement, if they entered Canada at a recognized "port of entry," they would automatically be returned to the United States without the right to file a refugee claim.

Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, meanwhile, is seeking to shut off the influx of refugees by "legal" means. It is negotiating with Washington to amend the Safe Third Country Agreement to extend its application to include "irregular" land pathways, such as Roxham Road. A loophole in the original agreement, which dates back to 2004, means that refugees who cross into Canada "irregularly," without passing through a recognized "port of entry," retain the right to apply for asylum within Canada.

As part of the xenophobic agitation around Roxham Road, Jean-François Lisée, a former head of the Parti Québécois (PQ) and now a prominent corporate media columnist, declared: "Let's keep all the Francophones and those who have immediate family in Quebec and let's put others on a nice bus ... and take them to Ottawa."

Lisée, who has long played a central role in stirring up anti-immigrant chauvinism in Quebec, is modelling his anti-Roxham Road agitation after the actions of far-right US politicians like Greg Abbott and Ron DeSantis. The Republican governors of Texas and Florida respectively, Abbott and DeSantis have expelled hundreds of newly-arrived migrants from their states and had them transported by bus or plane to Democratic-ruled states, where they are abandoned like cattle without even notifying the authorities or refugee aid agencies.

Mathieu Bock-Côté, a leading columnist for the *Journal de Montréal*, a right-wing populist tabloid owned by the billionaire

media-telecommunications mogul and one-time PQ leader Pierre Karl Péladeau, is also promoting far-right-wing nostrums. In his frequent diatribes against the Roxham migrants, he claims "human masses are moving towards the West" threatening western civilization and imperiling the very existence of the "Quebec nation." He has called for Roxham Road to be renamed "Trudeau Road," lending his voice to the far-right's demonization of the prime minister, who in 2020 was the target of a right-wing extremist assassination attempt and has repeatedly been the object of violent threats.

The fascistic rhetoric of Lisée, Bock-Côté and Co., like the anti-immigrant agitation of the entire Quebec ruling class of which they are a product, is aimed at defending the decaying capitalist order. Feeling threatened by the growing opposition of working people, the ruling class in Quebec and Canada, as everywhere else in the world, is whipping up chauvinism with the aim of scapegoating immigrants for the social crisis caused by capitalism and splitting the working class along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines.

Current PQ leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon is urging the CAQ government to deploy the provincial police (SQ—Sûreté du Québec) to close down Roxham Road if the federal government does not intervene "as soon as possible" and prevent "irregular entrants" from making refugee claims—as is their legal right under Canadian and international law.

The deployment of the SQ would provoke a constitutional crisis—one that the Quebec nationalists would exploit to intensify the CAQ's ongoing campaign demanding that Ottawa cede all power over immigration to the province. This campaign is aimed, as is the CAQ's broader "Quebec First" agenda, at reinforcing nationalism and dividing French-speaking workers from their anglophone and immigrant class brothers and sisters in Quebec, Canada and internationally.

CAQ leader and current Quebec Premier François Legault has thus far rejected the PQ's call for SQ intervention, saying that since the federal government is in charge of protecting the country's borders, it should renegotiate the Safe Third Country Agreement with Washington forthwith. Meanwhile, his government continues to encourage the far right, with constant denunciations of the Roxham Road migrants as "irregular" and "illegal" entrants to Canada, and demands for the closure of

what it calls a “porous” entry point to Canada.

For more than a decade, all the parties of the Quebec establishment have competed with one another to stir up prejudice against immigrants and cultural minorities.

The CAQ has made chauvinism central to its government policy through a series of laws targeting immigrants and minorities: Bill 9, which introduces “cultural” criteria into the immigrant selection process; Bill 21, which in the name of upholding “state secularism” bans Muslims who wear the hijab from teaching in public schools; and Bill 96, which promotes the privileged position of the French language in public life with the aim of dividing the working class along ethno-linguistic lines.

The PQ, the big business pro-Quebec independence party that long alternated as the province’s government, has also played a central role in this chauvinistic anti-immigrant turn. While St-Pierre Plamondon seeks to blame migrants coming through Roxham Road for Quebec’s “social problems,” the PQ has a long, unbroken record, from the early 1980s on, of imposing massive social spending cuts and attacking workers’ right to strike whenever it has held office.

Having pushed through savage austerity measures and consequently lost much of its working class electoral base, the PQ turned some 15 years ago to the promotion of virulent anti-immigrant chauvinism. This has included, among other things, the proposal that immigrants failing a French language test after three years of residence be stripped of certain political rights; the now-defunct “Charter of Quebec Values” that would have prohibited all government employees from wearing “ostentatious” religious signs with exceptions for “discreet” Catholic crosses; Lisée’s suggestion that Muslim women wearing the niqab or burka in public could have AK-47s hidden underneath; and St-Pierre Plamondon’s proposal in the last election that Quebec’s annual immigration intake be reduced to 35,000 under the pretext that “excessive” immigration poses a threat to the Quebec nation and its values.

The federalist-leaning Quebec Liberal Party, the other traditional party of government, passed Bill 62, which denies Muslim women wearing full-face veils the right to give or receive public services, including health care and education. These provisions were subsequently incorporated into the CAQ’s Bill 21.

As for Québec Solidaire (QS), the so-called “left-wing” party that represents affluent sections of the middle class, its leader Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois has deplored that Legault and St-Pierre Plamondon have blamed “uncontrolled immigration” for the rise of the far-right in Europe, while failing to “mention that in Europe, moderate parties have tried to curb the rise of xenophobic parties by adopting their rhetoric.” In so doing, continued Nadeau-Dubois, they have “normalized the extremes.”

There is truth in this. However, Nadeau-Dubois himself fails to mention that Québec Solidaire’s pseudo-left “sister” parties

in Europe—such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece—have either attacked immigrants when in power, or collaborated with the so-called “moderate” political establishment parties in so doing. In Quebec, QS has fully “normalized the extremes.” It has insisted that chauvinistic laws and debates about “excessive accommodations” to immigrants and defending “Quebec values” are “legitimate.” Its only complaint has been that the CAQ and PQ sometimes have gone “too far.”

As for Trudeau’s federal government, its posturing as “open” and “friendly” toward migrants and refugees is utterly hypocritical. Canada’s immigration policy, which has been praised, and held up as an example by Donald Trump, is highly restrictive and not in the least motivated by humanitarian concerns. Rather, it is governed by the profit interests of big business in Canada, which exploits hundreds of thousands of temporary workers in low-wage sectors such as agriculture and slaughterhouses. In addition, the Trudeau government has deported tens of thousands of migrants and ensured that only a small minority of asylum claims are accepted.

Many of the migrants passing through Roxham Road come from countries—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Haiti—that have been devastated by the wars and interventions mounted in recent decades by the United States with the active support of Ottawa. They also come from regions, such as Latin America, where social conditions have been ravaged by relentless demands for more austerity from imperialist institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, and Canada’s banks and other investors.

According to leaks to the media, Washington has agreed, in still-secret negotiations, to expand the scope of the Safe Third Country Agreement to eliminate the “irregular entry” “loophole.” But the Biden administration is apparently holding out for something in return. It will likely demand that Canada, which has already delivered massive amounts of weapons to the Ukrainian army, do even more in the US-led war against Russia and/or Washington’s equally reckless all-rounded diplomatic, economic and military-strategic offensive against nuclear-armed China.



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