

Behind the “revival” of the Parti Québécois: as class struggle mounts, ruling class intensifies anti-immigrant chauvinism

Louis Girard

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An ultra-nationalist section of the Quebec elite has launched a concerted campaign to resurrect the Parti Québécois (PQ), which for half a century ending in 2018 was one of the ruling class’s two parties of government in Quebec, Canada’s second most populous and sole francophone-majority province.

The imposition by PQ governments of brutal austerity measures, anti-strike laws and other anti-worker attacks caused its electoral base among working people to collapse. In the 2018 provincial election it finished fourth and in 2022 it fell further still, losing official party status in the National Assembly.

Faced with the resurgence of the class struggle, sections of the ruling class are now frantically seeking to revive this big business party, which—with the crucial assistance of its longstanding allies in the trade union bureaucracy—has repeatedly been used to divert and derail the militant struggles of Quebec workers.

The upsurge of the working class in Quebec finds its clearest expression in the ongoing contract struggle of the 600,000 provincial public and para-public sector workers, the vast majority of whom launched a seven-day strike last Friday.

Even though the PQ has just four members in Quebec’s National Assembly, its leader, Paul Saint-Pierre Plamondon, receives abundant and favorable coverage in the mainstream media, particularly in the *Journal de Montréal* and other right-wing tabloids controlled by the media-telecommunications mogul and former PQ leader Pierre Karl Péladeau.

The media hype orchestrated by the ruling elite is having an impact. The PQ won the Jean-Talon (suburban Quebec City) by-election in early October and now leads in voting intentions according to several polls. Meanwhile the other opposition parties, including the pseudo-left Québec Solidaire, are treading water.

PQ leader St-Pierre Plamondon is seeking to revive the PQ and its reactionary project of Quebec independence by intensifying its identity-based appeals around the “defense of the French language” and promotion of crass anti-immigrant chauvinism. He is thus following in the footsteps of Marine Le Pen in France, right-wing extremist Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and the former US President and would-be dictator Donald Trump.

In a recent press release, St-Pierre Plamondon deplored increasing “social disruption,” pointing to the “housing crisis” and the “crisis in essential services.” But rather than laying the blame on decades of austerity and the worsening social inequalities

caused by predatory capitalism, the PQ leader railed against the federal government’s “astronomical [immigration] thresholds,” “changes to airport rules to facilitate asylum claims” and the “timidity” of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government’s response.

In his xenophobic communiqué, the PQ leader also tied immigration to the supposed “crisis of the French language.” This underscores that St-Pierre Plamondon and the PQ are determined to develop and amplify the agitation initiated by the most extreme chauvinists, who are clamouring that “excessive” immigration is an existential threat to the “Quebec nation” and has placed its very existence “in peril.” A key player in this agitation is the *Journal de Montréal* and its stable of far-right commentators. Last May, it launched a hysterical campaign around a supposed Trudeau government supported, federalist “plot” to drown the “Quebec nation” in a mass of English-speaking immigrants.

St.-Pierre Plamondon’s PQ stands to the right of Quebec Premier François Legault’s CAQ, which has made anti-immigrant agitation and the adoption of chauvinist legislation central planks of its appeal and program. As for Trudeau and his Liberal government, the PQ’s demagogic accusation of their being “too open” to immigration flies in the face of reality. Earlier this year the Trudeau government closed the Quebec-US border crossing at Roxham Road, the main gateway for asylum seekers to enter Canada.

That the anti-immigrant venom of St-Pierre Plamondon and the Péladeau-owned tabloids currently sets the tone for establishment politics in Quebec is bound up with a longstanding and ever-accelerating shift to the right of the entire capitalist ruling elite. Important stages in this process included the manufactured 2006-07 scandal around supposed “unreasonable accommodations” to ethnic minorities, the Marois PQ government’s attempt to impose a “Charter of Quebec Values,” the Couillard Liberal government’s Bill 62, which targeted Muslim women, and the CAQ’s chauvinist Laws 9 and 21, which also target immigrants and religious minorities.

This toxic politics is part of the ruling class’s increasingly frantic efforts to divert the growing social anger and opposition caused by mounting capitalist crisis against immigrants. They have been embraced as “legitimate” and “necessary” by Québec Solidaire (QS), the pseudo-left party that defends the interests of

affluent sections of the middle class.

This chauvinist, anti-immigrant turn is far from unique to Quebec. Feeling threatened by an upsurge in workers' struggles, the capitalist ruling class is everywhere whipping up xenophobia, and increasingly inciting and relying on fascist elements. Such is the case with the federal Conservatives of Pierre Poilievre, an ardent supporter of the far-right "Freedom" Convoy, which menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa at the beginning of 2022 to demand the lifting of all remaining anti-COVID measures. Another example is Trump in the US, who sought to overturn the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections by mobilizing fascist thugs as part of his January 6, 2021 coup attempt.

The "housing crisis" and the "crisis in essential services" referred to by the PQ leader have a common cause: capitalist austerity imposed by all levels of government, regardless of the political label of the party in power, and the subordination of home-building, like other crying social needs, to capitalist profit.

When it was in power in the early 1980s, the PQ pioneered austerity in Quebec, which it imposed through draconian anti-worker legislation, including savage "emergency" back-to-work laws. In the 1990s, in close collaboration with the union bureaucracy, and in the name of balancing the budget and creating "winning conditions" for a third referendum on Quebec independence, the PQ imposed the biggest social spending cuts in Quebec history. It slashed billions from health care and education, closed hospitals and eliminated tens of thousands of jobs through early retirement schemes.

These cuts were intensified by the Quebec Liberal Party governments of Charest (2003-12) and Couillard (2014-2018) and the brief 18-month minority Marois PQ government (2012-14). Now the CAQ is enforcing "post-pandemic" austerity, as evidenced by its privatization push and the massive real wage cuts it wants to impose on the more than 600,000 public sector workers. The dismantling of public services has been accompanied by massive tax cuts for the rich and big business, leading to an enormous transfer of wealth from the pockets of the working class to the better-off.

In a document released by St-Pierre Plamondon with much fanfare in October and that purportedly outlines the PQ's budget for "Year 1" of an independent Quebec, the PQ leader claims that he wants to reinvest the billions in tax dollars that would be repatriated from Ottawa by a "sovereign" Quebec in "urgently needed services."

But a careful reading of the document reveals the PQ's true intentions. It denounces the "bloated size of the federal government "bureaucracy" and Ottawa's "frivolous ideological spending," code words used by the most overtly right-wing sections of the ruling class for decades to justify further social spending cuts. Unlike previous such PQ documents, the "Budget for Year One" also does not include "a guarantee" that Quebecers employed by Ottawa in providing federal services would be given commensurate employment in an independent Quebec. This omission, which further underscores that the PQ's plans to create a more "efficient" state are entirely directed against the working class, was subsequently justified by St-Pierre Plamondon on the grounds that Quebecers must be ready to make "sacrifices" for

Quebec independence and the "flowering" of the Quebec nation.

In foreign policy, the PQ has always maintained that an independent Quebec would be part of imperialist military alliances like NORAD and NATO. It has regularly supported Ottawa's wars and neocolonial interventions abroad, repeating its fraudulent rhetoric about "human rights," whether in Afghanistan, Ukraine or in Canada's diplomatic and military offensive against China in alliance with Washington. The PQ and its sister party at the federal level, the Bloc Québécois are, like the rest of the Canadian political establishment, complicit in the massacre perpetrated by the Israeli state against the Palestinian people of Gaza.

The PQ's revival, after its near-political extinction in the last provincial election, is above all due to the union bureaucracy, which has for decades suppressed the class struggle and subordinated the working class to the PQ.

During the six-month-long 2012 province-wide student strike, for example, the pro-capitalist unions intervened precisely when the strike was gaining momentum and risked sparking a mass working class movement against capitalist austerity, in order to channel it behind the election of a PQ government.

A crucial role in the PQ's revival has also been played by Québec Solidaire, which with 12 seats is the third largest party in the National Assembly. Its *raison d'être* is to resurrect the reactionary and discredited program of Quebec independence, i.e., the formation of a capitalist République du Québec. Its orientation is not towards the working class, but towards the union bureaucracy and bourgeois sovereigntist or pro-Quebec independence circles—and in particular towards the PQ. Founded out of the "left-wing" of the "rainbow coalition" for Quebec independence created by the one-time PQ leader and consummate Quebec bourgeois Jacques Parizeau, the QS has repeatedly offered the PQ electoral pacts on the fraudulent basis that Quebec nationalism is inherently progressive.

In reality, Quebec nationalism is intrinsically reactionary. It has become an incubator for far-right ideologies and forces as the ruling class prepares to "save" bankrupt capitalism through counter-revolutionary violence.

Now that workers are once again entering mass struggles, it is critical for them to clearly understand the right-wing, chauvinist, and pro-imperialist character of the Parti Québécois. The campaign to breathe new political life into this party aims to divide the Quebec working class along ethnolinguistic lines and isolate it from its class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the US and overseas.



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