

Quebec ruling elite intensifies its anti-immigrant agitation

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Premier François Legault's right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government used a February 27 press conference to step up its anti-immigrant campaign. One after another, a chorus of ministers denounced immigrants as a "threat" to public services and Quebec's "way of life."

This latest tirade against immigrants came amid a marked escalation in recent weeks of anti-immigrant agitation by Quebec politicians and the corporate media. Increasingly the establishment is adopting rhetoric once restricted to far-right provocateurs.

A pronounced turn toward Quebec chauvinism can be dated back to 2007 and the reactionary debate whipped up by the CAQ's predecessor, the ADQ, over claims of "excessive accommodations" to religious minorities. However, in recent years, Quebec's ruling elite has promoted ethno-nationalist chauvinism in ever more virulent forms. It now portrays ethnic and religious minorities as an existential threat to the French language and "Quebec nation," and is openly scapegoating immigrants for the worsening social crisis caused by decrepit capitalism—a crisis that condemns more and more workers and young people to economic insecurity and poverty.

At the press briefing, four prominent ministers in the Legault government called on Ottawa to take urgent action to stanch the inflow of asylum seekers and slash the number of them settling in Quebec. The CAQ government claims the cost of providing limited support to refugee claimants fleeing political repression, war and poverty exceeds \$1 billion annually, and is demanding more funding from the federal government.

This is pure right-wing demagoguery. As pointed out by the *Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes* (TCRI, Roundtable of organizations serving refugees and immigrants), "People seeking asylum represent 1.8% of the Quebec population" and "the budget allocated to these people represents only about 0.25% of Quebec's overall spending."

The government's distortion of reality is aimed at justifying its xenophobic agitation, which was the real purpose of the press conference. Denouncing "excessive" immigration, French Language Minister Jean-François Roberge asserted: "Yes, there are things that are threatened, there are services that are threatened, there is a way of life that is threatened when the

numbers [of asylum applications] are too great."

Education Minister Bernard Drainville then threatened to deny refugee children access to education. "We've reached a point," said Drainville, "where we can't rule out the possibility that, eventually, we'll no longer be able to educate the young asylum seekers who come to us."

This threat was reiterated two days later by the Premier after the Quebec Court of Appeal ruled that it was discriminatory for the Quebec government to exclude asylum seekers—even those with work permits—from access to subsidized childcare. Denouncing the Court of Appeal as a "federal court," Legault accused it of "telling us that we are obliged to provide subsidized childcare to asylum seekers, when we already can't provide it to Quebec citizens."

This ultra-nationalist rhetoric is now increasingly central to the platforms of all the parties in the Quebec National Assembly.

While the Legault government tries to blame immigration for the manifest crisis in the public healthcare and education systems, it is pressing forward with its attacks on the working conditions of public sector workers and privatization drive. These are in fact two sides of the same blade: dividing the working class by pointing the finger at immigrant workers facilitates the assault on working conditions and social services.

At the end of last year, most of Quebec's 600,000 public sector workers walked off the job to fight for better working conditions and public services. The strike had the potential to trigger a working class counter-offensive against austerity, not just in Quebec, but across North America. It ended in defeat because the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses systematically isolated the public sector workers and refused to broaden the strike by appealing to other sections of the working class to join a political struggle against Legault and his pro-austerity, "Quebec First" government.

The defeat of the public sector workers' struggle has left the field open for the ruling class to intensify its anti-immigrant hysteria. All with the aim of diverting along reactionary chauvinist lines the growing social anger over public services that have been bled white by decades of austerity, the lack of affordable housing, and the spread of precarious contract employment.

None of the parties in the National Assembly systematically opposes this outpouring of xenophobia. This is as true of Québec Solidaire (QS), the supposedly left-wing pro-Quebec independence party, as it is of the CAQ, the Liberals, and the Parti Québécois. While QS timidly criticizes some of the most outrageous examples of anti-immigrant incitement, it never goes so far as to expose the fundamental class aims of the chauvinist agitation.

It never denounces Quebec chauvinism as a weapon used by the ruling class to divide the working class, divert and channel social anger and frustration along reactionary lines, and strengthen its political-ideological hold over Québécois workers by promoting a false “national” unity.

In fact, QS is increasingly embracing the ruling elite’s chauvinist agitation. It is once again courting the Parti Québécois, which has largely set the tone for the anti-immigration campaign. And QS has been quick to assert its agreement with the reactionary framing of various social problems as caused or exacerbated by immigration and to propose its own anti-immigrant measures.

After its chief spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois commented on X that immigration was an “aggravating factor” in the housing crisis, QS became the champion of greater Quebec government control over immigration.

In a letter reported by the Montreal daily *La Presse*, Québec Solidaire MP Guillaume Cliche-Rivard, the party’s immigration spokesman, called for the invocation of article 33 of the 1991 Canada-Quebec Accord on immigration, which would allow Quebec to repatriate full powers over immigration. Elaborating on his party’s motives in a commentary reported by *La Presse*, Cliche-Rivard asserted that “we’ve reached 530,000 temporary immigrants, the current capacity has been exceeded.”

Invited to the talk-show *Tout le monde en parle* on Feb. 25 (another example of the media’s obsession with the immigration issue), Cliche-Rivard made a few sentimental statements of sympathy for refugees before hammering home the point: “It’s not up to Quebec to take in 55% of asylum seekers.”

QS thus accepts not only the framework of the debate, but the main conclusion of its right-wing “colleagues”: the housing and social services crisis is caused by immigration, and immigration must be restricted even further.

In reality, the degradation of public services is a direct result of the actions of the ruling class, which has drastically cut social spending to increase the wealth of the richest through tax cuts and multi-billion-dollar subsidies to big business. Public spending cuts have also allowed the ruling class to divert tens of billions into rearming Canada’s military so it can participate in wars of aggression abroad.

Furthermore, the mass exodus of populations from poor and war-ravaged countries is itself the outcome of the predatory actions of Canadian capitalism and its international partners,

particularly the United States. The North American imperialist powers have ravaged many societies through their wars, inaction on climate change, and the harsh economic policies they have imposed through the IMF and World Bank, affecting entire regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Latin America. As it happens, the vast majority of asylum seekers in Quebec come from Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly Haiti.

The ruling class in Quebec and increasingly openly in English Canada blames the victims of its aggressive foreign policy for the consequences of its domestic, class-war policy of dismantling public services and social programs. In a context of growing social and geopolitical tensions, the ruling elites in all the imperialist powers use this lie to divide workers and channel social anger in an explicitly right-wing direction.

The whipping up of anti-immigrant chauvinism is a key element in the ruling-class response to the global upsurge of the class struggle, which demonstrates the objective unity of the international working class. The establishment’s anti-immigrant venom aims to poison the atmosphere and stir up the worst forms of chauvinism in a desperate effort to prevent the rising tide of workers’ struggles from developing into a conscious challenge to the bankrupt capitalist order.

Last year, the *Journal de Montréal* (owned by the billionaire former Parti Québécois leader Pierre-Karl Péladeau) published a large dossier accusing the federal Liberal government of preparing a vast expansion of Canada’s English-speaking population through “massive” immigration, with the aim of “drowning” the French-speaking “Quebec nation.”

This is a Quebec version of the fascist “Great Replacement” theory advocated by far-right figures such as Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour in France, or supporters of Donald Trump in the United States. This theory presents “mass” immigration as a plot by “elites”—often implied to be Jewish—to replace the “white,” Christian population with African and Arab immigrants in Europe, or Latin American and Asian immigrants in the United States.

The turn of the ruling class towards fascist elements is not a sign of strength, but of weakness. It is a desperate attempt by the ruling elite to preserve an historically obsolete social order in deep crisis, facing growing opposition from their own populations. For this opposition to lead to historical progress, it is essential that workers in Quebec and Canada understand that they share common class interests with immigrant workers, and that they must wage a common struggle against the real source of war and social inequality—capitalism.



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