

Separatist Parti Québécois wins third by-election in a row as crisis of right-wing CAQ government deepens

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The chauvinist, pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois (PQ) won the provincial by-election in the predominantly rural riding of Arthabaska-L'Erable earlier this month, confirming its status as the province's "government in waiting," although it currently is just the fourth party in the National Assembly.

The PQ candidate, Alex Boissonneault, a former Radio-Canada host and self-avowed right-winger, won 46.3% of the vote in what was considered a stronghold of the ruling Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ).

With a meager 7.2 percent of the vote, a drop of 44 percentage points compared to the last election in 2022, the CAQ suffered a debacle, finishing fourth in the race.

The leader of the Conservative Party of Quebec, far-right libertarian Éric Duhaime, finished second with 35.1 percent of the votes cast. The supposedly "left-wing" Québec Solidaire (QS) finished last among the "major" parties, with a meager 1.5 percent of the vote, a huge drop from 2022 when its same candidate captured 9.2 percent of the vote.

The by-election results reflect deep popular dissatisfaction with the CAQ and Premier François Legault. His right-wing, "Quebec First" government, in power since 2018, has intensified the austerity measures of its PQ and Liberal predecessors.

Its massive budget cuts have left public services on the brink of collapse, as evidenced by high rates of burnout among workers, chronic shortages of teachers and nurses, and the dilapidated state of vital infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

At the same time, in a context of rampant inflation, access to affordable housing has become increasingly beyond the reach of young people and workers, while indicators of social distress such as homelessness and demand for food banks have skyrocketed.

This, along with a series of financial misadventures in which the government poured hundreds of millions in public funds into large companies that promptly squandered them, has caused Legault and his CAQ government to be widely viewed for what they are: loyal servants of big business and the wealthy.

To deflect the popular discontent generated by its pro-big business policies, the CAQ has stoked Quebec chauvinism, with the aim of splitting workers along ethnic and linguistic lines within Quebec and dividing them from workers across Canada.

Following in the footsteps of the Trudeau-Carney Liberal government, it has passed legislation (Bill 89) that effectively eliminates the right to strike in Quebec, and instigated police repression of anti-Gaza genocide protests.

Speaking like the captain of a sinking ship, Legault responded to the CAQ's rout in the Arthabaska by-election with a speech in which he

conceded that "Quebecers are disappointed in our government" and promised major "changes," including a cabinet reshuffle. This is a signal to big business that he intends to intensify the assault on workers and his attacks on the rights of immigrants and ethnic minorities. An article in *La Presse* last week said Legault is now considering introducing legislation to increase state intervention in strike and ratification votes and, angered by a teacher union's legal challenge to the government's chauvinist Bill 21, to restrict how union funds can be put.

However, in big business circles, there is mounting criticism of the CAQ for not slashing social spending even more aggressively. There are also widespread doubts about its ability—it is now trailing behind both the PQ and Liberals in the polls with less than 20 percent support—to impose the renewed attacks on the working class deemed necessary to secure profits in the face of global trade war and intensified competition for markets.

Certain sections of the ruling class, historically associated with the most unbridled Quebec nationalism, are now pushing for the return of the PQ to power to carry out this reactionary mission.

It is primarily their efforts that are behind the PQ's rise in the polls—not a renewed interest among workers in this party of big business, and champion of Quebec separatism and chauvinism.

But reviving the PQ, a party that was virtually wiped off the map only a few years ago and is widely hated among the working class for its anti-worker and anti-immigrant policies, is a complicated political operation.

It could not and would not have gained such traction, to the point of making the PQ the main beneficiary of the collapse in CAQ support with a third consecutive by-election victory, without the complicity of the unions and Québec Solidaire.

The union bureaucracy systematically isolates and derails every worker struggle, for fear that it could become the catalyst for a broader working class upsurge, in Quebec and across Canada, against austerity, the assault on the right to strike, war and rearmament. Its watchword is the maintenance of "social peace," that is, the capitalist system of exploitation.

The unions torpedoed the strike movement in Quebec's public sector in 2023–24, which at its height saw more than a half-million workers on the streets, and the November-December 2024 strike of 55,000 Canadian postal workers, to cite just two recent examples of growing rank-and-file opposition that the union bureaucracy smothered.

Unsurprisingly, the union bureaucracy, which fully defends

capitalism and enjoys close corporatist ties with big business and the state, has worked tirelessly with various levels of government in Canada, including Legault's in Quebec, to impose concessionary contracts and enforce strikebreaking laws.

In Quebec, the unions have worked hand in hand with the right-wing CAQ government while working to revive their long-standing alliance with the PQ.

Earlier this year, Magali Picard, president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ), Quebec's largest union federation, admitted to holding talks with the Parti Québécois about a possible endorsement in next year's provincial election in exchange for a promise to repeal Bill 89. Were such a promise to be given, it would be utterly worthless. The PQ is a big business party that has come into headlong conflict with the working class whenever it has held office, enacting both permanent prohibitions on the right to strike, in the name of essential services, and emergency strikebreaking laws.

A few weeks later, Picard and the leaders of Quebec's other major labour federations met with CAQ Labor Minister Jean Boulet. At the meetings conclusion, they issued a press release offering to "rebuild bridges following the adoption of Bill 89" if the government would resume in "good faith" "social dialogue," i.e., corporatist tripartite consultations between representatives of the government, business and the union bureaucracy.

As part of its relentless efforts to stifle the class struggle and revive the Parti Québécois, the union bureaucracy is redoubling its efforts to spread the poison of Quebec nationalism, which serves to divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada. In this it has the support of Québec Solidaire, a party of affluent sections of the middle class that supports the reactionary nationalist project of Quebec independence and seeks to win the patronage of the union bureaucracy by defending all its betrayals.

QS downplays the chauvinism and anti-immigrant incitement of the Parti Québécois and the entire ruling class, insisting that the PQ and the CAQ are "not racist." It separates the anti-immigrant turn in Quebec from the global rise of the far right of which it is a part, claiming there is no comparison to be made between the likes of Trump and LePen and the chauvinist and anti-immigrant incitement of the Quebec nationalists. In Quebec, they proclaim, "Things are not the same."

Whatever Québec Solidaire may say, the ruling class in Quebec is systematically cultivating chauvinism and "normalizing" far-right rhetoric and politics. The CAQ has adopted a battery of chauvinist laws, only to be criticized by the PQ for being "too soft," including Bill 21, which victimizes religiously devout Muslim women, and Bill 96, which reinforces linguistic discrimination.

Drawing on the chauvinist filth promoted by the ultra-right-wing *Journal de Montréal*, Legault and PQ leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon routinely denounce immigrants for the problems caused by capitalism, such as the lack of affordable housing, dilapidated public services, and crime. They have also given their stamp of approval to a Québécois version of the racist Great Replacement theory, claiming the federal government is out to swamp the "Quebec nation" in a sea of immigrants.

QS's role in masking the ruling class's systematic efforts to stir up anti-immigrant chauvinism continued in the by-election, with QS candidate Isabelle Fortin saying she "understood" people who wanted to vote for the PQ to "block the path" of Duhaime, who like the far-right federal Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre, came to the fore by championing opposition to anti-COVID public health

measures and the fascist-led "Freedom" Convoy. After the election, Fortin added that she was "delighted" by Duhaime's defeat and congratulated the PQ on its victory.

Such pragmatic, opportunist "lesser evil" tactics have failed time and again, notably in the United States, where pseudo-left tendencies such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) claimed that a vote for Biden and his Democrats, the party that gave the green light to the genocide against the Palestinian people and focussed on waging imperialist war on Russia, could "block the path" of Trump. Moreover, in the Quebec context, QS's promotion of the PQ goes hand-in-hand with its legitimization of Quebec separatism as a "left-wing" or "progressive" project, thereby creating extremely dangerous political conditions that can be exploited by the ruling class to incite national and linguistic divisions to paralyze the working class.

QS's complicity in orchestrating a dramatic lurch to the right in official politics became apparent immediately after the Arthabaska by-election when St-Pierre Plamondon noted, in an appeal to the far right, that he wanted to take up the issues raised by Duhaime during the election campaign, particularly with regard to "out-of-control" social spending.

The PQ leader also warmly welcomed comments from Maxime Bernier, a former Conservative minister and far-right politician at the federal level, calling him a "man of principle" for his support for a future referendum on Quebec independence.

In fact, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the CAQ from the Parti Québécois or Duhaime's Conservative Party of Quebec. They represent different varieties of xenophobia and all appeal to the far right, blaming immigrants for the social crisis caused by capitalism.

Workers in Quebec must beware. The ruling class is taking advantage of the suppression of class struggle by the unions, aided by QS, to cultivate the far right and revive discredited capitalist parties like the PQ and the Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ).

To oppose this, it is necessary to build a unified movement of the North American working class in a common struggle to defend jobs, public services, and democratic rights and oppose militarism and imperialist war. Such a struggle must be guided by a socialist-internationalist perspective, that is, the fight for workers' power so the global economy can be reorganized on the basis of meeting human needs, not augmenting capitalist profit.



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