

As push for Quebec independence referendum grows, workers in Canada must unite their struggles and oppose both the ruling-class separatist and federalist camps

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Former Quebec Premier and Parti Québécois (PQ) leader Lucien Bouchard has ignited a debate within the Quebec independence movement over the political wisdom of the PQ holding fast to its pledge to hold a referendum on the province's secession from Canada by 2030.

In a recent interview with Radio-Canada, the Canadian state's French-language broadcaster, Bouchard urged the PQ's current leader, Paul St-Pierre Plamondon, to reconsider his commitment to hold an independence referendum if the separatist PQ, which is currently leading in the polls, wins the next provincial election scheduled for fall 2026.

The PQ is the big business party that, since its foundation in 1968, has advanced the demand for an independent capitalist Quebec, and absent that, a massive transfer of powers to Quebec from Ottawa. During the party's 2020 leadership race, St-Pierre Plamondon rallied the party's hardline independence factions, recruited mainly from ultra-nationalist sections of the middle class, by pledging to hold a referendum in the first term of a PQ government.

The controversy over the PQ's referendum strategy has erupted at a time when significant sections of the ruling class have lost confidence in the ability of François Legault's avowedly pro-big business Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government to enforce a new wave of capitalist austerity in the face of mounting social opposition. Quebec's ruling class also increasingly views Legault as incapable of adequately defending the interests of Quebec Inc. amid a crisis in Canada-US relations and heightened tensions within the Canadian federal state.

Many of these forces are now turning to the PQ, which rivals the CAQ in inciting hostility to immigrants and promoting Quebec chauvinism, as a viable alternative for enforcing their class-war program.

Widespread public dissatisfaction with the CAQ, particularly over the lamentable state of public services and the housing crisis, enabled the PQ to win a third consecutive by-election on August 11 in the riding of Arthabaska-L'Érable.

Quebec's premier from 1996 to 2001 and prior to that the head of the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the PQ's sister party at the federal level, Bouchard led the "Yes" campaign in the October 1995 referendum on Quebec separation, along with Quebec's then PQ premier, Jacques Parizeau. He is widely known for his close ties to big business.

Bouchard's intervention reflects differences of opinion within "sovereignist," i.e., Quebec *indépendantiste*, circles on the best strategy to advance their agenda. These differences are fueled by the real possibility of the PQ returning to power.

The political situation is explosive, and voter allegiances can change very quickly. Some sections of the independence movement fear that the PQ's current referendum pledge could cost it votes and even cause it to

lose the next election.

They also argue that with Ottawa whipping up Canadian nationalism in response to US President Donald Trump's trade war measures and threats to annex Canada, this is not the right time to talk about Quebec sovereignty.

They therefore recommend caution, fearing that a third referendum defeat for the pro-sovereignty "Yes" side, after those in 1980 and 1995, could deal a potentially fatal blow to the Quebec independence movement.

More fervently nationalist elements, on the other hand, believe that it is "now or never" for Quebec independence, and are pressuring St-Pierre Plamondon to keep his promise.

These elements, exemplified by Mathieu Bock-Côté, a fascist scribbler for the ultra-nationalist tabloid *Journal de Montréal*, champion a Quebec version of the far-right theory of the "Great Replacement." It claims the Quebec "nation" is imminently threatened with disappearance or erasure due to massive immigration orchestrated by the federal government, with the aim of drowning French-speaking Quebecers in a sea of English-speaking or Anglophile immigrants with no attachment to "Quebec culture" and no interest in voting for independence.

For now, St-Pierre Plamondon is staying the course and has reaffirmed his commitment to hold a referendum in the "first mandate" of a PQ government. This position is bound up with electoral calculations—that the PQ and its leader need to appear "authentic" and boldly stand out from the other parties. But it is also rooted in the PQ leader's sympathy for the far-right conceptions of Bock-Côté and his ilk. St-Pierre Plamondon has himself accused the federal government of plotting to make the "Quebec people" disappear and routinely blames immigrants for everything from mounting crime to overwhelmed hospital emergency wards.

Internationalism versus Quebec and Canadian nationalism

Class-conscious workers must reject the reactionary program of Quebec separatism. It is promoted by sections of the ruling class in Quebec who see the creation of a new imperialist state in North America as a way to better position themselves in the global struggle for markets and profits, and to slash social spending in the name of eliminating the *dédoubllement* (duplication) of federal and provincial services.

From their point of view, unlike the Canadian federal state—which must reconcile the demands of other regionally-based ruling class factions in Ontario, Alberta or the West as a whole—an independent Quebec would be

exclusively dedicated to advancing the interests of the Quebec bourgeoisie.

Quebec's separation would result in the erection of a new political structure and state barrier to further divide Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and the world. Moreover, it would fuel reactionary linguistic, ethnic and regional divisions, pitting workers against each other in fratricidal conflicts in the interests of competing and equally reactionary factions of the Canadian bourgeoisie.

In warning workers and youth against the independence trap, we make no concessions to the federalist forces that oppose Quebec independence on a basis that is just as reactionary as the separatist project itself.

These federalist sections of the Canadian and Quebec bourgeoisie and political establishment oppose Quebec independence with the aim of defending the Canadian federal capitalist state, which for more than 150 years has served as their principal arm in upholding capitalist exploitation.

They fear that the separation of Canada's second most populous province would deal a severe blow to Canadian imperialism and jeopardize their ability to assert their predatory interests on the world stage. This concern is amplified by the fierce struggles among the imperialist powers for a new redivision of the world, which are taking the form of an escalating third world war.

Our opposition to separatism stems, on the contrary, from the need for workers to reject all forms of nationalism—Canadian or Québécois, pro-Quebec independence or pro-Canadian unity—as part of a political struggle for the unity of the Canadian working class based on an internationalist socialist perspective.

This perspective is itself based on the recognition that the capitalist nation-state system has become a reactionary barrier to the harmonious development of the global economy in the interests of the working class, giving rise to wars and intensified imperialist oppression; and that the contemporary crisis of the Canadian nation-state is rooted in the intensification of the contradiction between the nation-state system and world economy resulting from the development of globally-integrated production.

The only progressive resolution to this contradiction is to break down the artificial barriers of nation-states—not to erect new ones! This is what can guarantee the harmonious and planned development of the world economy to meet the social needs of the masses.

What lies behind the PQ's rise in the opinion polls

Since 2020, successive strikes have broken out in Quebec and across Canada in response to corporate attacks on working conditions and democratic rights, while youth and workers in their hundreds of thousands have demonstrated against the Israeli-state's genocidal assault on the Gaza Palestinians with Washington and Ottawa's political and military support.

Opposition to austerity and neocolonial aggression is growing rapidly. But it is politically stifled, misdirected and derailed by the pro-capitalist trade unions. With the complicity of the social-democratic NDP and nationalist formations such as Québec Solidaire, the union bureaucracies have isolated and sabotaged strike after strike, while supporting the right-wing federal Liberal government.

Finding no political expression on the left, the anger of the working class and widespread discontent among economically hard-pressed sections of the middle class can be politically co-opted by the PQ, which channels them to the right and toward its reactionary program for Quebec independence.

To facilitate this, the project of an independent *République du Québec* is

often cloaked in social demagogic, being portrayed as a “break” with the existing constitutional order and the status quo. In reality, Quebec's secession and the redrawing of the borders of North America would leave the capitalist social order entirely intact. Its only real purpose would be to improve the position of the Quebec bourgeoisie at the expense of its rivals and, above all, the working class.

The PQ's trajectory: ever further to the right

At its beginnings, from the late 1960s to the election of the first PQ government in 1976, the PQ presented itself as a vehicle for social progress, with its ambiguous talk of incarnating *un projet de société* (“societal project”) and claims to have “*un préjugé favorable pour les travailleurs*” (a favourable attitude towards workers.)

However, the savage austerity measures imposed by the PQ in the early 1980s during René Lévesque's second term, followed by the deep social cuts made by the Bouchard-Landry PQ governments from 1996 to 2003 in the name of ensuring a “zero deficit,” shattered the myth that Quebec independence would make it possible to build a more generous welfare state.

Throughout this period, the Quebec separatists spoke out of both sides of their mouths. On the one hand, they sought to sell their separatist ideas to workers by declaring that with independence “anything is possible.” On the other hand, they sought to reassure the ruling class that Quebec independence would not in any way jeopardize their privileges or change socioeconomic or geopolitical conditions to their detriment.

During the campaign for the 1995 referendum, the PQ presented itself as a “bulwark against the right-wing current” emanating from English Canada and the US, while pledging an independent Quebec would be a loyal member of NATO, NORAD and NAFTA.

After the narrow 50.58 percent defeat of the pro-independence “Yes” vote, and with the full support of the trade unions, the PQ imposed the biggest-ever social spending cuts, ravaging healthcare and education, with the avowed aim of creating “winning conditions” for a future referendum—that is, reassuring Wall Street, Quebec Inc., and, in so far as possible given their hostility to it, the dominant faction of the Canadian ruling class that an independent Quebec would serve their interests.

The PQ's austerity drive led to a massive erosion of its support among workers and the general population. The PQ's response was to turn to more explicit Quebec chauvinism, while demanding even fiercer cuts to what remains of public services.

After the PQ was nearly wiped off the political map in the last Quebec election in 2022, winning only three seats, its leader St-Pierre Plamondon concluded that a shift to the hard right—and even the far right—was necessary to revive the party and its independence project.

His political rhetoric today is a toxic mix of national exclusivism and extreme chauvinism, combining anti-immigrant incitement with calls for or measures to reinforce the privileged status of the French language in the public sphere. The party and its leader engage in virulent attacks on religious minorities (especially Muslims), and blame immigrants for the housing crisis and all manner of social and economic ills.

In October 2024, the PQ tabled its immigration plan. This document proposed drastically reducing all forms of immigration. Portraying immigrants as an existential threat to the Quebec “nation,” the PQ promised to control the borders by emulating “Fortress Europe,” where thousands of migrants die each year at the hands of brutal border police.

Criticizing the federal government from the right for allowing “uncontrolled” immigration, the PQ's plan presents Quebec independence as the only way to implement its fierce anti-immigrant

policies. In other words, Quebec should separate from Canada in order to participate more actively in the fascist witch-hunt against immigrants launched by Donald Trump in the United States and emulated elsewhere in the world.

St-Pierre Plamondon also has no qualms about associating himself with the most reactionary forces to promote Quebec independence. After enthusiastically welcoming a resurgence of the Alberta independence movement cultivated by Alberta's ultra-right-wing Premier Danielle Smith, the PQ leader traveled to Calgary in early September to establish ties with Alberta separatists, known for their far-right positions and sympathy for Trump.

In terms of foreign policy, St-Pierre Plamondon promises the ruling class that an independent Quebec, of which he would be the first premier, would be fully complicit in the imperialist depredations of Canada and the United States. He has thus reaffirmed that it would have an army and seek membership in NATO and NORAD, the North American Aerospace (and maritime) Defense Command.

Plamondon has routinely denounced the federal Liberal government for "excessive" social spending and inflating the deficit. He has vowed that the economic priority of a PQ government would be to "make the state more efficient" by cutting thousands of civil service jobs, including not rehiring federal civil servants working in Quebec (which the PQ had previously promised to do in the event of Quebec's separation).

To reassure the bourgeoisie that a PQ government at the head of an independent republic would be prepared to violently repress any attempt by workers to oppose corporate attacks, St-Pierre Plamondon has also advocated for the massive hiring of new police officers as part of a "law and order" program.

War, austerity, chauvinism and authoritarianism: this is what Quebec independence really has in store for the working class.

The complicity of the unions and the pseudo-left nationalists

The so-called "progressive" wing of the independence movement plays a key role in concealing this reality and helping a hitherto largely discredited PQ with its revival.

The nationalist and pro-capitalist union bureaucracy suppresses the class struggle, allowing the PQ's ultra-reactionary rhetoric to find some resonance among workers and youth who are angry about the social misery caused by the capitalist crisis.

At the same time, the bureaucracy is seeking to renew its longstanding political alliance with a PQ that is rapidly turning to the right. The president of the FTQ (Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec), Magalie Picard has indicated that Quebec's largest union federation is considering supporting the PQ in the next election.

For its part, Québec Solidaire, a party of the affluent middle classes that is preparing to join the "Yes" camp in the event of a third referendum, is trying to provide the PQ with a left-wing cover. While it occasionally offers timid criticism of the PQ's most reactionary positions, Québec Solidaire downplays its ultra-right-wing character by declaring that its venomous anti-immigrant rhetoric is not "intolerant" or by fraudulently claiming that St-Pierre Plamondon cannot be compared to far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen in France or Donald Trump in the United States.

As the collapse of the world capitalist order brings a new period of revolutionary struggles to the fore, the workers and youth of Quebec must definitively reject the poison of Quebec nationalism and the deadly trap that the independence project represents.

Instead, they must adopt a socialist-internationalist perspective that

corresponds to the integrated character of the world economy. Politically, this means the fight to unite all workers in Canada—French-speaking, English-speaking, immigrant and indigenous—in a common struggle, alongside their class brothers and sisters in the rest of North America and overseas, against bankrupt capitalism and for socialism.



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