

François Legault and the sharp right-ward lurch in Quebec politics

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Quebec Premier François Legault announced last month that he will step down once the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ)—the right-wing chauvinist, “Quebec First” party he has headed since its founding in 2011—chooses a new leader.

During the preceding year, Legault had insisted he would seek a third mandate in the provincial election slated for this October. But with the opinion polls showing him to be the country’s least popular premier and his CAQ likely to be reduced to a small rump in the National Assembly, he ultimately chose to step down.

Since coming to power in 2018, the avowedly pro-big business CAQ government has been instrumental in shifting Quebec politics far to the right. It has intensified the ruling class drive, implemented for decades under successive Liberal and Parti Québécois governments, to transfer social wealth from the working class to the rich and super-rich. However, Legault’s nearly eight years as premier have been characterized above all by the promotion of Quebec chauvinism and far-right, anti-immigrant incitement.

This orientation is not unique to the CAQ. Internationally, the capitalist ruling elite is increasingly whipping up bellicose nationalism and xenophobia to divide the working class in a context of resurgent class struggle. Whether it is Donald Trump’s operation dictatorship in the United States, Giorgia Meloni’s far-right government in Italy, or the rise of the pro-Nazi AfD in Germany, the bogeyman of immigration is constantly invoked to fuel reaction and strengthen the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state.

In line with Mark Carney’s federal government and the entire Canadian elite, Legault has responded to Trump’s second term by intensifying his program of class war. Legault has labelled this “shock therapy”: attacking the right to strike, increasing the privatization of public services, heavily subsidizing big business, and promoting the growth of Quebec’s armament industries.

Meanwhile, Legault has continued to make immigrants the scapegoats for all manner of social problems caused by the capitalist crisis and his own government’s austerity policies, including the deplorable state of public services, the housing crisis, and growing poverty and homelessness.

Despite its slavish support for big business, substantial sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie have become increasingly disenchanted with Legault and his government. A series of financial fiascos—Northvolt, Lion Electric, SAAQclic—combined with the downgrading of Quebec’s credit rating by S&P Global has undermined the CAQ’s economic credibility.

The ruling elite has also complained that Legault has not sufficiently reduced the “size of the government,” i.e., has not cut public services and social supports for working people deeply enough. It has exploited the growing popular anger against the CAQ to push Legault out.

With the resignation of the party’s founder and only true leader, and the recent departure of several prominent ministers who were potential successors, notably Geneviève Guilbault and Sonia LeBel, the CAQ is

now on the verge of collapse. It is currently running fourth in the opinion polls and projected to win from 0 to 5 seats in the 125-member Quebec National Assembly next October.

Unsurprisingly, business circles and the political establishment have praised Legault’s “legacy” in defending “Quebec’s interests,” that is, Quebec capitalism. This recognition has come from federalists of the Quebec Liberal Party as much as from the separatists of the PQ and the self-proclaimed “left-wing” party, Québec Solidaire (QS). The most revealing reaction came from the *Journal de Montréal* and its far-right columnist Richard Martineau, who thanked Legault for “keeping the nationalist flame alive” in difficult times.

In his farewell speech, Legault reaffirmed the importance his government has placed on promoting a strident, explicitly chauvinist Quebec nationalism. “Quebecers must be much more vigilant about the future of their nation and the future of the French language,” he declared, adding: “Quebec is a nation that will always be vulnerable in North America. We should not be ashamed to protect our language, our culture, and our values. Let us be proud to be Quebecers, let us be proud of our nation.”

The CAQ: spearheading the ruling elite’s shift to the right

A former businessman and CEO of Air Transat, Legault was recruited into politics in 1998 by former PQ premier Lucien Bouchard in the wake of the failure of Quebec’s second independence referendum in 1995.

At that time, Bouchard, with support of the union bureaucracy, had launched his “zero deficit” campaign, i.e. the drive to eliminate the province’s budget deficit through massive social spending cuts. Bouchard hoped to create the “winning conditions” for a third referendum by proving to international financial capital that an independent Quebec would be economically competitive and a reliable capitalist ally.

Legault was strongly influenced by the manifesto *Pour un Québec lucide* (For a clear-eyed vision of Quebec), published in 2005 at the instigation of his mentor Bouchard. This document called on the rival federalist and pro-Quebec independence factions of the political elite to temporarily set aside their differences over Quebec’s constitutional status in order to mount a more aggressive attack on the social gains of the working class and what remained of the welfare state.

After holding key ministerial positions in the Bouchard and Landry PQ governments, Legault temporarily left politics in 2009 to prepare, with the support of powerful economic interests, including his close collaborator, the billionaire Charles Sirois, the creation of a new party, the CAQ. The aim of the initiative was clear: to offer the ruling class a new political instrument capable of intensifying the shift to the right at a time when the PQ and the Liberals, the two traditional parties of the ruling class, had lost

much of their popular support after decades of anti-worker policies.

Launched in 2011, the CAQ presented itself as right-wing, “pro-entrepreneurial” “nationalist-autonomist” coalition of Quebec sovereignists and federalists. It absorbed the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ), formerly led by Mario Dumont, a right-wing populist party that had instigated the chauvinist campaign over “reasonable accommodations” in 2007.

Nationalism and chauvinism

After several years in opposition, the CAQ took power in 2018. Its right-wing nationalism has deservedly caused it to be compared with the Union Nationale under the notorious ultra-conservative and anti-communist Maurice Duplessis, who ruled Quebec for nearly 20 years between 1936 and his death in 1959.

Legault has made anti-immigrant chauvinism the cornerstone of his entire agenda. Along with the PQ, he has regularly denounced immigration as a threat to the survival of the Quebec nation in a Quebec version of the fascist “Great Replacement” theory.

Legault has repeatedly stated that the CAQ’s promotion of nationalism is necessary to maintain “social cohesion.” In practice, this means diverting rising social opposition into reactionary channels, and maintaining the ruling elite’s ideological and political hold over the working class through incessant nationalist tub-thumping.

In 2019, the CAQ pushed through its infamous Law 21. Under the fraudulent pretext of defending “secularism,” this racist law targets religious minorities, particularly Muslim women, by banning the wearing of religious symbols for certain categories of workers, while preserving Christian symbols displayed in state institutions.

Again with the aim of strengthening the bourgeoisie’s nationalist ideological hold over the working class, Legault’s CAQ passed the coercive Law 96 to reinforce the predominance of French in the public sphere. It made French the “only common language” in Quebec. While binding workers to the Quebec establishment, the state regulations imposing French as the language of work are also a form of affirmative action aimed at securing lucrative positions in business and government for the French-speaking Quebec bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed in a particularly brutal way the class nature of the Legault government. As elsewhere, priority has been given to profits over human lives. The government’s criminal negligence, combined with chronic underfunding of the health care system, has contributed to Quebec becoming one of the hardest-hit places in North America in terms of deaths per capita. To divert attention from this disastrous management, Legault intensified the CAQ’s agitation for the closure of the border between Quebec and the United States (notably Roxham Road) to prevent refugee claimants crossing into Canada.

All of the official parties have either openly supported these chauvinist policies or adapted to them.

A toxic competition has developed between the CAQ and the PQ over who will go the furthest in vilifying immigrants and implementing policies that punish them. Québec Solidaire, for its part, has played a key role in legitimizing these policies. Time and again, it has insisted that they have nothing to do with similar attacks on immigrants carried out by Trump and far-right governments and movements in Europe.

Meanwhile, the CAQ waged a sustained offensive against the living conditions of the working class. With the collaboration of the unions, the government twice imposed concessions-filled contracts on 600,000 public sector workers, while maintaining the underfunding of public services. Legault crowned this offensive with a massive assault on the right to

strike with last May’s adoption of Law 14 (Bill 89).

The union partnership with Legault

Legault was able to come to power and benefit from the popular opposition to the PQ and the Liberals because the unions for years systematically suppressed working-class struggles and social opposition, notably the 2012 student strike. Throughout Legault’s tenure, the unions have pleaded for “social dialogue” and partnership. They have done everything possible to stifle social opposition and keep Quebec’s workers’ struggles separate from those erupting in the rest of Canada and internationally. This sabotage of workers’ resistance took concrete form in the betrayal of public sector workers’ struggles and the unions’ smothering of opposition to the CAQ’s frontal attack on the right to strike.

During the pandemic, Legault largely ruled by decree. But he received the support of the unions, which facilitated the reopening of the capitalist economy by sending their members back to work to be infected with the coronavirus. In her comments on Legault’s resignation, Quebec Federation of Labor (FTQ) Magali Picard said that “no one could have done better” in leading Quebec during the pandemic.

While many workers are understandably pleased to see Legault leave office, they must recognize that in the absence of a genuine class alternative, the ruling elite will use the situation to shift politics even further to the right. This will include attempts to revive the Parti Québécois, which espouses an identity nationalism every bit as chauvinistic, if not more so, than that of the CAQ.

The massive opposition among workers—not only to the Legault government, but to the entire capitalist system that produced it—must find conscious political expression.

Quebec workers cannot defend their social and democratic rights if their struggles remain under the political and organizational control of the nationalist, pro-capitalist union apparatuses, which do everything in their power to subordinate them to the political establishment and limit their political horizons to Quebec, dividing them from workers elsewhere in Canada and internationally. They must adopt an entirely new socialist-internationalist orientation and perspective, with the aim of uniting their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in Canada, across North America, and internationally in a working-class counter-offensive.

This demands a break with all nationalist and pro-capitalist politics, especially the Quebec nationalism promoted by the unions and pseudo-left and the no less reactionary Canadian nationalism championed by their counterparts in English Canada. It also requires an organizational and political break with the union bureaucracy, through the building of new organization of class struggles, democratically-controlled rank-and-file committees.

Only the independent political mobilization of the working class in the fight for workers’ power will be able to defeat the ruling class’ agenda of austerity, imperialist war, dictatorship, and chauvinist reaction.



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