

Quebec's trade unions renew their alliance with the Parti Québécois, as it embraces far-right politics

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A delegation of union leaders, headed by Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL) President Magali Picard, attended the recent Parti Québécois (PQ) “orientation congress.”

The union bureaucracy is renewing its long-standing political alliance with the PQ at a time when this party is increasingly shifting to the far right, and placing anti-immigrant agitation at the centre of its campaign for Quebec's secession and the establishment of an independent capitalist Quebec.

PQ leader Paul St-Pierre Plamondon has jettisoned the party's previous attempts to cloak its reactionary sovereignty project in “progressive garb.” It now openly declares that the new imperialist state it aims to create in North America would be closely aligned with American imperialism, today led by the fascist, would-be dictator Donald Trump.

Whether they decide to explicitly support the PQ in the provincial elections next October or to back it tacitly, the unions are seeking to channel the immense social anger against capitalist austerity and the current Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government toward this chauvinist, ultra-nationalist party.

Picard, who heads the province's largest union federation, already admitted to being in discussions with the PQ last year, supposedly to find a party willing to repeal the CAQ's anti-worker laws. These talks took place even as the QFL and other major unions were doing nothing to mobilize the working class against the CAQ's Law 14 (Bill 89), which drastically restricts the right to strike in Quebec.

In response to accusations from the CAQ that the QFL and PQ were stitching together an agreement for the upcoming election, Picard stated that “there is no deal, unfortunately.” Leaving a cocktail reception for “honored” congress “guests,” she admitted, however, “that's what we're looking for: parties that are willing to set aside the measures [by the CAQ] that sow division.”

Who does Picard think she's fooling? Like the Liberals and the CAQ, the PQ is a loyal representative of Quebec big business, which, over the past four decades, has savagely attacked workers' conditions time and time again, including with “emergency” antistrike laws. Widely discredited for its social cuts and dismantling of public services, the PQ lost much of its traditional electoral support among workers, to the point where the party nearly disappeared between 2018 and 2023. It was only able to rise from the ashes over the past three years thanks to the efforts of the

ruling class, the mainstream media, and the union bureaucracy.

The PQ's resurgence has been linked to an ultra-reactionary shift under St.-Pierre Plamondon. Even the bourgeois press is forced to acknowledge that the PQ is trying to outflank Éric Duhaime and his Conservatives on the far right, by adopting their calls for massive social spending cuts, further corporate tax reductions, and increased police budgets and powers—all the while blaming immigrants for the myriad social problems caused by the capitalist crisis.

St-Pierre Plamondon is promoting a Quebec version of the fascist “Great Replacement” theory, accusing the federal Liberal government of wanting to submerge Quebec in a sea of English-speaking immigrants. To save the “Quebec nation,” St-Pierre Plamondon promises to drastically reduce immigration, while suggesting that he would favour measures to increase the birth rate among “native” Quebecers. The PQ leader is forging ties with far-right separatists in Alberta. Like them, he presents his plan to secede from Canada as an “entrepreneurial project” based on an alliance with Washington to advance the predatory objectives of the Quebec ruling class.

The unions are completely silent on these ultra-reactionary policies and are helping the PQ make workers swallow what is a poison pill. Picard enthusiastically welcomed a proposal from the party convention that the PQ reaffirm its so-called “pro-worker disposition” (“préjugé favorable aux travailleurs”). What a fraud! This stance, first advanced by PQ Premier and founder René Lévesque in the 1970s, has always been a subterfuge. After fifty years of austerity, anti-worker legislation, and a pronounced shift to the right and embrace of virulent anti-immigrant chauvinism, it is monstrous lie dripping with hypocrisy and cynicism.

The PQ's “pro-worker” demagoguery resembles that of federal Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre and the fascist Trump, whose admiration for Hitler is well-known. These reactionary demagogues present themselves as defenders of “ordinary people” and opponents of a “corrupt establishment,” while in reality they speak for the most rapacious sections of big business and the financial oligarchy.

The union bureaucracy's rapprochement with the PQ represents a further sharp lurch to the right, and must serve as a warning to the working class as to its readiness to embrace reaction and the chauvinist right.

There is, however, a broader process at work that goes beyond the unions' renewal of their alliance with the PQ, while it is morphing into a far-right party—dangerous as that is.

As opposition within the working class grows to the collapse of public healthcare, the housing crisis, and the ever-greater diversion of society's resources to corporate tax cuts, war and rearmament, the union apparatuses in Quebec, in English Canada, and internationally are intensifying their efforts to suppress the class struggle. In dividing workers, isolating their struggles, and subordinating them to the capitalist elite, the union's promotion of nationalism plays a central role.

The unions' alliance with the PQ has always been directed against the working class. It was through the promotion of Quebec nationalism and the PQ that the unions maintained control over the militant worker struggles that convulsed the province for over a decade starting in the mid-1960s and subordinated them to the Quebec and Canadian ruling class.

The PQ is not the only Quebec nationalist party. But it very much embodies the Quebec nationalism that serves as the political-ideological cement of the corporatist relationship between the unions, the state and employers. On this basis, the unions have sought to inculcate the conception that workers in Quebec should align themselves with the Quebec ruling elite in its squabbles with Ottawa and Bay Street in the name of the "greater interests of Quebec"; and they continuously propagate the falsehood that Quebec workers have more in common with the Québecois capitalist elite than with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and internationally.

In 1983, the QFL launched the Solidarity Fund—today Quebec's largest venture capital fund—after securing major financial support from the Lévesque PQ government in the form of large, uniquely-tailored tax breaks. The then QFL president Louis Laberge touted the fund, that is funneling money to Quebec Inc., as the means to save "Quebec jobs." In the midst of the 1981-83 recession, he cynically proclaimed it a more "revolutionary" step than founding a "workers' party." The other Quebec labour federations soon followed suit, establishing their own venture capital funds with Quebec government support.

The labour federations established these corporatist funds, which became a major new revenue stream for the union bureaucracy, at the same time as they suppressed a mass movement of more than 300,000 public sector workers against the PQ government's imposition by decree of contracts that slashed wages and working conditions.

In 1996, the unions rallied behind the Lucien Bouchard's PQ government's "zero deficit" campaign, facilitating the gutting of public services, mass job cuts, and the ravaging of the working conditions of hundreds of thousands of health, education and other government workers. The unions joined Bouchard in claiming that these brutal cuts to social programs were essential to creating the "winning conditions" for a third referendum on Quebec independence—that is, to proving to international finance capital that a "sovereign" Quebec would be "globally competitive" and a lucrative investment opportunity.

In 2012, the unions torpedoed the six-month student strike that shook Jean Charest's Liberal government, and channeled the mass

opposition to Charest's austerity agenda behind the return to power of the Parti Québécois, declaring "After the streets, the ballot box." During this sabotage campaign, then QFL President Michel Arsenault ordered workers outside Quebec to mind their own business and not support the students, in the name of "Quebec's right to self-determination."

When the unions denounce the CAQ's anti-worker laws to justify their alliance with the PQ, they are primarily referring to its Bill 3 on "union transparency." They see Bill 3 as a threat to their control of union dues, a key source of the union bureaucrats' salaries and other privileges.

Although they denounce the elements of Bill 3 that threaten their own interests, the unions did nothing to oppose the CAQ's Law 14, which is an historic attack on the right to strike. Similarly, the unions—in Quebec and across Canada—didn't lift a finger to oppose the Trudeau-Carney federal Liberal's government systematic attack on the right to strike, including illegalizing strikes by Canada Post, railroad, Quebec and West Coast port workers, and Air Canada flight attendants, over the past two years.

After organizing token, under-publicized actions against Law 14, the unions were forced to call for a large demonstration on November 29. But they said nothing—neither in their slogans nor even in their speeches—about Law 14 or the attacks of Mark Carney's federal government. They were completely silent on political developments outside Quebec, including the attacks on workers in the rest of Canada and the rise of fascism south of the border. But they loudly denounced the CAQ's Bill 3 and are lobbying the PQ and the other opposition parties to commit to repealing it.

Regardless of which party comes to power in Quebec in this fall's election, the ruling class will intensify its class war assault. And the unions will adapt and offer their services as accomplices. This rightward shift will inevitably be accompanied by further betrayals of workers' struggles by the unions, and by their toxic promotion of Quebec nationalism aimed at dividing Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in Canada and internationally.

Workers must reject all forms of nationalism—"Quebec first" chauvinism and the PQ's Quebec separatism, as well as Canadian nationalism—and unite with their class brothers and sisters across North America and internationally as a social class fighting for their distinct class interests against all the rival factions and political representatives of the capitalist elite. A working-class counter-offensive against austerity, privatization, rearmament and war can only be developed if it is armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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