Québec Solidaire: Hollow reformist promises to legitimize austerity and Québécois chauvinism

Hugo Maltais, Richard Dufour
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The Quebec election campaign—which concludes with voting across Canada's only majority French-speaking province Monday, October 5—is taking place against the backdrop of a systemic crisis of global capitalism. The trade war that Trump is waging against Canada is but one facet of a vast intensification of commercial, geostrategic and military conflicts. The ruling classes of all the imperialist states, Canada included, are frantically rearming for a third world war that has already begun, and that they intend to make the working class pay for through the dismantling of public services and social support, and the destruction of jobs and living standards.

All the parties contesting the election adhere to this class-war program, which will translate after the election into a sharp intensification of the state-employer assault on workers' living conditions—not just in Quebec, but across Canada.

Christine Fréchette's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), Charles Milliard's Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ), Paul St-Pierre Plamondon's Parti Québécois (PQ), and Éric Duhaime's Conservative Party of Quebec (PCQ) are big business parties that openly promote austerity and tout Quebec chauvinism. Their rivalry centers on who will succeed in convincing the ruling elite that they will be the most effective in intensifying the anti-worker assault, while containing and suppressing working-class opposition.

Québec Solidaire (QS), for its part, claims to speak on behalf of ordinary people and to oppose the pronounced turn to the right of Quebec's ruling elite. Its co-spokesperson and candidate for Quebec premier, Ruba Ghazal, has repeatedly proclaimed: "All the parties will implement austerity; the only one that will not is Québec Solidaire." This is a fraud.

An establishment party of privileged sections of the upper-middle class

Formed 20 years ago as a supposed "new left" party, QS quickly abandoned its claim to want to "move beyond capitalism." It has lurched ever further right and integrated itself ever more fully into the political establishment and the capitalist state, as the "left" wing of the Quebec sovereigntist (pro-independence) movement, which articulates the interests of a faction of Quebec's ruling class historically represented by the PQ.

In its obsession with proving to the capitalist elite that it has what it takes to be a "party of government" (or in French, "*gouvernable*"), QS has so watered down its timid reformist demands that, in the current election campaign, what remains is an empty shell—one that would nonetheless provoke fierce resistance from the ruling class, before which—as has already been demonstrated by its repeated retreats—QS would capitulate without a fight.

Despite the immense popular anger sparked by the deterioration of public services, the squeezing of living standards by galloping inflation and the wave of militant working-class struggles they have engendered since 2022, QS has proven unable to persuade workers of the seriousness of its ostensible oppositional stance. Among the five major parties, QS ranks last in the polls in popular support and will likely could suffer a marked decline in its share of the popular vote next Monday.

QS is a pro-capitalist party that expresses the aspirations of privileged strata of the upper-middle class. Through vaguely "left-wing" rhetoric, it seeks to contain social anger within the capitalist social and political order. It is in a de facto alliance with the PQ and has committed to assisting the PQ in establishing a capitalist *République du Québec* should the latter come to power and make good on its promise to hold a third referendum on Quebec's independence.

"Quebec Solidaire will be in the 'Yes camp' with our values," Ghazal told the "Le Bilan" television show Thursday evening. "We will see what Quebecers decide October 5. After that, if there are discussions to be had, we will have them."

QS works hand in hand with the union bureaucracy, which systematically suppresses the class struggle and promotes Quebec chauvinism, tying workers to the Quebec political establishment and dividing them from their class brothers and sisters in Canada and North America.

"Reforms" without substance

Under the slogan "It's possible," QS seeks to pass off its pitiful proposals as "ambitious" reforms. In reality, every promise is a palliative that in no way challenges capitalism, and which QS has no intention of fighting for through the independent political mobilization of the working class. Its strategy consists of pressuring the establishment—the big business parties, the union bureaucracy and corporate elite—for crumbs.

Its position on housing, the "priority of priorities" illustrates this well. QS promises to cap rent increases, to create 50,000 social housing units in a single mandate, and to increase the share of social housing to 20 percent of the rental stock by 2050. These promises are wishful thinking: it is impossible to cap rents and build social housing on a massive scale without tackling the stranglehold of institutional owners and the banks, and therefore private property—which QS explicitly excludes. Worse still,

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QS proposes a major tax break for owners who sell their most dilapidated buildings to non-profits (NPOs), which would allow these owners to pocket state-guaranteed profits. The 2050 horizon is a glaring admission: QS is pushing off a solution to the housing crisis for a quarter of a century.

The increase of the minimum wage to $20 is equally telling: this clearly insufficient measure would be accompanied by "$330 million in aid to employers"—in other words, subsidies for the bosses.

Its fiscal policies follow the same logic. QS claims that it will generate $5 billion per year by imposing a tax on the assets of households possessing $25 million or more—approximately 4,000 households. This represents only a tiny fraction of the profits accumulated by the Québec bourgeoisie. Even more significantly, $5 billion is a drop in the bucket when compared to the hundreds of billions needed to rebuild healthcare, education and other essential public infrastructure after decades of austerity.

At the same time, Québec Solidaire presents itself as "fiscally responsible," meaning trustworthy enough to manage the affairs of the ruling elite. It promises to eliminate the provincial deficit by the 2029-2030 fiscal year, thereby complying with the deadline set by the CAQ's Budget Act. This will require drastic cuts to social spending and punishing increases in electricity and other charges.

QS has continuously "updated" its platform to emphasize its pro-employer content, glorifying "Quebec entrepreneurship and SMEs (small and medium enterprises)."

The heart of the QS campaign—the promotion of reactionary Quebec nationalism

Under a thin reformist veneer, the core of the QS program and its raison d'être is Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism. The party claims to champion an "inclusive independence" distinct from that of the PQ, which over the past two decades has moved to the far right and espouses an explicitly chauvinist, exclusivist nationalism.

This distinction is illusory: Quebec independence is a fundamentally reactionary project, aiming to establish a third capitalist and imperialist state in North America that would divide, based on ethnolinguistic criteria, Quebec workers from their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada and the Americas.

QS provides a "progressive" cover for this project, which is backed by sections of the Quebec bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. While the PQ promotes Quebec separatism on far-right grounds (a 20 percent cut in corporate taxes, massive cuts to public services, a drastic reduction in immigration, the creation of a NATO-aligned army), QS legitimizes its chauvinism by presenting the right-wing-stoked "debate" on immigration as "healthy and peaceful."

Ghazal and QS have gone out of their way to reject any comparison between the anti-immigrant fulminations of St-Pierre Plamondon and those of Trump or Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far right—even as the PQ leader blames immigrants for the collapse of public services, all manner of other social ills and chauvinism, and openly flirts with elements associated with the far right. Ghazal has even stated that she understands Quebecers' "fear of disappearing," lending credence to the Quebec version of the fascist "Great Replacement" theory repeatedly invoked by the PQ leader.

In response to Trump's tariffs, QS proposes increasing the price of the hydroelectricity that Hydro-Québec exports to the United States—a nationalist response aimed at rallying workers around the Quebec state by presenting Hydro-Québec and its revenues as being "theirs." QS shows total indifference toward the American workers who would bear these increases, as well as the Quebec and Canadian workers who would suffer the reprisals.

Like the PQ and the sovereigntist movement as a whole, QS accuses Ottawa of prioritizing the "interests" of Alberta and Ontario over those of Quebec. This appeal to nationalism and regionalism serves to mask the acute class divide that prevails in all these provinces and Canada as a whole. Its aim is to politically subordinate the working class to the Quebec bourgeoisie in its struggle with rival factions of capital for a larger share of the spoils derived from the exploitation of workers across Canada.

The working class must reject the Quebec nationalism employed by the ruling class to divide workers and divert their attention from the real causes of the ever-deepening social crisis. In rejecting this trap, workers must make no concession to the federalists who oppose independence from an equally reactionary, pro-imperialist Canadian nationalist perspective. The only way that workers can assert their independent class interests is by forging the unity of all workers in Canada—French and English-speaking, immigrant and First Nations—with their American and international class brothers and sisters in a common struggle against the profit system.

QS: A pro-imperialist party

Generally, QS focuses almost exclusively on narrowly defined "Quebec issues" and pays little to no attention to international questions, even as geopolitical and military conflicts are intensifying, dragging the world into the vortex of a third imperialist world war.

During the election campaign, Ghazal has made no comment on the war waged by NATO against Russia in Ukraine with Canada's direct participation, the US-Israeli war launched against Iran, or the advanced preparations by Washington and Ottawa for a direct confrontation with China. She and QS have similarly made no issue of Ottawa's massive rearmament drive, and the sweeping cuts to public and social services through which it will be financed.

This silence is not merely the result of its narrow provincialist perspective. More fundamentally, it expresses the support of this party of the privileged middle classes for the neo-colonial aggression of the imperialist powers and, in particular, for Canadian imperialism.

QS has a long history of supporting imperialist war under the pretext of defending "human rights."

In 2011, Amir Khadir, who was then co-spokesperson of QS, endorsed NATO's air war against Libya, stating that "the Libyan people demand an intervention." QS supported regime-change in Syria by presenting the civil war fomented by the imperialist powers and their Gulf State clients as a "revolution." QS aligned itself with the imperialist campaign against Iran—mounted through decades of punitive sanctions and now all-out war—under the pretext of defending "women's rights." At the start of the war in Ukraine, QS initiated a National Assembly motion denouncing Russian "aggression" while remaining silent on NATO's provocative role.

The case of Gaza is the most damning: in October 2023, QS MNAs abstained from voting on a pro-Israel motion brought forward by the ruling CAQ. QS subsequently admitted that it could have blocked the motion, but "decided to consent to the tabling of the motion to allow it to be adopted." Ghazal, born to a Palestinian family, subsequently denounced crimes "on both sides," calling for people "not to choose one side or the other."

It is in this context that Ghazal's intervention last May must be understood, after business circles supported the CAQ government and

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City of Montreal's bid to host the headquarters of the future Defense Security, and Resilience Bank. This bank is part of the efforts undertaken by Canadian Liberal Prime Minister Mark Carney to finance a massive rearmament of Canada, targeting a military budget of $150 billion per year by 2035, in accordance with NATO's goal of 5 percent of GDP. Ghazal criticized the "new arms race encouraged by Mark Carney" and asserted that "no public funds should be used for this purpose."

QS's rhetoric on rearmament does not represent opposition to war, but rather a form of economic nationalism. QS does not oppose the $150 billion military budget as such. It merely asks that "Quebecers' money" be reinvested in Quebec for "our economy," and preferably in support of the environment-related industry ("green capitalism") in which Quebec has developed a certain expertise. It is in this field, Ghazal argued, that "the global competition for the economy of tomorrow has already begun."

QS's support for imperialism and rearmament is underscored by the fact that it is ready to provide political support and cover to the PQ's independence drive under conditions where St. Pierre-Plamondon has pledged that an independent Quebec would be strategically aligned with US imperialism, a member of NATO and NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) and meet NATO's 5 percent military spending target.

QS and the strangling of workers' struggles

Recent years have seen a growing mood of militancy in the working class, with major strikes mounted by, among others, half-a-million Quebec public sector workers, postal workers and Air Canada flight attendants. Within these struggles, QS has sought to keep workers under the control of the union apparatuses that act as the employers' police in the workplace.

During the election campaign, QS has conspicuously failed to make a major issue of the CAQ's Bill 14, which allows the Minister of Labour to arbitrarily end any strike in the name of the "well-being of the population." Nor has QS campaigned seriously on workplace safety, even as Oscar Robayo, a ramp agent at the Montreal airport, died a few days before the election was called, and a CPKC railway worker was fatally struck by a train at the Port of Montreal. These tragedies stem from deregulation and privatization, which subordinates the lives of workers to corporate profits.

QS is aligned with the union bureaucracy, whose function is to isolate and sabotage working-class struggles and bring them back into the fold of the PQ. Quebec Federation of Labour President Magali Picard participated in the PQ's Orientation Congress last January, where she endorsed the "worker-friendly" posture of this chauvinist party that promises austerity, privatization and corporate tax cuts.

Quebec workers must reject the nationalist program of QS' break with all the big business parties and pro-capitalist unions and develop a working-class industrial and political offensive against austerity and war and in defence of workers' rights, including the right to strike. Such a movement will only be able to prevail in so far as it unites all workers in Quebec—francophone, anglophone and immigrant—and fuses their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters across Canada, in the US and beyond. It must take up the fight for the socialist reorganization of society, placing social needs before private profit.

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