

Building the political left in Quebec

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On March 25, 26 and 27 Quebec Solidaire, the biggest left party that Quebec has seen for nearly a century, held its congress. The debate, which centred on ecological and economic questions as well as those concerning the social rights of workers, made it possible to adopt an orientation of going beyond capitalism.

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The political configuration of Quebec

Quebec is the second most populous province of Canada, with 7 million inhabitants, mainly French-speaking. The constitution of the Canadian state provides for sectors such as education and health to be under provincial jurisdiction. In Quebec, the national question (the opposition between federalism and sovereignty) has structured political life for the last fifty years, but we are now seeing a process of political recomposition on a left-right axis.

In Quebec, the Liberal Party (PLQ) has been in power since 2003. It is a federalist party, representing the Canadian bourgeoisie and strongly supported by the English-speaking population, including immigrants. Discredited by corruption scandals, its main strength remains the weakness of its adversaries.

The official opposition is formed by the Parti Québécois (PQ), a split from the Liberal Party which defends sovereignty-association with the Canadian state. Since the 1970s, the PQ has channelled social mobilizations towards the sovereigntist cause. Neoliberal and having postponed any concrete fight for sovereignty to the Greek Calends, the PQ is led by members of the small and middle Québécois bourgeoisie. The programme of the current leader of the PQ seems to consist of waiting for her turn in government. Several former leaders of the PQ, linked to federalist leaders, are promoting the neoliberal project under the name of the “lucid” group.

Democratic Action of Quebec (ADQ) is an “autonomist” party, in other words neoliberal and nationalist without being independentist. This party was momentarily the main official opposition

party in 2007, after having used the question of “reasonable compromises” [1] to promote its xenophobic discourse. ADQ is present in certain regions. We should also note that we are witnessing a rise of the Right in various forms, backed up by radical right-wing radios, neoliberal “think tanks” and supported by the concentration of the media in two great monopolies. The core of its discourse is centred on a phobia for public debt, the “generational shock” (the legacy of the debt and the payment of pensions) and on the waste of public money by the state.

Lastly, Quebec Solidaire (QS) is a new left party, which we will describe later. Gauche socialiste (Socialist Left, GS) [2] is one of the collectives (tendencies) recognized within Quebec Solidaire. We should underline here the historical disjunction between the existence of important social movements and the absence of a left party in Quebec since the end of the Second World War. The rise of social struggles in the period 1995-2005 made possible the emergence of a political alternative to the Parti Québécois.

Quebec less affected by the present crisis

Let us add that, on the economic level, Quebec, the society with the most socialized economy in North America, has been less affected by the crisis than the rest of the West. In fact, a manufacturing crisis has already occurred with the rise of the Canadian dollar under the effect of the oil exports of Alberta. This rise has also had negative effects on the forestry industry. During the period preceding the recession, Quebec had already lost 120,000 jobs, that is to say almost one in five. The wave of closures and lay-offs continues. The forestry crisis has been caused especially by overexploitation, by the supine attitude of the federal government in the face of American violations of the free trade agreement of and by the situation of under-investment maintained by the companies concerned.

There has been, despite everything, a contraction of the economy and especially an increase in the public debt, which remains below the OECD average. The deficits are partly the result of the subsidies given to the car industry and the financial sector, as well as military expenditure, on the federal level. On the provincial level, a vast programme of renewal of infrastructures, mainly the motorways, surrounded by an odour of corruption, has constituted one of the main causes of the increase in the debt, along with tax cuts that favour business and the wealthiest citizens.

The dynamics of the social movements

The rate of unionisation in Quebec is 40 per cent and the trade union movement is powerful but not very combative, particularly since the defeats of 2003 (anti-trade-union law) and 2005 (decree imposing working conditions on state employees). The leaderships more or less formally support the Parti Québécois and its federal equivalent, the Bloc Québécois. They refuse to give their support to the building of a left party and advocate, on a national and local level, dialogue with the state and the employers in the implementation of neoliberal policies. The principal confederation, which represents 500,000 workers, has an enormous speculative pension fund managed by an army of financial product sellers. This situation pushes the main organization of the Québécois social movement to defend the rentier interests of the financial bourgeoisie and to depend on the tax incentives granted by the government to the pension fund, not to mention questionable relations between certain trade union officials and elements of the grey economy. The public sector unions, in spite of a strategic framework which aimed at negotiating before having the right to strike, were able to keep their heads above water, mainly thanks to a Liberal government discredited by corruption.

The women's movement organized a big mobilization of 30,000 women in the framework of the 3rd World March of Women in autumn 2010. A certain radicalisation of demands and actions was proposed, but without allowing this mobilization to really influence the conjuncture. A series of people's groups conduct struggles on social questions (the right to housing, the struggle against poverty, popular education, etc). The student movement is divided but has demonstrated its capacity for mobilization over the last twenty years, particularly with the victorious general strikes of 1996 and 2005. We have seen a series of ecologist mobilizations since 2003 which have led to the abandonment of the building of a gas-fired power station, the development of wind energy and at the challenging of projects to exploit gas (shale gas) and oil. This mobilization is mainly citizen-based and regional, in the sense that, in spite of elements of national coordination, it comes mainly from people who were initially not organized.

The neoliberal offensive takes mainly the form of budget cuts and increasing charges for public services. The people's and feminist groups, as well as the student and trade-union left, have established a Coalition opposed to the increase in charges and the privatization of public services. While refusing to join this coalition, the big trade-union and student confederations have created the Social Alliance, which organizes actions along with the Coalition.

The building of the political left

Since 1994, two processes of fusion of left political parties have made it possible to unite most of the left of the trade union, student, people's and feminist movements and most of the left political groups [3]. Quebec Solidaire is the result of this process of convergence. Gauche Socialiste [4], the section of the Fourth International, took part in this process from the beginning.

In the 2008 elections, Quebec Solidaire succeeded in getting a member elected to the Quebec parliament - Amir Khadir, who has been recognized as being the Québécois political personality who is most appreciated by the population. The opinion polls indicate a constant rise in voting intentions, which oscillate at present between 9 and 15 per cent. This however over-estimates the real vote, which is confronted with the logic of the "useful vote" in the electoral system of British origin (first past the post).

Quebec Solidaire is a left party, ecologist and feminist. All of its structures must be based on parity between men and women, including the national and regional spokespersons. There exist ten collectives within it, including Gauche Socialiste, but the great majority of members are not linked to these collectives.

The platform adopted for the two elections in which the party has taken part proposed a series of social and economic reforms based on more progressive taxation, reinvestment in public services and social and ecological programmes, as well as limited nationalizations (energy).

An original and democratic process was put in place for the adoption of the programme. Spread out over several years, it dealt successively with five different themes:

- 1- The national, indigenous, immigrant and secular questions
- 2-
- 3- Economy and ecology
- 4-
- 5- Education, health and social justice
- 6-
- 7- Feminism

8-

9- Global justice

10-

Each one of these topics follows the same stages. We begin with “citizens’ circles” open to non-members, which discuss openly the chosen themes, based on questions pre-established in a participation notebook. A synthesis of these circles is then established nationally, then re-launched in the local associations, which can propose modifications of this synthesis. Finally, these amendments are discussed and voted on in the congress.

The first programmatic congress took place in autumn 2009. The principal orientation adopted defined QS as an independentist party, which will set up, if it is elected, a constituent assembly, whose results will be subjected to a referendum which could declare the independence of Quebec. This congress also took up the thorny question of secularism. The position adopted follows on from the thinking of the Federation of Women of Quebec and proposes an “opening” to the wearing of ostentatious signs (the Islamic headscarf in particular), indicating that it is by including women that we can make it possible to leave the ghettos of the communities. We also clarified our support for the self-determination of the indigenous peoples, which account for 2 per cent of the population but which are the majority over large swathes of territory, where they live under very difficult socio-sanitary conditions.

A congress on the economy, ecology and workers’ social rights

The Sixth Congress Quebec Solidaire was held on 25, 26 and 27 March, 2011, in Montreal. 350 delegates discussed of a great number of proposals on the economy, ecology and work, which will constitute essential sections of its political programme. At its Fifth Congress, in November 2009, Quebec Solidaire not only defined a clearly independentist orientation, but also adopted a democratic strategy of accession to sovereignty, the perspective of a constituent assembly. This congress started to outline democratic reforms of representative institutions (the voting system) and defined the place of the regions. This Fifth Congress also defined the state of Quebec as being secular and democratic, specified the conditions of integration of ethno-cultural communities and the relations founded on equality that we will have to establish with the First Nations.

The Sixth Congress continued to define the political physiognomy of Quebec Solidaire, around the following fundamental orientations:

- ♣ democracy must also be economic democracy
- ♣ an ecologist vision which goes beyond the limits of green capitalism
- ♣ determination to defend and radically extend workers’ rights
- ♣ the transversal character of the feminist struggle for the equality of women in all fields and all dimensions of economic, social and political life.

We want to illustrate here the spirit rather than the letter of the orientations adopted.

The economy must also be democratic

Democracy cannot stop at the gates of the workplaces. How can we speak about democracy if citizens do not have any say over the fundamental economic choices of the enterprise? This is why

Quebec Solidaire intends, in the long term, to go beyond capitalism and establish an economic and political system that supports the common good and does not make growth an end in itself. Quebec Solidaire is in favour of a strong public economy but supports the development of a social economy (co-operative, community-based, social enterprises) while maintaining the place of the private sector, which will have to be defined. Nationalizations will not be carried out in a bureaucratic manner, but will have as their objective a democratic management system. The mining industry must be placed under public control, with a majority stake held by the state. In short, with regard to natural resources, Quebec Solidaire wants to put an end to the plundering of resources by the multinationals and to give back to the community the power to decide how to develop them.

An ecologist orientation which goes beyond the limits of a green capitalism

Quebec Solidaire defends the energy sovereignty of Quebec. The energy sector must be taken charge of by the public sector. Quebec Solidaire aims at making possible the transition towards another energy system, which must include as a priority energy-saving and renewable energies. That is why Quebec Solidaire will put an end to the exploration and the exploitation of fossil energies such as the oil of the St. Lawrence Gulf and shale gases. It will also eliminate nuclear power and will stop the exploration and the exploitation of uranium mines.

The energy strategy of the Quebec state must be democratically established by the community, within which the workers of the sectors concerned will express their opinion. Quebec Solidaire recommends reducing greenhouse gas emissions between now and 2020, by at least 40 per cent compared to 1990, and defining a strategy to abandon fossil energies between now and 2030. Quebec Solidaire, breaking with the perspectives defended by green capitalism, is opposed to carbon credits, rejects false solutions such as biofuels and carbon capture, and taxes on carbon which hit especially the poor. The enterprises of the energy sector will be placed under public control (a majority stake held by the state), including if necessary full 100 per cent nationalization.

A radical extension of workers' rights

The congress adopted a series of orientations concerning trade union rights and the democratization of the work environment which will make it possible to radically improve the relationship of forces of workers in relation to the employers. Quebec Solidaire thus defines itself as an unwavering ally of the working and popular classes. The right to strike will be recognized in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The right to political and solidarity strikes will also be recognized. Lockouts will be prohibited. Other measures will make it possible to extend wage equity to all workplaces and to put an end to employment ghettos. For Quebec Solidaire, the concept of work must include the non-remunerated work that is essential for the existence of society, invisible work which is generally the lot of women.

Quebec Solidaire will defend an active and effective policy of full employment, including measures of positive action for women, handicapped people, visible minorities and indigenous people.

The minimum wage will be increased substantially. The use by employers of involuntary part-time work will be strictly limited and the right to move on to full-time employment as soon as possible will be ensured. The working week will be reduced to 35 hours and then to 32 hours, with an alternative possibility of prolonging holidays. All of this will be done without loss of pay, with proportional hiring of new workers, without intensification of work and with strengthening of the conditions limiting overtime work in workplaces.

The transversal character of the fight for women's equality

The congress recognized that the often invisible work of women, whether it is paid or not, forms an integral part of the economy. In the discussion on workers' rights, the need for measures in favour of equality of women and men at work was constantly raised and supported by the delegates.

Strategy of construction

The definition of the programme which was adopted included the concept of strategy. Thus, the programme is not limited to ends, to the desired "project of society". It puts forward means necessary for its realization. The congress made it possible to give some precise details on this subject and thus to consolidate the vision of "the party of elections and the party of the street", which includes the question of the link with the social movements. Thus, in the framework of the orientations adopted on the ecological question, we specified that it was necessary to take part in the international popular movement which makes the link between the climate and social justice, and to draw inspiration from its recommendations. We have to associate the full range of social and political movements in a militant campaign for climatic justice.

Debates which, without settling everything, take Quebec Solidaire forward in the definition of its project of society project

Quebec Solidaire made the choice of discussing orientations not by starting from largely ideological definitions, but rather from proposals for action aimed at achieving precise objectives. This choice by no means sought to build artificial consensuses. It aimed rather at making possible concrete debates based on evaluations of problematic situations and using the possibilities that they contain. It was a good choice. Instead of exacerbating nuances and divergences, this approach made it possible to outline the essential tasks which are before us, without making disappear the diversity of the objectives and the strategies present in this desire for social transformation which unifies Quebec Solidaire.

But the fact of concentrating on what was essential, of being satisfied with analyses that were often rapid and of not sufficiently clarifying the obstacles which we face in terms of the objectives that Quebec Solidaire has fixed for itself, led the congress to skip over many questions which the party will not always be able to avoid. This approach to debates will have to be modulated in order to further clarify for all the members of the party everything that is involved both in the analyses which back up the proposals put forward and in the strategies which it will be necessary to deploy to reach the goals that the party has fixed for itself. It will have to be corrected in order to give more time to the exchanges and to the appropriation of debates which are not always easy.

But to conclude, it should be underlined that the respect shown while engaging in debate, which characterized the whole of the congress, without exception, showed that the proclaimed desire of Quebec Solidaire to conduct politics in a different way is not a vain formula. It also made it possible to reinforce the coherence of a party which has many challenges to take up, but which increasingly demonstrates that it is being built as an essential instrument of an overall emancipatory project.

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P.S.

* International Viewpoint.

Footnotes

[1] “reasonable compromises” are measures adopted by state institutions so that the rights of certain minorities having special needs are respected. Mainly applied to handicapped people, certain measures applied to religious minorities have been in the news over the last few years: wearing the kirpan (Sikh dagger), raising questions about Christmas trees, spaces for prayer in workplaces and public places and of course, the wearing of the Islamic veil in the civil service and in schools. These measures, very much publicised in the media, have provided fertile ground for a xenophobic discourse, sometimes assimilated to a secular or feminist discourse, sometimes directly reactionary, evoking “the values of the French-Canadian nation.” A huge itinerant commission toured Quebec, facilitating among other things a discourse that was xenophobic if not racist.

[2] Gauche socialiste, Quebec section of the Fourth International (www.lagauche.com) has been at the heart of the process of unification of the Left in Quebec since it was formed. We are also present in social struggles and involved in one of the principal alternative Internet sites, Presse-toi a gauche: www.pressegauche.org

[3] See Susan Caldwell, “Quebec Solidaire - the new option in Quebec politics”, *International Viewpoint* 376, March 2006

[4] Gauche socialiste has prioritised building a mass party, but limited building itself